

“That That Nation Might Live”

Lincoln’s Biblical Allusions in the Gettysburg Address

By

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## Abstract

Abraham Lincoln, writes Isaac Arnold, his close friend and biographer, “knew the Bible by heart. There was not a clergyman to be found so familiar with it as he.” It was his mother’s recitation of the Psalms and Shakespeare’s plays while doing household chores that gave a young Abraham Lincoln a taste for the euphony of words. Throughout his writings and speeches, he frequently, carefully, and intentionally employed biblical imagery, rhythms, phrases, and themes to communicate his ideas. Lincoln spoke in a way that the American people could understand; he spoke the language of the Scripture to a deeply religious nation. *Four score and seven years ago* comes from Psalm 90. *Our fathers* sounds like the Old Testament Patriarchs. *Brought forth* sounds like the Israelite’s deliverance from Egypt or the virgin birth. *Shall not perish* sounds like eternal life. *New birth of freedom* sounds like salvation.

Most importantly, Lincoln borrowed the *content* of the Bible to show the uniqueness of the American regime and to encourage her people to *dedicate* themselves to its purpose. In Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1863, Abraham Lincoln reminded the American people that the nation, unlike every other country in the world, *lives*. She was *conceived*. She was *brought forth*. She was *dedicated* to the idea that *all men are created equal*, and yet, because we have called that truth a *self-evident* lie, she can only continue *living* if we *rededicate* ourselves to that *proposition*. These *brave* soldiers have given their lives *that that nation might live*, but the task is not complete. It falls to the *living* to restore the nation to life, to bring about *a new birth of freedom*.

Lincoln at Gettysburg invested his politics with the *content* of the Scriptures. He desired to raise a mirror to America, remind her that she *lives*, and call her to action.

Dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Kenneth Griffith,  
who instructed his grandchildren to “be proud of being, and be thankful that you were  
born, an American.”

A special thank you to Dr. Schramm, for helping me see that the human mind is free; to  
Dr. Sikkenga, for encouraging me to “follow the truth, wherever it may lead”; and to Dr.  
Foster, for showing me how to ask the right questions.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

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Editor's note: all quotations from the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence are italicized. All quotations from Scripture are from the King James Version of the Bible, accessed through BibleGateway.com.

## Introduction

Born on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1809 to an impecunious family in the backwoods of Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln was a self-educated man. In 1859 he wrote in an autobiographical sketch for the presidential campaign that

there were some schools, so called; but no qualification ever required of a teacher, beyond the “readin, writin, and cipherin” to the Rule of Three— If a straggler supposed to understand latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard [sic]— There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education.<sup>1</sup>

A voracious reader, a young Abraham Lincoln read anything he could find, but his favorite books, writes historian John Wesley Hill, were “the Bible, Aesop’s *Fables*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and Shakespeare’s plays.” But the Bible was Lincoln’s “favourite” book.<sup>2</sup> According to Isaac Arnold, his close friend and biographer, Lincoln “knew the Bible by heart. There was not a clergyman to be found so familiar with it as he.”<sup>3</sup> While in the White House, Lincoln is said to have told his child’s nurse that the Psalms “are the best, for I find in them something for every day in the week.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, one contemporaneous biographer wrote that one of Lincoln’s favorite practices was to “correct a misquotation of Scripture,” swiftly providing “the chapter and verse where it could be found.”<sup>5</sup> He became so familiar with Scripture that his speeches often reached the heights of the prophets’ cries, Job’s poetry, and the Psalmist’s musings.

Abraham Lincoln was his mother’s son, and though Nancy Hanks Lincoln was mostly illiterate, she was highly intellectual, writes Stephen Mansfield in his book,

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography,” 20 December 1859. In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy Basler, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1953), 3:511.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley Hill, *Abraham Lincoln: Man of God* (New York: Putnam, 1927), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Arnold, *The Life Of Abraham Lincoln*. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Company, 1893), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca R. Pomeroy, “What His Nurse Knew,” *Magazine of History* 32, no. I. 1926, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Noah Brooks, “Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,” *Harper’s Magazine*, vol. 30, 1865, 229.

*Lincoln's Battle with God*.<sup>6</sup> Because Nancy Hanks Lincoln could not read, she garnered wisdom through *listening*, through “the oral transmission of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> She memorized long passages of the Bible, of Shakespeare’s plays, and of the Declaration of Independence—and recited them frequently to her children. She set aside a part of every Sunday to “reading the Scriptures aloud to her family.”<sup>8</sup>

Lincoln picked up her rhythm. Years later, one friend wrote:

When he read certain verses which he had in early boyhood committed to memory by hearing her repeat them as she went about her household tasks, the tones of his mother’s voice would come to him and he would seem to hear her speak those verses again.<sup>9</sup>

His mother’s recitation—and insistence, probably against his father’s will, that he attend school when he could—is what kindled his hunger for learning and his obsession with the euphony of words. As a young boy, Lincoln “rolled new terms around his mouth, meditated on dictionary definitions, and tried out these new tools, sometimes clumsily, on townspeople who stared at him blankly.”<sup>10</sup> He “wrote for the ear,” seeking melody, pursuing mellifluousness.<sup>11</sup> Like a composer, he strove for a melody.

Throughout his speeches, Lincoln achieves an eloquence unmatched by any other American statesman by combining the low and the lofty. True to his Anglo-Saxon heritage, he typically uses simple, monosyllabic words to express his ideas. Derived from Old English, Saxon words are briefer and more *down-to-earth* than their Latin or Greek equivalents. Ronald C. White, in his book, *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln*

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What It Meant for America* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Chicago Press and Tribune Co., 1860), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Rankin, *Personal Recollections of A. Lincoln* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 321.

<sup>10</sup> Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> White. *The Eloquent President*. xxii.

*Through His Words*, explains that they “bring more clout.”<sup>12</sup> They have more of a punch. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that “the language of the street is always strong: ... [the word] *guts* is stronger than *intestines*.”<sup>13</sup> Winston Churchill, when he was awarded the London *Times* Literary Award in 1949, said that “short words are best, and the old words, when short, are the best of all.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, short words are often common, and are, therefore, easily understood, a significant benefit for the democratic statesman. James C. Conkling, Lincoln’s long-time friend from Springfield, wrote that the president’s use of plain, Saxon words “imparted strength to his style, at the expense, it may be of elegance, but which were understood and appreciated by the masses of people.”<sup>15</sup> Of the 272 words in the Gettysburg Address, 210 are of one syllable—almost three in four. Only 20 words have more than two syllables.

On the other hand, Lincoln did not shy away from soaring rhetoric, ornamenting his language with phrases like *four score and seven years ago, the better angels of our nature, to bind up the nation’s wounds, and assuage the anguish of your bereavement*. He could have simply said, eighty-seven years ago, our better selves, to help heal America’s injuries, or “Feel better soon.”

Lincoln seems to have adopted his high-low style from Scripture. The language in the King James Bible is often coarse, but it can also be sublime.<sup>16</sup> It is “a rough, hard

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<sup>12</sup> White. *The Eloquent President*, 254.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “June 24-28, 1840.” In *Emerson in His Journals*. Joel Porte, ed. (Cambridge MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1982) 240-241.

<sup>14</sup> Winston Churchill, “English Literature is a Glorious Inheritance,” 2 November 1949. In *Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill’s Speeches*. Winston S. Churchill, his grandson, ed. (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 453.

<sup>15</sup> James C. Conkling, *The Early Branch and Bar of Central Illinois*, 107-108. Quoted in White, *The Eloquent President*, 255.

<sup>16</sup> White. *The Eloquent President*, 254.



language, one in which *piss*, *dung*, and *bowels* stand uncensored,” but it also soars, as in the beginning of Genesis, the psalms, and the gospel of John.<sup>17</sup> After all, one of the chief goals of an English Bible was to put the Holy Word of God within the reach of both the learned and the simple, “the scholar and the illiterate,” without sacrificing the hallowed euphony of the text.<sup>18</sup> Like the English Bible, Lincoln’s blending of the high and the low is masterful. He skillfully binds the noble and the humble together, expressing “the highest sentiments” with “the lowest language.”<sup>19</sup> His rhetoric “exemplified the democratic sublime.”<sup>20</sup>

One historian even claims that “the power of Lincoln’s eloquence begins with his cadence, not vocabulary.”<sup>21</sup> One of the primary reasons his words are remembered is their flow. Take, for example, his strategic repetition:

...*we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we cannot hallow...*;

his antitheses:

<i>the brave men</i>	<i>our poor power</i>
<i>living and dead</i>	<i>add or detract</i>
<i>us, the living</i>	<i>those who fought here;</i>

his parallel structuring:

<i>this nation</i>	<i>any nation</i>
<i>so conceived</i>	<i>so dedicated;</i>

and his repetition:

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-century America*, (New York: W. Morrow, 1990), 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

*great civil war*                      *great battlefield*  
*so dedicated*                      *come to dedicate.*

Lincoln aimed for clarity, but also pace; for accessibility, but also beauty. He desired to be heard, not simply listened to.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Lincoln's rhetoric finds its eloquence in drawing its content from other sources, especially the Bible. In his speech writing, he "preferred the borrowed ax to the brand-new," notes one historian.<sup>23</sup> White claims that he "never started out to write a speech from scratch."<sup>24</sup> Lincoln professed to be a political conservative, someone who adhered "to the old and the tried against the new and untried," and the same might be said of his rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> Like the Declaration of Independence—which Jefferson explained was not simply an exposition of "new principles or new arguments, never before thought of"—the Gettysburg Address stands atop a sturdy foundation of thought.<sup>26</sup> Though President Lincoln does not quote from the Bible in the Gettysburg Address, "the whole of his speech was suffused with both biblical content and cadence."<sup>27</sup> In fact, every word Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg can be found in the King James Version of the Bible, except

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<sup>22</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, xxii: In fact, according to White, Lincoln spoke slowly, typically at 105 to 110 words per minute. (The average person speaks at about 150 to 160 words per minute.) White notes that he found this number by "adding the number of words of his most important addresses, the Gettysburg Address (272 words) and the Second Inaugural (701 words), by the time it took to deliver them: 2 ½ to 3 minutes and 6 to 7 minutes."

<sup>23</sup> A. E. Elmore, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: Echoes of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009), 144.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Eloquent President*, 235.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Union," 27 February 1860. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:537.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Henry Lee." 8 May 1825. TeachingAmericanHistory.org.

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-henry-lee/> Accessed 29 March 2014.

Jefferson writes: "This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion."

<sup>27</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 243.

for three: continent, proposition, and civil, which can be found in Lincoln's second favorite text: Shakespeare.

The beginning of the speech—*four score and seven years ago*—is taken from Psalm 90. *Our fathers* seems to be reminiscent of the Patriarchs of old. *Brought forth* alludes to the creation of the world, the Israelite's miraculous freedom from the Egyptians, and Mary's virgin birth. The soldiers died on the fields of Gettysburg, *that that nation might live*, says Lincoln, calling to mind Christ's sacrificial death for humanity. We resolve that there will be *a new birth of freedom*, a regeneration or salvation of the political kind. He says that, with America's rededication to the principles of the Founding, the nation *shall not perish from the earth*, referencing John 3:16. The last line of the address is borrowed from the prologue of John Wycliffe's 1384 translation of the Bible—the first Bible ever translated into English—which states, “This Bible is for the government of the people by the people and for the people.”<sup>28</sup>

Why does Lincoln allude to the Bible so frequently in the Gettysburg Address—and, indeed, quote Scripture so often in his other speeches and letters? Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer. Lincoln never explained why (or, if he did, it is lost). His assassination in 1865 cut short his life and precluded following generations from conversing with him further.

One possibility is that Lincoln understood his times and spoke in a way his audience could understand. The Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century ushered in a vibrant Protestantism in America that “exerted a powerful political

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<sup>28</sup> Hill, *Man of God*, 270.

Even Daniel Webster stated in 1830 that the Constitution is “the people's Constitution, the people's government: made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people.”

*The Papers of Daniel Webster: Speeches and Formal Writings*, Charles M. Wiltse and Alan R. Berolzheimer, ed. (Dartmouth University Press, 1986), I:339-340.

influence, encouraging civic responsibility and popular participation in politics, shaping party loyalties, platforms, and agendas, and providing the coin of politics.”<sup>29</sup> By 1850, one third of “Americans came within the orbit of the major evangelical churches,” notes Richard Carwardine, a scholar of religion and history, claiming that “the largest Protestant denominational families—Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists” boasted a membership of approximately three million, and those in attendance of almost nine million.<sup>30</sup> It was “an era when Christian faith was pervasive,” explains White.<sup>31</sup> “Any carefully prepared speech tapped into those sensibilities in an attempt to connect with a largely Protestant audience.”<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, men and women of faith were encouraged to “get involved” in politics. Churchgoers were dissuaded from withdrawing. Often, a political candidate’s legitimacy was determined by his confession of faith, his piety, his religiosity. Carwardine explains that “religious loyalties and antagonisms were a major, and sometimes the main, determinant of party attachment,” for the Whigs no less than the Democrats.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, Lincoln had learned the political cost appearing to be unfaithful the hard way in 1843, when he lost the Whig nomination for the congressional seat to Edward D. Baker. Baker was a “Campbellite, a member of a socially powerful and numerous Protestant denomination,” and Lincoln was not then—nor any time in his life—a member of any church.<sup>34</sup> After the election, Lincoln privately explained, “It was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no church, [and]

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Carwardine, “Lincoln, Evangelical Religion, and American Political Culture in the Era of the Civil War,” *The Journal of The Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 18, issue 1. Winter 1997. 27-55. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0018.104>. Accessed 15 April 2014.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Carwardine, “Evangelical Religion.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

was suspected of being a deist.”<sup>35</sup> The popular sentiment, he judged, might not have been fatal, but it was “very strong” and “levied a tax of considerable percent upon my strength throughout the religious community.”<sup>36</sup>

Three years later, in his 1846 campaign for a seat in the House of Representatives, Lincoln wrote a letter to the editor of the *Illinois Gazette*, responding to the aspersions of his opponent—Peter Cartwright, a popular, Methodist circuit rider—that he was “an open scoffer of *Christianity*.”<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, Lincoln claimed that he “never denied the truth of the Scripture” and “never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, Lincoln admitted his inability to “be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion.”<sup>39</sup> The letter was published after the election and, therefore, did not have had an effect on the results. According to Carwardine, though, this episode in Lincoln’s life aptly portrays the culture of the Antebellum era: it was predominately Christian.

Was Lincoln’s public display of religion—his claim to believe in the truth of the Bible and his constant referencing of Scripture—a ruse? Although possible, the theory is hard to believe. Lincoln was too skillful a politician to do such a poor job at convincing the public that he was religious. If Lincoln’s religion was purely politically motivated, he should have joined a church to remove all doubt of his infidelity.

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<sup>35</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “To Martin S. Morris.” 26 March 1843. Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:320

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:320

<sup>37</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Religious Views: Letter to the Editor of the *Illinois Gazette*,” 31 July 1846. Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:382.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:382.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:382.

But Lincoln did not join a church.<sup>40</sup> He never did, perhaps because he associated his father's strict discipline with organized religion.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps he saw the preachers as "uneducated, pushy, and proud," if not downright spiritually abusive.<sup>42</sup> Most importantly, it seems that Lincoln was "always wrestling spiritually" and "was always equally unwilling to appear otherwise," as Mansfield notes.<sup>43</sup> He thought for himself. He even admitted to a friend that it was "probably" his "lot to go on in a twilight, as questioning, doubting Thomas did."<sup>44</sup> In his "poor, maimed way," Lincoln went on with "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.'"<sup>45</sup> Lincoln, of course, is quoting from Mark 9:17-27,

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<sup>40</sup> Lincoln did attend an Episcopalian church in Springfield with his wife and weekly attended a church while living in Washington, D. C. after his election to the presidency. Mansfield writes that when Lincoln took office, he "was eager to find a church," and, after much consideration, attended Reverend Gurney's church, "at the intersection of New York Avenue and Thirteenth and H streets" while in D.C., attending Sunday morning services and even Thursday night prayer meetings (Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 124-127).

<sup>41</sup> Abraham Lincoln's tenuous relationship with organized religion most likely began early in his life, as his strict, Church-going, Bible-believing father, Thomas Lincoln, regularly beat him. He was, according to Mansfield, a "hulking, demanding, disapproving man" who cared much for "his son's physical strength" and economic output but little for his education. Thomas, driven perhaps by the necessity of the frontier, "intended to see that the boy produced and was not beyond using beatings to make his wishes known." When Nancy died at their new home in Illinois when Abraham was nine, Thomas went to Kentucky for months in order to find a new wife, leaving Abe and Sarah, Abe's older sister, with a cousin. When he returned, "Abe and his sister were thin, dirty, filled with fear, and barely comprehending." Legally, Abe owed labor to his father until he was twenty-one, but he never joined his father's church (Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle With God*, 6-7).

There is a difference between the faith of Thomas and of Abraham, however. "To reject the faith of Thomas was not necessarily to reject faith in God," Mansfield writes (26). There is ample evidence to suggest that, when the young Abraham was at times free from the strict rule of his father, his faith flourished. Matilda Johnston, Abe's stepsister, writes that when their parents went to church, the children would often use their few hours of free time listening to the future president teach on the Scriptures. She writes that "Abe would take down the bible, read a verse—give out a hymn—and we would sing" (Louis A. Warren. *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, 1816-30*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 2002. 28-32. Quoted in Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 38).

<sup>42</sup> Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 101-102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>44</sup> Rankin, *Personal Recollections of A. Lincoln*, 324-326.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 324-326.

When Lincoln left his father's home and moved to New Salem, he flirted with Thomas Paine's rational rejection of Christian doctrine. When he visited the Rankin household, he expressed doubts about his "former implicit faith in the Bible" (Rankin, Henry. *Personal Recollections of A. Lincoln*. 1916. 324-326.). According to Henry Rankin, Abraham Lincoln said that he was "tossed amid a sea of questionings." Sometime later, he is thought to have written a "little book on Infidelity," which supposedly assaulted the

when a father of a demonically possessed boy pleads with Jesus to heal his son. When Jesus replies “All things are possible to him that believeth,” the unnamed man asks for help: “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” Even the man of faith has his reservations about the power of Christ, but Jesus immediately casts out the demon. That Lincoln quotes only the first part of the father’s reply, omitting a confession of faith—“Lord, I believe”—may be a sign that even he did not know how much faith he had. He desired to believe, but did not know how—or even if he did. Thus, though His asking for reassurance is a sort of prayer, he seems to be, at least in this stage of life, caught in the grey.

