The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Abraham Lincoln

by Elton Trueblood

Abraham Lincoln's greatness was rooted in his spiritual depth, which gave him a moral foundation for his decisions and allowed him to speak openly about the dependence of the nation upon Providence.

Scripture: Exodus 14:13, Psalm 46:10, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 41:10, Mark 9:24, Romans 8:28, Philippians 4:6, 2 Timothy 1:7, James 1:5, 1 Peter 5:7

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

Description

Lord Tweedsmuir reflects on the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln, emphasizing his spiritual depth, moral convictions, and the divine guidance that shaped his decisions. Lincoln's greatness was revealed through his moral revulsion against slavery, mystical sense of the Union's importance, and abiding conviction in following the divine order. Despite facing personal turmoil and political challenges, Lincoln's spiritual depth and theological reflections, especially during his presidency, set him apart as a remarkable leader. His journey from doubt to faith, from anguish to hope, and from uncertainty to divine guidance showcases a man deeply committed to his principles and the well-being of the nation.

Transcript

A great man lays upon posterity the duty of understanding him.

LORD TWEEDSMUIR

Only a few persons in human history have so towered above their contemporaries that they are universally recognized as belonging to the ages. One such person was born in a one-room cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809, and died, as the victim of an assassin's bullet, on April 15, 1865. The magnitude of this man's accomplishment has attracted so much attention that thousands of books and even entire libraries have been devoted to an effort to understand the mystery of his greatness. Though Lincoln is not easy to understand and though answers are never simple, he is more understandable today than ever before. The new possibility of understanding arises, in part, from the similarity between our time and his. Again there is in the American spirit deep division and consequent anguish. The chance that his thinking may illuminate our own is a good reason for its reexamination.

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Lincoln's greatness was revealed in its fullness only at the end of the story, after months of turmoil not merely in the nation but in his own mind. While he is remembered primarily for his difficult political decisions which kept the Union intact, the more we study them the more we realize that all of them were reached at a level far deeper than that of politics. underlying all particular decisions was a moral revulsion against human slavery, a mystical sense of the importance of the Union, and an abiding conviction that the divine order could be ascertained and followed. One of the most revealing items, as we search for the secret of Lincoln's achievement, is his letter to the Quaker woman Eliza Gurney, written September 4, 1864. In this message, addressed to a private person,1 Lincoln expressed succinctly something of the anguish which he sensed in others and which reflected his own inner turmoil. "Your people," he wrote, "have had, and are having, a very great trial. On principle, and faith, opposed to both war and oppression, they can only practically oppose oppression by war." The difficulty was not that of following a moral principle at personal cost; the difficulty was that of knowing what to do when there is more than one principle, and when the principles clash.

It must be remembered that in the early autumn of 1864, when Lincoln wrote to Eliza Gurney, he was involved in a campaign for reelection, a campaign in which he was convinced, at that time, that he would be defeated. His political enemies were vicious in their criticism of his efforts to bring the war to an end, and it seriously appeared to many that the proponents of instant peace, without a solution to the problem, might win. So convinced of this was Lincoln that he wrote and sealed a letter to take effect on the occasion of the expected victory of his chief opponent, General George McClellan. The paper, which was secret

until the outcome of the election was known, was dated August 23, 1864, and read: "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President-elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards."

Increasingly, it is clear that the major key to Lincoln's greatness is his spiritual depth. His Second Inaugural, which has been widely acclaimed as the noblest state paper of the nineteenth century, is also recognized by those who study it carefully as a theological classic. The political sagacity rested in large measure upon a spiritual foundation.

To some people it seems strange to refer to Abraham Lincoln as a theologian. After all, his schooling was negligible; he was never a member of a church; certainly he did not think of himself as a professional in religious thinking. Far from being always confident, he passed through periods of uncertainty and doubt. In October, 1863, less than eighteen months before his death, he wrote: "I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am." A major element in Lincoln's greatness was the way in which he could hold a strong moral position without the usual accompaniment of self-righteousness.

