

THANKSGIVING, AND THE RELIGIOUS AWAKENING OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Thanksgiving is one of the “high holidays” of America’s civic life. While proclamations of national days of thanksgiving went back to George Washington, the holiday didn’t become an official feature of the American calendar until, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared the holiday would fall on “the last Thursday of November.”

But most people don’t realize that Lincoln actually issued *two* Thanksgiving proclamations, one in 1863, and the other in 1864, and that in a very real sense, the proclamation of the new holiday represented a spiritual development and catharsis in the life of Lincoln himself.

While Thanksgiving has always been imbued with an implicit acknowledgement of the Divine, what made its birth during the Civil War particularly poignant was Lincoln’s emphasis on national repentance. For most of his life, Lincoln’s religious beliefs went from a tacit materialism in his youth, to a vigorous theism in his adulthood. He was never a member of a church, and because of this, his political opponents frequently tried to paint him as irreligious. Lincoln himself vigorously denied this, and his speeches throughout his life are replete with biblical allusions, and references to God.

Lincoln was likely not a committed Christian when he was elected President of the United States. Before he was inaugurated, much of the South had already seceded, and it was very clear that a national crisis unlike anything previous was at hand. Lincoln openly called on the nation to ask for God’s assistance, but his focus in the war remained focused on one thing: maintain the Union, at all costs.

But what Lincoln, and many others, initially believed would last for only a few months ended up going on for years. Hundreds of thousands were dying, either from disease or violence. Virtually every family in America was affected. The burden on Lincoln was immense, as he, like everyone else, attempted to come to grips with the magnitude of the crisis. While the undoubted cause of the war was the sectional disagreements on slavery, and despite the fact that he himself vociferously opposed slavery itself, Lincoln began the war focused entirely on maintaining the Union. But he came to believe that something much more was at stake: human dignity itself. While elected President on a platform that insisted slavery should not be allowed to spread any further, Lincoln consistently avowed that he would not touch it in the states in which it already existed. The barbarity of the Civil War convinced him, however, that the ultimate issue in the war was slavery itself, for which God was exacting an atonement on the United States, His “almost chosen people,”¹ for its sinful complicity.

To understand Lincoln’s evolving attitude toward the role of Divine Providence in the Civil War, we must first take a look at a private meditation he wrote in early September 1862, called *Meditation on the Divine Will*. Written shortly after the Second Battle of Bull Run, where the

¹Abraham Lincoln, *Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, NJ* (February 21, 1861); Abraham Lincoln, Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 209.

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Union was decisively defeated by the Confederates under the command of General Robert E. Lee, Lincoln wrote as follows:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.²

September 1862 would go on to witness another significant battle, the Battle of Antietam, at which the Confederates were defeated. Lincoln's growing sense of Divine Providence no doubt fueled his next step, when in November 1862, he ordered that the Sabbath be observed by all Union soldiers, in which he quoted the words of his hero, George Washington, as inspiration and precedent:

The President, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, desires and enjoins the orderly observance of the Sabbath by the officers and men in the military and naval service. The importance for man and beast of the prescribed weekly rest, the sacred rights of Christian soldiers and sailors, and becoming deference to the best sentiment of a Christian people, and a due regard for the Divine Will, demand that Sunday labor in the Army and Navy be reduced to the measure of strict necessity. The discipline and character of the national forces should not suffer, nor the cause they defend be imperiled, by the profanation of the day or name of the Most High. "At this time of public distress"—adopting the words of Washington in 1776—"men may find enough to do in the service of God and their country without abandoning themselves to vice and immorality." The first General Order issued by the Father of his Country after the Declaration of Independence, indicates the spirit in which our institutions were founded and should ever be defended: "*The General hopes and trusts that every officer and man will endeavor to live and act as becomes a Christian soldier defending the dearest rights and liberties of his country.*"³

Six weeks later, on January 1, 1863, Lincoln would issue his famous Emancipation Proclamation, in which he freed the slaves in military zones of action. A few months later, on April 15, two years to the day before he was assassinated, he wrote another private document, his *Resolution on Slavery*:

²Abraham Lincoln, *Meditation on the Divine Will* (c. early September, 1862); Id. 359.

³Abraham Lincoln, *Order for Sabbath Observance* (November 15, 1862); Id. 382-83.