Whatever the cause of his quiet refusal to join a church, Lincoln was too honest to put on a religious show for political gain. His wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, is reported of saying, “Poor Mr. Lincoln is almost a monomaniac on the subject of honesty.”<sup>46</sup> He had too much integrity to use religion to manipulate the public.

Lincoln’s close friend and later bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon, claimed that the President “never told any on that he accepted Jesus as the Christ, or performed a single one of the acts which necessarily follow upon such a conviction.”<sup>47</sup> Lamon continued, claiming that Lincoln never “let fall from his lips or pen an expression which remotely implied the slightest faith in Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of men.”<sup>48</sup> However, though the President apparently did not speak of his personal faith much, Mansfield explains that the quietness of his piety was common to “the manner of the upper class” of

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divinity of Christ and the inspiration of Scriptures, but the document was lost when his friends, as the story goes, destroyed it against his wishes (Mansfield, *Lincoln’s Battle with God*, 41-42).

<sup>46</sup> Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 201.

<sup>47</sup> W. H. Lamon, *The Life of Lincoln* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1872), 501-502.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 501-502.

that time.<sup>49</sup> It was thought that a Christian's faith "drew wider respect if he never spoke of it but lived its values," writes Mansfield.<sup>50</sup> When elected President, Lincoln promised to depend on an "unshaken faith in the Supreme Ruler of the nations."<sup>51</sup> When he received the news that he had won the election, Lincoln assured that his faith would be ever present, even if it were quiet.

Lincoln's faith was "a graceful drama," a journey.<sup>52</sup> Though his pastor, Phineas Densmore Gurley, claims that Lincoln was a Christian, there is no evidence of Lincoln himself giving such a definitive statement.<sup>53</sup> There are as many first-account witnesses who claim that Lincoln was a believer as there are who claim the opposite. Though they search, historians have not found a dramatic resolution to his faith; there is no picturesque scene of an awkward, scrawny, tall man kneeling at an altar, confessing his faith in the Son of God.<sup>54</sup>

Why did Lincoln allude to the Bible at Gettysburg? In sum, he desired to speak in a way that people could hear; to give to a nation at war beautiful, lasting words in order to call them to action; and, most importantly, to invest his politics with the *content* of the Scriptures. He desired to raise a mirror to America and remind her that she *lives*. She was *conceived, born*, and can also die—if the people of the nation do not, *under* the divine guidance of the Lord, rally to her cause.

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<sup>49</sup> Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle With God*, 116.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>51</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Reply to Committee of Congress Reporting the Electoral Count," 26 February 1861. Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:246.

<sup>52</sup> Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Hill, *Man of God*, 295.

Gurley writes: "I have had frequent and intimate conversations with him on the subject of the Bible and of the Christian religion, when he could have had no motive to deceive me, and I consider him sound, not only in the truths of the Christian religion, but on all the fundamental doctrines and teachings."

<sup>54</sup> Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 191.



## I. Gettysburg: November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1863

On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1863—a week after the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg—Andrew G. Curtin, the Republican Governor of Pennsylvania, and David Wills, a prominent attorney from Gettysburg, visited the battlefield and noticed that “the graves were crudely marked, here by a piece of fencing, there by boards from ammunition or cracker boxes.”<sup>55</sup> Appalled by the lack of care given to the dead, Wills began plans for a national cemetery, calling for assistance from all eighteen states in the Union.

After completing all the necessary arrangements, Wills invited Edward Everett to give the keynote address at the cemetery’s dedication. By almost every account, Everett was the man for the job: born during the presidency of George Washington, he graduated from Harvard, later becoming its president; he represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate for ten years; he was Massachusetts’ governor; he was appointed to be the foreign minister to Great Britain for six years; and he ran for the office of the Vice President on the Constitutional Party ticket in the 1860 presidential election. Known as “the protégé and successor to the great New England orator, Daniel Webster,” Everett was the logical choice, for, after his retirement from the Senate in 1854, he had become the national figure for national harmony and peace.<sup>56</sup> Hoping to schedule another speaker, Wills failed to persuade “the leading literary artists of the day to participate” and contacted the President a mere seventeen days before the event.<sup>57</sup> Wills’s letter to President Abraham Lincoln reads:

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<sup>55</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 227.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242.

<sup>57</sup> Wills invited Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and William Cullen Bryant, according to White (229).

It is the desire that, after the Oration, You as Chief Executive of the Nation formally set apart these grounds to their Sacred use by a few appropriate remarks.<sup>58</sup>

President Abraham Lincoln's responsibility was clear: after Everett's address, he was to add a few words to dedicate these grounds. His invitation was, so to speak, "an after-thought."<sup>59</sup>

On November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1863, fifteen to twenty thousand people came to the dedicatory ceremony. Wearing a black suit and a top hat adorned with a wide mourning band in memoriam of his deceased son, Willie, Lincoln sat on a twelve-by-twenty-foot wooden platform, listening to Everett's grand elocution for two hours and eight minutes. When Everett finished, Chief Marshal Ward Hill Lamon introduced the President. It had been more than two years since, on his inauguration day, the President had delivered a prepared speech.<sup>60</sup>

President Lincoln "arose, adjusted his spectacles, took out of the left breast pocket of his frock coat his dedicatory remarks," and began.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 229.

<sup>59</sup> Hill, *Man of God*, 262.

<sup>60</sup> Gabor Borritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 113.

<sup>61</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 242.

## II. “Four score and seven years ago”

Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by calling the audience’s attention to the beginning—not of the Battle of Gettysburg or of the Civil War—but of America herself. In beginning with the words, *Four score and seven years ago*, Lincoln deliberately places his speech in the broader context of the American experiment. These pithy remarks are not simply a eulogy for those soldiers who died on this battleground, appropriate as that would be. It is more. It is a comment on the nature of America.

America *lives* from the truths that the Declaration of Independence announced. America was founded on the self-evident truth that *all men are created equal*, which means that all men are equally stationed with natural rights, including *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. Every person—regardless of his sex, race, height, intellect, religion, or athleticism—has a moral claim to liberty simply by virtue of being human. Since all of mankind shares a common trait—namely, humanness—each person is equally and morally entitled to natural rights. Algernon Sidney, the seventeenth century, English politician, wrote that God did not cause “some to be born with crowns upon their heads and all others with saddles upon their backs.”<sup>62</sup> To borrow a phrase from Aristotle’s *Politics*, no man is a god—born to rule others without their consent, and no man is a beast—born to be ruled like cattle.<sup>63</sup>

From this principle, the Founders claimed two axiomatic truths: first, *that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men* and, secondly, that the just powers of government are derived *from the consent of the governed*. If mankind possesses certain inalienable, natural rights, then the responsibility of government proper

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<sup>62</sup> Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 1698. Thomas G. West, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990), 510-511.

<sup>63</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Book I, 1253.a27. Allen Bloom, ed. (New York: Basic, 1968).

is to secure those rights. Government exists to protect what human beings already hold—the rights that are natural to them as human beings. In addition, since those who wield political power have the same inalienable and natural rights as those who do not, no legitimate government can rule without acquiring its citizens' consent. There is no just way to rule over someone unless he consents to it.

The Founding Fathers maintained that the principle of human equality is a timeless, universal truth, above the jurisdiction of history, culture, and tradition. In the Declaration, Jefferson appeals not to British Common Law or to Parliament or to King George III or to the people living in England. There is no plea to positive law. Rather, the Declaration appeals *the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God*, standards of right and wrong accessible by reason, revelation, or both, and applicable to all peoples at all time. This, according to Lincoln, is the awesome accomplishment of the document. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, the Founding Fathers were able to, in the moment, insert into their writings a *what for*, a reason why they were creating a new nation. The American experiment began with a radical declaration that *all men are created equal*, and in the first words of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln asks his listeners to remember those words.

What is the significance of the phrase *four score*? Why did Lincoln choose the words that have become so etched in the American mind? One possible explanation could be that he desired to start the speech with a rhetorical flourish, a simple rhyme: *four score*, two words that “set in motion a symphony of melodious sounds.”<sup>64</sup> White even helps us hear Lincoln's high-pitched voice in our heads by noting that the phrase “would have been stated slowly by Lincoln.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 243.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

In addition, by highlighting the issue of time in the first six words, *four score and seven years ago*, Lincoln aptly introduces the speech, for the structure of the address follows the theme of the opening sentence: time. Lincoln builds the speech, a mere 272 words and only 10 sentences, “with three sets of three sentences, dedicated to past, present, and future.”<sup>66</sup>

Yet, there seems to be something more to Lincoln’s word choice than just its rhythm or even its introductory nature. The character of the phrase becomes more lucid when compared to Lincoln’s other writings and speeches. In his speeches, Lincoln often began by referring to 1776 as the founding of the nation. In Peoria in 1854, Lincoln states that “nearly eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal.”<sup>67</sup> In his Chicago speech, Lincoln says that “we run our memory back over the pages of history for about eighty-two years.”<sup>68</sup> In a brief July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1863 address, Lincoln asked, “How long ago is it—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives, assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that ‘all men are created equal’?”<sup>69</sup> He even began his 1852 eulogy for Henry Clay by saying: “On the fourth of July, 1776...”<sup>70</sup>

Though the Gettysburg Address was not the first time Lincoln broached the founding of the nation, the phrasing at the beginning of the Gettysburg Address has a sort of solemnity that is unmatched by these other speeches. The cadence is different; the phrasing and subtle rhyming is beautiful. Unlike these other speeches, Lincoln begins by

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<sup>66</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 243-244.

<sup>67</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois,” 16 October 1854. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:275.

<sup>68</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Chicago, Illinois,” 10 July 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>69</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Response to a Serenade,” 7 July 1863. Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:319.

<sup>70</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Eulogy on Henry Clay,” 6 July 1852. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:121.

alluding to Scripture.<sup>71</sup> According to William J. Wolf, a twentieth-century theologian, the phrase *four score and seven years ago* is “an inspired adaptation of Old Testament counting,” particularly Psalm chapter 90.<sup>72</sup> Imitating the form of counting used in Scripture seems to have elevated the significance of the subject of the speech to make it worthy of the moment. Lincoln matched the weight of the speech with the gravity of the hour. White explains that he “employ[ed] a biblical cadence expressed in the rhythms of the King James Version” because he thought it “appropriate for the solemnity of the day.”<sup>73</sup> The task of dedicating the Soldiers’ National Cemetery at Gettysburg was one that required a sort of somberness, and, for Lincoln, the phrase did just that.

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<sup>71</sup> In his book, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion*, Glen E. Thurow writes that “the similarities of language and style to the Bible by themselves prove nothing about the religious qualities of Lincoln’s speech” [Glen E. Thurow, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion*, (Albany: State U of New York, 1976), 69.]. Just “because ‘four score and seven years ago’ is an adaptation of a Biblical method of counting, it does not follow that this method is *necessarily* religious,” he writes (Thurow, *American Political Religion*, 69).

However, there is ample evidence to justify the claim that Lincoln knowingly referenced Psalm 90 in his Address at Gettysburg. He was an avid reader of the Psalms. White notes that “multiple observers have left independent reports of Lincoln’s love of reading the Bible, especially the Psalms” early in the day or at noon (White, *The Eloquent President*, 243).

Moreover, there is reason to believe that Lincoln was familiar with Psalm 90. After winning the 1864 election, Lincoln, in a letter to John Phillips, a 105-year-old Deacon, writes: “The example of such devotion to civic duties in one whose days have already extended an average life time beyond the Psalmist’s limit, cannot but be valuable and fruitful” (Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:118). When Galusha A. Grow, a Pennsylvania congressman, delivered his acceptance speech for the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, he too called attention to July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776 as America’s birth:

Fourscore years ago, fifty-six bold merchants, farmers, lawyers, and mechanics, the representatives of a few feeble colonists, scattered along the Atlantic seaboard, met in convention to found a new empire, based on the inalienable rights of man. (Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, 46)

That this opening line from Grow’s speech is strikingly similar to the opening line of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is clear of course, but what is even more illustrative is what Grow stated later in the speech. He asserts that the time between 1776 and 1861 is “a period but little exceeding that of the allotted lifetime of man,” clearly aligning his speech with Psalm 90 (Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, 47).

At the very least, Lincoln’s contemporaries seemed to understand the phrase’s significance. It would be wise to assume that Lincoln—a speechwriter who painstakingly and deliberately chose every word of the Gettysburg Address—understood that as well.

<sup>72</sup> William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 169.

<sup>73</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 243.

Most importantly, Lincoln infuses the speech with the *content* of Psalm 90. In chapter 90, the Psalmist contrasts the eternality of the Lord with the mortality of mankind. He does this primarily through examining the issue of time, for time affects an everlasting God very differently than it does man. According to the Psalmist, while “a thousand years” seems like “yesterday” to the Lord (90:4), the entirety of a human being’s days is merely “threescore years and ten” (90:10). Of course, the men of great might may be able to prolong their days to “fourscore years,” but they only do so through “strength, labor, and sorrow” (90:10). Though it is possible to drag out one’s time on earth, it is incredibly difficult and painful and merely prolongs the inevitable: everyone on earth has to leave. Human beings cannot avoid death. In his entirety, man lives for less than a few hours in God’s eyes. Though “grass which groweth up flourisheth” in the morning (90:5), it “is cut down and withereth” in the evening (90:6). “We spend our years as a tale that is told,” writes the Psalmist (90:9).

By showing that America is eighty-seven years old, Lincoln is inserting the nation within the Psalmist’s comparison, placing it between an omnipotent, eternal God and a weak, finite species. God is forever. Man is for eighty years. America has reached eighty-seven.

The nation is clearly not something divine—to suggest that would be blasphemous. It is easy to see that eighty-seven is much closer to eighty than it is to infinity. America is much closer to being a human thing than it is to being a divine thing. For the Psalmist, the point is not merely that man lasts for only a little while and God remains forever. Rather, in chapter 90, the Psalmist uses the concept of time to compare man’s weakness to God’s strength. As Lincoln seems to be borrowing the Psalmist’s

phrase, is he suggesting that America is—like human beings—subject to God’s timing, His sovereignty, His wrath, and His power like the Psalmist declares? Knocked down by a vicious war of brothers versus brothers, America is facing the most difficult trial of its life.

Though it seems clear that America is not a divine regime, claiming that it is a diminutive or base nation does not seem proper either. After all, America, though a human creation, has outlived the men that formed it. He is noting “that the nation’s continuity had already surpassed the biblical time frame for life and death.”<sup>74</sup> She has already stretched past the reach of the Founding Fathers. Even in the grave hour of the Civil War, she survives. Perhaps Lincoln is implying that America is not a lowly, base nation but a human-created regime that has traces of something metaphysical in it. Perhaps he is saying that the nation is infused with something higher than flesh and bones.

Lincoln uses the Psalmist’s method of counting to show that America, like man himself, is a *living* thing. While the Psalmist uses the phrase to define the length of man’s days, Lincoln uses it to define the length of America’s. That America *lives* on, then, is a reason to pause for a moment of celebration. Surely, Lincoln desired to address the growing anxiety concerning the life, vitality, and future of the nation. The war had gone on much longer than anyone had expected. The economic, emotional, and spiritual toll of the hundreds of thousands of human beings lost during the war—fathers, brothers, husbands, and friends—is too great to fathom. At Gettysburg alone there were approximately 50,000 casualties. Modern historians can look back at his Address at Gettysburg and see that it is in the middle of the war, but Lincoln did not have that

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.



luxury. How long will this terrible episode continue? How much more will we have to endure? While Lincoln's opening line at Gettysburg seems to invoke a deep solemnity, a hint of a respectful celebratory tone can be found as well. *Even after all of this, America is still here.* In fact, Lincoln states in a July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1858 response to Douglas that when America began, "we were then a very small people in point of numbers, vastly inferior to what we are now, with a vastly less extent of country."<sup>75</sup> Now, four-score and seven years later, even though we are plagued with a great Civil War, we are still kicking.

Is it significant that America has *lived* for eighty-seven years? Many European countries and empires existed for much longer, a fact Lincoln most certainly would have known.<sup>76</sup> Why is it so important to Lincoln that this nation has lived more years than those allotted to man? Good for you, Yankee Doodle, says the aristocratic European, whose ancestors have lived on the same land for thousands of years, whose family has been in power for eighty-seven generations, not eighty-seven years. It seems that the Frenchman would laugh at America's celebration of its existence in 1863 like an elderly gentleman would laugh at a teenager complaining that he feels old. *Come talk to me in eighty-seven hundred years*, he mumbles under his breath. Ask a European to show you the *life* of his country, and he will show you the nation's stable, flourishing economy, or its history of military glory, or its long-standing, traditional religion. He may reminisce about the golden days, when king so-and-so enlarged the empire. He may even claim that his people are God's people.

However eloquent the man's claims may be, it seems that Lincoln would reply that that nation is not *alive*. While White explains that the phrase *four score and seven*

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<sup>75</sup> Lincoln, "Address at Chicago." Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>76</sup> As a young man, Lincoln read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God*, 35).

*years ago* shows that “the nation’s continuity had already surpassed the biblical time frame for life and death,” it seems that Lincoln is speaking of more than the nation’s longevity.<sup>77</sup> There is more to *living* than merely existing. According to Genesis chapter 2, a human being is more than flesh and bones, for in the biblical creation story, the Lord breathed *life* into Adam. In Ezekiel 37:1-6, when the Lord leads His prophet to “the midst of the valley” of “dry bones” in a vision, He asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones *live*?” Though Ezekiel does not know, the Lord instructs him to prophecy over the dry bones, saying “Behold, I will cause *breath* to enter into you, and ye shall *live*: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall *live*; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.” In a similar way, the principles of the Declaration *breathe life* into the nation. Ask an American to show you the *life* of his country, says Lincoln, and he will show you what happened four-score and seven years ago—in 1776.

The *living* thing is the moral thing that was brought forth on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, for it was the expression of the principle that “all men are created equal” that grounded the American regime in natural right from the start. To Lincoln, this is the idea that elevates America above the Psalmist’s limit. Lincoln’s use of the phrase *four score and seven years ago*, then, could be seen as not only a statement about the longevity of the nation, but also a commentary on the uniqueness of the American regime. What is significant about America is not the fact that it has existed for eighty-seven years, but rather that the *life-giving* principles of the Declaration of Independence have sustained it for that long.