What is perhaps most strange of all is the magnitude of the difference with Lincoln was able to make in the religious life of the nation. It has been customary to speak of Lincoln as the "savior" of the Union, but we are nearer to the truth when we speak of him as its creator, since the Union became much more genuine as a result of his efforts than it had ever been before. Previous to Lincoln, the Union was still largely a dream, but he changed the entire picture by the character of his own commitment. There were many threats of secession before 1861, some coming even from New England, but after Lincoln such threats

were not seriously repeated. "The Civil War," said Dean Sperry, "has proved to be not so much the fortress where the Union was preserved as the fiery furnace where men were smelted together into one political stuff."2

The change in the national capital, after Lincoln, was striking. No longer was it a sleepy Southern town with occasional bursts of energy when Congress was in session. The nation henceforth possessed two striking new symbols, the dome on the hill and the memory of a man who cared supremely about the Union. What emerged was a new mystique, which has not been entirely lost in the subsequent years. Part of the mystique has arisen from the way in which Lincoln refused to be satisfied with simplistic answers. He had, in fact, as little sympathy with the instant abolitionists as he had with the apologists for slavery. Deeply convinced of the reality of the divine will, he had no patience at all with any who were perfectly sure that they knew the details of the divine will. His faith in the service which America, under God, might give to the world can be understood only when it is placed in the setting of the religious experience which came to dominate his nights and days.

The degree to which Lincoln set a new style in the national life is astonishing. Before his administration, there was a succession of Presidents who were reticent in expressing their hopes and fears in unapologetically religious terms. Some of these men were personally devout, but they hesitated to use the language of devotion when representing the nation. In contrast, Lincoln spoke openly, and with a striking absence of self-consciousness, of the dependence of the nation upon Providence. He was the first to establish a Federal Thanksgiving, which, though it had roots in colonial America, was not regularized until done so by him in the autumn of 1863. What is most surprising is that the

novel pattern set by Lincoln has been followed by all of the men who have succeeded him in the highest office. The standard which he inaugurated, making it possible to refer to prayer and to divine guidance without embarrassment, has been continued to this day. The Federal Thanksgiving, according to which the life of devotion and the life of the nation are joined together, bears every evidence of being a permanent feature of our national existence. Professor Timothy L. Smith of Johns Hopkins University has pointed out that "the religious conviction which permeated Lincoln's statements and addresses set the tone for a new generation of public figures."3

The anguish which Lincoln experienced more than a century ago gave birth, not only to penitence and thanksgiving, but to much more that has endured in our spiritual panoply. The phrase "under God," which emerged spontaneously at the Gettysburg Battlefield in November, 1863, has now become an official part of our Salute to the Flag. "In God we trust," first used in Lincoln's administration, still adorns our coinage and is engraved on the walls of both houses of Congress. Out of anguish came greatness such as does not normally come in easier times.

The profundity of Lincoln's religious thinking which emerged during his days in the White House was not only new to the nation; it was also new to the man himself. One of the important features of Lincoln's theology is the fact that it was a development. The man had an amazing ability to grow! Lincoln, more than most persons, changed radically with the years and particularly with the heavy demands which events made upon him. He changed even in literary style. The most loyal reader of Lincoln's addresses is bound to admit that some of his early speaking and writing style was commonplace and pedestrian. There is very

little in the early utterances to prepare us for the brilliance of the

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Message to Congress (December 1, 1862), the magnificent simplicity of the Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863), and the profundity of the Second Inaugural (March 4, 1865). But before all of these masterpieces came the unforgettable "Meditation on the Divine Will," which has such a haunting quality that we can with difficulty put it down. As John Hay said, "It was not written to be seen of men," but it will be honored as long as men know what it is to suffer and to face difficult moral decisions.

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for, and against, the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party--and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true--that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

The document is undated, but appears to have been written in September, 1862, after the deep disappointment of the Second Battle of Bull Run. It provides one of the best exhibitions of the theology of anguish. Attorney General Bates reported that early in September, 1862, Lincoln seemed "wrung by the bitterest anguish." The President, for some reason, left the meditation on his desk, where John Hay found it and copied it. As Sandburg has said, the sad man was "musing on the role of Providence in the dust of events."4

The spiritual level of the Meditation of 1862 is radically different from anything exhibited in the writings of the prairie years.

