

ABRAHAM

A "None" Before His Time

LINCOLN:

- Catholic
- Baptist
- Mainline Christian
- Christian Generic
- Pentecostal/Charismatic
- Protestant Denominations
- Mormon/LDS
- Jewish
- Eastern Religions
- Muslim
- NRM & Other Religions
- None

Editor's note: A Christian "none" is one who refuses to allow relationship with God to be defined and confined by traditionally approved and accepted religious standards.

There was the strangest combination of church influence against me.... My wife had some relations in the Presbyterian churches, and some in the Episcopal churches; and therefore, wherever it would tell, I was set down as either one or the other, while it was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to vote for me because I belonged to no Church, and was suspected of being a Deist and had talked of fighting a duel.—Abraham Lincoln, March 26, 1843, in a letter to Martin M. Morris

On Good Friday, 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln was shot while watching a play at the Ford Theater in the nation's capitol city. Some say that just before John Wilkes Booth fired his .44 Derringer point blank into the back of the President's head, Lincoln had been ignoring the play and was talking with his wife about a possible visit to the Holy Land. With the long Civil War nearly over (the last Confederate general would not surrender until over two months later), Lincoln wanted to make a pilgrimage to see first-hand where Jesus was born, lived, taught and was crucified.

If this story is accurate, and these were the last thoughts of Lincoln, we have a quandary. Lincoln was never a member of any church. Beyond that, he seemed at one time to have rejected the

by Monte Wolverton

Bible and Christianity altogether. Will the authentic Abe Lincoln please stand up to his full height of 6 feet 4 inches?

About 15,000 books have been written about Lincoln—an honor second only to Jesus. In part, this is because Lincoln is so hard to pin down in terms of his underlying beliefs. With every book, every movie, every article about Lincoln we ask ourselves, *what spiritual perspective defined this man?* Who was this man who led us to end the appalling evil of slavery in America, an evil once accepted by a majority of Americans, an evil that had persisted in the world in spite of (and often *because of*) nineteen centuries of institutional Christianity? Did God actually choose Lincoln for this task, and if so, what kind of person (or “instrument,” as Lincoln more than once referred to himself) did God choose?

The answer is elusive. We can rummage through Lincoln



Religious Camp Meeting—1839, by J. Maze Burbank

quotes till the cows come home, and still be flummoxed. And then there is the question of authenticity—did Abe really say many of the things attributed to him? Citing the enigmatic Lincoln is a little like quoting Scripture. It’s possible to take statements out of context and stack them up to support any agenda. To find a way out of the maze, we offer three views of Lincoln. The first two represent extreme but popular views, and the third, we suggest, is closer to the truth.

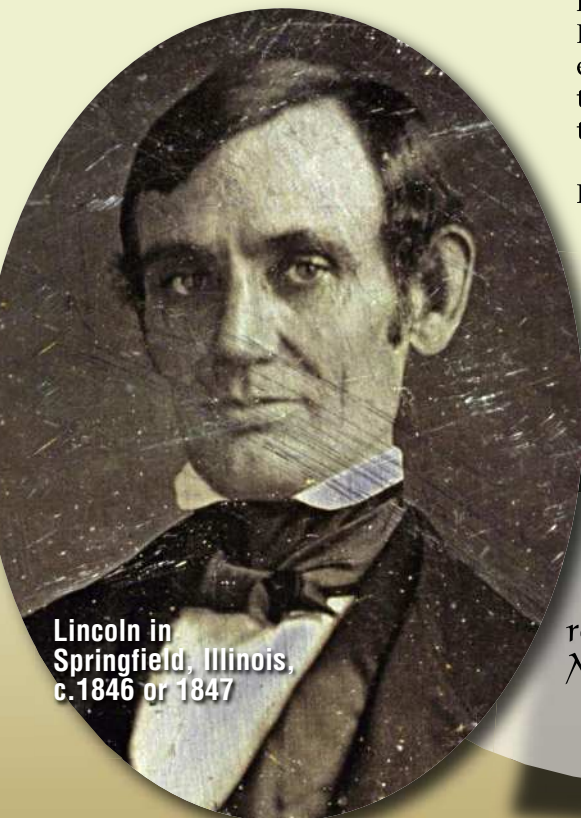
1. Lincoln the Pragmatic Politician

If you are an atheist or a humanist, you might

see Lincoln as privately skeptical (even atheistic) while publicly pious. You might think he quoted Scripture merely for effect, to engage a mostly devout and religious public to further his agenda.

