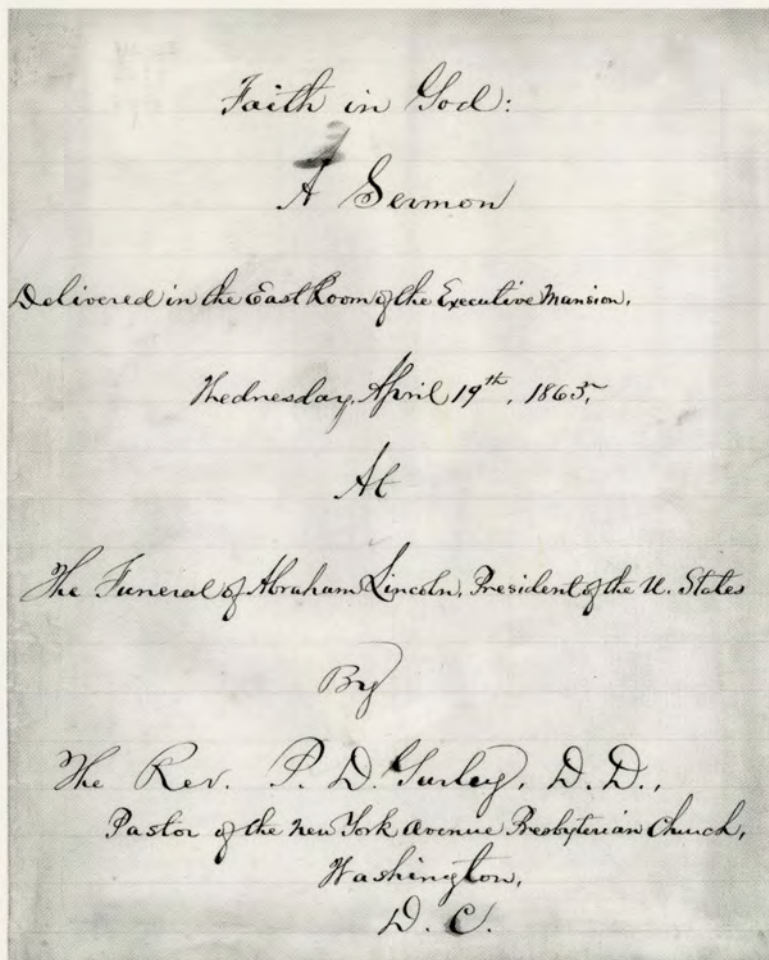


# The Journal of Presbyterian History



STUDIES IN REFORMED HISTORY AND CULTURE

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# JOURNAL OF PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

*Studies in  
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and Culture*

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56 On Holy Ground.

## Cover

On 19 April 1865, Dr. Phineas Dinsmore Gurley (1816-1868) delivered the funeral sermon for Abraham Lincoln in the East Room of the White House. The title page of the manuscript from which Gurley preached, "Faith in God," appears on the cover. Although Lincoln never became a member of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Dr. Gurley was intimate with the family during most of the time the Lincolns were resident in the capital. William Phipps's article in this issue discusses that relationship.

Originally from upstate New York, Dr. Gurley was graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1840 and ordained by an Old School Presbyterian presbytery in that year. He arrived in the nation's capital in 1854 after serving churches in Indiana and Ohio. He became chaplain of the Senate and the first minister of the prestigious New York Avenue church when his congregation merged with another to form that church in 1859. As a friend and confidant to the first family, Gurley consoled them on the death of Tad Lincoln, advised the President during his administration, prayed at his bedside the night of his assassination, and preached the sermon at his state funeral. Following the services in Washington, Gurley accompanied the body back to Springfield, Illinois, for its final interment.

In his sermon, Gurley sought to find meaning in Lincoln's death in the teachings of his religion. True to his Old School convictions, Gurley saw the sovereign hand of God at work in this affliction, chastening the elect in order to bring blessings out of sorrow. By investing such heavy religious symbolism into Lincoln's death, he and most other ministers of the era may have unwittingly contributed to the cult of the martyr president that elevated Lincoln above history and into myth.

The full text of Gurley's sermon was published in the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 39 (1961): 66-75. The original manuscript is in the collections of the PHS, Philadelphia. For the background and context of Gurley's sermon, see David B. Cheesebrough, "God Has Made No Mistake': The Response of Presbyterian Preachers in the North to the Assassination of Lincoln," *American Presbyterians* 71:4 (1993): 223-32.