According to Lincoln, it is important to distinguish the horse from the cart, and to place the former in front of the latter. The nation is alive not because of its economic

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<sup>77</sup> White. *The Eloquent President*, 244.

opulence, military prowess, bountiful and extensive geography, or robust citizenry. Many nations and empires possess those things—and more of them. China has a bigger population. Britain has a more powerful army. Rome had more land. According to Lincoln, though, America’s prosperity is an effect of what those courageous men did in 1776. It all stems from that moment. The Declaration contains the “principle that clears the path for all, gives hope to all, and, by consequence, enterprise and industry to all,” he writes.<sup>78</sup> That America is prosperous is a well-known fact, but its prosperity does not bestow aliveness. In his July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1858 reply to Douglas, for example, Lincoln claims that “we understand by what” the Founders did in 1776 “it has followed that the degree of prosperity that we now enjoy has come to us.”<sup>79</sup> In addition, in his Fragment on the Constitution and Union, supposedly penned in 1860, Lincoln writes of America’s success:

All this is not the result of accident. It has a philosophical cause. Without the Constitution and the Union, we could not have attained the result; but even these are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of “Liberty to all”—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprize, and industry to all. [*sic*]<sup>80</sup>

“The *expression* of that principle,” writes Lincoln, can be seen “in our Declaration of Independence.”<sup>81</sup> What Lincoln seems to be saying is that the fundamental principle of the Declaration is a generative fact that enables the country to be prosperous. If all men are created equal, then no person, group of persons, or government can take away a man’s property without his consent. In other words, that principle of human equality

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<sup>78</sup> Lincoln, “Address at Chicago.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.

<sup>80</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union,” January 1860. Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:168-169.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:169.

translates into a strong encouragement for man to work, for in a just regime, a man is able to keep the bread that he earns. Free men are prosperous, exceedingly prosperous.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> In Lincoln's Eulogy for Henry Clay, he states that Clay "desired the prosperity of his countrymen partly because they were his own countrymen, but chiefly to show to the world that freemen could be prosperous" (Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:126).

### III. “Our fathers brought forth”

Again borrowing a phrase from the King James Bible, Lincoln uses the phrase *brought forth* to claim that America is something new. The phrase is pregnant with meaning. The Bible uses the expression on multiple occasions to describe a variety of different beginnings, including the creation of the earth, the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and the birth of Christ Jesus. Genesis 1 asserts that “the earth *brought forth* grass and herb yielding seed after his kind” (1:12). Psalm 90 states that “before the mountains were *brought forth*, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (90:2). Exodus states that it was “the strength of the hand of the Lord *brought us forth* out of Egypt” (13:16).<sup>83</sup> Luke states that the virgin Mary “*brought forth* her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger” (2:7). Job, in the midst of his suffering, asks the Lord, “Wherefore then hast thou *brought me forth* out of the womb?” (10:18).

Like the Psalmist’s man, America is alive because she had a birth, a creation, a *bringing-forth*. At one moment in history, America did not exist, and then, in the next moment, it did, like God bringing forth the universe or “the Mother of God bringing forth her first-born,” as Guelzo writes.<sup>84</sup> Lincoln claims that America was not simply founded or organically and spontaneously created or manufactured in a laboratory. America, unlike every other country in the history of the world, was born.

It was *our fathers* who *conceived* and *brought forth* this *nation* some eighty-seven years ago, which seems like an odd way to speak of procreation. Biologically speaking, it

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<sup>83</sup> The Scriptures refer to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt as a *bringing forth* on several occasions, including Exodus 29:46; Leviticus 25:38; Numbers 20:16; Deuteronomy 9:12; 1 Samuel 12:8; 2 Chronicles 6:5; Jeremiah 11:4, 32:21; Daniel 9:15.

<sup>84</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, “A New Birth of Freedom” in *Claremont Review of Books*. Vol. XIII, No. 3 – Summer 2013. <http://claremont.org/index.php?act=crbArticle&id=137#.U1oAPMfc2No> Accessed 24 April 2014.

is the woman that gives birth, not the man. How is it possible that fathers and not mothers brought America forth?

Lincoln continues his argument for the uniqueness of the American regime. Every other nation was produced organically, by copulation between men and women. That's just the way it works. The people of France *today* came from the people of France *yesterday*. A man is French because his great-great-great-great-great grandfather moved to this land some hundreds or even thousands of years ago. His fathers fought in France's wars and were buried in its soil. In the simplest of terms, the nation of France exists because French men and women had children.

When Lincoln claims that America was *brought forth* from *our fathers*, though, he is not speaking of human procreation. Rather, the impetus for the nation—cause of the bringing forth of the nation—was the moral and philosophical truths communicated by the Declaration, that *all men are created equal*.

Americans, after all, celebrate their Independence Day in a way that cherishes and commemorates not only the beginning of the nation, but its *what for*. In a speech delivered in 1858 in Chicago, Lincoln states that Americans celebrate the nation's Independence Day—that fateful moment when we declared ourselves a free and sovereign state—in part, in order to “remind ourselves of all the good done” and “how we are historically connected to it.”<sup>85</sup> We are thankful for the prosperity that flows from it. “Descended by blood from our ancestors,” Americans proudly “claim” as their “*fathers* and grandfathers” those men who signed the document in 1776.<sup>86</sup> We know that because of what *our fathers* did, we are free. Like a Frenchman celebrating Bastille Day, the

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<sup>85</sup> Lincoln, “Address at Chicago.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.

American's celebration of his country is, in part, a celebration of his heritage or family (and, thus, a celebration of himself). This is where I came from, he says. This is who I am. Many Americans celebrate the nation's creation because they are connected to it "by blood," explains Lincoln.<sup>87</sup>

But this is not too different from what other countries have claimed throughout their history. The Romans, for example, proudly declare that their republic was founded by Romulus, the boy who murdered his twin brother to gain power. What elevates America's beginning is the fact that, first, it is a historical event (in other words, not a mythological tale), and, secondly, it occurred because of the "reflection and choice" of rational creatures, striving to create a just regime, as Federalist #1 states.<sup>88</sup> America's creation story is so wildly different from others' that Pascal, writing in 1670 (over one hundred years before America's birth), claims that it is necessary to fabricate the regime's genesis narrative in order to maintain the regime's legitimacy. He writes, "we need not feel the truth that law is but usurpation; it was introduced without reason; it has become reasonable; it is necessary to cause it to be regarded as authentic, eternal, and to conceal the beginning of it, if we do not wish it to come soon to an end."<sup>89</sup> Pascal, of course, did not live to see the clock strike July 4<sup>th</sup>, but it is clear that America does not square with his analysis. Americans celebrate the genesis of their nation both as a historical event *and* a noble cause.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, "Federalist #1." *The Federalist Papers*. George W. Carey and James McClellan, eds., (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 1.

<sup>89</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 1670. Section V: Justice and the Reason of Effects, 294. W. F. Trotter, trans., Oregon State University. <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/pascal/pensees-contents.html> Accessed 24 April 2014.

Harry Jaffa, Professor Emeritus at Claremont McKenna College and Claremont Graduate School, writes that Lincoln speaks of the Fourth of July “as if it were the American Passover,” the day on which “Americans are reminded of their ancestral liberation from the tyranny of the ‘Pharaohs’ of inequality and despotism, to the ‘blessings and security of self government.’”<sup>90</sup> Lincoln uses the same phrase that the King James Version of Exodus employs—*brought forth*—to describe the Israelite’s emancipation from Egypt. America’s Independence Day is a celebration, not just of a beginning or a production of something new, but of a liberty-laden creation. July the Fourth is a celebration of our father’s fight for freedom and, therefore, our freedom.

Still, there is “something else connected with it,” according to Lincoln.<sup>91</sup> The causes of these merriments, states Lincoln, “have not yet reached the whole.”<sup>92</sup> The American Independence Day is more than a historical or cultural event—or even an “ancestral” event, as Jaffa notes. If the Declaration is truly “an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,” as Lincoln writes in 1859, should not Americans’ festivities reflect that?<sup>93</sup> After all, many Americans, writes Lincoln, “perhaps half our people, are not descendants at all” of that founding generation.<sup>94</sup> The “German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian” men and women who immigrated to America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had no biological connection to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, or Benjamin Franklin.<sup>95</sup> What to them is the Fourth of July? What to the Gentile is Passover?

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<sup>90</sup> Harry Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 111.

<sup>91</sup> Lincoln at Chicago. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.

<sup>93</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “To Henry L. Pierce and Others,” 6 April 1859. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:374.

<sup>94</sup> Lincoln at Chicago. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.



In a similar way that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ transformed membership in the Lord's family from a covenant of national heritage to a covenant of grace, the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence make it possible for people of non-Western-European descent to be fully American. According to the Apostle Paul, when Jesus Christ died and rose again, the Old Covenant between God and Israel was fulfilled and replaced by a New Covenant of "grace, through faith" that "hath appeared to all men."<sup>96</sup> Christ Himself has made the sacrifice for all of mankind—not only the Jew. Thus, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," writes Paul (Galatians 3:28). Christianity sees neither Jew nor Gentile, for, as the Gospel of John states that to "all who believe in Him and accept Him, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). In fact, believers are even instructed to call the Lord "Abba Father," a term of intimate friendship, aptly translated as "Daddy" (Romans 8:14-16).

Thus, is it proper to claim that Passover—the celebration of the Lord's victory for His people—has not been an exclusively Jewish festivity since 33 C.E., when Jesus Christ became the victor over death itself and put relationship with the Father within reach of all those who admit their need for a savior and accept Christ's amazing grace? According to Jaffa, Christ Jesus transformed "the community of blood" into "a community of faith."<sup>97</sup> The Christian community's stipulations for membership make possible every human being's entrance into that community. Christians do not tell the story of Passover because they are biologically linked to Moses. Rather, they see in the tale the power of the God of Abraham—their own God.

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<sup>96</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:11

<sup>97</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 150.

According to Lincoln, those men who emigrated from Europe to America find “themselves our equals in all things,” not because of their blood—not because of history, or culture, or tradition—but because they see the “moral sentiment” of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>98</sup> In the highest sense, the American is not connected to the Founding Fathers because he was born in Virginia or South Carolina or any other state. He is connected to his *fathers* “through that old Declaration of Independence,” which proclaims that *all men are created equal* in their natural rights.<sup>99</sup> The connection is so powerful, states Lincoln, that “they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.”<sup>100</sup>

Lincoln “transmutes the latter-day immigrants from the ethnically divided nations of the Old World into members of the same *family*, united by the transcendent faith in human equality,” explains Jaffa.<sup>101</sup> When Lincoln calls the Founders *our fathers*, he knowingly includes peoples who are, biologically speaking, not the Founders’ sons and daughters. Yet, using “the very idiom of transubstantiation,” Lincoln claims that the immigrants are of the same flesh and the same blood.<sup>102</sup> They are, in a way, family. They have the same *fathers*. To borrow a phrase, in America, there is neither English nor French, black nor white, for ye are all one in kind: Americans, a people connected together by the moral principle of the Declaration. The people of God and the people of the Declaration belong to their respective communities in similar ways. The Passover and America’s Fourth of July are of the same species.

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<sup>98</sup> Lincoln, “Address at Chicago.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:499, 500.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:499.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 500.

<sup>101</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 151.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Similar to the Jewish Passover, the American struggle for freedom was limited, in the particular, to the thirteen colonies, but, in its philosophy of right, its claim was universal. President Calvin Coolidge, on the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, reflected on the uniqueness of the American regime, explaining,

There is something beyond the establishment of a new nation, great as that event would be, in the Declaration of Independence, which has ever since caused it to be regarded as one of the great charters that not only was to liberate America but was everywhere to ennoble humanity.<sup>103</sup>

According to President Coolidge, “it was not because [the Declaration] was proposed to establish a new nation, but because it was proposed to establish a nation on new principles, that July 4, 1776, has come to be regarded as “one of the greatest days in history.”<sup>104</sup> Empires come, and empires go. Often does one people declare independence from another people. What is unique about America is that it was founded on the idea that *all men are created equal*, that all human beings possess innate, natural rights. According to Lincoln, this thought is the *living* thing that was *brought forth*, the thing that Americans celebrate on the Fourth of July.

Is such a reflective citizenship possible? In 1852 Lincoln delivered a eulogy for his dear friend and Kentucky politician, Henry Clay. In the speech, he celebrates Clay as a statesman who defended liberty and did what “the times have demanded” of him.<sup>105</sup> Henry Clay loved America “partly because it was his own country.”<sup>106</sup> It is a human thing to love your own. In the Old Testament, when two women disputed to whom the infant son belonged, King Solomon, acting as judge, ordered his servants to “divide the

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<sup>103</sup> Calvin Coolidge, “Speech on the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence,” 5 July 1926. TeachingAmericanHistory.com <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-on-the-occasion-of-the-one-hundred-and-fiftieth-anniversary-of-the-declaration-of-independence/> Accessed 17 April 2014.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Lincoln’s “Eulogy on Henry Clay.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:132.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:126.

living child in half,” knowing that the mother would rather give up her child than see him die.<sup>107</sup> A wise judge, he knew well that it is natural to cherish what is yours, even selflessly. He knew that a mother’s sacrificially giving up her child in order to save his life is natural and, thus, ruled accordingly. As he expected, Solomon discovered who the true mother was when one cried out, “O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it,” and the other instructed to “divide the living child in two.” Similarly, according to Lincoln, Clay’s dedication to his nation is natural.

However, Clay adored his country in part because it was his, “but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity, and glory because he saw in such the advancement, prosperity, and glory of human liberty, human right, and human nature.”<sup>108</sup> He loved America because he saw something good inherent within it. As he observed his country, he saw something in the regime worth fighting for. It was a free country that made human beings free, so he propelled it forward; it was a country rooted in natural right that existed to protect the natural rights of human beings, so he gave his life to protect it. As the American commemorates the birth of his country, Clay dedicated his life to glory of the nation, not simply because it was his, but because it was good. He followed Aristotle’s instruction in the *Politics*: he sought “not the traditional but the good.”<sup>109</sup> Such a reflective citizenship is possible, according to Lincoln, but only when a man loves liberty and justice more than he loves his own country. In sum, Clay reflectively loved America because of what it was: *conceived in liberty*.

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<sup>107</sup> 1 Kings 3:16-28 (KJV)

<sup>108</sup> Lincoln’s “Eulogy on Henry Clay.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:126.

<sup>109</sup> Aristotle. *The Politics*. 1269a2-3. Carnes Lord, trans. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1984).

*Conceptions* bring birth, and births are inextricably tied to purpose. What is conceived must also be *dedicated*. Man asks why he was born; he asks what on earth is he on the earth for. In the Scriptures, for example, Job asks the Lord, “Wherefore then hast thou brought me forth out of the womb?” (Job 10:18). A formerly wealthy and happy man, he had lost his oxen and asses (1:14-15); his sheep (1:16); his camels (1:17); all of his sons and daughters (1:18-19); and his house (1:18-19). He was covered in boils and scraped his skin with the fragments of broken pottery that he found in the ruins of his possessions (2:7-8). Even his wife abandoned him (2:9-10). After his three less-than-helpful friends came and sat with him in silence for seven days, he cursed the day of his birth and wished that he had never been born. A man known for his patience, he was running out of it.

During the American Civil War, the broken nation asked Job’s broken questions: What for are we here? In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln attempts to give an answer.

#### IV. “And dedicated to the proposition”

When the Founding Fathers of 1776 wrote the Declaration of Independence, they declared that they *held* the concept of human equality as a *self-evident* truth. The document claims that all men are the same—not necessarily in their intellectual capacity, or moral ability, or physical aptitude—but in the sense that all men are men and, therefore, have an equal claim to rule themselves. “All human beings are equally human beings, in the same sense that all dogs are equally dogs, and all chairs are equally chairs,” Jaffa explains.<sup>110</sup> Human equality, in this sense, is self-evident, for, according to Jaffa, “anything denominated by any common noun partakes equally in the class characteristics referred to by that noun.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, the fat man is a man. The white man is a man. The short man is a man. The young man is a man. That all of these men fall under the definition of *man* is, according to the American Founding Fathers, *self-evident*.

The word *self-evident* is mathematical. According to Euclidean geometry, which both Jefferson and Lincoln studied, a self-evident truth is something that includes within itself the evidence of its own validity. In other words, the Declaration claims that human equality is an axiomatic truth. If one can understand what a man is, one can, with certainty, know that he is equal to other men in his natural rights. According to the manifesto of 1776, no further proof is necessary. Thus, the Declaration’s claim is an ultimate assertion of a fixed, universal human nature that is as irrefutable as “the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.” It is as unassailable as  $A = B$ ,  $B = C$ ,  $\therefore A = C$

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<sup>110</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 120. For a comical illustration of this point, see Peter Griffin’s inability to name “something that you sit in” besides a chair on Family Feud (in FOX’s *Family Guy*): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=R68YB172wrg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R68YB172wrg)

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

In the words of Lincoln, the Founders *brought forth* the American regime in the concept of human equality. This self-evident truth is the necessary beginning of American Politics, for it possesses a moral gravitas. If all men are, by nature, the same in their humanness, then all men equally possess natural rights, including *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. From this simple, moral truth, the Declaration claims two necessary components of a just regime: first, the governed people's consent and, second, the government's securing of the natural rights of its citizens. The sameness of humankind acts as a moral barrier against any person or group of persons that attempts to rule over someone without his consent. Borrowing the image from Algernon Sidney, Thomas Jefferson writes that "the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."<sup>112</sup> In addition, the sameness of humankind gives just government its purpose: *to secure these rights*. Borrowing from John Locke's contract theory of government, the Declaration maintains that, because human beings cannot secure their rights individually, they must come together and form a government. Whenever government *becomes destructive* to these ends, it is the duty of the people *to alter or abolish it*. In sum, holding the concept of human equality as a *self-evident* truth, the Founding Fathers build the entire structure of the American regime on it.

What the men of 1776 understood very clearly was that America is an experiment. The success of what was *brought-forth*—that concept of human equality, embodied in the American regime—was not certain. Knowing that victory was not the inevitable

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<sup>112</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Roger C. Weightman," 24 June 1826. *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, Merrill D. Peterson, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1516-1517.

denouement of the American drama, the Founders rested all their “political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government,” as Federalist #39 states.<sup>113</sup>

In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln does not use the phrase *self-evident*. Rather, he states that the nation was *dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal*. According to White, the word *proposition* was one of Lincoln’s favorite, one that he used “nearly three hundred times in previous addresses and letters.”<sup>114</sup> Lincoln seems to use the word *proposition* because America denied that the concept of human sameness was a *self-evident* truth. What happens to a regime when a society no longer *holds* to the moral foundation of the regime? What happens when human beings deny the unmistakable certainty of human sameness?

