

Christianity in America
The Gettysburg Address
“The Gettysburg Address and Abraham Lincoln”
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July 4, 2021 • Evening Sermon

The Gettysburg Address:

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, **conceived in Liberty**, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met here on a great battle field of that war. We are now have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place of for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

*But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they have, thus far, so nobly carried on. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to the that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a **new birth** of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

It has been my privilege over the years to not only serve the Lord as a pastor but the Lord has allowed me to do some work in the area of history and study. The Gettysburg Address in particular has fascinated me throughout the years. I don't even remember how many books I have read on it as I have examined it. I encourage you to take the time to work through it because you will see some very clear patterns that had developed within it. You can almost hear the echoes of not only Biblical texts, but Biblical and theological terms that work around redemption, the delivering power and the grace of the Lord Jesus to set free those who are under the bondage of sin that they might come to life. The Lord brings from all the nations those whom He has set free into one holy nation that belongs to Him. You can also hear the echoes of the Apostles' Creed especially at the beginning when it says 'conceived in Liberty.' Here is a death where men sacrificed that others may be set free. Men sacrificed that others may not live and such a death does not need to be consecrated for it's consecrated by its very purpose.

Clearly, what is done there for national, political and social issues draws from the great redemptive stories does not equal it but it does draw upon it. The glorious Gospel has worked itself into our culture on many occasions and crisis and this was one of them. Not only does he talk of the last full measure of the anticipation of how they gave everything in suffering that others might live and be set free, the echoes point to something much greater, where our Lord gives of His all at the cross as He drinks the cup of God's wrath that was due to sinners, to set us free that we might live unto Him. Even notice the notion of 'born again' that this nation thus

conceived might now receive a 'new birth' and its great aspirations of all men created equal and free would be realized afresh and anew because of what happens on places like these battle fields.

Then Lincoln puts in what he felt were the two great principles – a nation under God and a nation that had a government that was of the people, by the people and for the people. It is a government that arises by the people by common consent, thus a constitutional republic. This is not only a government that exist by covenant the people have with one another, but a government that is not God yet is under God. He very carefully chose that phrase for he didn't with God, of God or for God but under God. Many people have discussed this, saying was 'under God' an afterthought or an aforethought? I have done the research and I am absolutely convinced that it was not an afterthought yet early on in my history I had learned that it was something he put in extemporaneously. But I don't believe that for a number of reasons, because of the two extant copies of the Gettysburg Address we have, how they were given and what Lincoln himself said about them. One of them was by the great orator, Edward Everett who spoke before Lincoln for over two hours and then Lincoln comes up and speaks for two minutes and 38 seconds. There was just utter silence when he finished. Lincoln sat down beside Everett and said 'I think perhaps it was poorly constructed and delivered.' Everett says 'Not so, for I've heard nothing greater, we are stunned' and that's why later he would ask for a copy of it.

It has carried on and I'm not sure it's taught in civic classes any longer but in my civics class we had to memorize this. We were required to work our way through in the context of a public education at that time. Under God was just an astounding statement but there something even more astounding and that was that this was written by his own hand. The 16th President of the US, Abraham Lincoln, wrote this with his own hand with all this theology written in, with all these Biblical terms with the reflections of the Apostles' Creed with the penetration and thoughts from what was known as the Book of Common Prayers and this is the same man who decades before becoming President had debated and actually was a great adversary of one of the evangelists of the second great awakening whose name was Peter Cartwright. They were political and theological foes.

In fact, Lincoln had written a small piece of work where he questioned as a skeptic the authority, reliability and inerrancy of the four Gospels. Lincoln never denied the faith but he did take an adversarial role. I think a lot of it was personal animosity that went back and forth between him and Cartwright who Lincoln felt manipulated people instead of speaking to people. Lincoln felt that a true religion, while having emotional impact was not to be based on the emotion, but upon the rational grasp of truth. He was willing to be convinced that truth has a supernatural and supra dynamic to it, but it ought not to be irrational so Lincoln entered into that debate with Cartwright and others. It's amazing how God in His amazing grace tracks us down.

In 1850, in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln's beloved son Eddie takes ill and is in the throws of a severe illness for 52 days. As his son is going through this illness, Lincoln begins to go into despair. Finally, Eddie dies and the two pastors Lincoln calls upon – one at the Methodist church, the other the Episcopal church – were not available. So, he goes to Dr. James Smith. He is what we used to call back then, an old school, Calvinistic Presbyterian preacher. He was the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Springfield. He and Lincoln began to deal eye to eye with the matters of eternity, the matters of salvation and the matters of grace. Smith spoke pointedly with President Lincoln and his wife. Lincoln's mother's background was presbyterian so he gave him the audience and then they began to meet regularly after that. Interestingly, Dr. James Smith was one of the top scholars and authors who as an apologist defends the inerrancy of

God's Word. He published three books. He gave them to Lincoln and they would spend many hours discussing them. Lincoln's family eventually joins the church and he rented a pew which is what you could do back then. Even though he had rented a family pew he still had not joined although he would regularly attend and meet with Dr. Smith who would share the Gospel with him and challenge him regularly.