## Lincoln's Presbyterian Connections

*This essay focuses upon the way in which Lincoln was significantly influenced by Calvinists throughout life. In this regard, Dr. John Allen, the Reverend James Smith, and the Reverend Phineas Gurley were Presbyterian leaders of particular importance. His religious life evolved from little commitment to an acceptance of the moral commitments and the providential guidance of biblically oriented persons.*

*William E. Phipps*

I  
THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF ABRAHAM Lincoln is difficult to reconstruct with certainty because he was reticent in expressing his views and because remembrances of the towering figure contain wide discrepancies. Early biographers tended to read into the life of their hero their particular outlook on religion. At one extreme is William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield, who asserted that he did not believe in "a personal God."<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the spectrum is the devout Christian treatment in the first Lincoln biography, a bestseller written by Josiah Holland. That newspaper editor depicted Lincoln as confessing, "I know that . . . Christ is God."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there is necessarily a tentativeness in this investigation into Lincoln's associations with Presbyterians throughout his adult life, even though an effort has been made to examine sources objectively.

The life of Lincoln displays a man who moved from weak to strong religious commitment, although this was not associated

in his mind with becoming a church member. He was attracted by the religion whose founder taught that God was to be loved with all of one's mental as well as emotional powers. He was fond of the Bible, one of the few books that he continually read throughout life for its literary style and its spiritual content.

Lincoln was influenced by several Protestant denominations, and especially by particular Presbyterians. Although he has been written about more than any other American, little attention has been given to tracing his Presbyterian connections that continued through his adult years. He championed divine Providence from his Illinois years onward, but this doctrine was not initially nurtured in a Presbyterian congregation. He was raised by parents who were members of a Calvinist Baptist church that emphasized Calvinist predestination.<sup>3</sup>

In 1831, Lincoln left his family to work in New Salem, Illinois. Across the street from his store and post office was the home of Dr. John Allen, who had recently settled

**Dr. Phipps** is Professor Emeritus of Religion and Philosophy, Davis and Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia. Copyright 2002 Presbyterian Historical Society.



there after graduating from Dartmouth Medical School. A staunch Presbyterian, Allen started a Sunday school in the pioneer community and became its superintendent. Paul Simon notes that "Lincoln admired Dr. Allen and frequently visited with him." Lincoln hungered for what the Vermont native could provide, because he was the best educated person in the village. He contributed to Lincoln's intellectual and character development by loaning him books and discussing with him their contents. During this period Lincoln read and was influenced by Thomas Paine's critique of religion entitled *The Age of Reason*. Lincoln belonged to the New Salem Debating Society that Allen formed, which trained him in skills he would need as a lawyer. Allen was an abolitionist and Lincoln formed his own position on slavery as they talked over ideas of justice and "charity." Lincoln was assisted by Allen in his two campaigns to become a representative to the Illinois General Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing that addiction to corn liquor was a major problem in New Salem, Allen also organized a temperance society, but it was not well accepted. The Hard-Shell Baptists, who had the one church in the community, even expelled from their membership the village school teacher for joining the society. Lincoln's abstinence resolve, which continued from his youth onward, was strengthened by his friendship with Allen.<sup>5</sup>

After moving twenty miles to Springfield to practice law, Lincoln courted Mary Todd. She had been brought up as a Presbyterian in Kentucky, but attended the Episcopal Church after she came to live with her older sister, Elizabeth Edwards. Abraham and Mary were married in 1842 by the town's Episcopal priest. During that year Lincoln was invited to speak to the temperance society that met at the Second Presbyterian Church. The society members were probably disgusted that most of his remarks were not directed against sinful "drunkards" but against self-righteous teetotalers. "Such of us as have never fallen victims," he ob-



James Smith, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, from 1849 to 1856 (RG414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

served, "have been spared more from the absence of appetite than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have."<sup>6</sup>

During his Springfield years, Lincoln increasingly displayed a religious orientation. When campaigning for a congressional seat in 1846, he was denounced as an infidel by his opponent, Methodist evangelist Peter Cartwright. He responded to the negative campaigning by declaring publicly that he was not a "scoffer" at religion.<sup>7</sup> That same year he prophetically informed Aminda Rankin, "Probably it is to be my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did."<sup>8</sup>

In 1850, the funeral for three-year-old Eddie Lincoln was conducted by Presbyterian James Smith because the Episcopal rector was out of town. Dr. Smith had recently been installed as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. The Lincolns became attracted to Smith because of the strength he provided at this time of grief,<sup>9</sup> and the inspiration they received from the

revival meetings conducted by this "big, brainy man, with a great voice."<sup>10</sup> Mary became a member of that Presbyterian congregation by profession of faith in 1852 and her husband attended with her when he was not circuit riding.<sup>11</sup> In 1856, their youngest son Thomas (nicknamed Tad) was baptized in the church, and he and his older brothers attended its Sunday school. Lincoln paid a \$36 annual pew rent and supply preacher William Bishop recalled his sitting at the end of the pew with his long legs stretched out in the middle aisle. The family occupied that pew for ten years and it has become one of the Lincoln shrines in Springfield, located at the front of the First Presbyterian Church's present sanctuary.<sup>12</sup>

Smith's personal background made him especially appealing to Lincoln. A Scottish native, Smith received a quality education in Glasgow before emigrating to Tennessee.<sup>13</sup> On reading such books as Paine's *Age of Reason*, he concluded that "religion was a fraud contrived to govern mankind."<sup>14</sup> After emigrating to the United States he was converted in 1825, ordained by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1829, and became editor of the *Cumberland Presbyterian*. He then served as pastor in Kentucky before joining the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (Old School) and being called to Springfield in 1849.