After the Founding, many United States citizens, perhaps especially in the South, repudiated the principles of the Declaration. The first few pages of Plato’s *Republic* tell a similar story. As Socrates and Glaucon attempt to leave the religious ceremony at the Piraeus, a slave of Polemarchus chases them, asking them to wait. When Polemarchus and several others catch up, he demands that they stay for the festival, noting that, because his posse is bigger than theirs, they have to comply with his orders. According to him, the advantage belongs to the stronger. When Socrates asks him if it would be possible to convince him to let them leave, Polemarchus asks, “Can you persuade us if we don’t listen?” Glaucon answers, “There’s no way.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, “Federalist #39.” *The Federalist Papers*. George W. Carey and James McClellan, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 194.

<sup>114</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 245.

<sup>115</sup> *The Republic*, 327a1 – 327c4.



John C. Calhoun, a renowned politician from South Carolina, was one of the first to claim that the Declaration is “the most false and dangerous of all political errors.”<sup>116</sup> According to Calhoun (and many others), the enslavement of blacks is a win-win-win situation: a divinely mandated institution, it is good for the Politics of the United States of America, for the slaves, and for the slaveholders. Calhoun, in a speech delivered to the United States Senate in 1837, maintains that chattel slavery, far from being an evil, is actually “a positive good.”<sup>117</sup> “The existing relation between the two races in the South,” he “fearlessly” maintains in this address, “forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions.”<sup>118</sup> Stability and freedom, in other words, require un-freedom. The regime’s foundation and structure must be lined with some sort of inequality. The proof is in the pages of history. Boldly, Calhoun states that “there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other. Broad and general as is this assertion, it is fully borne out by history.”<sup>119</sup>

Calhoun is not wrong, at least, not entirely. For nearly all of human history, tyrants grand and diminutive have ignored or repudiated those *self-evident truths* of human equality in word and in deed. The Southern argument for the “positive good” of chattel slavery is nothing novel, for it is “the same old serpent” as the argument for the divine right of kings, states Lincoln in the 1858 speech in Chicago.<sup>120</sup> Like the slave-owners, the despots averred that slavery was good for their subjects. “In all ages of the

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<sup>116</sup> John Calhoun, “Speech on the Oregon Bill.” 27 June 1848. TeachingAmericanHistory.com <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/oregon-bill-speech/> Accessed 24 January 2014.

<sup>117</sup> John Calhoun, “Slavery is a Positive Good.” 6 February 1837. TeachingAmericanHistory.com, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/slavery-a-positive-good/> Accessed 24 January 2014.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Lincoln at Chicago. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:500.

world,” Lincoln proclaims, tyrants have declared that they rule men without their consent “because the people were better off for being ridden.”<sup>121</sup>

A few months after his speech in Chicago, Lincoln dubbed the fight between the principles of human equality and inequality an “eternal struggle” between “the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.”<sup>122</sup> Throughout history, this tyranny manifests itself in many forms, and, thus, it seems that Lincoln is not only the enemy of slavery, but of the divine right of kings in every form.<sup>123</sup> Slavery was, to Lincoln, “simply one manifestation of the far larger original sin of human politics,” writes Guelzo.<sup>124</sup> That the serpent has many heads is no reason to be fooled. Lincoln states:

It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, “You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.” No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.<sup>125</sup>

In short, “the divine right of kings, in the comprehensive sense of the right to rule others without their consent, predominated within Western civilization until the American Revolution,” explains Jaffa.<sup>126</sup> Until 1776, every regime in the history of the world was implicitly or explicitly established on the claim that some men were born to rule and others were born to be ruled. “In the long experience of mankind,” writes Jaffa,

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Seventh and Last Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Alton, Illinois,” 15 October 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:315.

<sup>123</sup> In fact, Lincoln never once mentions or even alludes to slavery in the Gettysburg Address. The cosmic conflict between the argument for inequality and the argument for equality is much grander than the particular sin of slavery.

<sup>124</sup> Guelzo, *A New Birth of Freedom*.

<sup>125</sup> Lincoln at Alton. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:315.

<sup>126</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 127.

those “self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence had never been the basis of the experiment of popular self-government.”<sup>127</sup> Calhoun was right, sort of. The American experiment was a completely new species of government.

Like the divine right of kings argument, Calhoun’s positive-good line of reasoning stands on the most solid justification its proponents could concoct: God’s Word. Americans at the time saw the Bible as the expression of God’s purposes for the world and His instructions for living a moral life. It was held as a sacrosanct text that applied to every part of life. According to Mark A. Noll, a professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, “the prevailing American hermeneutic” was embodied in a Reformed, literal interpretation of the holy text.<sup>128</sup> In other words, society at large believed that whatever the Bible said, it meant, and whatever it meant, must be followed in even the smallest parts of life. In the Southern mind, “if the Bible tolerated—or actually sanctioned—slavery, then it was incumbent upon believers to hear and obey. The logic was inescapable.”<sup>129</sup> The South’s positive-good argument depends on a political theology that elevates some human beings above others. Similar to the tyrants of the Old World, the South interpreted the Bible in a way that separated fundamentally those who rule from those who are ruled.

For example, in 1859 Jefferson Davis, the later-President of the Confederacy, cites Genesis 9:18-28 as ultimate trump card in the debate on human equality. The “judgments of God” are on our side.<sup>130</sup> In the passage from Genesis, when Noah’s

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>128</sup> Mark A. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, Charles Reagan Wilson, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 43.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Jefferson Davis, “Speech at Jackson,” 6 July 1859. In *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches*, Dunbar Rowland, ed. (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 4:71-72. Quoted in Jaffa, *New Birth of Freedom*, 156.

youngest son Ham does not cover his father's drunken nakedness, Noah curses him: "a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (10:25). Tracing the Negroes in America to the race of Ham, Davis declares that the blacks are "blessed" in their station of "servitude."<sup>131</sup> They belong nowhere else. The Lord spoke, and there is nothing more to say. God Himself hath established their low position, and thus, their position is not up for debate.<sup>132</sup>

In the Antebellum era, the curse of Ham became the "most elaborate and systematic" justification of proslavery theology.<sup>133</sup> It assumed its own sort of self-evidence, for it conveniently "framed the ethos of plantation life within a sacred history."<sup>134</sup> The myth "became symbolically persuasive because it reinforced prevalent attitudes about the nature of government and the planters' image both of themselves and of the ideal Southern plantation," notes one historian.<sup>135</sup> The slaves were, like Ham, unruly and dishonoring of God's ordained authority, even, perhaps, through sexual sin.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Robert Boyle, an Irish political philosopher and chemist, wrote in 1664 that the black skin color was not a curse. He writes, "There is another Opinion concerning the Complexion of *Negroes*, that is not only embrac'd by many of the more Vulgar Writers ... [that] the Blackness of *Negroes* an effect of *Noah's* Curse ratify'd by God's, upon *Cham*; ... And not only we do not find expressed in the Scripture, that the Curse meant by *Noah* to *Cham*, was the Blackness of his Posterity, but we do find plainly enough there that the Curse was quite another thing, namely that he should be a Servant of Servants .... which accordingly did in part come to pass, when the *Israelites* of the posterity of *Sem*, subdued the *Canaanites*, that descended from *Cham*, and kept them in great Subjection. Nor is it evident that Blackness is a Curse, for Navigators [Western explorers] tell us of Black Nations, who think so much otherwise of their own condition, that they paint the Devil White."

Boyle, Robert. *Experiments and Considerations Touching Colours*. London. 1664. 159-160. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14504/14504-h/14504-h.htm>. Web. Accessed on 08 April 2014.

<sup>133</sup> William Summer Jenkins, cited in Randy J. Sparks, "Mississippi's Apostle of Slavery: James Smylie and the Biblical Defense of Slavery," *Journal of Mississippi History* (1989), 51.

Mark Noll, on the other hand, writes that, though the Southern belief that the Hamitic Curse applied to the American Negro "flourished among the people at large," the argument was "largely passé among intellectual elites" (Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," 62)

<sup>134</sup> Thomas Peterson, *Ham and Japeth in America: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen, New Jersey: American Theological Library Association, 1978), 117.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>136</sup> Though the Bible never explicitly says what Ham does wrong, some believe that he raped Noah, his own father.

In his book, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, Stephen Haynes asks, “By comporting himself as a dishonorable and disorderly son, did not Ham embody the very traits that distinguished the slave population?”<sup>137</sup> Though the passage does not specify the color of Ham’s skin, Ham’s blackness fit into the “cultural common sense” of the Antebellum South.<sup>138</sup> They “considered Ham’s negritude to be as self-evident as Noah’s identity as the first planter patriarch,” their agrarian father.<sup>139</sup> James Henley Thornwell, one of the South’s leading theologians at the time, claimed that the answer had been decided long, long ago. “[T]hat the relation betwixt the slave and his master is not inconsistent with the word of God, we have long since settled ... We cherish the institution not from avarice, but from principle.”<sup>140</sup>

Professor Jaffa posits that “the Civil War was as much a war between differing versions of Christianity (or about the teachings of the Bible) as it was about slavery and the Constitution.”<sup>141</sup> Lincoln, in his Second Inaugural Address, adds that “both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.”<sup>142</sup> The ultimate crisis of the Civil War seems to be that there was no apparent biblical resolution to the crisis. Henry Clay, Lincoln’s hero, warned of the nation’s dividing in an 1852 interview with the *Presbyterian Herald* of Louisville, Kentucky, a few weeks before his death. In the article, he chastised American churches for succumbing to the increasing bitterness and hostility in the intense political debate, calling “the sundering of religious

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<sup>137</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 12.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> James Henley Thornwell, “Our National Sins,” 21 November 1860. Chalcedon Presbyterian Church. [http://chalcedon.org/docs/counselpdf/2001\\_4%20Our%20National%20Sins.pdf](http://chalcedon.org/docs/counselpdf/2001_4%20Our%20National%20Sins.pdf) Accessed 15 February 2014.

<sup>141</sup> Jaffa. *A New Birth of Freedom*. 153.

<sup>142</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” 4 March 1865. Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:333.

ties” in America “the greatest source of danger to our country.”<sup>143</sup> For Clay, the plain and simple truth was that if the preachers could not keep the Christians from “running into excesses and fanaticism,” the nation would go under.<sup>144</sup> About nine years later, that is what happened.

Despite claims to the contrary, Lincoln believes that “the Bible gives no such direct answers” to resolve the contentious slavery debate.<sup>145</sup> In a fragment tentatively dated to October 1858, Lincoln admits that while “there is no contending against the will of God, there is some difficulty in ascertaining and applying it to particular cases.”<sup>146</sup> Surely one must not argue against God, but what exactly is God saying? At the moment, the difficulty was not conjuring up public faith in support of God’s word but in actually ascertaining what God’s word was. “Is it the will of God that Sambo shall remain a slave or be set free” or not? asks Lincoln.<sup>147</sup> For whatever reason, the answer is not found in Scripture.

Should the presence of slavery in the Bible be interpreted as an endorsement of the institution? Should the differences between the debt slavery in the ancient Hebraic culture and the chattel slavery in nineteenth century America affect the way Scripture is interpreted? How ought a people interpret the words of God? Should America focus on the spirit of the text—which seems to celebrate freedom—or the actual particulars of the text? While Paul writes in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, “Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” he writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, “Let every man abide

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<sup>143</sup> Chester Forrester Dunham, “The Attitude of the Northern Clergy Toward the South, 1860-1865,” PhD Dissertation (University of Chicago, 1939), 2.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166.

<sup>146</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology,” 1 October 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:204.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it.”<sup>148</sup> Paul also exhorts his readers in Galatia to “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage,” and in Genesis, the Lord instructs Moses to free the Israelites from enslavement in Egypt.<sup>149</sup> In Romans 8:21, Paul even claims that Christ Jesus delivers the believer from “the bondage of corruption” and brings him “into the glorious liberty of the children of God,” but he also instructs Titus to “[e]xhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things” in order to “adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things.”<sup>150</sup> Ultimately, Lincoln concludes that “the Almighty gives no audible answer to the question [of the morality of slavery] and his revelation—the Bible—gives none—or, at most, none but such as admits of a squabble as to its meaning.”<sup>151</sup>

That neither the Bible nor the God of the Bible offer explicit support for either side becomes even clearer when Alexander Stephens, the Vice President of the Confederacy, puts forward his own mode of reasoning. In 1861 Alexander Stephens delivers what became known as “The Corner Stone Speech.” Continuing Calhoun’s and Davis’s argument, he declares that the Confederacy’s “corner stone rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man.”<sup>152</sup> Explicitly rejecting the “prevailing ideas entertained by [Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the

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<sup>148</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:17; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:20-21

<sup>149</sup> Galatians 5:1; Exodus 1-15.

<sup>150</sup> Titus 2:9-10 (KJV). See also Romans 8:21-25 - Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

<sup>151</sup> Lincoln’s “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:204.

<sup>152</sup> Alexander Stephens, “The Cornerstone Speech” in Savannah, Georgia on 21 March 1861. TeachingAmericanHistory.com. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/cornerstone-speech/> Accessed 17 April 2014.

formation of the old constitution,” Stephens suggests that the Founders lived in the dark age, before Science disabused the human mind from thinking that *all men are created equal*. The ideas of 1776 “were fundamentally wrong.” Borrowing a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew, Stephens states that because the regime had a “sandy foundation,” it fell when the “storm came and the wind blew.”<sup>153</sup> In fact, because modern Science has disproven human equality, all who still hold to the Founder’s philosophy, all those who hold to “the errors of the past generation,” are literally “fanatics,” with “defective reasoning.”<sup>154</sup>

The Confederacy, on the other hand, is a new species of government, he claims: “the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth”—that “the negro, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.”<sup>155</sup> Borrowing a phrase from the Psalms, he states, “this stone which was rejected by the first builders” has become the “corner-stone in our new edifice.”<sup>156</sup> The Confederacy, according to Stephens, is the first regime based on modern Science. It is the first truly enlightened nation.

While Stephens does follow suit by referencing scripture, his justification for the pro-slavery argument is telling. Like Davis, Stephens cites Genesis 9, but unlike Davis, he does not solely rely on Scripture. According to Stephens, modern Science has somehow discovered—he does not say specifically in this speech when or who or how—that the Negro is inferior. Stephens’ mode implies that the conclusion of the argument—that the Negro is “fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system”—is much

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* See also Matthew 7:24-27 (KJV).

<sup>154</sup> Stephens, “The Cornerstone Speech.”

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Psalm 118:22-23 (KJV)



more important than the justification of the argument.<sup>157</sup> Which is it? Is the Negro inferior “by nature *or* by the curse against Canaan?” The Negro cannot be inferior *both* because of his nature and because of his curse, for the two are mutually exclusive: one is deeply situated in the fabric of the Negro’s essence from the beginning and the other is superimposed by a curse of Noah. In other words, if the Negro were by nature inferior, of what significance is the curse?

What Stephens’s mode of reasoning shows is that Scripture’s position on slavery is not as obviously clear as men like Davis and Calhoun claim. Writes Jaffa: Stephens’ “mode of reasoning” shows that “it apparently required a discovery of science to reveal the truth within the Bible.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, the Bible must not be so clear after all.

In this discussion on the biblical morality of American chattel slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, Lincoln never attacks the South’s justifications for the inequality of the Negro. He does not argue with their claim that the nation is dependent on slavery. He does not contest their interpretation of Genesis—and certainly he could have successfully.<sup>159</sup> He does not produce new scientific data to disprove their hypothesis that the Negro is intellectually or morally inferior. Rather, he employs reason to interpret revelation.<sup>160</sup> In a rational and non-sectarian way, Lincoln skillfully refutes the pro-slavery theology by extending the argument to its moral and political conclusions, and examining the consequences. In a mode of reasoning reminiscent of Socrates, Lincoln

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<sup>157</sup> Stephens, “The Cornerstone Speech.”

<sup>158</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 224.

<sup>159</sup> In hindsight, an attack on the Southern interpretation of Genesis 9 seems almost destined for success. How exactly did a curse produce a “blessing,” and why were the Negroes better off for it? Moreover, wasn’t it God, not Noah, who cursed Ham and his descendents. In addition, Jaffa notes that “any attempt to link the Canaanites of the Bible with the American Negro slaves is pure fantasy. For one thing, the Canaanites were not black” (*New Birth of Freedom*, 158).

<sup>160</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166. “Unless we know the answers of reason, we cannot know the answers of revelation,” he writes.

does exactly what the Southerners ask him to do: suppose the possibility that the Negro is undeniably inferior. Could that be true? If so, what then?

Throughout the slavery debate, however, Lincoln is cautious to avoid contesting the equality of the races on the grounds of the gifts of nature. Lincoln asks his readers to “suppose it is true, that the negro is inferior to the white in the gifts of nature” not to argue that the Negro actually is inferior, but to, in the words of Jaffa, “like Socrates, [reason] from the premises that are generally accepted.”<sup>161</sup> By entertaining the notion that the slave is intellectually or physically inferior to the white man, Lincoln “does not at all concede the truth of those premises.”<sup>162</sup>

In fact, Lincoln does quite the opposite. The question of whether or not the Negro is less intelligent than the white man is, “irrelevant to the question of the justice or injustice of slavery,” writes Jaffa.<sup>163</sup> In a speech given in 1858, Lincoln states that the Negro “is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment either.”<sup>164</sup> Those things have nothing to do with whether or not the Negro is “entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>165</sup> According to Lincoln, “in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal ... and the equal of every living man.”<sup>166</sup>

What Lincoln does is compare slavery with Christian morality, accessible to persons of faith. In a fragment dated tentatively to 1858, Lincoln contrasts the “rule of

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<sup>161</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:204. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166.

<sup>162</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois,” 21 August 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:16.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

slavery” with the generally accepted “Christian rule of charity.”<sup>167</sup> Charity for the poor, after all, is a common theme throughout the Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 15:7-8, for example, the Lord instructs the Israelites:

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.

Proverbs 14:31 reads: “He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor.” Throughout Scriptures, especially the Psalms, a book with which Lincoln was exceptionally familiar, God fights for the cause of the needy.