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Indeed, it has been possible, by referring to early statements independent of later developments, to represent Lincoln as an unbeliever. But, by recognizing growth, we can save Lincoln from both his uncritical admirers and his uncritical detractors. There were a few hints of theological depth even in the years before the crucial autumn of 1862, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Lincoln's was the kind of mind which did not reach its true magnitude except in experiences of sorrow and of strain. Thus, in the emotional parting at the Springfield Railroad Station on February 11, 1861, Lincoln rose at least temporarily to a great height. "I now leave," he said, "not knowing when or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell."5

On the long journey to Washington, with numerous stops over a period of eleven days, the President-elect made many brief addresses, most of which are not really notable. An exception is provided in the unexpected phrase, depicting Americans as God's "almost chosen people," which was uttered at Trenton on February 21, 1861. Here the idea of a national vocation received one of its first clear expressions. The

sentence which includes the surprise twist is: "I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost

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chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle."

The struggle here mentioned was, in part, that of the American Revolution, but it was also something more. It was this extra which continued to haunt Lincoln as President until his last tragic days. The vision which was slowly becoming clarified was, he said, "something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all times to come." The vision, which transcended all mere nationalism, was becoming highly prophetic. Twenty months later, in the Annual Message to Congress of December 1, 1862, the dream was given an even sharper expression when the man born in a Kentucky cabin wrote, "We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth."

Very few expected the kind of greatness which emerged in Lincoln's final phase. Because we have known the climactic utterances all of our lives, many of us being able to repeat every word of the Gettysburg Address, it is difficult to understand the ridicule which Lincoln was forced to endure as he entered into the highest office. In an editorial the Baltimore Sun said, "Had we any respect for mr. Lincoln, official or personal, as a man, or as President-elect of the United States, his career and speeches on his way to the seat of government would have cruelly impaired it." To make their harsh judgment even more clear the editors continued, "We do not believe the Presidency can ever be more degraded by any of his successors, than it has been by him, even before his inauguration."

What is especially obvious in Lincoln's spiritual pilgrimage is that the theological positions of his early manhood had little in common with those expressed at the end. Lincoln's career developed in five places, Kentucky, where he was born, southern Indiana, where he spent most of his boyhood, New Salem, Illinois, where he grew into full manhood, Springfield, Illinois, where he lived longest, and Washington, D.C., where he matured and died. Each of these places was important in his intellectual growth.

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We know, chiefly because of the patient research of Dr. Louis A. Warren, of the group of Baptists with whom Thomas and Nancy Lincoln were associated before their removal to Indiana.6 The most important fact is that they were strongly antislavery in conviction. In one of the best of several short autobiographies which Abraham Lincoln wrote,7 he recognized the early influence of antislavery conviction as one reason for moving across the Ohio River. Referring to himself in the third person, Lincoln wrote:

At this time his father resided on Knobcreek, on the road from Bardstown, Ky. to nashville, Tenn. at a point three or three and a half miles South or South-West of Atherton's ferry on the Rolling fork. From this place he removed to what is now Spencer county Indiana, in the autumn of 1816, A. then being in his eighth year. This removal was partly on account of slavery, but chiefly on account of the difficulty of land titles in Ky.

It is difficult to exaggerate the cultural poverty of Lincoln's formative years, from the age of seven to the age of twenty-one. By his own account, the Lincolns settled "in an unbroken forest," where, since the great task was "the clearing away of surplus wood," the boy "had an axe put into his hands at once." Lincoln recognized that "the family were originally Quakers," but since that connection was merely historical, Lincoln's father and step-mother both joined the Baptist congregation in their new neighborhood.