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Whereas, while *heretofore*, States, and Nations have tolerated slavery, *recently*, for the first in the world, an attempt has been made to construct a new Nation [the Confederacy], upon the basis of, and with the primary, and fundamental object to maintain, enlarge, and perpetuate human slavery, therefore, Resolved, That no such embryo State should ever be recognized, or admitted into, the family of Christian and civilized nations; and that all Christian and civilized men everywhere should, by all lawful means, resist to the utmost, such recognition or admission.⁴

Clearly, Lincoln's sense of the Civil War was becoming more and more imbued with a Divine impulse. He knew that as important as the Union was, the ultimate issue at stake was far more so. That issue was slavery.

Within this context came Lincoln's first Thanksgiving Proclamation in October 1863, where Lincoln exhibits the stirrings of a Presidential mind drawn to the truths of theology in the midst of the greatest storm of his, and the nation's life. In its first paragraph, Lincoln emphasized the importance of thankfulness to God:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

He continued:

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Lincoln went on to enumerate various economic blessings the nation had enjoyed, even in the midst of the maelstrom. His conclusion echoes his 1862 *Meditation*:

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

⁴Abraham Lincoln, *Resolution on Slavery* (April 15, 1863); Id. 444-45.

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This appears to be the very first time that Lincoln ascribes the Civil War to the nation's sins, which many would have understood to be a reference to slavery. Few Americans would have wholeheartedly endorsed, let alone appreciated Lincoln's words at the time. Their family members were dying. They wanted the war over, not to be reminded that it was going on because of the nation's own sins. Lincoln went on to prescribe what would become that preeminently American holiday:

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.⁵

It is scarcely conceivable that a modern politician, let alone in the midst of a monumental national crisis, would ever refer to “our national perverseness and disobedience.” And yet that is precisely what Lincoln did. Alongside gratitude and thanksgiving, he called for humility and repentance. For Lincoln, Thanksgiving was always intended as a day of national self-reflection—on both the blessings, and the curses, of life; on both the things we enjoy, as well as the things we desperately need to get out of our lives. One gets the sense that the paradox of a man celebrating while in sackcloth and ashes would have been a decent approximation of what Lincoln was shooting for.

Lincoln's second Thanksgiving Proclamation ran very similarly. Written just weeks before the 1864 election, an election Lincoln believed he would lose, Lincoln wrote:

It has pleased Almighty God to prolong our national life another year, defending us with His guardian care against unfriendly designs from abroad and vouchsafing to us in His mercy many and signal victories over the enemy, who is of our own household. It has also pleased our Heavenly Father to favor as well our citizens in their homes as our soldiers in their camps and our sailors on the rivers and seas with unusual health. He has largely augmented our free population by emancipation and by immigration, while He has opened to us new sources of wealth and has crowned the labor of our workingmen in every department of industry with abundant rewards. Moreover, He has been pleased to animate and inspire our minds and

⁵[Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving Proclamation \(October 3, 1863\).](#)

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hearts with fortitude, courage, and resolution sufficient for the great trial of civil war into which we have been brought by our adherence as a nation to the cause of freedom and humanity, and to afford to us reasonable hopes of an ultimate and happy deliverance from all our dangers and afflictions...

But as much gratitude as Lincoln expressed, the proclamation again went on to advocate an attitude of humble penitence before God, the dispenser of both blessings and curses, which the then Civil War was only too aptly demonstrating:

Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do hereby appoint and set apart the last Thursday in November next as a day which I desire to be observed by all my fellow-citizens, wherever they may then be, as a day of thanksgiving and praise to Almighty God, the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe. And I do further recommend to my fellow-citizens aforesaid that on that occasion they do reverently humble themselves in the dust and from thence offer up 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 which it has pleased Him to assign as a dwelling place for ourselves and for our posterity throughout all generations.⁶

While more optimistic than his first proclamation, Lincoln once again called for Americans to “reverently humble themselves in the dust,” the proper position for offering “penitent and fervent prays and supplications to the Great Disposer of Events,” both phrases pregnant with biblical overtones and cadence. Again, we must consider: is it even possible to imagine a modern American politician making a similar call to the American people today, let alone in the midst of a great national crisis? The asking of the question virtually answers it.