Smith described to Bishop his initial intellectual encounter with Lincoln:

He was a deist and inclined to skepticism as to the divine origin of the Scriptures, though, unlike most skeptics, he had evidently been a constant reader of the Bible. I found him an honest and anxious inquirer. He gradually revealed the state of his mind and heart, and at last unbosomed his doubts and struggles and unrest of soul. In frequent conversations I found that he was perplexed and unsettled on the fundamentals of religion. . . . I placed in his hand my book on the evidences of Christianity, which gives the arguments for and against the divine authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture. Mr. Lincoln took the book, and for a number of weeks, as a lawyer, examined and weighed the evidence, pro and con.<sup>15</sup>

That book by Smith was a result of his en-

counter with Charles Olmstead, a lawyer in Columbus, Mississippi. He was "the champion of infidelity" and author of *The Bible: Its Own Refutation*, a Paine-ite tome. When Smith visited Columbus to speak to youth about Christianity, he accepted Olmstead's challenge to debate the truth of the Bible. On eighteen evenings in 1841, large crowds listened to arguments by the two men, and afterward Smith was requested to publish the interesting exchange.<sup>16</sup> Two years later he produced an erudite volume entitled *The Christian's Defense*, with this statement of content, "Containing a fair statement and impartial examination of the leading objections urged by infidels against the antiquity, genuineness, credibility, and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures; enriched with copious extracts from learned authors." Smith was familiar with such authors as David Hume, a fellow Scotsman and the most prominent skeptic of modern history. He was also knowledgeable of outstanding pagan philosophers as well as with Paine, a thinker who was as radical in his religious as in his political views. Their objections to biblical claims, along with those of Olmstead, were stated in their own words and then Smith combated them in a reasonable manner. He displayed an understanding of the original biblical languages as well as a knowledge of several world religions. To show that Hebrew enslavement in Egypt was factual, and not a fiction as his opponent claimed, Smith illustrated his text with a print of a painting from an ancient Egyptian tomb showing taskmasters directing Semitic slaves as they made mud bricks. Sound evidence is offered elsewhere in Smith's book for rejecting Olmstead's contention that Jesus, like Napoleon, "was endeavoring to overthrow the established government" in order to establish "a temporal kingdom."<sup>17</sup>

Most texts on the logic of orthodox Christian belief are written for those who are already persuaded of its truth. Hence Lincoln found refreshing this book by a former doubter that was addressed to those sharing his frame of mind. He told Ninian

Edwards, his brother-in-law, "I have been reading a work of Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity and have heard him preach and converse on the subject and I am now convinced of the truth of the Christian religion."<sup>18</sup> William Wolf, in his book on Lincoln's religion, comments on Smith's book, "This 600-page tome is worthy of careful study, for it is one of the very few technical books on theology read by Lincoln."<sup>19</sup>

Lincoln was also deeply impressed by another theological work that was published by Robert Chambers a year after Smith's book.<sup>20</sup> Chambers, who had grown up in the Scottish kirk, wrote *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, and it became a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. It attempted to reconcile geological and biological discoveries with the biblical view of an orderly Creator. Chambers maintained that cosmic and organic evolutionary processes were the mode by which God's purposes were being fulfilled.

Shortly after Lincoln became associated with Presbyterians he delivered an address, at Smith's request, to the Bible Society of Springfield. He spoke of the importance of every family possessing a Bible and studying it. The text of the address is not extant but Smith later remembered:

He drew a striking contrast between the Decalogue and the moral codes of the most eminent lawgivers of antiquity, and closed in the following language: "It seems to me that nothing short of infinite wisdom could by any possibility have devised and given to man this excellent and perfect moral code. It is suited to men in all the conditions of life, and inculcates all the duties they owe to their Creator, to themselves, and to their fellow man."<sup>21</sup>

Smith stated that he spent evenings with the Lincolns a couple times a month over a period of seven years and that he and Lincoln had "pleasant conversations in driving over the prairies."<sup>22</sup> Lincoln joined Smith in viewing reason and faith as companions in the quest for truth, while realizing that faith is able to go beyond reason in understanding the dilemmas of life.



