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Was Lincoln a Christian?

By

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WAS LINCOLN A CHRISTIAN?

One hundred and thirteen years ago today, in a little log cabin down in Larue County, Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln was born; almost a century and quarter. Today his birthday, and a world honoring him; that fact in itself is an achievement that almost defies, even at this perspective, an analysis of his life that would in any sense add to his luster. It is not my effort nor my desire in planning what I have to say to you this day to make any effort to add to the information which most of us know very well about Abraham Lincoln, nor to seriously try with my own limitations and incompetence to add to the brilliancy and the glory that shrouds his name. But there is one thing which every man covets and every historian desires when speaking or writing of an historial person of such dimensions as Lincoln, and that is that they might be able to take away that which has accumulated of falsity and that which represents the honest intentions or misguided efforts of men who have tried to make the character about whom they speak to fit and adjust their own ideas, their own wills.

I presume that, with the exception of the Nazarene Himself and Shakespeare, no two men that have thus far lived have been so unfairly treated and so partially treated by individual bents of certain inclinations and disposition as has the character and life of Abraham Lincoln. More has been writttn about him and said about him (with these two execeptions) than any other man that has ever lived, and it seems almost somewhat ironical that, having been born just a few years over a century ago, so much should have accumulated about the character and life of Lincoln that is not substantiated or verified by the main reliable sources of authority. It is partly the price that one pays who belongs to the public, for misinformation is much more swift in its channels than true information; and much of that which has clustered about the

name of Lincoln has represented that which grew and developed from a mouth-to-mouth story and repetition of certain characteristics or certain things about him, and it seems somewhat strange to me that if this is true, with only a comparatively short time intervening between his going away and the day that we celebrate, how much more will it be true with the centuries which are yet unborn! And if it is so true of Abraham Lincoln, with only a few years, what can we say of Shakespeare, and what can we say of Jesus? The increasing difficulty of reliable information of a little over a century in itself is of sufficient reason to be a challenge to any mind against formulating opinions and expressing judgments that are based upon the shallow and shoddy.

I have been a student of Lincoln all my life, and for many years it has been my ambition to read everything that I could read about him, to absorb the matchless romance and tragedy of his life, to try and discover that background without which no man's life can be explained, to find those subtle agencies and hidden forces which are responsible for the flowering and the crystallization of his genius, to see in the little things as the indicators of the majestic heights to which he arose when the big things came. And it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of Lincoln; he can never become threadbare as a theme, and yet the very nature of the circumstances compels a continued reiteration of certain well known things about him; and it is well that it is so. We give evidence of our higher selves when we honor the highest self of some great and beautiful character; we give evidence of our own spirituality when the spiritual genius of some other personality has for us a charm and an attraction; it is evidence of our own intellectual place, the sphere we occupy, when we find an affinity with the intellectuality of preceding genius.

Notwithstanding the difficulty about Lincoln, it is possible for us to feel a warmth and a glow about him that the years can not dim and the constant repetition of facts concerning him cannot weaken or lessen. Others may speculate in the realm of science; biology may authoritatively speak of his nativity; science may seriously try to give a reason and justify his unimpeachable life, but we are not concerned with that this day. We know that heredity cannot explain

Abraham Lincoln, just as heredity cannot explain any man of genius. There are certain laws that the scientist has indisputable reason for believing exist, and there are certain biological processes that take place. But you cannot explain Lincoln by them; you cannot explain the genius of Lincoln by a golden continuity of genius that runs through his family—it is not there. You cannot explain Lincoln by education, for, in the sense that you and I speak of being educated today, he knew it not. Until his 14th year, six months of schooling was all that he could boast of. You could not explain it through education; it is not there. No factory trained mind was Lincoln's. You cannot explain it through religion, and it is this which is of supreme import at this moment. Lincoln's father and mother were members of the Free Will Baptist Church. His mother died when Abraham was 4 years of age, and Lincoln lovingly and tenderly, later spoke of her gracious, womanly and maternal character by a remark which you have all heard but which can stand repeating again and again: "All that I am or all that I ever expect to be, I owe to my devoted mother."