Ironically, some Christians hold a similar view of Lincoln. They believe the Civil War was more a dispute over states’ rights than it was over slavery. They point out that Southern states, fearing that the election of Lincoln surely meant abolition was on the way, were forced to secede to protect their sovereignty. From that perspective, Lincoln was just another big-government politician, and the

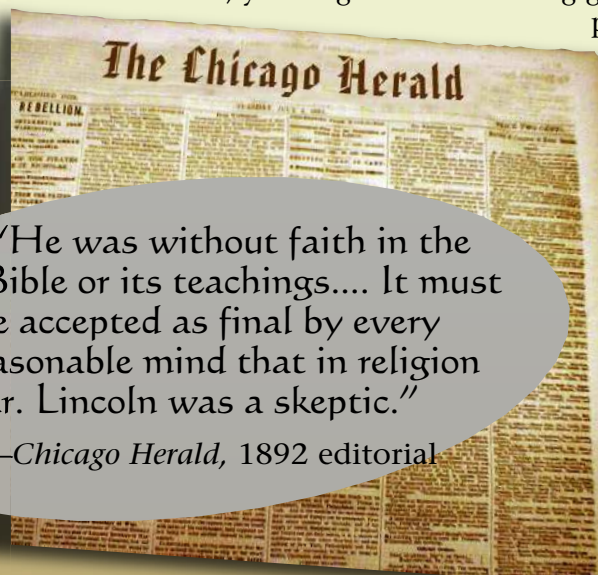
Civil War was nothing more than a war of “northern aggression.” It’s surprisingly easy to support this view of Lincoln with selected quotes and sources. Some are of



Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, c.1846 or 1847

“He was without faith in the Bible or its teachings.... It must be accepted as final by every reasonable mind that in religion Mr. Lincoln was a skeptic.”

—Chicago Herald, 1892 editorial





The Lincoln family would have seen many traveling revivalists pass through their community. In later life, Lincoln had a distaste for such emotionalism in preaching, favoring well-constructed arguments and sound reason—a later hallmark of his law practice and politics.

questionable origin, but many are well substantiated. For example:

- “The Bible is not my book nor Christianity my profession”—often quoted and attributed to Lincoln, but the source is uncertain.

- In his early political career, Lincoln’s opponents repeatedly accused him of being a Deist (more on this later), an infidel or even an atheist—charges he never categorically denied at the time. Lincoln’s Presidential candidacy was opposed by over 85% of church pastors in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois.

- “My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures, have become clearer and stronger with advancing years and I see no reason for thinking I shall ever change them.”—1862, to Judge J.S.

About 15,000 books have been written about Lincoln...Who was this man who led us to end the appalling evil of slavery in America... an evil that had persisted in the world in spite of... nineteen centuries of institutional Christianity?

Wakefield, after Willie Lincoln’s death.

- In an 1892 editorial, the *Chicago Herald* wrote of Lincoln: “He was without faith in the Bible or its teachings. On this point the testimony is so overwhelming that there is no basis for doubt. In his early life Lincoln exhibited a powerful tendency to aggressive infidelity. But when he grew to be a politician he became secretive and non-committal in his religious belief.... It must be accepted as final by every reasonable mind that in religion Mr. Lincoln was a skeptic.”

- Mary Todd Lincoln wrote, after her husband’s death, that he “was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian.”