Lincoln argues that even if one accepts for a moment that the black race is inferior, the “pro-slavery theology” of the South contradicts one of the most basic and widely accepted premises of Christianity. While the Bible instructs men to “*Give* to the needy,” the South commands men to “take from him that is needy.”<sup>168</sup> If, as the pro-slavery theologians maintain, the Negro is inferior, then it seems that he exactly fits the biblical definition of “him that is needy,” and, therefore, the white man ought to “*give* to him,” not “take from him.”<sup>169</sup> Accordingly, the pro-slavery theology is completely out of step with biblical morality.

In addition, in a succinct fragment dated August 1858, Lincoln wrote, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is not democracy.”<sup>170</sup> In three

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<sup>167</sup> Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:204.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Definition of Democracy,” 1 August 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:532.

short sentences, Lincoln attempts to annihilate the pro-slavery theology of the South. He applies the Golden Rule—the sum of “the law and the prophets,” as Matthew’s gospel states—to the peculiar institution of slavery.<sup>171</sup> Lincoln contrasts the “generally admitted principle—the rule of charity—that could hardly be disputed by any Protestant or Catholic” to the Southern argument, concluding that as he does not desire to be ruled without his consent, so would he not rule someone without his consent.<sup>172</sup>

To treat someone as you desire not to be treated is unjust, according to Christ Jesus, perhaps because both persons are just that: persons. The principle of reciprocity only applies if both parties are of the same kind. Christian morality instructs one human being to treat the other well because there is a *sameness* to humanity. A human being ought not steal another human being’s fruits—even if that other person has much more or bigger fruit. In an 1858 speech, Lincoln draws a line between the Founders’ understanding of human equality and the biblical understanding of the image of God: “nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows,” he declares.<sup>173</sup>

Extending the Golden Rule to its logical conclusion, it seems that the only legitimate reason to treat something as sub-human is if that thing is, indeed, sub-human. No human being fits into that category, according to both the very essence of a human being—something that is by definition *not* sub-human, a *self-evident truth* accessible through reason—and the Bible.

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<sup>171</sup> Matthew 7:12 – Jesus said, “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”

<sup>172</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166, 155.

<sup>173</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Lewistown, Illinois,” 17 August 1858. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:546.

In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus tells a crafty lawyer that to inherit eternal life, he must love the Lord and his neighbor. When the lawyer asks Jesus who is included in the definition of neighbor, Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>174</sup> In the story, a band of thieves rob a lone traveler on the road to Jericho, leaving him for dead. The priest and the Levite ignore his pain, but a Samaritan man—an enemy of the Israelites—bandages him and pays for his lodging. “Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?” asks Jesus (10:36). Though the lawyer, perhaps out of shock or disgust, cannot utter the word *Samaritan*, the answer is clear: every person is your neighbor, including the Samaritan. According to Joachim Jeremias, a prominent, twentieth-century German theologian, Jesus intentionally chose to make the Samaritan the hero of the parable in order to teach the lawyer that “no human being was beyond the range of his charity.”<sup>175</sup> Every person, regardless of his or her ethnicity, sex, or heritage, deserves to be treated like a human being, including the American Negro. If Christ’s words are to be taken seriously, there is no room for exceptions.

Thus, Lincoln saw that the debate between the two interpretations of the Bible is settled by the question of whether the black man was a human being. If the Negro is human, the slave-owner’s possession of him without his consent is unjust. If the Negro is not human, then it could be just to enslave him. Nearly two millennia after Jesus, the expositors of the pro-slavery theology did almost everything in their power to declare the

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<sup>174</sup> Throughout their histories, the Israelites and the Samaritans had strenuous relations. At approximately 721 B. C. E., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and took them as slaves. In approximately 677 B. C. E., the Assyrian king brought pagan foreigners—who later received the appellation of “Samaritans”—into the region once occupied by the Israelites in order to tend the land. When the Israelites returned to their homes, tensions arose. Whose land is it? Who is God’s chosen people? Even in the first century, the Jews had “no dealings with the Samaritans” (John 4:9). For the Jews, “Samaritan” was used as a pejorative (John 8:48).

<sup>175</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (SCM Press, London, 1955), 141.

Negro is not a human being. These men excluded the Negro from the neighborhood of humankind. The Negro is not the white man's neighbor, they argued, for the Negro is not a person. Even the verbiage they used stemmed from their philosophy. Jaffa explains that "the word 'chattel' (as in 'chattel slavery') is derived from 'cattle' and refers to the subrational order of creation. To call black human beings chattels is to deny that they are part of 'mankind.'"<sup>176</sup>

Why do men like John Calhoun, Jefferson Davis, and Alexander Stephens claim what seems so clearly false? Why do pro-slavery theologians refuse to compare their doctrine with the rest of Christian orthodoxy? Why do they seem to twist the spirit of Scripture to fit their own agenda? It seems that they, as well as much of the nation, were blinded by self-interest. Slavery was exceptionally profitable. Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793 helped transform the status of slavery in the southern mind from a necessary evil to the greatest securer of economic opulence and livelihood they had ever seen. Before 1793, producing cotton required an extensive amount of manpower. Workers—typically, but not exclusively, slaves—picked cotton fiber in the fields and removed the sticky and entrenched seeds by hand. The cotton gin radically streamlined the process by combing out the seeds in the cotton with its teeth. It cleaned raw cotton efficiently and quickly, making the industry much more profitable. According to Hugh Thomas, the United States exported 138,328 pounds of cotton in 1792.<sup>177</sup> Two years later, that number increased "over ten-fold," and in 1820, the United States was exporting nearly 35,000,000 pounds of cotton.<sup>178</sup> The exponential growth of the cotton industry

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<sup>176</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 210.

<sup>177</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 571.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

made slavery, in the mind of the South, an absolute necessity. Cheap, slave labor functioned as the backbone of the agrarian South's economy. The more profitable cotton became, the more endeared the institution of chattel slavery became to them. The pro-slavery theology of the South line plantation owners' pockets with cash. Self-interest encouraged them to belie the teachings of the Bible.

In fact, Christians used Noah's curse of Ham to justify racial, chattel slavery "only with the growth of the slave trade and the increasing reliance on sub-Saharan Africa as a source for slaves," explains Stephen Haynes in his book, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*.<sup>179</sup> Haynes explains that the account of Ham's curse most likely originated in the 10th Century, when the Canaanites were enslaved by the Israelites.<sup>180</sup> While many Church fathers—in the medieval and pre-modern periods—used the pericope to explain "the origins of slavery, the provenance of black skin, and the exile of Hamites to the less wholesome regions of the earth," Haynes notes that there was no "explicit justification for racial slavery until the fifteenth century, when dark-skinned peoples were enslaved by the Spanish and Portuguese."<sup>181</sup> The genesis of the slave trade encouraged humans to twist the meaning of Scripture. One does not want to have God tell him that his industry is immoral. Accordingly, the Genesis passage became obfuscated by the economics of slavery as well.

Lincoln understood well that self-interest often speaks louder than a desire for righteousness. It is, in a way, more easily felt than the call of morality. Since the institution of slavery is entirely to the pro-slavery theologian's benefit, why should he

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<sup>179</sup> Stephen Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 6.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

oppose it? Is it even possible for him to oppose it? In the fragment from October 1858, Lincoln paints the picture of Rev. Dr. Ross, a prestigious Presbyterian minister from Alabama who defended chattel slavery as a divinely mandated institution, sitting under the canopy of a willow tree, “with gloves on his hands,” considering whether or not his Negro, Sambo, ought to remain a slave.<sup>182</sup> Dr. Ross, of course, lives off of the sweat of Sambo’s brow. He does not work in the fields, because Sambo does. Dr. Ross’s is a life of luxury, but only because he, figuratively speaking, sits atop Sambo’s back—booted and spurred. What decision will Dr. Ross come to? “If he decides that it is God’s will that Sambo remain enslaved, he thereby retains his own comfortable position” and does not need to get his hands dirty in the fields.<sup>183</sup> If Sambo goes back to work, Dr. Ross can stay in the shade. “If,” on the other hand, “he decides that God wills Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread,” writes Lincoln.<sup>184</sup> “Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which was ever been considered favorable to correct decisions?” asks Lincoln.<sup>185</sup> In such a situation, can Rev. Dr. Ross, or any human being, make such an unbiased decision? Lincoln does not answer the question because the answer seems self-evident. As James Madison writes in Federalist 10, “No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity.”<sup>186</sup>

The oddity of slavery shows its face when those who claim that slavery is a good not only benefit from its continuation, but also refuse to become slaves themselves. “As a

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<sup>182</sup> Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:204.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:204.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:204.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* 3:204-205.

<sup>186</sup> Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, “Federalist #10,” *The Federalist Papers*. George W. Carey and James McClellan, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 44.



*good* thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks the good of, for himself,” proclaims Lincoln.<sup>187</sup> This astounding incongruity between the pro-slavery theologians’ word and deed makes the whole enterprise suspicious. “Nonsense!” Lincoln proclaims. “Wolves devouring lambs, not because it is good for their own greedy maws, but because it is good for the lambs!!!”<sup>188</sup> The rationale just does not add up. Lincoln explains that “although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it by being a slave himself.”<sup>189</sup> Although men like Calhoun, Davis, Stephens, and Ross celebrate slavery, none of them desires to be enslaved themselves. Clearly, the institution exists for the benefit of the cunning wolves not of the lambs.

The Bible and the God of the Bible remain silent, and the slave-owner’s judgment is clouded by self-interest, so what should Rev. Dr. Ross do with his slave? According to Lincoln, the most fruitful thing to do is ask the one that slavery affects the most—the slave—but oddly, “no one thinks of asking Sambo’s opinion on it.”<sup>190</sup> Lincoln’s observation here assumes that Sambo has an opinion and that he is capable of communicating it, which reveals Lincoln’s position on the humanness of the Negro. That the slave is able to think and communicate his thoughts means that the slave is a human being, for there is no other being known to man that can do these things except a human being. And yet, no one asks for Sambo’s thoughts, perhaps because if Sambo is given the freedom to speak, the slave-owner’s will lose control of the means to his livelihood.

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<sup>187</sup> Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:205. Emphasis original.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:205. Emphasis original.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:205.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:204.

But Sambo cannot speak eloquently or read or write, the pro-slavery theologians rebut. Not only that, he seems incapable of learning. The South's argument for the intellectual inferiority of the Negro a self-fulfilling prophecy, argues Lincoln. They begin with the assumption that "some men are too *ignorant* and *vicious* to share in government," writes Lincoln, and keep the Negro "ignorant and vicious" through the machinations of their own system.<sup>191</sup> Of course the typical Negro will not be able to read if the slave-owner prevents him from reading. Of course he will be unable to habituate himself to the art of self-government if he is not permitted to rule himself in *any* of the smallest details, states Lincoln.

Is it possible for any society to oppose its own self-interest so directly? Is it within man's capacity to abide by the Golden Rule against his interest? In one sense, the Golden Rule is not a principle of interest, and this seems clear. If the white man can do to the black man what the black man cannot do to the white man, then the economy, or, more specifically, the white man's economy, will flourish. Pocket books will grow, and plantations will expand. Yet, Lincoln explains that, in another sense, the Golden Rule *is* a principle of self-interest, for there is no argument that "could justify the enslavement of Negroes that could not also justify the enslavement of whites."<sup>192</sup> The pro-slavery case is an argument not for black slavery, but for *slavery*.

If the Southerner can prove that he may enslave the Negro because of the Negro's skin color, what is to prevent others "with a fairer skin" from enslaving the Southerner?<sup>193</sup> If society accepts that the Southerner may enslave the Negro because the

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<sup>191</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Fragment on Slavery," 1 July 1854. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:222. (Emphasis original.)

<sup>192</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 166.

<sup>193</sup> Lincoln, "Fragment on Slavery." Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:222.

Negro is somehow intellectually inferior, why cannot others “snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave” the Southerner?<sup>194</sup> “By this rule,” writes Lincoln, “you are to be slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.”<sup>195</sup> The same argument the slave-owner employs to rule over the Negro can be used to rule over the slave-owner. The same poison that the white man spews can also be used to poison him. Lincoln’s argument here is an attempt to persuade the South through its stomach.

Though there were arguments against slavery to be found in the fields of theology and science, Lincoln chooses a different route altogether. Why does he not tackle the pro-slavery theology of the South head on and on their turf? Why does he defend the principles of the Declaration by accepting the Southern argument and examining what becomes of it? It seems that, for better or worse, Lincoln’s chief aim in defending human equality is not to assist the nation come to a proper way of interpreting the Bible. How a Christian society ought to interpret the Bible is not, it seems, his primary concern, perhaps because any such attempt was likely to be incorrect and / or divisive. Lincoln was keenly aware of mortal man’s inability to wrap his mind around the truths of God. Perhaps Lincoln offered no comprehensive interpretation of the Bible because it was not his place as President to do so. In addition, though each sect of Christianity read the same Bible, each had its own way of interpreting it. For the President to *take a whack at* defining the apposite way to interpret the Holy Scriptures would divide the country on religious grounds, a dangerous fire to add to a combustible situation. Instead, Lincoln employs non-sectarian, biblical imagery. There are many competing interpretations of the

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<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.* 2:222.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* 2:223.

Bible, but no orthodox Christian would openly forsake the Golden Rule or the rule of charity. He does not pull obscure passages from the Bible in order to prove his point but, rather, appeals to a broad, Christian doctrine that is easily accessible to every tradition of the religion—and to reason.

What is even more telling is that Lincoln's comparison of Christian orthodoxy and chattel slavery shows that his religion, at least his public religion, is as much rooted in reason as it is in revelation. A man who wrestled with orthodox Christianity, Lincoln claims that human beings do not need the Bible to discover the immorality of slavery. In the fragment on slavery tentatively dated to 1854, Lincoln writes that the wrongness of slavery has been "made so plain by our good Father in Heaven, that all *feel* and understand it, even down to the brutes and creeping insects," who obviously cannot read the Holy Scriptures.<sup>196</sup> In other words, according to Lincoln, it is the Lord who makes the wrongness of slavery *self-evident* to humankind. Even the ant knows when it has been wronged. Even it knows to "furiously defend the fruit of its labor against whatever robber assails him," writes Lincoln.<sup>197</sup> Similarly, "the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master does constantly *know* that he is wronged," even though he cannot open the Bible and read it by candlelight.<sup>198</sup> It is rooted in his nature, the nature that God has given him.

According to Lincoln, then, what is the relation between reason and revelation? Generally speaking, the Christian tradition, perhaps best articulated by Saint Thomas

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:222.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:222.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:222.

Aquinas, is that “the light of faith” perfects “the light of natural reason.”<sup>199</sup> Faith most certainly “does not do away with” reason, for both are a gift from God on high.<sup>200</sup> Since God gave humankind both *fides* and *ratio*, a fundamental contradiction between the two would mean that “He would be the cause of our error,” an absolute impossibility.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, Aquinas maintains, “it is impossible that the contents of philosophy should be contrary to the contents of faith, but they fall short of them.”<sup>202</sup> The two play on the same team, so to speak, but because reason is more incomplete than faith—because it is “imperfect”—Aquinas states that “philosophy should be brought within the bounds of faith.”<sup>203</sup> Reason ought to be subordinated to religion. Any philosophy found contrary to theology is not true philosophy “but rather an abuse of philosophy arising from faulty reasoning.”<sup>204</sup>

The natural rights philosophy of the Founding is undeniably contrary to the pro-slavery theology of the South in the nineteenth century (something on which Calhoun, Stephens, Davis, and Lincoln agreed). In Antebellum America, faith and reason fought, but unlike Aquinas, Lincoln implies that the fault belongs to faith, or, more specifically, that it is an abuse of faith. Even if reason is “incomplete,” as Aquinas states, offers provides a better argument against slavery than faith or even the Bible itself. In a March 1860 speech in Hartford, Lincoln proclaims that “natural theology” is capable of proving that “slavery is morally wrong. God gave man a mouth to receive bread, hands to feed it,

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<sup>199</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Is it Permissible to Use Philosophy in the Science of Faith?” *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, q.2, a.3; from *Faith, Reason and Theology*, trans. Armand Mauer (1987)

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

and his hand has a right to carry bread to his mouth without controversy.”<sup>205</sup> Humans can figure out at least that much on their own.<sup>206</sup>

At least in the question of the ethics of slavery, it appears that human nature is a more reliable source for Christian morality than the Bible because even the Bible is not above the forceful influence of self-interest. It is easy to ignore the *self-evident* truth of human sameness when a powerful, blinding force is used against it. Lincoln understood that the root of the issue in the heart of the Southern cause was not a religious piety that adhered to a strict system of biblical ethics but a rowdy, blinding self-interest. The first cause of the pro-slavery theologian’s argument was his economics. “Prosperity,” declares Lincoln in his 1857 speech on *Dred Scott*, has a tendency “to breed tyrants,” and by the mid-nineteenth century, slavery had made the South prosperous.<sup>207</sup> The Bible and Science were employed to secure that which South’s self-interest clamored for.

For Aquinas, faith checks reason. For Lincoln, it is the other way around. For him, Scripture is no trump card. It too can be corrupted.

Despite Lincoln’s best efforts, the South was not persuaded. As of 1860, the pro-slavery theologians were winning the philosophical battle for America’s soul. In a Tocqueville-style exposition of the American regime, James Stirling, a British man who visited America in 1857, writes in his *Letters From the Slave States* that those who offer “the Scriptural argument in favor of slavery” are “perfectly triumphant” over “the orthodox Abolitionists” in the debate on the biblical morality of slavery.<sup>208</sup> An outsider

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<sup>205</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Hartford, Connecticut,” 5 March 1860. Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:3.

<sup>206</sup> On October 15, 1858, Lincoln comically notes that “the Bible says somewhere that we are desperately selfish. I think we would have discovered that fact without the Bible.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:310.

<sup>207</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois,” 26 June 1857. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:398.

<sup>208</sup> James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), 120.  
[books.google.com/books?id=KB3\\_5mnSvOsC](https://books.google.com/books?id=KB3_5mnSvOsC) Accessed 15 February 2014.

looking in, Stirling claims that there is, in the eyes of the American public, no contest between the two theologies:

The express recognition of slavery, both in the Old and New Testaments, the rules for its regulations in Leviticus and Exodus, and the precepts for the behavior of masters and slaves (mistranslated as ‘servants’ in our version) in the Epistles of Paul and Peter, are irresistible proofs that the institution was recognized by the founders of both Judaism and Christianity. How those who adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and consider every direction contained in its pages as applicable at all times to all men, are to reconcile these facts with modern anti-slavery notions, it is, thank goodness, no business of mine to find out.<sup>209</sup>

According to him, the South had handedly won the theological debate.