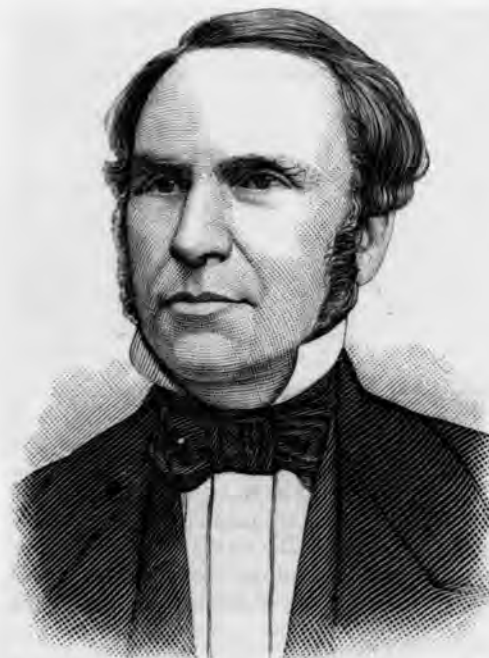
Exterior shot of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (KS data file, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

## II

After moving to Washington in 1861, the Lincolns had a choice of Presbyterian churches to attend. Allan Guelzo, in his recent scholarly biography of Lincoln that stresses his Calvinist spirituality, writes that on coming to the White House he had

a certain cultural friendliness as a Whig to religious morality and a vague willingness publicly to identify himself with Christian churches. Washington's First Presbyterian Church, which liked to advertise itself as the "church of the presidents" because Jackson, Polk, Pierce, and Buchanan had rented a pew there, offered Lincoln the use of the same pew as his predecessors, but sitting in the pew of the Jacksonians was not Lincoln's idea of comfort.<sup>23</sup>

The Lincoln family quickly decided to become affiliated with the New York Avenue Church where Dr. Phineas Gurley, a Princeton Seminary graduate, was pastor. The church was the result of the merger of two earlier congregations, and in 1859, Gurley was the first minister to preach in the new



Phineas Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. during the years that Lincoln was president (RG414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

sanctuary. He had been elected chaplain of the Senate the previous year.<sup>24</sup> When the Lincolns again became pewholders, they had a choice of annual rental rates. In 1860, the church's trustees had "agreed that the sofa pews next to the pulpit should be assessed at \$20 [per year] and the circular pews near the door at \$16 each."<sup>25</sup> The one they rented was six rows from the pulpit on the right of the center aisle.<sup>26</sup>

Willie and Tad Lincoln usually attended the Sunday school and the worship service at the New York Avenue Church. One Sunday the president criticized them for skipping the morning service. They informed their father that they had attended the Fourth Presbyterian Church where the service was more fun. Lincoln said, "But I didn't know that you went to church for fun." The boys responded, "Oh yes, papa! You just ought to see those old rebels slam their pew doors and stamp out when the minister prays for the President."<sup>27</sup>

William Henry Roberts, who attended

the New York Avenue Church as a Union soldier and became the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. for many years, observed that Lincoln attended the church regularly on Sundays and stood in reverence, along with some other men in the congregation, during the lengthy pastoral prayer. Once an elderly visitor wandered down the aisle. No usher had assisted the poorly dressed man and he felt ill at ease. Lincoln noticed him and cordially invited him to sit in his own pew.<sup>28</sup>

Lincoln also frequently participated in the midweek prayer meeting. He recognized that some were attending with hopes of having an opportunity to petition him about their personal concerns. To avoid publicizing his attendance he arranged with Gurley to slip into his study by the side door and sit there during the meeting. The glass-paneled door leading to the meeting room was left ajar so that he could inconspicuously share in the worship.<sup>29</sup>

When Lincoln wished to consult with Gurley, he would customarily send his carriage to bring him to the White House. Gurley made suggestions to Lincoln about what should be contained in what would be called the Emancipation Proclamation, and in token of this the New York Avenue Church was given and now displays in the Lincoln Parlor his handwritten 1862 draft of that document.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally Gurley would bring Lincoln reports of special cases from his visits to military hospitals.<sup>31</sup> At Gurley's request, Lincoln commuted a soldier's sentence, saving him from the gallows.<sup>32</sup>

Once Lincoln wanted to offer assistance to Gurley's daughter Frances, who had charmed him by her cordiality when he attended church. She later talked about his concern for her well-being with a *New York Times* reporter, which resulted in this article:

As soon as the news of the fall of Fort Sumter reached Lincoln, he sent for Dr. Gurley to come to the White House that they might pray together. After a few hours spent in seeking comfort and advice from God, the divine started to leave