If you roam the Internet, you will find many more quotes at least as shocking and puzzling as these. Was Lincoln a hypocrite? He *was* a shrewd political and legal strategist who often kept his personal opinions to himself. He was also famously adept at using homespun humor to disarm political and legal opponents. But is it really possible that Lincoln was a hater of God and the Bible, all the while posing as godly? If so, maybe Honest Abe wasn’t—and we ought to consider installing a statue of someone else in the Lincoln Memorial.

2. Lincoln the Unchanging Churchgoer

Many Christians assume Lincoln was a devout, born-again believer. It would be so convenient for institutional Christendom had Lincoln been a lifelong member of some denomination, whose creeds and dogmas charted a clear course for



Mary Todd Lincoln

wrote, after her husband’s death, that he “was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian.”

him through a great national crisis, after which he would have urged everyone to accept Christ, say the Sinner’s Prayer and attend church every Sunday. While it is nearly impossible to squeeze Lincoln into that mold, he did make many statements that strongly suggest he was a believer. Again, some quotes are questionable, but many are solidly validated. Here are a few examples:

- “When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. Yes, I do love Jesus”—allegedly said by Lincoln to an unnamed White House visitor in 1864,

The answer is elusive. We can rummage through Lincoln quotes till the cows come home, and still be flummoxed.

Lincoln never joined any church or denomination. Why? Perhaps his Universalist leanings clashed with the hell-fire condemnation and exclusivism ...the my-way-or-the-highway dogmatism that characterizes so many churches and denominations.

and printed in the *Freeport Weekly Journal*, on December 7 of that year.

- As Lincoln departed from Springfield for his inauguration in Washington, he told his audience of well-wishers: "...without the assistance of that divine being whoever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To his care commending you as I hope in your prayers you will commend me."

But was Lincoln a died-in-the-wool, gung-ho, Bible-thumping religious zealot? The following quote better describes Lincoln's reasoned relationship with the institutional church:

"That I am not a member of any Christian church is true, but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures, and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general or of any denomination of Christians in particular. I do not think I could myself be brought to support a man for office whom I knew to be an open enemy of and scoffer at religion"—1846 handbill published by Lincoln in response to his opponent in a congressional race.

3. Lincoln the Lifelong Learner

In his book *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, Ronald C. White, Jr. paints a picture of a man

who is ever-questioning, intellectually curious and open minded. His beliefs were never set in stone, but rather grew and evolved throughout his lifetime. A brief review of the aspects of Lincoln's life that formed his religious history may help unravel the enigma.

At the time of Lincoln's birth, his parents, Thomas and Nancy, were active in a Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. This austere religious environment likely out-Calvined Calvin, according to one scholar. The Lincoln family would have seen many traveling revivalists pass through their community. In later life, Lincoln had a distaste for such emotionalism in preaching, favoring well-constructed arguments and sound reason—a later hallmark of his law practice and politics.

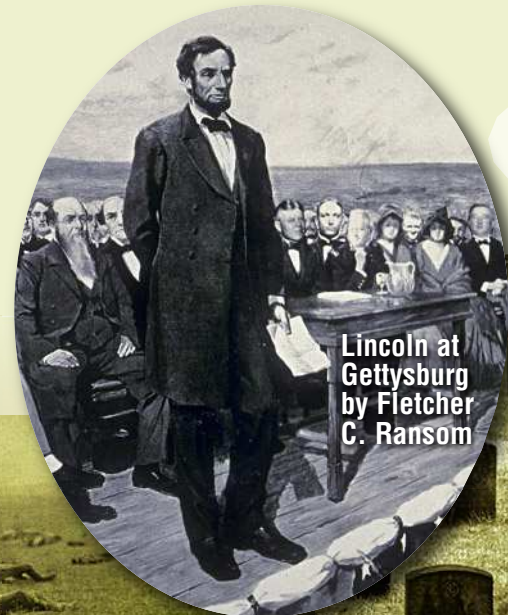
Further, the Lincolns' church opposed slavery, which was lawful in Kentucky, where slaves made up about 25% of the population. Lincoln's parents would have voiced their disapproval of the slave traders who often traveled the road that passed near the family cabin.