And yet, despite the South’s best efforts, it seems that she was not completely persuaded by her own arguments. Lincoln writes that “almost every man has a sense of certain things being wrong, and at the same time, a sense of its pecuniary value. These conflict in the mind, and make a riddle of a man.”<sup>210</sup> Inside of the hearts of the Southerners was an ill twisting, a conflict between good and evil. Stirling powerfully adds that the Southerners’ obstinate and boisterous proclamations were, in reality, a sign that even they did not wholly subscribe to their own doctrine. He writes:

With all his loud assertion, I do not believe that the slave-holder is thoroughly persuaded in his own mind of the truth of his doctrines. His creed, like many other creeds, is reiterated all the oftener and the more loudly from a lurking doubt of its perfect truth. The slave-owner defends his position ostensibly against the Abolitionist; but in reality against his inner self.<sup>211</sup>

That the slavery question is “to be decided by the moral sense of man,” as Stirling writes, is a tragedy of catastrophic import, for the South, reminiscent of Polemarchus, refused to listen.<sup>212</sup> The South, through an unholy alliance of theology, Science, and self-interest, threw out the *self-evident* truth of the Founders. Philosophically, their argument

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<sup>209</sup> Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States*, 120.

<sup>210</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Hartford, Connecticut.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:3.

<sup>211</sup> Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States*, 123.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

was the defeat of 1776, for the danger of *self-evident* truths is that, once they are denied, they cannot be re-proven. Once ignored, there is just nothing left of them. If a people deny that the definition of *man* does include all men, how would one persuade them otherwise? If a community refuses to see what is *self-evident*, how does one open their eyes? Since a *self-evident truth* contains within itself the evidence of its own validity, denying it also destroys all support for its validity. There is nothing outside of it to make its case. This revolution in belief was not limited to the academic or the ecclesiastical but affected American society as a whole. The Founder's claim that a man is a man was the foundation for entirety of American self-government. What happens to that government if that claim is discarded? What happens to the house if the foundation is rejected?

Jefferson called the concept of human equality a *self-evident* truth, but Lincoln did not have that luxury. He writes in an 1855 letter:

When we were the political slaves of King George and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that "all men are created equal" a self evident truth; but now when we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be *masters* that we call the same maxim "a self evident lie."<sup>213</sup>

Within the context of American politics at the time—with approximately one half of the country claiming chattel slavery as a positive good or even divinely instituted—it would be imprudent to declare that the concept of human equality was a *self-evident* truth. While Lincoln claimed that human equality was so obvious that no one could deny it, the Confederates claimed that human *inequality* was so obvious that no one could deny it. By the time Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, the nation had been killing itself—brother against brother—over this question for years.

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<sup>213</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to George Robertson," 15 August 1855. Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:318. (Emphasis original.)



The pro-slavery theology of the South shows the limitations of religious rhetoric. Although Lincoln alludes to Scripture, refers to non-sectarian rules of Christianity, and even quotes from the Bible itself throughout his speeches, the rumblings of the Southern stomach prevented their ears from hearing most everything he had to say.

Lincoln's use of the word *proposition* shows that he had "come to understand the fragility of the Union."<sup>214</sup> Even after living for *four score and seven years*, the nation is still an experiment. By using the word *proposition*, Lincoln seems to be reminding his audience that America was never a shoe-in. Though Lincoln began his Address at Gettysburg by calling to mind the Declaration, his use of the word *proposition* speaks to a different political certainty than did the Founders' *truths* that were *self-evident*.

What happened four-score and seven years ago still matters today, but the Founding Fathers did not settle the nation's problems once and for all. There is still much to be done. The word *proposition* suggests that the debate between the divine right of kings and human equality is still open. It is still yet to be seen whether the experiment would be successful. It is still yet to be seen whether the nation could *live*.

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<sup>214</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 245.

## V. “Now we are engaged in a great civil war”

In the second paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, a mere four sentences, Lincoln transitions from the past to the present, beginning with a short word denoting the immediate present—*now*. Like the many biblical stories of a person’s trust or a people’s faith being tested, the Civil War is a test, an immense test, claims Lincoln. The struggle between brother and brother is a trial by fire as to whether or not America, or any nation *conceived in liberty* and born to the idea of human equality, can survive. The nation was born. It *lives*. It can also die. The Civil War, according to Guelzo, was “a kind of pass/fail examination to determine once and for all whether the American Founding had indeed been misbegotten,” and it was a terrible test.<sup>215</sup>

For Lincoln and his listeners, the most immediate and impressionable part of the test was the *great battlefield* on which they were standing. Even for those not in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in early July, the calamities of the war could not be ignored. According to White, it was

...not a serene cemetery with rows of white crosses on manicured lawns. Gettysburg on that day was still an unfinished burial site. Barely a third of the bodies had been buried. Confederate skeletons lay unburied beneath stones and vegetation dying with the onset of winter.<sup>216</sup>

Despite the best efforts of the undertakers, most of the soldiers were improperly buried, and many of the dead who were given an adequate burial had been disturbed by frantic mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, searching for any trace of the fallen. Dug up, the graves were not closed properly. The scene was soaked in death. Even as Lincoln arrived by train the day before the ceremony, he saw “hundreds of

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<sup>215</sup> Guelzo, “A New Birth of Freedom.”

<sup>216</sup> Ronald C. White, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 65-66.

coffins on the station platform.”<sup>217</sup> The cost of the test was high, and everyone who *met* at Gettysburg that day saw it.

Unlike Everett, who gave a thorough account of the battle, Lincoln does not offer any specific details. He does not explore the graphic, gory details of the fight. Rather, he simply modifies the words *civil war* and *battle-field* with *great*, one of the few adjectives employed in the speech. Perhaps Lincoln assumed that his audience already knew the haunting specifics. Perhaps he decided to give them mercy and not explore the grotesque event. Perhaps Lincoln had a different purpose altogether.

Lincoln’s official task at Gettysburg was to be the ribbon-cutter-in-chief. Wills’s invitation to the President asked him merely to make “a few appropriate remarks” in order to “formally set apart these grounds.”<sup>218</sup> He was invited, not to give an oration or even a short speech, but to simply produce a few words in order to commemorate the event. It was an important task, but a small one, especially compared to Everett’s.

Indeed, Lincoln does not object to the reason for his invitation, for he states that *it is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this*. With a humble gratitude, Lincoln’s words extol the glory of those men who died at Gettysburg. He attempts to set the deceased apart by showing the cause of their actions, the purpose of their movements. According to him, their death was a sacrifice, given *that that nation might live*. They paid the highest price for America. They died in order to help prove that experiment.

According to Lincoln, these men did not die in order to prolong the existence of a collective memory but to protect the *life* of something that *lives*. Echoing one of the prominent themes from the first paragraph, Lincoln claims that the nation is *alive*. Since

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<sup>217</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 230.

<sup>218</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 229.

the *livingness* of the nation is inextricably linked to her conception and her birth, these men gave their lives in pursuit of what her conception and her birth represented: the actualization of human equality and liberty. In sum, Lincoln is claiming that the Civil War is America's great test, determining whether her experiment in self-government will succeed or fail. It is a test of whether or not she can *live*.

Though he does not quote directly from Scripture, Lincoln's language evokes a memory of biblical sacrifice. These men died that the *nation might live*. In 1864 Lincoln wrote a letter to Lydia Bixby, a mother who lost five sons in the war, attempting to express the nation's deep gratitude. He prayed that "our Heavenly Father" would "assuage the anguish of your bereavement" and give you "only the cherished memory" of them and "the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom."<sup>219</sup> There is a nearly parallel idea in Scripture of Christ dying that mankind might live. Christ died on the cross, its own sort of altar, so that humankind might live. 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:9 shows that God's love was made manifest to us in that "God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him."

While Lincoln draws a surface level connection between the Union soldiers' sacrifice and Christ's biblical sacrifice, it requires an amount of mental gymnastics to claim that the two sacrifices were of equal importance in Lincoln's mind. Christ's sacrifice provided eternal life for all humankind and secured ultimate victory over the powers of darkness forever. Christ's was a perfect sacrifice, without blemish, that took the place of humanity and received the punishment that should have been hers. Christ's restored humankind's relationship with God the Father, the Creator of the Universe. None of these elements are present in the soldiers' deaths. The only similarity between the two,

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<sup>219</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "To Mrs. Lydia Bixby," 21 November 1864. Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:116-117.

it seems, is the sacrificial element, that these men *gave their lives that that nation might live*.

Lincoln is not speaking to only those present that day, nor to the Union Army, nor to the North, nor to America itself. He states that the Civil War is a testing of whether or not America or *any nation so conceived and so dedicated* in the same way can live. Lincoln at Gettysburg seems to suggest that the ideas within the address apply to all of mankind, and he appeals to everyone who will listen. In a way, at Gettysburg Lincoln repeats his claim from two and a half years prior that the question applies to “the whole family of man”: will the experiment in self-government, dedicated to human equality, be successful?<sup>220</sup> “The Union cause must win,” writes Lucas Morel, a professor of Politics at Washington and Lee University, “not only to prove the practicability of the American experiment in self-government, but also to hold out the promise” that *any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure*.<sup>221</sup> Is a nation like America possible in the world? Can men really govern themselves or is mankind forced to build the edifices of their governments on the backs of slaves? The answer, Lincoln states, is to be found in the hearts of Americans in 1863. The time of testing is now, and there may not be a second chance. Thus, in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln gives America a decisive mission. Put colloquially, Lincoln instructs the nation: don’t screw this up, or you screw it up for everyone.

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<sup>220</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Message to Congress in Special Session,” 4 July 1861. Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:428.

<sup>221</sup> Lucas Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-government* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), 55.

## VI. “We cannot”

In the third and final paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln shifts to the future. He is quick to point out the inadequacy of his words. What can a few hundred words dropped from the mouth of a mere man—even the President—add or remove to the sacrifice of tens of thousands of men on the battlefield? Though the Gettysburg Address has become known as one of the greatest speeches in American history, Lincoln deflects any praise or glory that may be given to him rather than the soldiers.

Lincoln’s ability to disappear is one of the rhetorical geniuses of the speech. The President of the United States of America—in his first prepared speech in more than two and a half years, at *the* pivotal moment in the nation’s history, in front of an audience of over 15,000 people—chooses to not talk about himself, the strength of his army, or why he should be reelected.<sup>222</sup> Where is Lincoln in the speech? The focus is not the President or his actions. In fact, as White notes, “Lincoln says nothing of himself.”<sup>223</sup> For a political speech, it seems exceptionally above the petty presidential speeches delivered today.

Instead of using the first personal singular, Lincoln talks in the first person plural, referring to *we*, *us*, or *our* fifteen times in the ten sentence speech.<sup>224</sup> The 6’ 4” character of Lincoln is found only within the plural in the address. Lincoln does not talk at America. He seems to be speaking with America, and he humbly includes himself.

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<sup>222</sup> Gabor Boritt notes that the Gettysburg Address was Lincoln’s “first prepared speech since his inauguration day, more than two and a half years earlier” (*The Gettysburg Gospel* 113).

<sup>223</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 255.

<sup>224</sup> Notice the first person plural throughout Lincoln’s speech: “our fathers,” “we are engaged,” “we are met,” “we have come,” “we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we can not hallow,” “our poor power,” “what we say here,” “for us the living,” “for us to be here dedicated,” “we take increased devotion,” “we here highly resolve.”

In the first sentence of the final paragraph, Lincoln contrasts *the brave men* with *our poor power* to *add or detract* from what they have already done. Guelzo writes, “any dedication to be done that day had been accomplished already by the dead soldiers themselves.”<sup>225</sup> As the maxim says, *actions speak louder than words*, and these actions speak like thunder. Like Henry V in Shakespeare’s play, Lincoln proclaims that the entire world cannot forget what these men did here.<sup>226</sup> What the soldiers did on the fields of Gettysburg will live on in humankind’s memory for ages.

In the penultimate passage of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln begins to call the nation to action by beginning with “the negative side of the argument.”<sup>227</sup> Lincoln repeats three times the words *we can not*: *We can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow*. It is a beautiful crescendo of phrasing that builds up to a climax of what *we can not* do. We cannot *wholly devote* the grounds to a purpose. In addition, we can not *set apart* the grounds to its sacred use. In addition, there is certainly nothing we can do to *make holy* the grounds. As Lincoln admits the insufficiency of his words at the moment, each new thing that *we can not* do reaches new heights. Each new thing he mentions is more difficult than the one that precedes it.

As Lincoln leads his listeners down the line of things that they cannot do, he creates the expectation that there is, indeed, something for them to do. “Starting with the negative first served to prepare the audience to agree with his evocation of what each

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<sup>225</sup> Guelzo, “A New Birth of Freedom.”

<sup>226</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act IV Scene iii 18-67  
King Henry, on the battlefield at Agincourt, says:

This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remembered.

<sup>227</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 247.

person in the audience could do,” explains White.<sup>228</sup> He is about to commission them to a national revival.

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*



## VII. “The great task remaining before us”

Lincoln declares that these men died to both win the war and to reaffirm the principles of the Founding. The two parts of their *great task* are inextricably linked together, for the nation cannot reaffirm those principles if it loses the war—it will be torn apart, bleeding, perhaps even destroyed—and the nation’s victory without those principles is actually a suicide—what made the nation *alive*, according to Lincoln, was its conception in liberty and its dedication to those principles. One without the other is the death of America.

In a fragment dated approximately to 1860, Lincoln quotes Proverbs 25, writing that the Declaration’s “assertion” of the principle that *all men are created equal*

was the word, “fitly spoken” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple — not the apple for the picture.<sup>229</sup>

Drawing from Scripture, Lincoln creates a metaphor that explains the Constitution’s relation to the Declaration of Independence, or, the connection between the Union and its end. The Union cannot exist without the Constitution, and the Constitution has no purpose without the Declaration. While the Constitution provides an answer to *how*, the Declaration provides the answer to *why*. The principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence animates and gives *life* to America by giving the regime her purpose.

Thus, the Union is not, in of itself, some mystical thing. America is not worth preserving simply because she exists. The reason the Union is worth fighting for—the reason that thousands of men died at Gettysburg in July of 1863—is that she points to

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<sup>229</sup> Lincoln, “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:169. Proverbs 25:11 states: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”

something good. Like a human being, she exists for a purpose, and its purpose is to make free human beings, including, because of the circumstances, the enslaved Negro.<sup>230</sup>

Since the nation was *conceived in liberty* and *dedicated to the proposition* of human equality, losing the principles of the Founding is a catastrophic suicide. She will cease *living*. In addition, though, losing the actual battle against the Confederacy is also a death because, for these principles to matter, they must be put into effect. While human equality is “a permanent truth, and one in no way dependent upon its recognition,” the concept exists only in the abstract unless it is brought into the particular.<sup>231</sup> The universal principles must be in practice. If there is no vessel to carry *all men are created equal* from shore to shore, the regime is no more. In other words, to say that America is living is simply to say that the principle of equality is *alive* in America. It is not merely true in some abstract sense. The nation cannot *live* without both the apple of gold *and* the frame of silver.

There could be no end to slavery without Lincoln, but there could be no Lincoln without Jefferson, and Lincoln recognized this. After all, it was Lincoln who extolled Jefferson for having, “in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence,” the “coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document” the principle of human equality.<sup>232</sup> The immediate purpose of the Declaration of Independence was to declare the united colonies’ independence from Great Britain, but

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<sup>230</sup> A similar example is Sir Winston Churchill in World War II, who saw that if the British Empire fell, the spirit of the nation would die as well. In his first broadcast as Prime Minister to the British People in May 1940, Churchill calls the time “a solemn hour for the life of our country, of our Empire, of our Allies, and, above all, of the cause of Freedom.”

Winston Churchill, “Arm Yourselves, and Be Ye Men of Valour!,” 19 May 1940. In *Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill’s Speeches*. Winston S. Churchill, his grandson, ed. (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 207.

<sup>231</sup> Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 121.

<sup>232</sup> Lincoln, “To Henry L. Pierce and Others.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:376.

Jefferson inserted “an abstract truth, applicable to all men at all times.”<sup>233</sup> Lincoln praises Jefferson for clearly defining the moral foundation of the regime in the heat of the moment, but it seems that Lincoln deserves similar praise: in the heat of the moment, he has the “coolness, forecast, and capacity” to define the meaning of the war, to remind America of her end.<sup>234</sup> Even during the immense struggle of the conflict, Lincoln is, like Jefferson, able to rise above the day-to-day flow of events and lay claim to the moral issue.

There were many Northerners who desired to end the vicious war immediately and return “the Union as it was,” but Lincoln was quick to remind America of her purpose.<sup>235</sup> On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1863, three days after the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke to a jubilant crowd, saying that he would “like to speak in terms of praise due to the many brave officers and soldiers who have fought in the cause of the Union and liberties of the country from the beginning of the war.”<sup>236</sup> The men enlisted in the Union fought for the *cause* and *liberties* of their nation, not simply for the nation. Those men who died at Gettysburg *nobly advanced* the cause of liberty. They gave *the last full measure of devotion*, sacrificing themselves upon the altar of freedom. They died that the nation might *live*. As Morel notes, the ultimate end of the war, the reason for which these men died, “was not a Union without purpose or meaning.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort*, 50.

<sup>236</sup> Lincoln, “Response to a Serenade.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:320.

<sup>237</sup> Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort*, 51.

## VIII. “The living”

Thus, the end of the Gettysburg Address reveals Lincoln’s true motives for the speech, what Morel calls the president’s “rhetorical twist.”<sup>238</sup> If Lincoln had a ceremonial responsibility to say “a few appropriate remarks,” he both migrates and transforms it. It is not merely his task and it is not merely to open the cemetery. To the approximately fifteen thousand people present—to every person within earshot and even to every American—Lincoln asks *the living* to *dedicate* themselves to the cause for which these men died.

The Gettysburg Address is America’s clarion call.