Lincoln is elected President. Ten years later in 1860 Lincoln is on his way to the inauguration. Lincoln says to Dr. Smith 'I'd like to continue, is there someone of your capabilities and convictions. I want someone who will preach the Word of God, not who will speak of politics to me.' Dr. Smith said 'Yes, I know just the man' and this was another old school presbyterian preacher. His name was Phineas Gurley. On a personal note, I actually pastored Gurley's great, great granddaughter in Charlotte, North Carolina. Gurley was the pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. that had been the result of two other churches coming together in 1859. Today it is known as Lincoln Chapel and it can be visited even today. Lincoln was offered a pew at First Presbyterian Church which other presidents and elected officials would attend and be apart of but Lincoln said 'no, I wish to go as my pastor in Springfield has directed me.' So, Lincoln began a relationship with Dr. Gurley who was quite the preacher and Lincoln began to meet regularly with him also on a regular basis.

President Lincoln as some presidents before him did, would open up the doors of the White House to people to have access because he felt it was the people's house. Because of that people would come and meet with him. Later, a Christian lady from New York state came and met with him and she happen to be of a Quaker decent so she was a passivist. Realizing that the US was at war she wanted to meet with Lincoln and she said to him 'As you know I do not affirm war but I realize we are in one and I simply wish to come meet with you and pray with you if you would allow me.' Lincoln said yes and the ten-minute visit stretched onto an hour. When she left he turned to one of his assistant secretaries and said to them 'whenever this woman comes she must have immediate access to me for I have met a Christian in whom there is no guile.' She would be a regular visitor to pray with him throughout these early months throughout the war.

Then there came another tragedy. Another one of Lincoln's son took to cholera due to the terrible water supply in Washington. He went into a lengthy illness. There was an African America servant who cared for him and nursed him 24 hours a day and wouldn't leave his side. President Lincoln usually would come in every night as he would sit with his precious Willy and would usually dose off. Lincoln would talk with this African American servant who knew Christ and would share the Gospel with Lincoln as she would also tell him of Willie's commitment to Christ and that Willie was ready to meet the Lord, which he did. Dr. Gurley, now Lincoln's pastor, then comforted the family and did the funeral service of his son in which it was noted by all the pensive look upon Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's countenance changed for there was something about him even though he didn't lose his wit, there was something of sobriety that these events, conversations and the horrors of war was actually bringing into his life.

Lincoln then began, unknown to many people, a series of reflections. Today they are known as Meditations Upon the Diving Will and it is accessible to the public. I want to share with you his conclusion. Interestingly, on the other side of this war was a man named Robert E. Lee who wrote the same conclusion in one of his journals. This is the conclusion; 'The arrogance of our nation and the presence of chattel slavery has brought us under the wrath of God, it remains to be seen – is this the wrath of God to discipline us for that which is ahead or to dismiss us because of our great sins. We will know at the end of this conflict.'

This was written in 1862 and Lincoln's thoughts were going very deep in this conclusion. Then comes the Battle of Antidam and the Battle of Gettysburg. Then there is the setting aside in November what is now the National Cemetery in Gettysburg. Abraham Lincoln had not been invited to speak. He actually invited himself and the commission in charge of it wanted to poll the states on whether he could speak. They gave him permission for a brief word of soberness. So, Lincoln did what he was asked to do and thus we have the Gettysburg Address.

That's not all that happens in his life. Under Dr. Gurley Lincoln becomes convinced of his sins. Dr. Gurley becomes a mentor of his. To this day you can go to New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and see the pew where Lincoln and his wife, Mary Todd would sit on the Lord's Day morning. Lincoln also attended on Sunday nights. I want to repeat that the President of the United States, in a war, regularly attended Sunday night services. When he attended on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights he didn't sit in his designated pew because it would draw attention and he didn't want to do that. He was regularly accommodated on Sunday mornings but he didn't want to cause any disturbances but there was a sofa that sits in the Lincoln chapel today but it was in near the anti-room where the pastor would go up to the pulpit. That is where he would sit during Sunday evening sermons and after Dr. Gurley had preached, he would come over to Lincoln. Gurley said they would constantly talk about how to handle the freeing of the slaves, the amendments and policies that would readmit the southern states, what to do about education. Lincoln would want to know from Gurley the Biblical principles, not political ones, on all these matters they discussed.

The number one subject Lincoln wanted to talk about according to Dr. Gurley's journal was the state of the soul after death. He knew the ultimate state, the final state, the new body for the new heavens and the new earth, but Lincoln loved to talk with him about the intermediate state – the soul that is with the Lord in the paradise of blessing. Lincoln wanted to know what it would be like in the intermediate state and their conversations would be at length on this. Dr. Gurley would later say that it was almost as if the Lord was preparing him.