After the family moved to Indiana, young Abe began his lifelong consumption of books, including the Bible, memorizing much of what he read. He quoted from memory the Ten Commandments, the

Sermon on the Mount, the 23rd Psalm and many other passages. The premature deaths of his mother and sister may have driven his interest in things spiritual, but also may have contributed to his later religious disillusionment.

Sometime during his late teens or early adulthood Lincoln encountered *The Age of Reason* by Deist Thomas Paine. Deists hold that there is a Creator, but that he is not involved in human affairs. Lincoln reportedly wrote an essay against the divinity of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible.

The manuscript was allegedly destroyed by a friend to protect Lincoln's reputation. But Lincoln's teacher and friend William Mentor Graham, who claimed to have read the essay, said that it was rather "a defense of universal salvation." Said Graham, "I remember well his argument. He took the passage, 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' and followed with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's



**Battle of Gettysburg dead—
photographed July 5–6, 1863.**



transgression to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ." Historian Mark Noll agrees: "At least early on, Lincoln was probably also a Universalist who believed in the eventual salvation of all people."

Lincoln ventured into many different vocations. He piloted a flatboat carrying local produce and livestock down the Mississippi to New Orleans. He tried his hand at operating a general store. He served as a captain in the Illinois Militia during the Black Hawk War. He served as postmaster, county surveyor, and finally decided to teach himself law. One of his mentors in that profession demanded that he learn the position of his opponent as well as his own, since only then could he counter all possible arguments. This habit seemed to carry over into his thoughts about spiritual matters.

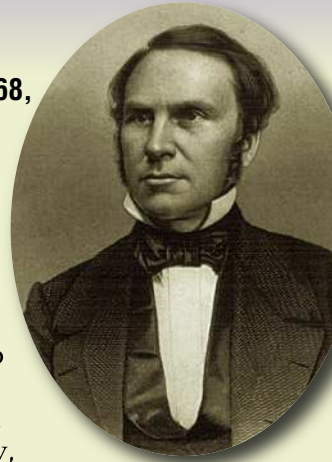
In 1846, after a decade of law practice and four successive terms in the Illinois Legislature, Lincoln was elected for one term to the U.S. House of Representatives. Afterwards he returned to his law practice in

Springfield. For the next two decades Lincoln represented a wide variety of companies and individuals. A master of legal argumentation, he appeared before the Illinois Supreme Court in no less than 175 cases.

Around 1850, Lincoln met Rev. James Smith, a Scottish immigrant and Deist who had converted to Christianity. He became pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln and his family frequently attended. One of Smith's books was a part of Lincoln's library, *The Christian's Defense*, a defense of the inspiration and authenticity of the Bible. Smith asserted that when it came to matters of faith, that order, logic and reason should outweigh emotion.

After his presidential inauguration in 1861, Lincoln and his wife, Mary, began attending New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, pastored by the Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley, who was also U.S. Senate Chaplain. Gurley's coherent, reasoned and thoughtful sermons appealed to Lincoln. Gurley did not involve himself and his

Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley, pastor of NYAPC, 1860-1868, was a friend and spiritual advisor to Lincoln



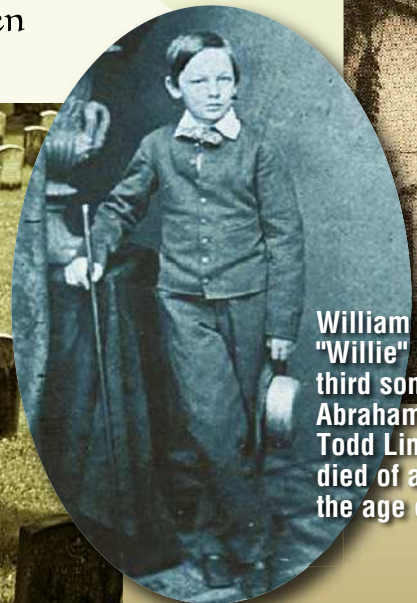
church in politics, a further plus for Lincoln, who believed God to be far above human politics. Not surprisingly, Gurley became a close friend of the President and his wife, preaching the funeral for their son William in 1862, and officiating at the funeral for Lincoln himself three years later. Many years afterward in a letter, Gurley would vouch for Lincoln's Christianity in no uncertain terms (in spite of the fact that Lincoln was not a member).