New York Avenue Presbyterian Church interior. The Lincoln pew is the dark pew, middle aisle, right, approaching pulpit (KS data file, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

the White House for his home, when the President delayed him." "What of your daughter?" he asked. "She is engaged to young Elderkin, is she not? And he is a member of the graduating class at West Point. . . . I must talk with her." . . . He had seen at once that if war must come, Elderkin would be an even better soldier with a wife and home of his own to fight for. . . . Miss Gurley had but one doubt, . . . she had no clothes in which to be married. . . . The President's carriage went about the city bent upon a strange errand—he was borrowing a trousseau. . . . So on the next morning after the eventful conversation between the President and Miss Gurley, young Elderkin arrived in Washington to attend his own wedding. Dr. Gurley performed the ceremony, after which President Lincoln stood by the side of the bride and received with her.<sup>33</sup>

In 1862, Presbyterians were present to provide comfort to the Lincoln parents when their favorite son was dying of typhoid fever. Knowing his situation, Willie gave all his savings from his little bank to the Sunday school mission work.<sup>34</sup> In his funeral tribute, Gurley had this to say about Willie and Mary Lincoln:

His mind was active, he was inquisitive and conscientious, his disposition was amiable and affectionate, his impulses kind and generous; his

words and manners were gentle and attractive. It is easy to see how a child thus endowed could, in the course of eleven years, entwine himself around the hearts of those who knew him best; nor can we wonder that the grief of his affectionate mother today is like that of Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted "because they were not."<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln obtained copies of Gurley's eloquent remarks to distribute to friends, and he frequently pondered them.

Robert, the eldest son, had little connection with New York Avenue Church during his father's presidency because for most of that time he was studying at Harvard. His association with that church came at the end of life, after a distinguished career in business. In 1926, the church's pastor, Dr. Joseph Sizoo, conducted his burial service in the Arlington National Cemetery. His family, aware that the church had a steeple when the Lincolns worshiped there during the Civil War, gave the Lincoln Memorial Tower to replace what a storm had blown down. It is one of the loftiest church spires in downtown Washington and it was transferred to the new edifice in 1951.<sup>36</sup>

During the Civil War, when governmen-

tal regulations were much upon the minds of citizens, Lincoln said: "I like Gurley. He don't preach politics. I get enough of that through the week, and when I go to church I like to hear the gospel."<sup>37</sup> John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, reported that Lincoln liked it that Gurley's "preaching was confined with remarkable closeness to the great central doctrines of the cross."<sup>38</sup> However, the Union president no doubt approved of these remarks in a sermon by his pastor: "God manifestly made the vast country [between the Northern Lakes and the Southern Gulf] to be one. . . . 'What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.' Our Southern brethren . . . are, in the madness of offended pride and passion, struggling to achieve an impossibility."<sup>39</sup>

In response to a military directive, Gurley announced one Sunday that the sanctuary would be transformed into a hospital. Lincoln then stood and declared: "This action was taken without my consent and I hereby countermand the order. The churches are needed as never before for divine services."<sup>40</sup>

The war also brought Lincoln into contact with other Presbyterian individuals and groups. Dr. Byron Sunderland, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Washington, was also a chaplain of the Senate. In one prayer "he alluded critically to Lincoln's having been at the theater the night before."<sup>41</sup> Once, when Sunderland visited the White House, Lincoln spoke to him regarding the dilemma of the South and North:

They want a servile class; we want to make equality practical as far as possible. And they are Christians, and we are Christians. They and we are praying and fighting for results exactly the opposite. What must God think of such a posture of affairs? There is but one solution—self-deception. Somewhere there is a fearful heresy in our religion, and I cannot think it lies in the love of liberty.<sup>42</sup>

In 1863, a delegation from the Presbyterian Synod of Baltimore was received at the executive mansion and Gurley introduced its members to the President. Lincoln said to

them: "I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am. Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance in God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right."<sup>43</sup>

In an amusing way, Lincoln suggested that Presbyterians had a way of speaking that distinguished them from other Christians. When Senator William Fessenden of Maine exploded with profanity over a patronage issue in Lincoln's presence, the President inquired if he was an Episcopalian. After overcoming his surprise that Lincoln had made that denominational association, the Senator acknowledged he was one. "I thought so," said Lincoln. "You Episcopalians all swear alike. [Secretary of War] Seward is an Episcopalian. But [Secretary of State] Stanton is a Presbyterian. You ought to hear him swear."<sup>44</sup> When it was reported to Lincoln that Stanton had called him "a damned fool" for some order he had issued, he responded, "If Stanton said I was a damn fool, then I must be one," and he contacted Edwin Stanton to learn of his foolishness.<sup>45</sup>

Lincoln became involved in a church-state case pertaining to Dr. Samuel McPheeters, the pastor in St. Louis of a Presbyterian congregation composed of both northern and southern supporters. He was suspected of being a rebel sympathizer because he baptized an infant with the name of a Confederate general. After General Samuel Curtis expelled McPheeters from the state, he defended himself by declaring that he never "introduced into the pulpit any matter of a political kind" because he did not think that he should preach politics.<sup>46</sup> After he came to Washington to protest, Lincoln suspended the order against him and issued a vague governmental non-interference policy: "When an individual, in the church or out of it, becomes dangerous to the public interest, he must be checked, but the churches, as such, must take care of themselves."<sup>47</sup>

While upholding a person's right to

keep his political allegiance private, Lincoln appreciated clergy who voluntarily allied themselves with the Republican party. Dr. Robert Breckinridge, a noted author and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, helped to keep his state from defecting to the Confederacy. Even though two of his sons were Confederate soldiers, he strongly supported the Union. He was a delegate to the 1864 Republican convention in Baltimore and, while serving as its chairman, notified Lincoln of his nomination for a second term as president.