Abraham Lincoln stood one winter's day beside an open grave in a little clearing that his father, Thomas Lincoln, had cleared away, and there, without a sermon, without a minister, without a prayer, a few neighbors laid to rest the great heart of Nancy Hanks. This so impressed the mind of Lincoln (and who could doubt but what it would), that when the springtime came, and the birds came back to sing, and the trees warmed by the love of spring sunshine burst into beauty and the buds into flowers, Abraham Lincoln went many miles through the forest to find a preacher, and bringing a rough, homespun, unlearned preacher, he had a funeral for his mother, at her grave that had long been closed.

One of the surest indications of the greatness of maturity is to be found in the greatness of youth. There has never been a character that has achieved greatness but what gave evidence of that greatness in his youth. Youth, so fresh, so impressionistic, so susceptible, so wonderful! Youth seems to be the indicator of future genius. Abraham Lincoln was no exception. And early in his life we find Lincoln giving evidence of a mental attitude divorced from pure emotionalism about the subject of religion. He lived at

a time when hell was painted in lurid flames by an uneducated clergyman; he lived at a time when theological dissension was tearing the finer qualities of life; he lived at a time when neighbors would not speak to neighbors over the subject of baptism; he lived at a time when that most despicable of all theological doctrines was promulgated with untiring energy on the part of zealous men and women who possessed more zeal than intellectual capacity; that doctrine of the damnation of unbaptized babies. In those early days in Kentucky—which did not last very long for Abraham Lincoln and his family soon moved into Indiana, and in Indiana Abraham Lincoln was thrown in the midst of this turmoil of theological quandary.

Lincoln started in to think for himself at a very early age, and one of the outstanding remarks of his paramount spaciousness and tolerance of later years was to be found in the fact that he early gave evidence of possessing a speculative mind rather than a contemplative mind. Abraham Lincoln's natural mental attitude was the attitude of speculation. Abraham Lincoln, though he never was a star in the practice of law, possessed what is commonly spoken of today as a legal mind. This evidence of that mind is given verification in his days at New Salem. There are a few years of Lincoln's life just here that are more or less obscure; many writers and historians have sought to read all sorts of things into those years, but they represented a period when Lincoln was attending an educational institution called an "academy," that was very primitive, in New Salem. He was boarding with a man by the name of Hill. He was 22 years of age; he had passed through that period of revival services which occurred with regularity in those primitive days, and it is told of him that he loved to attend those services and that he loved preachers and preaching but that he never in his life, then or since, ever made any public manifestation or gave any evidence whatsoever that he had passed through that experience in religion which the orthodox church of his day spoke of as "conversion." Abraham Lincoln possessed the mystical, superstitious trait that is always a part of genius in some particulars. (And I speak of Lincoln as a genius.) Very seldom is genius completely symmetrical.... There never

has been an outstanding man of genius in any development of human life that was completely symmetrical. There are developments one way or the other which by the preponderance of genius in one particular channel apparently is robbed from some other channel of life. In the intellectual sanity which Abraham Lincoln possessed on all subjects of religion there can be traced a subtle background of mysticism and superstition. After he had gone to Washington, in a letter to a friend in Springfield he said this: "I have always been superstitious," and those who knew him best have continually spoken of the little evidences of superstition which very frequently manifested themselves in some of the little more commonplace experiences of life.

While we are talking about that, why not let all of us confess? Who is not superstitious? Oh, I am not talking about the larger thought of superstition; I am talking about picking up a pin; I am talking about walking under a ladder; I am talking about raising an umbrella in the home; I am talking about having some obstruction come between you and your friends when you are walking; I am talking about little things I know, but it is from just these little things that men have woven big things about the life of Lincoln, and the position which I am establishing is this, that it is unfair to the bigness and the great, wonderful toleration which Lincoln possessed. But it was there. Likewise, his mysticism; there was a big, deep background of mysticism to the life of Lincoln, almost to the sense that at times he would react psychologically about events which had not yet transpired. It is unquestionably true that the dream which Lincoln had in the White House a few months preceding his own assassination, caused him to confide to Mrs. Lincoln and one or two intimate friends that he would never finish his term of office, that last night he dreamed he saw himself lying in state, and what was more, he said, "I heard the cry of the people." Those little, strange things that no man can analyze, that your modern psycho-analysis and your modern philosophy of Freud and all of the other things are helpless with. Lincoln possessed this faculty to a remarkable degree. Lincoln said to Bishop Simpson, "Do you ever find yourself talking with the dead?" And that great tragedy which came into his life the second year in the White