The Second Inaugural Address

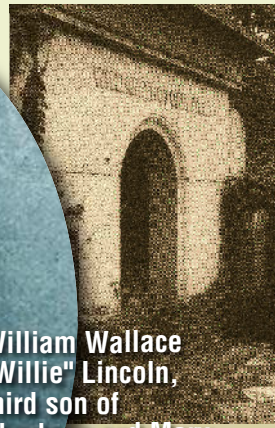
Gurley's sermons helped inspire Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—just six weeks before the President's death. If there were a single document summarizing Lincoln's thoughts about God at the end of his life, this would be it.

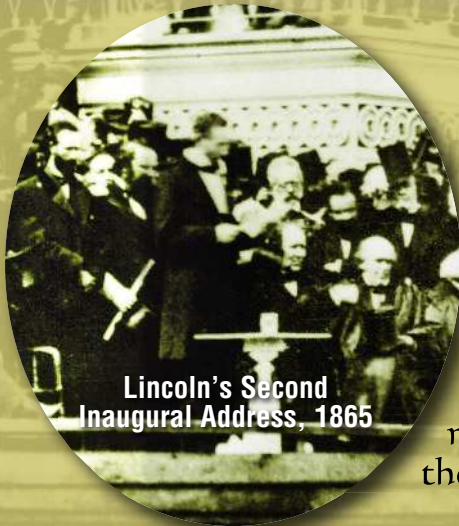
The Second Inaugural Address should silence those

"When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ."



William Wallace "Willie" Lincoln, third son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. He died of an illness at the age of 11.





Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, 1865

The Second Inaugural Address should silence those who claim that Lincoln remained a lifelong skeptic... mentioning God 14 times in the speech.

who claim that Lincoln remained a lifelong skeptic, or that the Civil War was a mere dispute over state's rights. In this speech Lincoln goes beyond politics, attributing the events of the previous four years to the acts of God in the world, mentioning him 14 times in the speech.

Further, Lincoln unequivocally casts the war as a battle to end slavery—to free one eighth of the U.S. population. He denounces the religious institutionalism that conscripts the Bible and prayer as weapons for its own use.

He argues against the idea of a tribal god who supports one party or polity over another. "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged."

Lincoln does not blame the South for slavery, rather he reminds his audience that slavery was a shameful part of American culture from the

beginning. He characterizes the war as a natural consequence of slavery—or rather the judgment of God on the nation as a whole. Finally he calls for a new era of forgiveness and reconciliation, "with malice toward none with charity toward all" in the wake of the war.

Students of theology may see more than a few glimpses of the Calvinist doctrines of Predestination and Necessity woven through Lincoln's message. As his wife once commented: "Mr. Lincoln's maxim and philosophy were: 'What is to be, will be, and no prayers of ours can arrest the decree.'" But Lincoln's theology and his specific view of the nature of God are somewhat beside the point. His Second Inaugural Address clearly shows him to be a believer.

Yet Abraham Lincoln never joined any church or denomination. Why? Perhaps his Universalist leanings clashed with the hell-fire condemnation and exclusivism preached from many pulpits. Or perhaps he wanted to avoid the my-way-or-the-highway dogmatism that characterizes so many churches and denominations. Lincoln, from

Whatever teachers Lincoln read or listened to, whichever churches he attended, he never checked his brains or his capacity for critical thought at the door...

all accounts a tolerant and forgiving man, had little tolerance for this kind of intolerance. He never stopped learning and growing in his spiritual understanding.