But this was not new for Lincoln, for earlier in the year, on July 7, 1864, he had issued a proclamation “Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer.” The practice was an ancient one, rooted in the Hebrew Bible, as was abundantly obvious to President George Washington and the founding generation when he issued his own Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1789, [which I have written about elsewhere](#). In this proclamation, Lincoln was even more blunt, calling on the American people:

[T]o confess and to repent of their manifold sins; to implore the compassion and forgiveness of the Almighty, that, if consistent with His will, the existing rebellion may be speedily suppressed and the supremacy of the Constitution and laws of the United States may be established throughout all the States; to implore Him, as the Supreme Ruler of the World, not to destroy us as a people, nor suffer us to be destroyed by the hostility or connivance of other nations or by obstinate adherence to our own counsels, which may be in conflict with His eternal purposes, and to implore Him to enlighten the mind of the nation to know and do His will, humbly

⁶[Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving Proclamation \(October 20, 1864\)](#).

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believing that it is in accordance with His will that our place should be maintained as a united people among the family of nations; to implore Him to grant to our armed defenders and the masses of the people that courage, power of resistance, and endurance necessary to secure that result; to implore Him in His infinite goodness to soften the hearts, enlighten the minds. and quicken the consciences of those in rebellion, that they may lay down their arms and speedily return to their allegiance to the United States, that they may not be utterly destroyed, that the effusion of blood may be stayed, and that unity and fraternity may be restored and peace established throughout all our borders...⁷

One month before his final Thanksgiving Proclamation, Lincoln was presented with a Bible from the “Loyal Colored People of Baltimore,” a gift of thanks for his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and other acts on behalf of the black citizens of the country, who were finally beginning to taste the freedom which had always been rightfully theirs. Given his lifelong lack of affiliation with any particular church, as well as his youthful skepticism, his response to that gift is telling:

In regard to this Great Book [the Bible], I have but to say it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man’s welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it. To you I return my most sincere thanks for the very elegant copy of the great Book of God which you present.⁸

A few weeks after his second Thanksgiving Proclamation, when responding to a Southern women requesting the release of her husband, a prisoner of war, on the grounds that he was religious, Lincoln responded curtly:

At each of the interviews [to release their husbands who were prisoners of war] one of the ladies urged that her husband was a religious man. On Saturday, the President ordered the release of the prisoners, and then said to this lady “You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him that I say that I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread on the sweat of *other*]men’s faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven!”⁹

For Lincoln, a decisive change had occurred, a change which was exhibited in his establishment of the Thanksgiving holiday, and all his conduct in the latter years of the war. God was at work,

⁷[Abraham Lincoln, *Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer* \(July 7, 1864\).](#)

⁸Abraham Lincoln, *Response to Presentation of a Bible by the Loyal Colored People of Baltimore* (September 7, 1864); Abraham Lincoln, Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 628.

⁹Abraham Lincoln, *Reply to a Southern Woman* (December 6, 1864); Id. 663.

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but neither strictly for the Union or the Confederates, he believed. He was at work to destroy slavery, and in the process, exact an atonement from the American nation that had tolerated it. In this sense, God had no “side.” For Lincoln, no attitude so captured this reality as both profound gratitude for the continued survival of the country, as well as deferential humility given what it had yet to endure, and the reasons underlying its perilous position. It all culminated with his second Inaugural address, which remains, to this day, arguably the most profound and insightful theological disquisition of any American President:

Both [Union and Confederate] 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. [Matt. 7:1] The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!’ [Matt. 18:7; Luke 17:1] If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’ [Ps. 19:9] With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.¹⁰

Even in saying this, Lincoln knew he was pressing buttons, as he made clear in a letter to one of his longtime political operatives, Thurlow Weed:

Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told [in his Second Inaugural]; and as whatever humiliation there is in it falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.¹¹

¹⁰Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address* (March 4, 1865); Id. 687.

¹¹Abraham Lincoln to Thurlow Weed (March 15, 1865); Id. 689.

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To fully reflect on all of this would require a great deal of ink and parchment. Suffice it to say that, as an American, this remarkable background of the Thanksgiving holiday induces my reverence and gratitude for those ancestors who fought, bled, and ultimately secured my freedom, and the freedom of so many others, so that we might take it for granted in this country that slavery is evil, and unacceptable. In that fight, they were up against an institution that had survived in one form or another for thousands of years, in every nation on earth. But they determined to finally accept the chastisement of the Almighty, and extinguish it. I didn't pay the cost for that, and neither did you. It was paid for us by ancestors who had to grapple with what remains, to this day, not only America's most lethal war, but a war that was more lethal than all of its other wars *combined*. We are its beneficiaries. We take many good things for granted precisely because they were secured by those who could not. For that, as for so many other things, I am, on this Thanksgiving, filled with gratitude and humility, just as Abraham Lincoln hoped we would be.

“I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.” (Psalm 77:11-12)