House, when little Willie died, can all be explained in a most human basis, for there was nothing supernatural in it, nor did Lincoln claim any supernaturalism in it but he claimed this humanity in it when he said, "I find myself sometimes talking to Willie as though he were by my side." His strange, lovely kinship with him! I think that the greatness of Lincoln is evidenced in that wonderful relationship which Lincoln had with his beloved son Tad. I can see him now sharpening his pencil for him, standing at the White House window and looking across the Potomac, by the monument at Washington, and I can see the reluctance with which Lincoln leaves that little boy, and I can see him in those dark hours when the destiny of a people was upon his shoulders and the cries of a people in his heart, with Tad curling up in a little ball of love and sleeping on the floor of his conference room, and Lincoln, holding important sessions of state with his cabinet, looked at little Tad and said, "Oh, there is my inspiration!" And little Tad was in dreamland.

This background of Lincoln, in the sense of the larger and more spectacular and more dramatic moments in which he lived, must all be taken into consideration and never neglected if we are to arrive at a true, symmetrical understanding of his character.

At the age of 22, Lincoln saw New Salem passing through one of those orgies of religious debauchery: evangelists of one sect and another had terrified the hearts of the people, they had spoken in such disgusting authoritativeness about truths of which they had no knowledge or verification. The reaction of Lincoln was this, that he prepared an essay on Christianity, in which he gave a very clear outline (at 22) of where he stood upon the subject of religion, and orthodox writers about him since have tried to establish as a truth that in a discussion in the little store in New Salem, as Lincoln pulled this paper from his pocket and read it to them, at its conclusion Mr. Hill grabbed the paper, tore it in two and cast it into the flames. Those who have tried to establish and make Lincoln an atheist, and make him this and make him that, have many, many times used this as an illustration to confirm their own individual desires of what they would like to have Mr. Lincoln's religion to have been: I have been at work for two or three months in

anticipating this service in verifying that story, and only yesterday I found in a book shop a publication, whose authority cannot be denied or questioned, that tells the story as it was. The paper that was torn up (and there was one torn up) was a letter which had passed between Mr. Lincoln and one of his friends over Anne Rutledge who was their mutual sweetheart, and Lincoln's fine toleration in that affair which was purely a personal matter of Mr. Lincoln and did not concern anyone else, and only concerns us as we are able to establish a fact about the other, Mr. Lincoln's letter that was thrown into the flames was a letter in regard to that circumstance. The essay that Lincoln wrote on Christianity was not destroyed by Mr. Hill, and it is upon the statement of Mr. Hill himself, who in the later years grew and even then knew of the latent ability and genius of Abraham Lincoln.

Now, therefore, what authoritative information have we about Lincoln's religion? First, this: Abraham Lincoln never joined any church; he was never a church member; Abraham Lincoln never signed his name to any creed. Abraham Lincoln never partook in any of the sacraments of orthodox christianity; he never partook of the Lord's Supper; he never was baptized or christened. He refused consistently, from his early years unto his death bed, to have anything whatsoever to do with argumentative, speculating or ecclesiastical christianity. Now, if you mean, in answering the question, Was Abraham Lincoln a Christian?—if you mean joining a church, if you mean accepting a creed as to the nature of Jesus Christ, as to the circumstances of His birth, as to the practice of the rites of the church: if you mean this, no man living or dead could ever have proven that Abraham Lincoln was a Christian. Abraham Lincoln attended the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield; after his marriage to Mary Todd, she being an Episcopalian, Abraham Lincoln attended the Episcopal church. A very sweet spirited and lovely character by the name of Dr. James Smith came to the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield while Lincoln was a member of the legislature, and Mr. Lincoln had a death in his family, losing his first son, and he invited Dr. James Smith to preach the funeral service. Mr. Lincoln was very much attracted to Dr. Smith, and it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Both Mr. Lincoln and Mary Todd went

back to the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, as attendants and not communicants. On their removal to Washington, Mr. Lincoln attended a Presbyterian church in the city of Washington, but he attended at various times religious services of all the denominations and of all churches. The kindly letter which he wrote to one of the Roman Catholic chaplains in the Civil War is a surer evidence of Abraham Lincoln's christianity than the effort which has been made by the orthodox clergy to establish as a fact that Lincoln was a Christian in the church and ecclesiastical sense.