Pigeon Creek Baptist Church, affiliated with the denomination known as "Regular Baptists," was organized June 8, 1816, shortly before the Lincoln family arrived from Kentucky. The congregation met at first in their rude homes, but on Lincoln's eleventh birthday, February 12, 1820, plans for the meeting house were

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accepted. The building, which became very important to young Lincoln, was thirty feet long and twenty feet wide, of hewed logs. It was eight feet in the understory and six feet above the joists. They called it "Pigeon Meeting House." According to the records Thomas Lincoln joined by letter June 7, 1823, and "Sister Sally Lincoln by experience of grace," on April 8, 1826. When Nancy, Abraham's mother, died, in October, 1818, she was buried in the forest, but the grave of her daughter is in the yard adjacent to the meeting house. Because the teen-age Lincoln was appointed sexton, he had abundant opportunity to hear the itinerant preachers, who tended to be strongly antislavery.8

Lincoln's schooling was negligible, the aggregate, he said, not amounting to one year. In place of schooling, the boy had access to a few books which he read so faithfully that they left a permanent mark upon his mind, and helped to create the final elegance of his style. The chief books were the Bible, the plays of Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Aesop's Fables, the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and Weems' Life of Washington, the influence of these books upon his later thought and style of expression being evident at many points. When, for example, Lincoln spoke at Trenton, New Jersey, on February 21, 1861, he referred to his boyhood reading of the Life of Washington and revealed how that experience had aroused in his young mind a sense of the nobility of the total movement of which he was a part. "I recollect thinking then," he said, "boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for."

We know part of the secret of Lincoln's greatness when we notice that the books which formed his early taste for literature were, on the whole, far removed from the trivial. Thereby, the lack of formal education was partly balanced by what Professor Whitehead

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has called "the habitual vision of greatness." Weems may not have been a wholly reliable author, but the greatness of the man whom he depicted shone through and reached the boy in his rude forest home. Lincoln said of his education, in his autobiographical fragment of 1860, "What he has in the way of education, he has picked up." After he had settled in New Salem and was twenty-three years of age, he was encouraged by Mentor Graham9 to undertake a study of English grammar, a task which gave him something which a college education might not have provided. If he had attended Illinois College, as once seemed possible, it is hard to believe that the outcome would have been on the level of the style of thought and speech which actually emerged. Certainly it would not have been the same. He said he regretted his want of education and "does what he can to supply the want."

In his effort to reach a rational theology, Lincoln as a young man had very little real help. There was no church at New Salem, and few of his neighbors cared greatly about ideas. Though the deep sense of reverence which had developed in the Indiana forest seems never to have left the young man, he began to speculate in ways which made some people think of him as verging on infidelity. Certainly he was influenced for a time by the amateur philosophizing of his pioneer neighbors, as he revolted against the ignorant preaching which he heard from time to time. As a young boy in Indiana, he had enjoyed mimicking the hell-fire and brimstone preachers of the raw frontier. "On Monday mornings he would mount a stump, and deliver, with a wonderful approach to exactness the sermon he had heard the day before."10

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In Illinois Lincoln was repulsed by the crude emotionalism of the annual revivals, including those conducted by his political rival, Peter Cartwright. Lincoln, being naturally alienated by the fierce competition between denominational groups, experienced some sympathy with those who, by their opponents, were termed "infidels." His law partner in Springfield, William H. Herndon, emphasized this connection grotesquely, even going so far as to say, "Now let it be written in history and on Mr. Lincoln's tomb: 'He died an unbeliever.' " No serious modern historian accepts this as true. If it is true, we are forced to the conclusion that Lincoln was the arch-hypocrite. His hundreds of statements affirming the reality of God's guidance would have to be assigned to insincerity, a task too great even for the most inveterate debunker.

The slender thread of truth on which Herndon wove his thesis is not really very surprising. What it amounts to is that, in his New Salem days, the young Lincoln apparently read the Age of Reason by Thomas Paine and Volney's Ruins. These were, of course, discussed around the fire in the evenings. In the winter of 1831-1832, a debating society was formed with Lincoln as a participating member. The young man's brilliant mind made him delight in taking any side in a debate, but it is highly unreasonable to conclude that positions taken in this fashion reflected his own enduring convictions.