### III

After Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre and carried to a house across the street, Gurley was summoned to the president's bedside. He remained there until he died the next morning. Stanton then turned to Gurley and asked, "Doctor, will you say something?" After a pause, he said, "Let us talk with God" and "kneeling, he proceeded to offer a most touching and impressive prayer."<sup>48</sup> When it was concluded with "Thy will be done, amen," Stanton declared, "Now he belongs to the ages."<sup>49</sup>

Four days later Gurley gave the funeral address in the East Room of the White House to six hundred invited guests, including sixty clergy. The pastor told of his frequent associations with Lincoln for more than four years and of being most impressed by "his abiding confidence in God, and in the final triumph of truth and righteousness." Gurley recalled, "Never shall I forget the emphatic and deep emotion with which he said, in this very room . . . : 'My hope and success in this struggle rests on that immutable foundation, the justness and goodness of God.'" Lincoln "remembered that God is in history and he felt that nowhere had His hand and His mercy been so marvelously conspicuous as in the history of this nation." Gurley suggested that no man since Washington was "so deeply and firmly enshrined in the very hearts of the people." Then he described personal

qualities of Lincoln that caused him and others to love him:

We admired his childlike simplicity, his freedom from guile and deceit, his staunch and sterling integrity, his kind and forgiving temper, his industry and patience; . . . his readiness to hear and consider the cause of the poor and humble, the suffering and the oppressed; his charity toward those who questioned the correctness of his opinions; . . . his wonderful skill in reconciling differences; . . . his true and enlarged philanthropy, that knew no distinction of color or race, but regarded all men as brethren, and endowed alike by their Creator "with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>50</sup>

Gurley was silent about Lincoln's profession of Christianity but pointed to his living by New Testament ethics. The pastor accompanied Lincoln's body on the circuitous twelve-day journey of the funeral train to Illinois and composed en route a hymn for the burial service. At the conclusion of the Springfield ceremony, before Gurley pronounced the apostolic benediction,<sup>51</sup> those assembled sang his hymn, followed by the doxology:

Rest, noble Martyr! rest in peace;  
Rest with the true and brave,  
Who, like thee, fell in Freedom's cause,  
The nation's life to save.

Thy name shall live while time endures,  
And men shall say of thee,  
"He saved his country from its foes,  
And bade the slave be free."

These deeds shall be thy monument,  
Better than brass or stone;  
They leave thy fame in glory's light,  
Unrival'd and alone.

This consecrated spot shall be  
To Freedom ever dear;  
And Freedom's son of every race  
Shall weep and worship here.

O God! before whom we, in tears,  
Our fallen Chief deplore;  
Grant that the cause for which he died,  
May live forever more.<sup>52</sup>

### IV

Having found it embarrassing that Lincoln found attending plays one of his favorite forms of entertainment, and that he

was shot in a theater, Gurley did not make public comment on the matter until a month after the president was buried. John Wilkes Booth had mortally wounded Lincoln while he was enjoying a comedy on the day when Jesus' crucifixion was being commemorated in churches. In a sermon entitled "The Voice of the Rod," Gurley viewed the assassination as a providential "lesson touching the character and influence of the theatre." He pointed out that an actor trained in tragic drama had been the person to "skillfully lodge the fatal bullet in his brain" and then "stalk defiantly across the stage." Gurley's narrow outlook on the theater was not unusual, for the pious at that time viewed a warehouse as only slightly less holy than a playhouse. His more conservative orientation than Lincoln is revealed in this comment about the president:

Had he been murdered in his bed, or in his office, or on the street, or on the steps of the Capitol, the tidings of his death would not have struck the Christian heart of the country quite so painfully; for the feeling of the heart is that the theatre is one of the last places to which a good man should go and among the very last in which his friends would wish him to die. . . . I have always regarded the theatre as in the main a school of vice and corruption—the illumined and decorated gateway through which thousands are constantly passing into the embrace of gaiety and folly, intemperance and lewdness, infamy and ruin. . . . May it be odious to you. . . . Number it from this day forth among the polluting, perilous, and prohibited places where you and your children must never be found.<sup>53</sup>

On certain issues Lincoln differed from Gurley and Smith, but when compared with the friendship he had with any other individual minister, they "stood out and above the others like twin peaks above the plain."<sup>54</sup> Both belonged to the Old School Presbyterians, led by Professor Archibald Alexander of Princeton Seminary. That party followed Calvin's emphasis upon mind rather than passions in dealing with issues. The wide recognition of the abilities of Smith and Gurley is displayed by the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree that each

received. For the last thirteen years of Lincoln's life those mentors nurtured the growth of his faith, and each helped the Lincolns cope with the death of a son.