When he was 12 years of age, he wrote in a little copy book, when he was taking his first lessons in writing, this:

“ Abraham Lincoln,
“ His book and his pen;
“ He will be good,
“ But God knows when.”

And it is still in existence today.

When I discover those little things about Abraham Lincoln, and then discover that there was no great liberal creed, no great liberal church of which he knew or had access to, no great liberal movement in religion—for a man who was not orthodox in mind at that time was always called atheist and unbeliever—I know Lincoln, with that fine ethical and spiritual background, found a certain inspiration in the church, but he never surrendered his own intellectual grasp of true christianity or religion by uniting with any church, anywhere, in all this country.

If what Carlyle said was true, that the most important fact about a man is that man's religion, can we not find in Abraham Lincoln a great evidence that a man's religion is after all the supreme fact about the man? I ask for no uncanny explanation of Lincoln; I do not deify Lincoln, for he was human. But I do claim this, that the world has never seen a character that was so indicative of what a liberal, tolerant, God-minded, honest effort of true religion will do for a man than it was in the life and character of Abraham Lincoln.

There is the background; not the Presidency, not slavery, not the Gettysburg Address, not the Second Inaugural Address—none of these, but that evidence which early in his life manifested the weighing capacity of his brain, his titanic intellect. I think that

Abraham Lincoln was the greatest work of art that democracy has ever produced, and probably it will not produce another for another century or more. Such pinnacles are rare, even in a century. When I think of the myriad-minded men of the ages—you can name them on your two hands: Homer; Plato; Socrates; Dante; Shakespeare; Milton. The modern Tolstoy; Mazzini; Rosseau; Whitman; Emerson; Lincoln. There they are. God takes centuries to make such men, and invariably the background of their lives is the fine nobility that manifested their kinship with immortal truth.

What is the background of the life of Lincoln? That little log cabin, that little broken in body and crushed in spirit: Nancy Hanks. Probably the great weariness of face that Lincoln wore was largely determined by that strange, tragic countenance, from the pre-natal influencing of that little mother, in that forest with its poverty. And yet Lincoln, with strange and beautiful irony, knew how to laugh; he knew how to make others laugh, and sometimes when his own heart was being twisted and torn by tragedy his face was wreathed in smiles.

The background of Lincoln's religion was to be found in its primitive contact, just where all true religion manifests itself. With Abraham Lincoln there was no veneer; Abraham Lincoln's ruggedness and virility were the ruggedness and virility of the primitive; he was primitive in his emotions, not ashamed to laugh and not ashamed of the tears. He was primitive in his love; he could love but one and when they buried her body, Abraham Lincoln said: "This day they have buried my heart." He never recovered from that sweetheart's death; it colored his whole life. He was primitive in his morals: Abraham Lincoln knew not a double standard. For Abraham Lincoln there was not one moral for a man and another for a woman. Abraham Lincoln's moral sublimity was the sublimity of one standard, and that is the primitive standard. No sophistries of modern platitudes on the subject of ethics found a response in his religion; no subterfuge of modern isms or cults established any other order for him. Abraham Lincoln's religion was the verification in every thought and action of his life, that there is a moral order in this world, and he did not ask God to change it.

When they worried him about praying (as a convention of ministers did in Washington) and beseeched him to pray for victory, for peace, Abraham Lincoln sent his message to that group of men, a message that I must repeat, for it was his religion: Tell them, my dear sir, that the President of the United States is not concerned about having God on his side but that he is concerned about being on God's side," and the result of it was that the rationalism of Abraham Lincoln's religion and the sweet reasonableness of Abraham Lincoln's faith is not to be found in a God that can change a world to suit the whims of people, but that ultimate victory comes from adjusting our lives to the life of God. That was the religion of Abraham Lincoln, and that was all the religion that Abraham Lincoln had.