Herndon claimed that Lincoln, in his New Salem period, wrote a book defending infidelity, the book being lost.11 There has never been any conclusive evidence about this supposed book, but whatever plausibility the story once had was undermined by the discovery, after ninety-six years, of Lincoln's own statement in which he denied that he had ever held an "infidel" position.

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The statement, which brought one long controversy to an end, is a handbill printed on July 31, 1846. it was found by Dr. Henry E. Pratt, executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, and was published in the March, 1942, issue of the Abraham Lincoln Quarterly. Dr. Pratt's discovery represented one of the major advances of the century in Lincoln scholarship. The handbill is so important for the understanding of Lincoln that it calls for reproduction in its entirety:

To The Voters of the Seventh Congressional District Fellow Citizens:

A charge having got into circulation in some of the neighborhoods of this District, in substance that I am an open scoffer at Christianity, I have by the advice of some friends concluded to notice the subject in this form. That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scripture; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I

understand is called the "Doctrine of necessity"-- that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument -- The habit of arguing thus however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years -- And I add here, I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations. The foregoing, is the whole truth, briefly stated, in relation to myself upon this subject.

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion. Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his maker, I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of a community in which he may live. If, then I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who would condemn me for it; but i do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.

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The handbill clarifies many points. For one thing it shows that what Lincoln called the "Doctrine of Necessity" was an important feature of his developing world view. Apparently, what he referred to was the idea of determinism, according to which all events are explained as necessary consequences of prior causes. The basic flaw in this philosophy, and the chief reason why Lincoln, with his clear mind, could not uphold it, is that it makes impossible any genuine responsibility. Men are certainly not responsible for that which they cannot avoid doing, just as the stone is not responsible for the death of a person who is killed by its movement. There is abundant evidence that Lincoln valued supremely the sense of personal responsibility and the freedom of decision without which it is meaningless. Accordingly, the agony of decision came to be more and more important in his life. On the other hand, however, he never left off one element in the idea of necessity, viz., that our destinies are not wholly of our own making.

The determinism about which the young men of New Salem sometimes debated was not far removed from the doctrine of predestination which Lincoln had heard expounded so often in his Pigeon Creek boyhood. Slowly and painfully this conception was purged of its crudities, until what remained was the mature conviction expressed in the Second Inaugural. In this, we observe, Lincoln did not refer to "necessity" or to "determinism," but he did affirm his abiding conviction that the destinies of men and nations are not wholly within their own hands. After the fiery trial and the anguish of experience, something which differed from both determinism and voluntarism was envisioned and accepted. It was this position, so much richer than compromise, which fascinated the late eminent theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. "This combination," he said, "of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment must be regarded as almost

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a perfect model of the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal and responsible toward the moral treasures of a free civilization on the one hand while yet having some religious vantage point over the struggle."12

A second clarification which the handbill provides is the precise dating of the change which came in Lincoln's own thinking. According to the handbill, a major change occurred in 1841, when Lincoln was thirty-two years of age. We can now see that the fundamental chapters in Abraham Lincoln's life, after his childhood, were four. The first chapter takes him to the age of thirty-two; the second, a period of twenty years, ends with his departure for Washington, in February, 1861; the third ends with the autumn of 1862,

when he had been in the White House during a year and a half of unrelieved frustration; the fourth and last, occupying two and a half years, carries him to the assassination.

The change in 1841 was a radical one. He had already been settled in Springfield for four years, had practiced law, and had served in the Illinois legislature, but this measure of success had not been sufficient to give him any real peace of mind. In a period of self-doubt and dire despair Lincoln broke his first engagement with Mary Todd. His decision, at the beginning of 1841, was influenced both by the fear that Miss Todd might not be happy in sharing his humble station and the further fear that her aristocratic relatives "looked with much disfavor on the match."13 The young man's act was not disgraceful, but the entire experience was one of anguish.