It is, as Justice Clarence Thomas states, Lincoln’s “Great Commission.”<sup>239</sup>

At Gettysburg, Lincoln invites the entire nation to join those who have died in their two-fold mission: to win the war and reaffirm the principles of the Founding. Lower your bucket into the soldiers’ deep reservoir of devotion for our nation and her purpose, he pleads. Fortify your hearts by gathering *from* that wellspring of sacrifice, for it is our profoundest purpose to continue the fight that they started. It is our deepest duty to carry on the cause that they began, to “shoulder the burden of securing liberty and equality,” as Morel writes.<sup>240</sup> “With all thoughts fixed on the death of loved ones, comrades in arms, and fellow citizens,” Lincoln captures the feeling at Gettysburg and channels it in order to “renew the resolve of the living to” complete the task at hand.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, 48.

<sup>239</sup> Clarence Thomas, “The Virtue of Practical Wisdom,” Remarks delivered at the Third Annual Claremont Institute Lincoln Day Colloquium and Dinner in Washington, D.C., The Claremont Institute. 9 February 1999. [http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.524/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.524/pub_detail.asp) Accessed 9 March 2014.

<sup>240</sup> Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, 50.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Lincoln goes one step further. He ties the meaning of the soldiers' deaths to the actions of those still *living*. Because America can die in two ways, the nation's refusal or inability to rededicate herself to the principles of the Founding will mean that *these dead shall have died in vain*. Of course, Lincoln truly honors them by linking them to an honorable cause: without their sacrifice, America and all that she stands for would have died. They died for a nation with purpose, but if we lose the purpose, they lose the glory that they gained on the battlefield. Our dedication to that cause, implies Lincoln, "is decisive not only for the present and the future, but for the past. It is decisive for the dead as well as the living. If the present generation fails the test, the dead shall have died in vain."<sup>242</sup> In other words, quite shockingly, "the dead receive life from the living."<sup>243</sup> Their glory is dependent on our actions.

The fifteen thousand people who came to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on November 19<sup>th</sup> expected to hear a "few appropriate remarks" about a cemetery. Instead, Lincoln challenges them with a profound purpose, one that, if accepted, would save the nation. It is the responsibility of those who still live to *dedicate* themselves to the incomplete work continued by those who died on the battlefields of Gettysburg. Lincoln, writes Morel, "transitions from dedicating the battlefield cemetery to dedicating himself, his listeners, and hence the nation" to the cause for which these men died, the same cause for which the nation was *dedicated*.<sup>244</sup>

The Gettysburg Address seems like a subtle reinterpretation of the Founding, for Lincoln, a careful speech-crafter, uses different words than the Founders do. The

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<sup>242</sup> Glen E. Thurow, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion* (Albany: State U of New York, 1976), 87.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort*, 48.

Declaration of Independence states that *we hold these truths to be self evident*, not that, as Lincoln claims, they *dedicated* themselves to this *proposition*.<sup>245</sup> Is he bestowing a purpose on the regime, reimagining the way in which the Founders subscribed to the concept of human equality, or lowering the truth-status of that principle?

The Declaration speaks of both the nation’s beginning and its end—America’s foundation and its purpose—for the two are inextricably linked together. A man cannot discuss one without, implicitly or explicitly, referring to the other. According to the Declaration, the foundation is that *self-evident* truth, that *all men are created equal* in their natural rights, which include *Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*. The *end* of the government is, put simply, the government’s *securing* of *these rights*. The foundation supports the nation’s pursuit of its end. In fact, the entire justification for the colonies’ separation from Britain was that King George III had violated the just ends of government through *a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object: a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism*. If Lincoln is incorrect and the Declaration is concerned only with the nation’s beginning and not the nation’s end, then the Founding Fathers lack a legitimate justification for their independence. The reason that the Founders reject the rule of King George III is the very same reason they found a new regime: that their natural rights would be *secure*. In short, both Lincoln and the Founding Fathers believe that the principle of human equality is not only the moral foundation of the regime; it is also the regime’s purpose.

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Declaration of Independence	The Founders and “all men are created equal”	Gettysburg Address
“hold”		“dedicate”
“self-evident”		“proposition”

If the Gettysburg Address sounds different than the Declaration of Independence, it is because Lincoln's is a rhetorical modification. Lincoln does seem to shift the conversation's emphasis onto the purpose of the regime, but he certainly does not introduce a new purpose altogether.

To say that a nation has a purpose is to say that it was *dedicated* to that purpose, and at Gettysburg, Lincoln claims that the nation was *dedicated* to the idea of human equality. The implication, though, is that this *dedication* required real, human devotion. It was not simply *dedicated* in some abstract sense. The nation could only be *dedicated* to the idea that *all men are created equal* through the blood, sweat, and tears of human beings—men and women who devoted themselves to the nation and its purpose. In fact, the Declaration of Independence ends with a solemn proclamation of loyalty to the task at hand. All 56 men *mutually pledged* to each other their *Lives*, their *Fortunes*, and their *sacred Honor in support of this Declaration*. The Founders' *holding* to the concept of human equality was a life or death decision: treason punishable by death. While they explicitly declared that they *held* onto the idea, their action demonstrated a manly, vigorous dedication to equality and resistance to tyranny. What was declared to be an abstract principle was, in reality, the cause for which thousands of militiamen and soldiers in the Continental Army gave their lives.

Finally, while the Founders declare that the concept of human equality is a *self-evident* truth, Lincoln claims that they saw it as a *proposition*. There is a difference—often a gargantuan difference—between principle and practice. Something can be *self-evident* “in itself” and yet not accepted by a people—either because they simply do not

see or because they reject it.<sup>246</sup> The concept of human equality, for both Lincoln and for the Founders, is *self-evident* in principle and *propositional* in practice.

Jefferson does not argue about the *self-evidence* of the thing itself, but only about whether it matters to us. *We hold these truths*, he writes. In other words, we have decided to build a government on these principles. Lincoln agrees, and extends the *self-evidence* of the idea to its practical outworking. The immorality of slavery, he writes in 1854, is “made so plain by our good Father in Heaven, that all *feel* and understand it, even down to the brutes and creeping insects.”<sup>247</sup>

The issue of contention is this: is this idea *self-evident* to the citizens of America? Does it still matter today? In fact, neither the Revolutionary War nor the Civil War were ever contests over the truthfulness of the Declaration’s principles in the abstract but contests over whether *any nation so conceived or so dedicated* could *live* or continue *living*. In other words, what makes *all men are created equal* important to America is not merely the fact that it is true—out there, somewhere in a metaphysical world. Politically speaking, the principle of human sameness in natural rights does not matter unless it *lives* in the *here* and now. Ultimately, what matters is the actualization of the principle, and the Founders declared that the principle of human equality matters to the nation.

The Founders understood very well, though, that simply because they declared it to be so, does not mean that the nation—from then henceforth—would continue to *live*. Knowing that victory was not the inevitable denouement of the American drama, the Founders rested all their “political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-

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<sup>246</sup> Aquinas writes that something can be self-evident in two ways: “on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us.”

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 2: The Existence of God. Article 1. “I Answer That.”

<sup>247</sup> Lincoln, “Fragment on Slavery.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:222.



government,” but what is it that puts self-government within the reach of humankind? Is it not an ongoing education in civic virtue, a *rededication* to the principles of the Founding? Obviously, the Founding Fathers did not actually believe that the Founding generation had secured the nation’s *life* forever.

In his own way, Jefferson suggests that *living* is an ongoing process. On the eve of his death, 50 years after the nation’s birth, Jefferson wrote, “Let the annual return” of July the Fourth “forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.”<sup>248</sup> In other words, Jefferson hoped that America’s celebration of Independence Day would *refresh* the people’s *devotion* to the principles of the Founding—and that this would continue *forever*—which sounds oddly familiar to Lincoln’s hope that the nation would *rededicate* herself to those principles, even *four score and seven years* later.

The Founding contains within itself everything necessary for the nation to *live*, except one thing: each generation’s renewed *dedication* to the principle of human equality and, therefore, freedom. Because the nation *lives*, Americans are continually pressed to *rededicate* themselves to that principle—and to understand its worth.

In 1863 especially, what the nation needs to survive is a new *dedication* to that principle. Thus, the Gettysburg Address’s primary goal is to galvanize the people to give themselves to the cause of the nation, *that that nation might live*. Just as the Founding Fathers and *those who gave their lives* at Gettysburg *dedicated* themselves to the idea of human equality, so should we.

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<sup>248</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Roger C. Weightman,” 24 June 1826. TeachingAmericanHistory.org. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-roger-c-weightman/> Accessed on 10 April 2014.

To be dedicated to something is to be wholeheartedly and earnestly devoted to an end; to be set apart for a sacred purpose; to be consecrated to an ultimate goal. The nation's *noble advancement* toward its purpose requires deep devotion, including, in many cases, *the last full measure of devotion*.

But can an entire nation give *the last full measure of devotion* to a theory of government? Why should a people utterly *dedicate* themselves to an abstract, *self-evident* truth, one that was proclaimed so long ago? 1863 is a long ways from 1776, *four score and seven years* to be exact. *Holding* to something *self-evident* seems static. It has a stigma of being fettered to the theoretical. Does it require concrete action? Does it require movement or sacrifice, and is it all that urgent? Is it possible for an entire people, caught in the *great* conflict of the Civil War, to *dedicate* themselves to a *self-evident* truth? As stated before, Lincoln did not have the luxury of calling that truth a *self-evident* one—not with half of the nation claiming that human equality was a self-evident *untruth* and not with the entire nation fragmented about the meaning of the war. Lincoln's words had to match the need of the day, and what America needed was a call to action.

Encouraging the nation to *dedicate* themselves to the *proposition* of human equality, it seems, more tangibly impresses the necessity of political action than does asking them to keep *holding* onto that *self-evident* truth. Lincoln is not asking for a tacit acceptance of the abstract Founding of the nation, but a deep devotion to its end, the end for which these men died. A *proposition* is something that “does not contain internally the evidence of its own validity; it must be proven true.”<sup>249</sup> If it must be proven true, then there is a task to complete. In Lincoln's mind, the very formulation of the thing makes a continual *dedication* necessary for its preservation.

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<sup>249</sup> Thurow, *American Political Religion*, 73.

In sum, the substantive difference between the Founders' and Lincoln's understandings of that fundamental principle is a rhetorical one, not a philosophical one.

According to Lincoln and the Founders alike, the concept of human equality is both a *self-evident truth* and a *proposition*. It is a sturdy, abstract foundation that needs continual rededication to. Lincoln as statesman understood that what America needed on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1863 was not a history lesson about the origins of the nation, but a clarion call to *rededication*. At Gettysburg, Lincoln does not lower the truth status of the principle of human equality, but rather shifts the way the nation thinks about its application. It breathes *life* into the nation, but only if the people *dedicate* themselves to it.

Lincoln shows the immediacy of the task at hand by using the word *here* three times in the last sentence of the second paragraph. This debate is not merely limited to Independence Hall in 1776, and it concerns more than just the pantheon level statesmen of years' past. This is a war, and it is happening *here*. It is happening *now*. America is on the operating table, and the question is, will she continue breathing?

## IX. “A new birth of freedom”

In the final two phrases of the speech, Lincoln calls for *a new birth of freedom*, but not a new regime. He is not supplanting Jefferson and Madison, for there is no reason to discard their doctrine. According to him, there is no flaw in the principle of the Founding. In fact, within the Declaration of Independence are the principles necessary to destroy slavery at its roots. The Founding era provides exactly the prescription that the nation needs in 1863, for the Founders, says Lincoln, detested slavery. “The plain unmistakable spirit of that age towards slavery,” boldly declares Lincoln at Peoria in 1854, “was hostility to the PRINCIPLE and toleration ONLY BY NECESSITY.”<sup>250</sup> Do not do “obvious violence to the plain unmistakable language of the Declaration,” he warns in his 1857 address against the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision, by twisting it to mean something that it does not.<sup>251</sup> The creators of “that notable instrument,” he states in that speech, “defined with tolerable distinctness” in what way *all men are created equal*: “in ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ This they said, and this meant.” If they did not truly believe this to be true, why would they include it in the nation’s charter? The principle of human equality had no practical use in separating from Great Britain, claims Lincoln. *Our fathers* did not gain a thing by including it in the document. The logical conclusion is that “it was placed in the Declaration, not for that, but for future use.”

The time for America to use that principle to destroy chattel slavery was not in the Founding generation. Circumstances that they did not create had introduced and maintained slavery in the new world long before 1776. In fact, Lincoln states in his

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<sup>250</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:275. (Emphasis original.)

<sup>251</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:405.

address in Peoria that “wherever slavery is, it has been first introduced without law. We find concerning it, are not laws introducing it; but *regulating* it, as an already existing thing.”<sup>252</sup> Slavery had become a despicable necessity. In a letter to John Holmes in 1820, Jefferson referred to the problem as holding “the wolf by the ears.”<sup>253</sup> America “can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”<sup>254</sup> The Founders did not inherit a clean slate, and, according to Lincoln in the speech on *Dred Scott*, “they had no power to confer such a boon” of freedom on the Negro.<sup>255</sup> Lincoln claims in the address in Chicago in 1858 that the Founders could not establish our Constitution unless they tolerated, for the moment, the institution of slavery.<sup>256</sup>

*Our fathers* did, however, take a single but bold step down the path toward freedom. They “meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit,” Lincoln explained in that 1857 speech.<sup>257</sup>

The Founders, states Lincoln,

... meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.<sup>258</sup>

The Founders set the principle of the Declaration, like a city upon a hill, upon a pedestal for all to see.

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:405-406.

<sup>253</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to John Holmes.” 22 April 1820. TeachingAmericanHistory.org. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-john-holmes/> Accessed 30 March 2014.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:405.

<sup>256</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Chicago.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:501.

<sup>257</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:406.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:406.

The time for the “abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,” to become “a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression” came in the Civil War.<sup>259</sup> The cornerstone that the builders of the Confederacy had rejected became a stumbling block. And it was a terrible fall from morality. What the arguments of Calhoun, Davis, and Stephens revealed was that much of the nation was willing to admit, for the first time in America’s history, that slavery was not only a necessity, but a moral good as well. In the Founding generation, “our Declaration of Independence was held sacred by all, and thought to include all,” states Lincoln in his speech against the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision.<sup>260</sup> Now, in 1857, many desire to make “the bondage of the negro universal and eternal,” and throw everything but the kitchen sink at the Declaration in order to bring it down, including “mammon,” “ambition,” “philosophy,” and even “the Theology of the day.”<sup>261</sup> Slaveholders “stand musing,” attempting to invent a new device “to make the impossibility of [the slave’s] escape more complete than it is,” rages Lincoln, who sounds like the American Amos.<sup>262</sup>

Thus, Lincoln’s *new birth of freedom* is not at all a refounding. It is an American revival, the nation’s restoration to *life*. In his mind, Lincoln is offering the nation a chance to fulfill the *proposition* declared by their *fathers*. He is offering the nation a path to political salvation, to “re-purify” the “republican robe” that has been “soiled.”<sup>263</sup> This is the great task on which Lincoln invites the entire nation to embark: save the Union, and

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<sup>259</sup> Lincoln, “To Henry L. Pierce and Others.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:376.

<sup>260</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:404.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:276.

help it *live*. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1854, Lincoln delivered an address in Peoria, Illinois, urging his listeners to

...re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south — let all Americans — let all lovers of liberty everywhere — join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.<sup>264</sup>

By calling for *a new birth of freedom*, Lincoln is galvanizing the nation for a renaissance of *dedication* to the principle of human equality in natural rights.

And yet, Lincoln's calling for *a new birth of freedom* is not an attempt to merely set the clocks back to 1776 or even to 1787. His is not a naïve nostalgia that yearns to return to the days when the trans-Atlantic slave trade was legal and when slavery was tolerated as an evil necessity. Lincoln's *new birth of freedom* is not merely a repeat of the nation's original *bringing forth*. Lincoln's desire to restore the nation to the principle of human equality is necessarily wedded to his desire for freedom for the American Negro. In principle, the births are substantively the same, but in practice, the nation's *new birth* is elevated above the first. His desire is to save it *and* to make it "worthy of the saving."

Lincoln seems to draw this phrase, *a new birth of freedom*, from the Christian idea that salvation is a *new birth* in Christ. The third chapter of the Gospel of John, for example, tells of Jesus' instructing Nicodemus, "a man of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews," that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."<sup>265</sup> Man

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<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> John 3:1-6 (KJV) – "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

must be born a second time. He must be *brought forth* of God. John 3:16, only a few verses later, speaks of the believer's eternal reward: "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Lincoln's audience would have most certainly understood the allusion and appreciated the solemnity of the phrase.

In a handful of ways, however, Lincoln's *new birth of freedom* is very unlike Christ's. First, while Lincoln's *new birth* is a freedom from despotism, Christ's *new birth* is a deep freedom from the chains of sin and from death. Lincoln's clarion call "point[s] toward a renewal, a new birth, not of freedom from sin, but political freedom," writes Guelzo.<sup>266</sup> Secondly, Christ's *new birth* signifies a completely new creation. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians clearly states that "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."<sup>267</sup> Lincoln's *new birth*, however, is not discarding the old, and it is not creating something new. America was not, to borrow a phrase from Paul, initially born "of the flesh" and reborn into "the spirit." Lincoln is calling for a revitalization of *dedication* to the principles of the founding. He is not advocating the creation of a new thing altogether.

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<sup>266</sup> Allen Guelzo, "Lincoln's Sound Bite: Have Faith in Democracy," *The New York Times*. A29. 18 November 2013. [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/lincolns-sound-bite-have-faith-in-democracy/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=1](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/lincolns-sound-bite-have-faith-in-democracy/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=1) Accessed 1 April 2014.

<sup>267</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17 (KJV).



## X. “Under God”

The only way this *new birth of freedom* can occur is *under God*, a phrase Lincoln extemporaneously adds to the speech. These two words do not appear on the piece of paper that he held in his hand.<sup>268</sup> In an uncharacteristically spontaneous manner, Lincoln inserts the phrase at the last moment, perhaps as he sat on the platform listening to Everett’s speech or even as he delivered the address.

These two words, inserted into the climax of the Gettysburg Address, offer a glimpse into Lincoln’s heart in 1863. They act as both a caveat and a prayer. First, Lincoln puts the immense possibilities of American politics within the context of the God’s purposes in history. It is difficult to find words to describe the weight that Lincoln carried on his shoulders, for, in a way, he was responsible for a country torn apart; for the deaths of tens of thousands of brothers and fathers and sons. His was a life of unspeakable, melancholy pain, and in 1863 Lincoln had no way of knowing that the *great* war was half concluded. In the moment, all Lincoln could see was that it persisted and that it was so, very, incredibly terrible. It was a struggle for America’s purpose, and though he did not know it, it would take even his life.

