

Address by Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr. to the
Civil War Round Table.



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CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

(Mr. TUCK (at the request of Mr. EDMONDSON) was given permission to extend his remarks at this point in the Record and to include extraneous matter.)

Mr. TUCK. Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday night, April 18, I had the privilege of attending the gold-medal dinner given annually by the Civil War Round Table of the District of Columbia at the National Press Building. The dinner was well attended and the program was quite interesting indeed. The distinguished senior Senator from North Carolina, the Honorable SAMUEL J. ERVIN, JR., was the gold-medal dinner speaker, and he delivered a very able address dealing with the religious phase of the life of President Lincoln, which I am sure constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of this period of our history. I ask unanimous consent that I may extend my remarks at this point in the Record so as to include this excellent presentation by the distinguished Senator from North Carolina in Mr. ERVIN.

THE RELIGIOUS FAITH OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN
(Address of Senator SAM J. ERVIN, JR., to the Civil War Round Table of the District of Columbia at Washington, on April 18, 1961)

I wish to talk to you about the religious faith of Abraham Lincoln, who was never a member of any church.

The literature which has grown up around Lincoln numbers thousands of volumes. Anyone who delves in this literature to any substantial extent is deeply impressed by the conflict in the testimony concerning his attitude toward religion.

William H. Herndon, his law partner of many years, asserts that Lincoln "was an infidel, sometimes bordering on atheism." Dr. Lyman Abbott declares that he was an agnostic. Dr. J. G. Holland, who visited Illinois soon after the assassination to collect material for his biography of Lincoln, informs us that residents of Springfield expressed these contradictory opinions in respect to Lincoln: "That he was very religious, but that he was not a Christian; that he was a Christian, but did not know it;" and "that he was so far from being a religious man or a Christian that 'the less said upon the subject the better.'" John Hay and John G. Nicolay, secretaries to Lincoln during his occupancy of the White House, assure us that "he was a man of profound and intense religious feeling." Moreover, a number of rigidly orthodox Christians recount various improbable stories about Lincoln to indicate that he embraced their orthodoxy in all its details.

Many persons of a philosophic turn maintain that every individual is the inevitable product of his heredity and environment.

Lincoln was cautious to a fault. As a consequence, he suffered at times from what has been aptly called "The obstinacy of irresolution." As Dr. William E. Barton says: "When he did not know what to do, he would not do anything."

This cautiousness had its origin in one of Lincoln's chief mental characteristics. He found it extremely difficult to accept as valid any proposition whose truth he could not prove by reasoning. Herndon described the effect of this mental characteristic upon Lincoln's attitude toward religion in these

words: "In order to believe, he must see and feel, and thrust his hand into the place."

Whether this mental characteristic was inherited from ancestors or acquired from environment we do not know. But we can trace with virtual certainty some of the effects of Lincoln's environment upon his attitude toward religion.

Abraham Lincoln spent his boyhood in the backwoods of Kentucky and Indiana. During this period, he received less than 12 months of schooling in the aggregate over a space of 9 years; read and reread the "Bible," "Pilgrim's Progress," "Aesop's Fables," "Robinson Crusoe," Weems' "Life of Washington," and "Franklin's Autobiography"; assisted his poverty stricken father in farming; and attended his family's Calvinistic Baptist Church, where he heard somewhat unlettered ministers preach many long sermons on predestination and eternal damnation.

This preaching left two indelible imprints on Lincoln's mind, one a belief in predestination and the other a disbelief in eternal punishment. The strength of his belief in predestination caused Herndon to assert that "in philosophy Lincoln was a fatalist."

Lincoln's disbelief in eternal punishment constituted a reaction to the hell-fire sermons he heard in his youth and was based on his conviction that punishment was "intended for the good of the offender" and "must cease when justice is satisfied." He often manifested his disbelief in endless punishment by quoting this paraphrase of Martin Elginbrod's famous epitaph:

"Here lies poor Johnny Kongapod;
Have mercy on him, Gracious God,
As he would do if he was God,
And you were Johnny Kongapod."

Abraham Lincoln spent his young manhood at New Salem, Ill., a long since vanished village which stood beside the Sangamon River about 15 miles from Springfield.

During this period, he engaged in merchandising and surveying; won election to the Illinois Legislature and to the captaincy of a military company which saw noncombatant service in the Black Hawk War; read law, the Bible, Shakespeare, and such supposedly heretical books as Paine's "Age of Reason" and Volney's "Ruins of Time"; expressed very decided and somewhat radical views to his contemporaries on the subject of religion; and formed the habit of attempting to clarify his thoughts by committing them to writing.

Herndon says that Lincoln assimilated Paine's "Age of Reason" and Volney's "Ruins of Time" into his own being. Acting under the influence of their teachings, he allegedly wrote two papers, one defending universal salvation, and the other asserting "that the Bible was not God's revelation" and "that Jesus was not the Son of God." Be that as it may, circumstances indicate that while living in New Salem "he was surrounded by a class of people exceedingly liberal in matters of religion" and became acquainted with all of the arguments advanced against the major tenets of Christianity.

Abraham Lincoln was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1837. He forthwith removed from New Salem to Springfield, where he resided and practiced law until his departure for Washington to be inaugurated as 16th President of the United States. He spent the remainder of his life in Washington.

If we are to understand his attitude toward religion, we must understand the mind of Lincoln and the methods by which he reached conclusions in that area of life.

Lincoln judged most things by his simple sense of justice. He subjected religious dogmas to these additional tests: First his belief in predestination, which he absorbed from the Calvinistic sermons he heard; and, second, his inherent rationalism, which was strengthened by his reading of Paine.

Whether his belief in predestination and his rationalism were consistent Lincoln did not inquire. He was not a theologian, and did not attempt to construct a consistent creed.