Had he lived, we don't know where Lincoln's thoughts and studies would have taken him, just as we don't know precisely what he believed when he was alive. But Jesus told us "by their fruits you shall know them." Maybe we shouldn't focus so much on Lincoln's spiritual journey—since apart from Christ all of our journeys are filled with dead-ends, detours and disasters. Maybe we should focus on his enduring accomplishments—and by Lincoln's own admission, they were not his accomplishments, but those of God working through him!

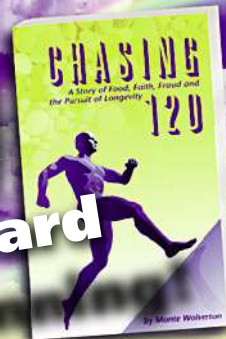
Whatever teachers Lincoln read or listened to, whichever churches he attended, he never checked his brains or his capacity for critical thought at the door. As the instrument of God who fought to free American slaves from tyranny, Lincoln maintained his personal freedom from religious tyranny. What kind of person did God choose to lead the great battle to bring freedom to all Americans? He chose a person who was free—one who was not enslaved by religious institutionalism—one who was genuinely free in Christ. □

Syndicated cartoon artist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth and CWR magazines, Monte Wolverton lives in Washington state.

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MORE POINTS TO PONDER:

1. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus consistently defied the attempts of religious professionals to shoehorn him into their religious practices and beliefs. Jesus was a Jew, and he faithfully observed the old covenant law. Why didn't he just agree to all standards and definitions the religious professionals attempted to impose on him?

What does a Christ-follower "look like" in your opinion?

2. Isn't one of the issues we should consider the very definition of the word "religion"? In its broadest sense, most think of **religion as a system of beliefs that offers a relationship with God, or at the very least an improved and enhanced relationship with God, on the basis of human deeds, work and performance. Even the secular use of the word "religion" speaks of something habitually done, over and over again, repetitiously, without thinking.**

3. However, Christianity is not, as originally and classically taught and proclaimed a religion. **Authentic Christianity is a relationship and way of life, given by God's grace, wherein Christ-followers live a new life, the life of Jesus, as the risen life of Jesus Christ lives within them.**

4. Is there such a thing as an ir-religious Christian?

5. Can a "none" be a Christian, while refusing to give allegiance to membership policies, initiation rites, rituals and ceremonies prescribed and ordered by a religious entity?

6. How does one become and remain a Christ-follower?

7. When the topic of "nones" is introduced, why do you feel many within organized/big business Christendom claim that the "nones" who do not attend a brick-and-mortar church are a proof that the sky is falling and that Jesus' Second Coming must be near? Do such individuals have any vested interests for making such claims?

8. Why are so many people now identifying themselves as religious "nones"?

9. Is removing oneself from what might be an authoritarian or even abusive church *de facto* proof that one is a Christian?

Chasing 120—A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity

Perpetually grinning, fast-talking Texas adman-turned- preacher Dr. Tyler Belknap promises health and longevity to a cult following via his nationally televised daily infomercial programs. The meteoric success of Belknap's Wellness 120 empire is fueled by "the pursuit of longevity," touted by Belknap as a biblically-based promise of 120 healthy years for those who follow his regimen and purchase his nutritional products.

The dark side of Wellness 120 is that many of Belknap's supplements are laced with exotic substances and genetically modified plants developed in his high-tech secret research lab. Wellness 120 creative director Dave Whitman and his wife Marcia suddenly find themselves in the center of a huge crisis when their robustly healthy teenage son suffers brain damage from one of Belknap's psychoactive, genetically modified food products. The Whitmans must come to grips with the fact that the charismatic leader they once admired is a crook and charlatan whose empire has been built on false promises and religious fraud.

Chasing 120, written by author, artist and syndicated cartoonist Monte Wolverton, reflecting many of his life experiences, is an easy, entertaining read, filled with intrigue and authenticity—a story that speaks to the shattered dreams of so many who have experienced their house of pseudo-religious cards falling around them.

**Available at
www.ptm.org/120
and Amazon.com**