In a letter addressed to his law partner, John T. Stuart, on January 20, 1841, Lincoln wrote: "I have, within the last few days, been making a most discreditable exhibition of myself in

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the way of hypochondriaism."14 Three days later he wrote: "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not [sic]. To remain as I am is impossible."15 As late as March 27, 1842, in writing to his friend Joshua Speed, he referred to "that fatal first of Jany. '41." He might have been happy, in subsequent months, he said, "but for the never-absent idea, that there is one still unhappy whom I have contributed to make so."16

The key to Lincoln's famous employment of humor is not that he failed to appreciate the tragic aspects of human existence, but rather that he felt these with such keenness that some relief was required. "If I couldn't tell these stories I would die," he told a worried Ohio congressman who had come to protest General George McClellan's handling of the Army of the Potomac. Isaac N. Arnold was one of his close associates who saw clearly, in Lincoln, the combination of characteristics of an opposite nature. "Mirthfulness and melancholy, hilarity and sadness, were," he said, "strangely combined in him. His mirth was sometimes exuberant. It sparked in jest, story and anecdote, while at the next moment, his peculiarly sad, pathetic melancholy eyes would seem to wander far away, and one realized that he was a man 'familiar with sorrow and acquainted with grief.' " Andrew D. White, later the famous President of Cornell University, said "his face seemed to me one of the saddest I have ever seen."

Part of the paradox lies in the fact that the teller of humorous tales vastly preferred tragic poetry to any other. Reading Shakespeare's plays in the Indiana cabin, he came to love Macbeth, Hamlet, Richard III, and King John, so that he could repeat effortlessly

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long passages, even during the strain of the war years. On April 9, 1865, steaming up the Potomac, only five days before his assassination, Lincoln deliberately guided the conversation to literary subjects and read aloud from Shakespeare for several hours to his companions.

After 1841 Lincoln was equidistant from the heresy which makes a person believe that he can do nothing, and the opposite heresy which makes him suppose that he is the master of his own fate. He was working out a philosophy which was deep enough in include both foreordination and free will. The third way, which differed from both fatalism and voluntarism, was, in essence, a theory of divine vocation. More and more

this became the foundation upon which Lincoln built the superstructure of his thought. The idea of vocation, of course, involves paradox, but there is no possibility of understanding Lincoln's mind if paradox is eliminated.

Because to his friend Speed Lincoln could write with utter honesty and with no necessity to impress the electorate, the letter of July 4, 1842, is of major significance. In the course of this letter he wrote, "I believe God make me one of the instruments of bringing your Fanny and you together, which union, I have no doubt He had fore-ordained."17 As early as July, 1842, Lincoln had recovered his confidence in himself by reaching a conviction of God's guidance. "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord" was, he said, his text for the moment. Out of his continuous reading of the Old Testament, the tortured man was able to draw, for personal application, the words of Moses to the people (Exodus 14:13). By this time he and Mary Todd were engaged again, and they were married exactly four months later, November 4, 1842.

An important element in the new beginning of 1841 was a gift

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to Lincoln from Speed's mother-in-law of a new Bible. In a letter to Mary Speed, written September 27, 1841, Lincoln said, "Tell your mother that I have not got her 'present' with me; but that I intend to read it regularly when I return home. I doubt not that it is really, as she says, the best cure for the 'Blues' could one but take it according to the truth."18 Many years later, in the White House, Lincoln autographed his photograph with the words: "For Mrs. Lucy G. Speed, from whose pious hand I accepted the present of an Oxford Bible twenty years ago." Whatever the cause of his cure, the important fact is that it occurred. Accordingly, in a letter to Joshua Speed, written at Springfield February 3, 1842, Lincoln said, "I have been quite clear of hypo since you left, -- even better than I was along in the fall."19 Life did not become easy, but after 1841 it was different.