His rationalism engendered in his mind the conviction that all things in the universe were governed by absolute and eternal laws. He read books on the natural sciences and became a convert to the theory of evolution.

These things being true, it is not altogether surprising that Lincoln entertained negative doubts and positive disbeliefs concerning the literal truth of some passages of the Bible and some of the generally accepted theological dogmas of the Christian churches.

Note has been taken of his disbelief in eternal punishment, which was repugnant to his simple sense of justice. As a rationalist, he was unable to prove by reasoning the dogma of the supernatural birth of Christ and in consequence doubted, if he did not disbelieve, that dogma. As a believer in an ordered universe governed by absolute and eternal laws, there was no place in his philosophy for accidents or miracles. As an evolutionist, he could not accept as literal truth the biblical story of the creation. He may also have questioned at times the divine revelation of the Scriptures. At least an inference to that effect is justified by his own statement attributing his defeat in his first race for Congress to churchmen who opposed him because he was reputed to be a deist and did not attend church.

During his sojourn in New Salem and his early years in Springfield, Lincoln expressed his doubts and disbeliefs rather freely. As a consequence, many of his contemporaries characterized him as an infidel.

In so doing, they did not imply that he denied the existence of God. They meant that he did not accept the Bible as literally true in its entirety and had doubts and disbeliefs as to certain religious dogmas. This is made plain by Herndon. Although he asserts that Lincoln was an infidel, he assures us that "Lincoln believed in God and immortality as well as heaven—a place."

As he grew older, Lincoln became extremely reticent about matters of religion.

All Americans are familiar with Lincoln's remarkable evolution as a lawyer, orator, writer, and statesman. He underwent an equally remarkable evolution in religion. As Herndon observes, "he gradually rose up, more spiritualistic."

Contrary to the popular impression, Lincoln was a man of few books. Herndon tells us that he read less and thought more than any other prominent person of his day. A few of the books he read impressed him profoundly, and assisted him in concluding that Christianity is essentially a way of life rather than a creed.

One of these books was "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation" by the Scottish author, Robert Chambers, which came to his hands a few years after his removal to Springfield. According to its author, this book constituted "the first attempt to connect the natural sciences with the history of creation." It convinced Lincoln that the theory of evolution was consistent with faith in God and the Bible.

The religious faith of Lincoln was profoundly deepened and ripened by the discipline of sorrow and its consequences.

On February 1, 1850, Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln were bereaved by the death of their second son, Eddie, who was between 3 and 4 years of age. At that time Lincoln was virtually out of the habit of attending church, and Mrs. Lincoln's pastor, the Episcopal minister, was absent from Springfield. Under these circumstances, they asked Dr. James Smith, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, to conduct funeral services for Eddie.

Dr. Smith complied with the request, and a strong bond of mutual respect grew up between him and Lincoln. Lincoln discussed his doubts and disbeliefs with Dr. Smith, and read Dr. Smith's book entitled "The Christian's Defense," which gave the arguments for and against the divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures.

This was one of the books which profoundly influenced Lincoln, who made this statement to his brother-in-law, Ninian W. Edwards: "I have been reading a work of Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity, and have heard him preach and converse on this subject, and am now convinced of the truth of the Christian religion."

As a consequence of these things, Lincoln became a pewholder in the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield. Mrs. Lincoln transferred her membership from the Episcopal Church to that church, and the Lincolns worshipped there with regularity until they took up their residence in the White House. After that time they consistently attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, whose pastor, Dr. Phineas D. Gurley, was a source of much spiritual support to Lincoln during the dark days of the Civil War.

Notwithstanding these events, Lincoln did not seek membership in any church. He simply could not give intellectual assent to all the articles in any orthodox creed. Paradoxical as it may seem, the requirements prescribed by the theology of his day for admission to church membership were stricter than those established by the Good Lord for entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven.

As the result of his spiritual evolution, Lincoln became a deeply religious man. While we cannot say with certainty that his every doubt was satisfied and that his every disbelief was removed, we can affirm these things with assurance: He believed in God. He had faith in the Bible. He accepted the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. He practiced prayer. He revered Christ.

His belief in God as the Creator of the universe and as the Sovereign Ruler of men and nations was attested time and again in his presidential papers and public speeches.

His faith in the Bible was demonstrated in emphatic words used by him during the summer before he was assassinated. On that occasion he gave his longtime friend, Joshua Fry Speed, this advice and assurance concerning the Bible: "Take all of this Book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier man."

His belief in the immortality of the soul was reflected with clarity in his letter which he wrote to his stepbrother, John D. Johnson, while his father, Thomas Lincoln, was dying:

"I sincerely hope father may recover his health, but, tell him to remember to call upon and confide in our great and good and merciful Maker, who will not turn away from him in any extremity. He notes the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our head, and He will not forget the dying man who puts his trust in Him. Say to him that . . . if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before, and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to join them."

The testimony concerning his disposition of mind toward prayer before his elevation to the Presidency is somewhat scant. After that event, however, he resorted to prayer with increasing frequency. He explained this practice by saying that many times he was forced to his knees, "not knowing where else to go."

His reverence for Christ was well illustrated by two statements made by him near the end of his life.

In accepting the gift of a Bible from a committee representing the Negroes of Baltimore, he said:

"In regard to this great Book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this Book."

In answering a question of Congressman Henry C. Deming as to why he had never united with a church, he said:

"I have never united myself to any church, because 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. When any church will inscribe over its altars, as its sole qualification for membership, the Saviour's condensed statement of the substance of both law and gospel: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church I will join with all my heart and all my soul."

When all is said, his secretary, John G. Nicolay, was not in error in his declaration that Lincoln "had faith in the eternal justice and boundless mercy of Providence, and made the Golden Rule of Christ his practical creed."

End.