Though Lincoln’s religion is hard to define, what is clear is that he keenly felt the need for divine assistance. Lincoln knew that he could not go it alone, and it seems that his heart echoed the Psalmist’s question: “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.”<sup>269</sup> Reverend Gurley, the pastor of the D.C. church that the Lincoln attended, noted that, after Willie’s death and his “visit to the battlefield of Gettysburg,” Lincoln told Gurley that he “had lost confidence in everything

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<sup>268</sup> According to White, Lincoln’s “speaking text read:  
*that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom*” (*The Eloquent President*, 250).

<sup>269</sup> Psalm 73:25 (KJV)

but God, and that he now believed his heart was changed, and that he loved the Savior.”<sup>270</sup> In the Civil War, it seems that Lincoln met his end, and found God’s beginning. Lincoln “knew he stood *under* the *living* God of history.”<sup>271</sup>

As the circumstances of the day reminded Lincoln of “God’s immediate control of the events of history and in His purpose to accomplish justice,” Lincoln reminds America of the limits of her actions.<sup>272</sup> It is not simply the President who cannot escape from God’s jurisdiction. The entire nation is *under God*. There is nothing humans can do—even this great nation—that is outside of the plans or the power of God.<sup>273</sup> Lincoln’s appeal to divine providence implies that *the living* are not in control of the world in which they *live*.

In an 1864 letter to a Quaker woman named Eliza Gurney, in which Lincoln thanks her for her continual prayers, he says that

“The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. ... Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 326.

<sup>271</sup> William J. Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), 186. For Guelzo, however, Lincoln’s expressed need for divine assistance is not necessarily as orthodox as White maintains. Guelzo writes: “At its barest, providence was for Lincoln nothing more than the ‘necessity’ imposed by cause and effect, just as the will responded automatically to motives and the call of self-interest. It satisfied Lincoln’s need, in a universe governed by necessity, to ascribe all human events to some form of causation. ... and even when Lincoln was willing to grant to providence some form of intelligence, purpose, or power as God, it was an idea that only dimly resembled the Presbyterian idea of God,” a personal being (*Redeemer President* 153).

<sup>272</sup> Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 176.

<sup>273</sup> Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, perhaps the most beautiful and important speech in American history, explores this theme in greater depth, but the kernel of the idea reveals itself in the Gettysburg Address as well.

<sup>274</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Mrs. Eliza P. Gurney,” 4 September 1864. Basler, *Collected Works and Speeches*, 7:535.

Politics directed one way is a futile art when the Lord wills that the world travel in another direction, and it is often difficult to ascertain in which way the Lord is moving. In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln states that though both sides pray to the same God and “both read the same Bible, ... the Almighty has His own purposes.”<sup>275</sup> The God of Abraham ultimately guides man’s attempts to abolish slavery and to understand the right. The whole nation—its entire body and all of its movements—are *under God*.

Secondly, Lincoln sees himself as a tool in God’s hands, working to accomplish the almost divine mission of securing human freedom. During his inaugural route to Washington in early 1861, Lincoln proclaims in an address to the Senate of New Jersey, “I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty” in “perpetuating” “the original idea” of America.<sup>276</sup> The picture is one of the Lord as a craftsman, using men to affect His purposes, even men who may be unworthy.

In fact, Lincoln’s word—*instrument*—is another allusion to Scripture. In Acts 9, after Saul is converted and blinded on the road to Damascus, the Lord sends Ananias to minister to him. When Ananias expresses his fear—he had “heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem”—the Lord responds: “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.”<sup>277</sup> Lincoln thought that he, like Saul of Tarsus and even

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<sup>275</sup> Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:333.

<sup>276</sup> Lincoln, “Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:236.

<sup>277</sup> Acts 9:12 – 16 (KJV) “And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.”

Jonah, was an instrument, perhaps one that did not truly deserve to be a part of God's plans. God uses who He will use, Lincoln seems to say, even an uneducated, tall and awkwardly thin man from the backwoods of Kentucky; even someone who does not belong to a church.

The phrase *under God* suggests that *a new birth of freedom* can only occur with God's assistance, and by inserting that phrase into the address at Gettysburg, Lincoln invites the nation to ask the Lord for his assistance in the fight.

Even the continuation of the nation is a sort of miracle. Lincoln begins his Proclamation of Thanksgiving on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1864 by stating that "it has pleased Almighty God to prolong our national *life* another year."<sup>278</sup> It is He who directs our path. It is He who directs our steps, so let us be thankful, and let us pray, encourages Lincoln. Let us "reverently humble" ourselves "in the dust," offering "penitent and fervent prayers and supplications to the Great Disposer of events for a return of the inestimable blessings of Peace, Union, and Harmony throughout the land."<sup>279</sup> The proclamation—similar to the Gettysburg Address—is an invitation to spiritual surrender. America still celebrates this "day of Thanksgiving and Praise to Almighty God, the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe" on the last Thursday of November.<sup>280</sup>

The renewal of the nation is a monumental and difficult task, one that cannot be completed without divine support, but God's assistance did not make human sacrifice or *dedication* unnecessary. God's activity "never meant the inactivity or passivity of human

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Modern translations of the text, including the English Standard Version, The New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version, use the word "instrument" in place of "vessel."

<sup>278</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation of Thanksgiving," 20 October 1864. Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:55.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.* 8:56.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* 8:55.

beings,” writes White.<sup>281</sup> On the contrary, Lincoln maintains that God acted “through the activity of human instrumentalities.”<sup>282</sup>

Thus, Lincoln’s insertion of the two words, *under God*, is a prayer, in front of the entire nation, for the entire nation, asking the Lord to assist America in her project for freedom. As Hill explains, if there is to be *a new birth of freedom*, it can “come only *under God*.”<sup>283</sup> It can only come if He allows it, and it can only come with His direction.

Lincoln was not the only politician in American history to, in a moment of great trial, spontaneously ask for help. His unplanned insertion of *under God* at Gettysburg is similar to Benjamin Franklin’s request for prayer at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Franklin, the oldest delegate at the Convention, asks the men gathered to remember when “we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection” at the beginning of the war with Great Britain.<sup>284</sup> In fact, Franklin reminds them that the Lord “graciously” answered our prayers.<sup>285</sup> But now, asks Franklin, more than ten years later, have we

... forgotten that powerful friend? or do we imagine that we no longer need his assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God Governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?<sup>286</sup>

At these two decisive moments of America’s history, there was a statesman who reminded America of her place in the world. The nation cannot rise without His aid. She cannot *live* without it either.

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<sup>281</sup> White. *Eloquent President*. 158-159.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

<sup>283</sup> Hill, *Man of God*, 275.

<sup>284</sup> Franklin, Benjamin. “Request for Prayers at the Constitutional Convention.” BeliefNet. [http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/21/Benjamin\\_Franklins\\_Request\\_for\\_Prayers\\_at\\_the\\_Constitutional\\_\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/21/Benjamin_Franklins_Request_for_Prayers_at_the_Constitutional__1.html) Web. Accessed 6 April 2014.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

For many, Lincoln's insertion of *under God* is simply an example of another partisan feigning religiosity for political benefit. For others, it is just another case of an American president stirring up the public's religious imagination to accomplish a political purpose. Today, politicians of all stripes conclude their various addresses with a reflexive "God bless you and God bless America," and plenty of American presidents infuse their speeches with biblical allusions or quotations from Scripture.

In fact, it seems that Americans—and many who speak of America—are *always* bordering on blasphemy. Lincoln calls America God's "almost chosen people." G. K. Chesterton claims that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a *creed*," the one "set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>287</sup> Chief Justice William Rehnquist writes that "millions and millions" of Americans regard the flag "with an almost mystical reverence, regardless of what sort of social, political, or philosophical beliefs they may have."<sup>288</sup>

William T. Cavanaugh, a prominent, modern theologian, laments the way that Christians have allowed "the nation-state" to "define identity and belonging and have turned those attachments into a kind of ersatz religion with its own ersatz liturgy."<sup>289</sup> Spreading freedom becomes our divinely mandated mission—not proclaiming the good news and baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>290</sup> *Rededication* to the concept of human equality becomes our liturgical ritual. We see ourselves as a political powerhouse on the face of the earth, bringing justice and peace wherever we go, "a kind of substitute" for God "on the stage of history. When the

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<sup>287</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1922), 7.

<sup>288</sup> *Texas v. Johnson*. Rehnquist Dissent, 491 US 397. (1989).

<sup>289</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 3.

<sup>290</sup> Matthew 28:19-20.

concept of chosenness becomes unmediated by the church and unmoored from the biblical narrative,” writes Cavanaugh, “the danger is that the nation will not only be [a] substitute church but [a] substitute god.”<sup>291</sup> America’s civil religion is, in short, “the age-old sin of idolatry.”<sup>292</sup>

What sets apart Lincoln’s rhetoric from the average politician’s speech making—and above Cavanaugh’s critique—is his refusal to enlist God in the nation’s conflicts and his demonstrated respect for divine mystery. Unlike the congeries of contemporary political and religious partisans, Lincoln refused to proclaim that “God is on our side.”<sup>293</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent twentieth century theologian and ethicist, writes that Lincoln’s “religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those held by the religious as well as by the political leaders of the day.”<sup>294</sup> The primary proof of this, he writes, is “the fact that he was able to resist the natural temptation to do what all political leaders, indeed all men, have done through the ages: identify providence with the cause to which he was committed.”<sup>295</sup> Lincoln, writes one historian, “found the strength to say amen to the divine will while resisting the temptation to tack the Cross onto the flagpole.”<sup>296</sup>

Lincoln himself expressed his reservations about marrying his cause to the Lord’s cause, even though he believed his cause to be just. During a dinner at the White House during the war, a clergyman encouraged Lincoln that “the Lord is on the Union’s

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<sup>291</sup> Cavanaugh, *Migrations*, 94, 96. Cavanaugh uses the word “itself,” as opposed to “herself,” though, when talking about America. His verbiage attempts to paint the regime with inanimate terms. Examples of American exceptionalism, writes Cavanaugh, include Fukuyama’s “end of history” argument and George W. Bush’s “right side of history” contention (94).

<sup>292</sup> Cavanaugh, *Migrations*, 2.

<sup>293</sup> White, *The Eloquent President*, 158.

<sup>294</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln.” *Christian Century* 82, no. 6: 1965. 172-175.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> Thomas H. Clancy, “Lincoln’s ‘Almost Chosen’ People,” *America* 124, no. 6: 1971. 145-147.

side.”<sup>297</sup> Lincoln responded, as the anecdote goes, “I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side.”<sup>298</sup> Cavanaugh’s claim that America sees herself as the manifestation of God on earth—a just, powerful, invincible nation—does not apply to Lincoln. For him, America is *under God*, not God Himself.

A man who wrestled with the truths of Christianity his entire life, Lincoln lives in the uncomfortable grey, and, in many ways, so does his rhetoric. Is God on our side? Surely, both the North and the South “pray to the same God,” but God has answered neither completely, Lincoln says in his Second Inaugural.<sup>299</sup> “This respect for the divine mystery kept Lincoln from being the prophet of statolatry, of a kind of American Shintoism that identified God’s purposes with our own,” writes one historian.<sup>300</sup> Lincoln’s religious rhetoric is not blasphemous. Abraham Lincoln is much too humble and honest to make such outlandish claims.

In addition, Lincoln uses the language of the Bible to communicate his ideas, but he does not supplant Christianity with his own ersatz religion. America, for all its glory, is still *under God*. Wolf writes that “Lincoln gave definition to America’s hope for democracy in terms compelling to his contemporaries, but he also sustained that vision in its original religious rootage and reference to God’s will.”<sup>301</sup> His clarion call to action is still *under God*. Lincoln, claims Morel, “never forgot that religion existed for a higher purpose.”<sup>302</sup> He was fully aware that “revealed religion had a claim on the souls of the

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<sup>297</sup> Ward Hill Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. 91. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/39630/39630-h/39630-h.htm> Accessed 25 April 2014.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address.” Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:333.

<sup>300</sup> Clancy, “Lincoln’s ‘Almost Chosen’ People,” 147.

<sup>301</sup> Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 184.

<sup>302</sup> Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, 2.



citizenry wholly apart from its utility in preserving the government. Lincoln, in other words, did not confuse the political utility of religion with religion's true aim: to connect people to God, not to their government.”<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

## XI. “Shall not perish from the earth”

Lincoln ends the Gettysburg Address on a rousing message of hope, an invitation to partake in something great, something enduring. It is one of those phrases that, like the preamble of the Declaration of Independence and the first verse of the Star Spangled Banner, has become America’s lyric. This is American poetry.

Only *living* things can *perish*; inanimate objects cannot die. Because the nation was *brought forth*—because it *lives*—it can *perish*, but we will not let it, extols Lincoln. Not on our watch. It is up to us to keep this regime—*of the people, by the people, for the people—living*. There is no guarantee of success, but it is *here* where we can secure something lasting. It is *now* when we can preserve something that has *lived* longer than the Psalmist’s limit. The fate of the nation is on our shoulders. This is our chance to be a part of something permanent. This is our chance for glory.<sup>304</sup>

The concluding phrase, *shall not perish*, is reminiscent of Jesus Christ’s claim, recorded in John 3:16, that whoever believes in Him “should not perish, but have everlasting life.”<sup>305</sup> Lincoln’s audience would have unquestionably recognized the allusion. The verse is one of the most well known in the entire Bible.

Humans thirst for the everlasting, but can mankind build anything that lasts that long? Lincoln is careful to distinguish America’s continuation of *life* from eternal life in Christ Jesus by qualifying America’s so-called permanence with the phrase *from the*

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<sup>304</sup> Again, Winston Churchill’s rhetoric mirrors Lincoln’s in both its unabashed hopefulness and invitation to partake in greatness and permanence. Three days after assuming the position of Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill delivers an address to the House of Commons, ending the speech by reminding his colleagues that he takes up his task “with buoyancy and hope” (Churchill 206). In another address before the House of Commons, approximately one month later, Churchill states, “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘*This was their finest hour*’” (Churchill 209).

<sup>305</sup> John 3:16 (KJV) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

*earth*. The *life* of the nation is of qualitatively less import than the eternal *life* of Christ Jesus because it only exists on this earth. It is a human creation, something that *lives* only as long as the earth continues spinning. Lincoln may have had Psalm 102:25-27 (KJV) in mind, a passage which reads:

Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.

The earth—and therefore, the things of this earth—are not forever. They fade, like an article of clothing. Man *lives* for eighty years. America has *lived* for eighty-seven. The Lord is eternal. Unlike the nation, His word *lives* long after the earth “pass[es] away,” which means that the person who hears His word and believes in the Father has “everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.”<sup>306</sup>

And yet, Lincoln’s concluding line at Gettysburg offers his listeners an opportunity to partake in something great. It is, for the arena of politics, the best that humans can do. Writes one theologian: “Lasting as long as the earth lasts is the closest that any human institution can come to eternal life this side of heaven.”<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Matthew 24:35 (KJV) – “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”  
John 5:24 (KJV) – “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

<sup>307</sup> Elmore, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*, 128.

## Conclusion

Lincoln alludes to Scripture in the Gettysburg Address to communicate his ideas with a biblical cadence but also, and most importantly, to infuse the speech with the deep theological content of Scripture. In a subtle way, Lincoln claims that the nation *lives* like the church. America is God's "almost chosen people," as he says in 1861, a clear reference to Paul's claim that the church is "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people."<sup>308</sup> The order of Lincoln's words is important. It is not that America is almost God's chosen people. Lincoln does not claim that the nation *is* the church ... and then pull the statement back a little. Lincoln does not use the word "almost" to avoid blaspheming. The thought of idolatry probably never crossed his mind. Instead, the adjective "almost" modifies "chosen people." America is, like the church, *under God*. In fact, she is *of God*, but she does not hold that spot of God's chosen people and does fight the church over that position. Rather, she works *under God* in a way similar to the church. In other words, Lincoln's analogy is a simile, not a metaphor. A proper translation of Lincoln's phrase is, America is God's *like* chosen people. She *lives* like the church lives—only with the continual rededication of her people to that *life-giving* principle of human equality and only with the assistance of a benevolent God.

That the nation was *brought forth* by our founding *fathers* some *four score and seven years ago* means that the nation *lives*. Though it is not of heaven, it has lasted longer than the lifespan of human beings. Because its *conception* and *bringing forth* was a philosophical one, the nation's stipulations for membership function like the church's do. The people of God and the people of the Declaration belong to their respective

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<sup>308</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:9 (KJV)

communities in similar ways: any person of any ethnicity, gender, height, or weight can join, for attachment to the community depends on a sort of faith. Like the biblical stories of men and women being tested, the Civil War is a test to see if America would keep the faith in her Founding principles. Like Christ gave Himself for His people, the church, the men who died at Gettysburg gave their lives *that that nation might live*, and *from* that wellspring, Lincoln encourages the people *increase* their *devotion* to the cause for which these men sacrificially died. At Gettysburg Lincoln asks the people to fight for *a new birth of freedom*, a sort of political salvation, so that the American regime would *not perish from the earth*. At Gettysburg, Lincoln asks America to *rededicate* herself to the principle of human equality, *that that nation might live*.

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## **Appendix: Complete Text of the Gettysburg Address<sup>309</sup>**

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

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<sup>309</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg,” 19 November 1863. Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:17-23.

## About the Author

Born and raised in Medina, Ohio, Joseph Griffith was home educated, graduating in 2010. At Ashland University, Joseph majors in Political Science and History. He is a 4.0 student; a 3-time Political Science and History Student of the Year; an Ashbrook Scholar and a recipient of the *Timken Award for Academic Excellence* in the program; an Honors Scholar and scholarship recipient in the Honors Program; a College of Arts and Sciences Scholar; a recipient of the *Joseph and Renee Maggelet Campus Ministry Award*, the *Who's Who Among Students Award*, and Alpha Lambda Delta's *Outstanding Senior of the Year*; a member of Alpha Lambda Delta (National Academic Honorary), Omicron Delta Kappa Society (Leadership Honorary), Pi Sigma Alpha (Political Science Honorary), and Phi Alpha Theta (History Honorary); a Resident Assistant in Andrews Hall; and a worship leader and a Bible study co-leader for The Well on campus.

In June 2014, Joseph is marrying the love of his life, Katie. In the fall of 2014, he is entering Baylor University's Ph.D. program in Political Science.