His background, then, was to be found in this fact, that nothing could disturb Lincoln from this idea that right—oh, my friends, when I think of this, it overwhelms me with shame, to think that we cannot have more men, that you and I cannot develop that primitive rigidity and inflexibility of moral rectitude that is based upon this truth. Now, we need it, so badly. Standing there like a rock, with the Rock of Ages for his footstool, there he stands, and he uttered by every sentence of his life and every act of that life the idea that **RIGHT** wins in the end, and no power on earth can defeat the ultimate victory of a man when he is right!

Oh, that was Lincoln's religion. And after all my studies and all of the reflection which I have had about his religion, and all of the books that I have read and that you have read, there it is, and you know it. As my humble tribute on this Lincoln's Birthday, I want to say this, and I wish I could say it to all the world, that I could burn it into the hearts of all the people, that this great, gentle, "homely and beautiful" Abraham Lincoln's religion was to be found in that eternal struggle and verification of right; the finest thing I can say about him,—I cannot say enough about him, my heart is too full,—the finest thing I can say about him, though, is this: I can see him in my mind's eye: I see him go from Springfield to Washington; I see them change the course of the train that was bearing him to Washington because of the assassination awaiting him in Philadelphia; I see him stand on the back platform of that crude train, and, raising his right

hand, say to his neighbors: "I am going down to Washington, friends, for a little while. I am going to try and do my duty, and I want your help and your prayers." I see him again when Stanton tries to usurp the office of President, when Stanton goes to Lincoln and intimates Lincoln's incapacity; and I see how he handles that. I see him again with Edward Everett at the Battle of Gettysburg; I see him at that dark hour after the Battle of Bull Run; I see him again at midnight, with that old shawl about his shoulders, standing there at the window, with the blue sky reflecting the golden glory of an old, old moon; and I see his face bathed in hot tears where the sculpture of responsibility had chiseled out his face and made great deep furrows. I see him in the loneliness of life; I see him one night leave Washington, in disguise, with his old army coat turned up about his face, wearing an old hat, with two secret service men and I hear him knock at the door of a home in Brooklyn that night, a lady answers that knock and her suspicions are aroused and she refuses that visitor to see her distinguished husband. Then he revealed himself, and I saw him in that study of a man who defended him and fought for him, and sold black men in his own pulpit as an awful example to his great audience; I see this work of God, this modern prophet, this great liberal. I see these two giants as they walk the floor of that study that night, Abraham Lincoln and Henry Ward Beecher; I see those giants lock hands with God; in the dark hours Lincoln's heart was breaking, he needed Beecher and Beecher needed him. And these two men of genius—God bless them both, and I say to you as my crowning and last tribute to Lincoln this, that the finest and sweetest thing I know about him is that he never knew how to compromise!

Oh, spirit of Lincoln! Come back! Come back to your people. Come back to your country. Come back! Thou rugged woodsman, thou rugged heart of honesty; thou open mind, thou uncompromising Lincoln! Come back to inspire us of this generation, touching once more the altar fire in the heart of youth; give us a message for the future.

Oh, Lincoln, we honor thee; we love thee.

And the last night—there he sits, brow furrowed but heart light; a play, a theatre,—what it must have meant to him!. There he sits. Everything was going

beautifully; the audience had stood as he walked into his box, and then sat down again. And I see him as he wraps those great, long legs around each other, and folds those strangely long arms about each other, giving his attention to the play. And then his head drops, and there is a shout! Consternation reigns. But even in his death Lincoln was quiet, and great; his head just dropped down, his body relaxed. And the man who fired that bullet tripped in the folds of the flag that Abraham Lincoln saved!

And Stanton said, "He was the greatest of us all," closed the door of the box, looked at the waiting friends crowded outside, and uttered this imperishable sentence: "Now he belongs to the ages!"

One hundred and thirteen years ago today, Abraham Lincoln was born.

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