The relatively tranquil period of Lincoln's life covering the twenty years up to his departure from Springfield as President-elect was sharply pierced by the death of Eddie, the second son of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. The death of this little boy, not yet four years old, on February 1, 1850, produced a second spiritual crisis comparable in its results to that which came nine years earlier. On February 23, 1850, Lincoln wrote to his step-brother, John D. Johnston, "I suppose you had not learned that we lost our little boy. He was sick fifty two days & died the morning of the first day of this month."20

Consequent to the new crisis was the friendship of Dr. James Smith, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield. Dr. Smith was a well-educated Scotsman, the author of a book, The Christian's Defense. Lincoln had never before encountered a proponent of the Christian faith of Smith's intellectual strength and distinction. When the Lincolns were forlorn in the loss of

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their child, Dr. Smith reached them at their point of greatest need. At Eddie's funeral the pastor preached the sermon and soon, thereafter, at his suggestion, Mary Lincoln joined the First Presbyterian Church. Mr. Lincoln did not join with his wife, but attended Divine Worship with the degree of regularity which his roving life permitted. Already it was obvious that both those who afterward called him an atheist and those who claimed that he was an orthodox Christian were demonstrably wrong. He believed, but he did not believe lightly or conventionally. The death of his son sufficed to eliminate forever the lighthearted irreverence of his youth.

Something of the new faith which came following the death of Eddie is indicated by the message which he wrote to his step-brother, when his father was dying:

I sincerely hope father may recover his health, but at all events, tell him to remember to call upon and confide in our great and good merciful Maker, who will not turn away from him in any extremity. He notes the fall of a sparrow and numbers the hairs of our heads, and He will not forget the dying man who puts his trust in Him.

A new emphasis, different from anything expressed in Lincoln's earlier statements, was that concerning life after death. The letter continued:

Say to him that if we could meet now it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant, but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before, and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to join them.21

In this middle period of his life Lincoln did not claim that all of his doubts were swept away, for they had not been. One of the most appealing of his utterances, confided to a neighbor, bore

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exactly on this point. "Probably it is to be my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did. But in my poor maimed, withered way, I bear with me as I go on a seeking spirit of desire for a faith that was with him of olden time, who, in his need, as I in mine, exclaimed, 'Help thou my unbelief.' "22

The anguish and turmoil of Lincoln's mind never ended. When, toward the end of the Springfield period, people began to mention Lincoln as a possible occupant of the highest office, the man himself was doubtful, considering himself inadequate for the magnitude of the responsibility. Thus, in a letter written July 28, 1859, he said, "I must say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency." What roused him out of a certain lethargy was the slavery issue. In a brief autobiography, written December 20, 1859, he said, "I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again." In his adamant stand against the extension of slavery into hitherto free territories, he began to feel that he was indeed an instrument of the divine will. Never claiming certainty, he lived by hope and entered the conflict with a confidence with sustained him. "I do hope," he said at Clinton, Illinois, on October 14, 1859, "that as there is a just and righteous God in Heaven, our principles will and shall prevail sooner or later."

Increasingly, whether in religion or in politics, Lincoln occupied and embattled middle ground. As in religion he had to fight on two fronts, so he fought in the political arena. His position was naturally criticized as much by the militant Abolitionists as it was by the militant proponents of the extension of slavery. Even to this day there are writers, including theological ones,

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who claim to be shocked when they discover that Lincoln did not affirm the factual equality of the races. He did not claim this because it was the point at issue. The question, he said over and over, is not what a man's particular abilities may be, but what his rights are as a human being made in God's image. He listened to the arguments of the proslavery party, especially the argument that slavery was good for the slave. The peculiarity of slavery, he said, consists of the fact "that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks the good of, for himself."23

More and more Lincoln dealt with the problem of human slavery, not merely on the political level, but upon a far deeper one. Thus, at New Haven, Connecticut, on March 6, 1860, he said, "We think Slavery a great moral wrong, and while we do not claim the right to touch it where it exists, we wish to treat it as a wong in the Territories, where our votes will reach it. We think that a respect for ourselves, a regard for future generations and for the God that made us, require that we put down this wrong where our votes will properly reach it."24 This position did not satisfy the Abolitionists any more than it satisfied the slave party, but Lincoln followed it because he was keenly aware of the limitations which fidelity to the Constitution imposed. As an instrument of the divine will he was devoted to the possible! This decision required that emphasis be placed upon extension. This is why, after he was elected, Lincoln wrote to Alexander H. Stephens as follows: You think slavery is right and ought to be extended; while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us."25 Two and a half months later, these same words were employed in Lincoln's First Inaugural Address

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delivered March 4, 1861. Much as he was convinced that slavery was wrong, he rejected the argument that it should therefore be attacked by force where it was legally established. Emancipation was right on principle, but peaceful union was also right on principle. Hating both oppression and war, in the words of his letter to Mrs. Gurney, he sought a way in which oppression could finally be ended without war. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend' it."

