

Lincoln and Universal Salvation, Part 2

Commentary for May 16, 2020 – Abraham Lincoln's Beliefs

In "[Lincoln and Universal Salvation, Part 1](#)" I wrote how disappointing it was that two bookstore workers and a Park Ranger at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. did not know of a book about Lincoln's religious beliefs. I quoted five Lincoln contemporaries who said he was a devout Christian and he believed in universal salvation.

The foundation of Lincoln's religious faith was ultra-Calvinism. William Eleazar Barton in [The Soul of Abraham Lincoln](#) (1920 edition, page 272) explains:¹

"Thus, when he [Lincoln] argued in favor of universal salvation he did it upon the basis of the old Calvinistic theology with which he had been familiar all his life. If God was, indeed absolute sovereign, and as good as He was great, and willed not that any should perish, then no one could finally perish. Universal salvation became logically and ethically compulsory.

The Christ who tasted death for every man, did so as the necessary means to the efficiency of a plan of salvation whereby the curse of the fall was fully offset by the sacrifice of Christ, at the instance of the sovereign will of God. As in Adam all died, even so in Christ were all made alive [1 Corinthians 15:22]. His theory of universal salvation was the logical expression of his determinism, influenced by his rationalism and confirmed by his appeal to a justice that would not accept a fall more universal than the atonement of Christ.

This was not because Lincoln approached the theme from the direction of the grace of Christ, but of the irresistibility of a divine decree. He profoundly believed himself an instrument of the divine will, believing that will to be right, and creation's final law."

Lincoln's argument (as Barton tells it) makes perfectly good sense.

Two Quotes about Lincoln's Religious Beliefs

Below are two excerpts from a blog article quoted from *The Almost Chosen People* by William J. Wolf (Doubleday & Company Inc, 1959). It is one of three books Wolf wrote about Lincoln's religion. I have not read them.

"The Religion of Abraham Lincoln"

"One of Lincoln's associates, Mentor Graham, tells of Lincoln: 'He took the passage, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive [1 Corinthians 15:22],'" and followed up with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's transgressions to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ.'" (Wolf, page 47)

¹ The weblink will take you directly to pages 271–272.

“... Lincoln wrote an essay about 1833 on predestinated universal salvation in criticism of the orthodox doctrine of endless punishment. It is also consistent with the evidence that in 1850, Lincoln, through the reading of his pastor’s *The Christian’s Defense* and his own wrestling with the problem, became convinced intellectually of the validity of the biblical revelation. Lincoln’s conviction that God would restore the whole of creation as the outcome of Christ’s atonement would have been in itself a bar to membership in the Springfield church he attended.” (Wolf, pages 103–104)

Was Lincoln Headed for Heaven or Hell?

Lincoln was challenged to answer that question. Lincoln ran for Congress in 1846 against a formidable political opponent, a famous frontier preacher named Peter Cartwright. He was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher, known throughout Illinois. During his sixty-five years of riding the circuit, he baptized nearly ten thousand converts. In the Congressional campaign some of Cartwright’s followers accused Lincoln of being an “infidel.” Lincoln decided to meet Cartwright and attend his rally. Carl Sandburg tells the story this way in [Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years](#) (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., pp. 147–149):

“In due time Cartwright said, “All who desire to lead a new life, to give their hearts to God, and go to heaven, will stand,” and a sprinkling of men, women, and children stood up. Then the preacher exhorted, “All who do not wish to go to hell will stand.” All stood up — except Lincoln. Then said Cartwright in his gravest voice, ‘I observe that many responded to the first invitation to give their hearts to God and go to heaven. And I further observe that all of you save one indicated that you did not desire to go to hell. The sole exception is Mr. Lincoln, who did not respond to either invitation. May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where are you going?’

And Lincoln slowly rose and slowly spoke.

‘I came here as a respectful listener. I did not know that I was to be singled out by Brother Cartwright. I believe in treating religious matters with due solemnity. I admit that the questions propounded by Brother Cartwright are of great importance. I did not feel called upon to answer as the rest did. Brother Cartwright asks me directly where I am going. I desire to reply with equal directness: I am going to Congress.’”

Lincoln won the election and went to Congress.

“The Creed of Abraham Lincoln in His Own Words”

Next is a compilation of Lincoln’s own words collected by William Barton in *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln*. In Chapter XXIII, “[The Creed of Abraham Lincoln in His Own Words](#)” Barton begins with the sources of his information **in bold**. The “Creed” itself is on page 300.

I believe in God, “**the Almighty Ruler of Nations,**”² “**our great and good and merciful Maker,**”³ our Father in Heaven, who “**notes the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads.**”⁴

² “[First Inaugural Address—Final Text,](#)” March 4, 1861.

³ “[To John D. Johnston,](#)” January 12, 1851.