In distributing memorabilia after the assassination, the Lincoln family gave Smith a gold-headed cane and Gurley an inauguration hat that had been used by their former parishioner. In a note accompanying the gift to Gurley, Mary Lincoln wrote: "If anything can cast a ray of light across my dreary and blighted pathway, the recollection of your Christian kindness, extended to myself and family in our heavy bereavements will ever be most gratefully cherished."<sup>55</sup> The notoriety Gurley received through friendship with the martyred Lincoln contributed to his becoming moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the highest elected position of the denomination. He died in 1868 after the completion of his year's service in that office.<sup>56</sup>

The Lincolns' friendship with Smith continued after he retired to Scotland. Even though Smith was a Democrat, Lincoln described him to Seward as "an intimate personal friend."<sup>57</sup> Lincoln appointed him to succeed his son who had died while serving as United States consul in Dundee. Before Smith's death in 1871, he guided Mary Lincoln on a tour of Scotland. When she died, her funeral was held in her beloved First Presbyterian Church in Springfield. Pastor James Reed compared Abraham and Mary to two lofty pines struck by the same bolt of lightning: one felled to the ground, the other, though shattered, living on for seventeen years.<sup>58</sup>

### V

Recognizing the strong bond Lincoln had with individual Presbyterian leaders and his faithfulness in attending Presbyterian churches, why did he never officially become a church member? In his famous debate with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln suggested one reason why he did not outwardly identify with a denomination. Impatient



with the lack of antislavery agreement in churches, he asked questions of several denominations such as this, "What has raised this constant disturbance in every Presbyterian General Assembly that meets?"<sup>59</sup> After reading Frederick A. Ross's addresses to the New School General Assembly entitled *Slavery Ordained of God*, he responded with "Nonsense!"<sup>60</sup> Another reason for his never being baptized and joining a church is that he was reluctant to make an outward show of faith to attract political support. But intellectual integrity appears to be the main reason why he never professed the total creedal affirmations of a particular denomination. He could not believe in the eternal punishment of nonbelievers and in the supernatural stories about the one he called "the Savior." Guelzo claims that he also could not accept the doctrine of the Trinity: "Lincoln's concept of God . . . was not the orthodox trinitarian God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit described by the Old School [Presbyterian] theologians but a truncated one with God the Father—remote, austere, all-powerful, uncommunicative—and neither Son nor Spirit."<sup>61</sup> However, it is doubtful that Lincoln's God was "remote" and "uncommunicative," for his prayer habits are witness to the contrary.

Jesse Fell, a journalist with whom Lincoln confided on details of his life, commented in 1870:

Whilst he held many opinions in common with the great mass of Christian believers, he did not believe in what are regarded as the orthodox and evangelical views of Christianity. . . . He fully believed in a superintending and overruling Providence that guides and controls the operation of the world, but maintained that law and order, and not their violation or suspension, are the appointed means by which this Providence is exercised.<sup>62</sup>

Lincoln occasionally quoted from *Hamlet* lines that convey his view of Providence, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will." This Shakespearean saying is sometimes wrongly classified as "fatalism," a designation that properly pertains to all events being

determined so neither divine nor human forces can alter them.

Henry Deming, a congressman from Connecticut, related that he had asked Lincoln why he never united with a church. He replied, "I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their articles of belief and confessions of faith."<sup>63</sup>

Lincoln told Gurley that he could not subscribe to everything in the Westminster Confession of Faith but "if all that I am asked to respond to is what our Lord said were the two great commandments, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul and strength, and my neighbor as myself, why, I aim to do that."<sup>64</sup> Believing that Lincoln was planning to become baptized and join the Presbyterian Church, Gurley said:

I have had frequent and intimate conversations with him on the subject of the Bible and the Christian religion, when he could have no motive for deceiving me, and I consider him sound, not only on the truth of the Christian religion, but on also its fundamental doctrines and teachings. And more than that, in the latter days of his chastened and weary life, after the death of his son Willie and his visit to the battlefield at Gettysburg, he said to me with tears in his eyes, that he had lost confidence in everything but God and he now believed that his heart was changed and that he loved the Savior and if he was not deceived in himself it was his intention soon to make a profession of religion.<sup>65</sup>