From the day when these words were uttered, the augustness of the oath became more and more important in Lincoln's thinking. It seemed to him that the taking of the oath lifted the struggle out of the level of politics into the level of the holy. At no point did this become more clear than in the Cabinet meeting held on September 22, 1862. Lincoln, who had actually written an Emancipation Proclamation two months earlier, explained his decision to emancipate slaves in all territories then in rebellion against the federal government. In sharp contrast to the mood with which the meeting had begun, the President, feeling that he was treading upon holy ground, became extremely solemn. "I made," he said, "a solemn vow before God, that if General Lee was driven back from Pennsylvania, I would crown the result by the declaration of freedom to the slaves." We are chiefly indebted, for our knowledge of these words, to Francis B. Carpenter, the artist who lived in the White House while he worked on the well-known painting which depicts the reading of the Proclamation to the Cabinet. Carpenter's report is corroborated by that of Secretary Salmon P. Chase, who described the eventful meeting in his diary. The key words of Lincoln are: "When the Rebel

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Army was at Frederick, I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation, such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to anyone, but I made a promise to myself and (hesitating a little) to my Maker. The Rebel Army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise." Another confirmation comes from the diary of Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy. Referring to Lincoln, Welles wrote, "He had, he said, made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle (which had just been fought) he would consider it his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation." God, Lincoln said, "had decided this question in favor

of the slave." After that day in the autumnal equinox of 1862, there was much more anguish for Americans, both in the North and in the South, but the course was set. The spiritual pilgrimage of Abraham Lincoln had reached the beginning of the end.

Chapter Two || Table of Contents

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1. This letter is a prized possession of the Pennsylvania Historical Society in Philadelphia. [BACK]

2. Willard L. Sperry, The Meaning of God in the Life of Lincoln (Boston: Central Church, 1922), p. 16. [BACK]

3. Revivalism and Social Reform (Harper Torchbook, 1965), p. 39. [BACK]

4. Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1939), p. 590. [BACK]

5. The fact that the ending, as we now have it, is in Lincoln's own handwriting is evidence of the authenticity of this version. [BACK]

6. Lincoln's Youth, Seven to Twenty-one (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1959), pp. 13, 14. [BACK]

7. This was written for John L. Scripps probably in June, 1860, to assist Scripps in the production of a campaign biography. See Collected Works, IV, pp. 60-67. [BACK]

8. For details see Lincoln Lore, No. 661. [BACK]

9. Local schoolmaster and leading Baptist at New Salem, Graham shared Lincoln's intellectual interests. Lincoln lived at Graham's house in 1833 and was reputedly helped by the older man in his public speaking. [BACK]

10. Ward Hill Lamon, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, p. 39. [BACK]

11. A careful consideration of the "lost book" is provided by William J. Wolf, Lincoln's Religion (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), pp. 45-47. [BACK]

12. The Irony of American History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 172. [BACK]

13. See Lincoln Lore, No. 707. [BACK]

14. Collected Works, I. p. 228. [BACK]

15. Ibid., p. 229 [BACK]

16. Ibid., p. 282. [BACK]

17. Ibid., p. 289. [BACK]

18. Ibid., p. 261. [BACK]

19. Ibid., p. 268. [BACK]

20. Collected Works, II, pp. 76, 77. [BACK]

21. Ibid., pp. 96, 97. [BACK]

22. Henry B. Rankin, Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), pp. 324, 325. Though not all of Rankin's recollections are consistent with other known evidence, this testimony of Rankin's mother appears to be reliable and has been much admired. [BACK]

23. This is part of a fragment to which Nicolay and Hay gave the date October 1, 1858. [BACK]

24. Collected Works, IV, p. 16. [BACK]

25. Ibid., p. 160. [BACK]