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

I believe in "His eternal truth and justice."⁵

I "recognize the sublime truth announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history that those nations only are blest whose God is the Lord."⁶

I believe that "it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God," and to invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit; "to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon."⁷

I believe that "it is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father" ... "equally in [our] triumphs and in these sorrows"⁸ which we may justly fear are "a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins to the needful end of our reformation."⁹

I believe that the Bible "is the best gift which God has [ever] given to men." "All the good [from] the Saviour [of] the world was communicated [to us] through this book."¹⁰

I believe "the will of God prevails."¹¹ "Without [Him] all human effort is vain."¹² "Without the assistance of that Divine Being, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail."¹³

"Being a humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father," **I desire** "that all my works and acts may be according to His will; and that it may be so," **I give thanks** to the Almighty, and "have sought His aid."¹⁴

I have a "solemn oath registered in heaven"¹⁵ "to finish the work" **I am** in,¹⁶ "in full view of my great responsibility to my God,"¹⁷ "with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives me [us] to see the right."¹⁸ "Commending" those who love me "to His care," "as I hope in their [your] prayers they [you] will commend me,"¹⁹

I look "through the help of God" to "a joyous [meeting] with many loved ones gone before."²⁰

⁵ ["First Inaugural Address."](#)

⁶ ["Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day,"](#) March 30, 1863.

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

⁸ ["Proclamation of Thanksgiving,"](#) July 15, 1863.

⁹ ["Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day."](#)

¹⁰ ["Reply to Loyal Colored People of Baltimore upon Presentation of a Bible,"](#) September 7, 1864.

¹¹ ["Meditation on the Divine Will,"](#) [September 2, 1862?].

¹² ["To the Friends of Union and Liberty,"](#) May 9, 1864.

¹³ ["Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois,"](#) February 11, 1861.

¹⁴ ["Reply to Eliza P. Gurney,"](#) October 26, 1862.

¹⁵ ["First Inaugural Address."](#)

¹⁶ ["Second Inaugural Address,"](#) March 4, 1865.

¹⁷ ["Message to Congress,"](#) March 6, 1862.

¹⁸ ["Second Inaugural Address."](#)

¹⁹ ["Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois."](#)

²⁰ ["To John D. Johnston."](#)

At the end of [The Soul of Abraham Lincoln](#), Appendix VI, pp. 350–352, William Barton gives his final evidence. The argument is complex but interesting. Words in **ALL-CAPS** are Barton's emphasis:

"My next and last witness is W.H. Herndon. In his Abbott lecture in 1870, Herndon says that Lincoln's belief was, that **ALL WOULD BE SAVED, or none. That remark he frequently or often made; that agrees with Harnett's statement that he [Lincoln] believed all would be saved. When a man believes all men will be saved, he can then be logical and say all will be saved or none, and not otherwise. In the same letter, Mr. Herndon says Mr. Lincoln held that God has a fixed punishment for sin and no means could bribe him to remit that punishment. That evidence agrees with Cogdal's statement that sin was to be punished, but not endlessly. ...**

I am now through with the evidence I shall offer at this time, though I could add the evidence of a dozen more to the same purport. I think I have clearly proved [1] that **LINCOLN WAS A UNIVERSALIST in 1833; [2] that he wrote a manuscript on that subject then; [3] that in 1847 he **DENIED THE CHARGE** of infidelity; [4] that in 1850–58, 59 he was still a Universalist. If this be true, then was he an infidel? But to get a clear understanding of the case, Universalism and infidelity are as far apart as the poles.**

Universalism maintains that there is one God, whose nature in love revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. This Lincoln certainly believed, infidelity denies it. Universalism maintains that the Old and New Testament Scriptures maintain a record of God's revelation to man; infidelity denies it, and says the New Testament is no more inspired than Homer's songs, Milton's "Paradise Lost," or Shakespeare. ...

Before closing, I wish it distinctly understood that if I could show that **LINCOLN WAS NOT AN INFIDEL without showing him a Universalist, I would do so; that I am not trying to bolster up Universalism on Lincoln's faith, as I do not claim to be a Universalist myself.**

There are many points in Mr. Herndon's lecture and letter that I might notice, but as I am only trying to show that **HERNDON IS WRONG in his understanding of Lincoln's religious belief, I shall not notice them, as they do not concern me or the question in dispute.**

Mr. Herndon, in his lecture and letter both, says Mr. Lincoln wrote a manuscript against Christianity. Mr. Graham, **LINCOLN'S TEACHER at the time, testifies that he had the manuscript in his possession eight to ten days, read it two or three times carefully and [it] was in favor of Christianity and universal salvation. Mr. Mostiller says Lincoln flatly denied infidelity in 1847, and he would swear to it. Mr. Harnett heard Lincoln on the atonement in 1858. Mr. Cogdal testifies to the same in 1859.**

Abraham Lincoln was one of the more noble and honorable personalities in history. He was a good politician who successfully kept his "controversial" religious beliefs private. He did not speak in detail about his religious faith when campaigning for President, but he chose to be profoundly biblical when he incorporated religion into his presidential statements.

Abraham Lincoln will be one of the very fascinating historical figures I look forward to meeting in the future when he is raised by God to the glory God intends for us all.