Sidney McCleary Lauck, a member of the New York Avenue Church who had met Lincoln, testified by means of an affidavit that Dr. Gurley told her after Lincoln's death "that Mr. Lincoln had made all the necessary arrangements with him and the Session of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to be received into the membership of the said church, by confession of his faith in Christ, on the Easter Sunday following the Friday night when Mr. Lincoln was assassinated."<sup>66</sup> Wolf received a letter from a grandson of Gurley claiming that "numerous hearers" had similarly affirmed Mrs. Lauck's sworn statement. Wolf percep-

tively regards this alleged decision by Lincoln as an exaggeration at best because, had this happened, Gurley would have mentioned such in his funeral address.<sup>67</sup>

While indifferent to orthodox dogma, Lincoln cherished religious morality, as articulated in these immortal phrases: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right." Calvinist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr has concluded that "Lincoln's religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those, not only of the political leaders of his day, but of the religious leaders of the era."<sup>68</sup> A question worthy of consideration by church people during this bicentennial decade of his birth is this: Have there been any American leaders since Lincoln who have surpassed him in the *practice* of bedrock beliefs held by Presbyterians and other Christians?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Life of Lincoln* (New York: DaCapo, 1983), 360; for other examples of this type see Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 226–28.

<sup>2</sup> Josiah Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Mass.: Gurdon, 1866), 237; other hagiography examples can be found in Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 218–22.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Simon, *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 5, 10, 127.

<sup>5</sup> William Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (London: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), 1:196.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:278.

<sup>7</sup> Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 117.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>9</sup> James Reed, "The Religious Sentiments of Abraham Lincoln," *Scribner's Monthly*, July 1873, 336. Reed, who followed Smith as pastor of that Springfield church, obtained this information from a letter about Lincoln's religion that John Stuart, Lincoln's first law partner, wrote him on 17 Dec. 1872.

<sup>10</sup> William Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Doran, 1920), 156.

<sup>11</sup> James Smith to William Herndon, 24 Jan. 1867, published by the *Chicago Tribune*, 6 Mar. 1867; see Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, *Herndon's Informants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 555.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Chapin, *Ten Ministers* (Springfield: First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, 1953), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Post, "Lincoln and the Reverend Dr. James Smith," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 34 (Dec. 1942): 397.

<sup>14</sup> James Smith, *The Christian's Defense* (Cincinnati: James, 1843), x.

<sup>15</sup> Barton, *Soul of Lincoln*, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *The Christian's Defense*, i–ii, x–xi.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:160; 2:191.

<sup>18</sup> Reed, "Religious Sentiments," 338, from a letter about Lincoln's religion that Edwards wrote him on 24 Dec. 1872.

<sup>19</sup> William Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Seabury, 1963), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Barton, *Life of Lincoln*, 2:460.

<sup>21</sup> Reed, "Religious Sentiments," 338.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 549.

<sup>23</sup> Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Edgington, *A History of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church* (Washington: New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1961), 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> The hallowed pew was retained when the sanctuary was renovated in 1886 and, standing out from pews of more recent vintage, it can still be found there.

<sup>27</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 236.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–44.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 207.

<sup>33</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 238–39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>35</sup> Edgar Jones, *Lincoln and the Preachers* (New York: Harper, 1948), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 218, 267.

<sup>37</sup> From Rev. William Schenck memorial sermon for Dr. Gurley on 13 Dec. 1868, quoted in Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 321.

<sup>39</sup> Phineas Gurley, *Man's Projects and God's Results* (Washington: Ballantyne, 1863), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 240.

<sup>41</sup> Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper, 1953), 107.

<sup>42</sup> Reed, "Religious Sentiments," 342, from a letter about Lincoln's religion that Sunderland wrote him on 15 Nov. 1872.

<sup>43</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:535–36.

<sup>44</sup> Wolf, *Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 138–39.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Lincoln and the Preachers*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> George Apperson, "Presbyterians and Radical Republicans," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History* 73 (Winter 1995): 247.

<sup>47</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:86, 178.



<sup>48</sup> Schenck's report, quoted in Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 438.

<sup>50</sup> Phineas Gurley, "The Funeral Sermon of Abraham Lincoln," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 39 (June 1961): 70-73.

<sup>51</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>53</sup> Phineas Gurley, *The Voice of the Rod* (Washington: Ballantyne, 1865), 15-16.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Lincoln and the Preachers*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 253.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:51.

<sup>58</sup> Chapin, *Ten Ministers*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:310.

<sup>60</sup> Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 314.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> Herndon and Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, 358.

<sup>63</sup> Barton, *Soul of Lincoln*, 244.

<sup>64</sup> Barton, *Soul of Lincoln*, 245. The substance of those remarks was recorded in several different situations.

<sup>65</sup> Edgington, *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 244.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>67</sup> Wolf, *Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 203.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln," *The Christian Century*, 10 Feb. 1965, 172.