President Lincoln committed his life to Christ and arranged with Dr. Gurley to join the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1865 but Lincoln did not want to do it until after the inauguration. Back then, the inauguration was at the end of March, first of April. There was the inauguration in March of 1865 and then of course, in the first week of April President Lincoln was assassinated. Dr. Gurley did not get to do what President Lincoln had asked him to do which was to baptize him after he had joined the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, but Gurley did do his funeral and actually had the last words in his ear as he prayed with him before he took his last breath after the assassination at the Ford Theater as he had been taken across the street being placed upon a bed. It was after that, that the secretary of war said 'he now belongs to the ages.' Dr. Gurley would later write, 'he now is with the Lord.' Absent from the body, present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8).

I'd like to close this time by sharing with you a couple of thoughts. One, notice how God uses in His providence events and people, I say this reverently, for the blood hound of heaven, the Holy Spirit to track us down and bring us to saving faith in Christ. God used a couple of preachers, the providential deaths of two sons that were brought to heaven in an untimely way for a family but for the perfect timing of the Lord and He does so in such a way that when the man gets saved his life gets changed. Up until now no President has used the personally revealed name of God in their speeches. They would always use terms like Author of our religion or Creator or Transcendent One, for it was considered the politically correct language of that day, but not Lincoln.

There is only one speech that Lincoln gave that he did not use 'God' in the speech and that was his first inaugural address. If you go read his speeches in the Meditations Upon the Divine Will, you will see his constant referencing of God. Perhaps one of his greatest speeches was a six minute inaugural speech that he made upon the second inauguration. Here is the last paragraph;

"With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in. Let us 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 lasting peace among ourselves, with the world and with all nations."

Time and time again Lincoln gave profound speeches and except for the first inaugural address, in which I don't believe he was yet converted, all reference in a personally and theologically accurate yet intimate way the God who had so impacted him. You may not know that a later preacher at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church was a man named Peter Marshall. There was a movie about Marshall's pastorate at that church and the title of the movie is A Man Called Peter. It was in the context of the 1950s that on a Sunday night there was a special service to commemorate the celebration of President Lincoln's birthday, a member of that church in absentia. Lincoln's birthday was in February and someone made a speech during that celebration in much more detail than I have done here about his life and conversion.

When they finished that night they made several points. One was that Lincoln put in 'under God' because he believed no nation should allow itself to take the place of God. You're not God, you're not even with God, you are under God – this nation must always see itself under God. Secondly, they acknowledge that Lincoln's desire was what he declared in 1863 that the fourth Thursday in November would be a day of thanksgiving in accordance of the desires of our first President, George Washington. Lincoln was obviously a student of Washington for the third thing mentioned is that Lincoln believed that Washington's desire was that the country would adopt a motto 'In God We Trust' would yet be done and placed upon all of our coinage – that we would not trust in money but God alone.

Sitting out there on a Sunday night service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, hearing that testimony and those three things that were shared, was a senator and congressman. After hearing this they went back under the leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would come to Christ and be baptized at First Presbyterian Church of Gettysburg (Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, currently), just blocks from where this speech was given decades earlier. Under Dwight D. Eisenhower, they would take what was a humanist pledge of allegiance and change it by inserting 'under God' and that was by law (put into law) from that testimony on that night.

Interestingly, in the pledge of allegiance there seems to be a pause when it said and the pause comes after this line; "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation...(here's where the pause is) *under God...*" There is no comma after 'one nation' for it is to be said 'one nation under God' and the pause seems to come because for years it had been done without 'under God' so 'under God' had been inserted later. So, the pause wasn't due to being grammatical but because it later was inserted there. People are still getting used to that and we still seem to pause there to this day. Then 'In God We Trust' was put on our money by legislation and then Thanksgiving was made a national holiday for us by legislation also.

So why am I telling you all this? I don't care if you're a president, a mechanic, a plumber, lawyer, homemaker or whatever you are, when consistent Christians live for Christ what you do echoes, not only into eternity but into the coming years. What God did in Lincoln's life not only saved him, not only set a standard for a nation in a time of crisis, but kept blessing us even to this day. When God works in His people, there are no small people. God does great things and draws straight lines with crooked sticks and He does so in such a way that He alone gets the glory. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to enjoy celebrating the freedoms we have in this country and of fellowship in the body of Christ. We pray that Christ would be exalted. I pray that everyone reading this might not only give You thanks for what You have done in this nation, not only would encourage those who have served to protect this nation, but most of all would know the God of glory. While we are grateful for social, political freedoms that we have in this nation, we look to, enjoy and invite all to the greatest freedom of all – that when you come to Christ, He will save you from the penalty, power, increasingly from the practice and one day when He comes from the presence of sin. Praise be to God, glory and grace, in Jesus' Name, Amen.