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### Abraham Lincoln's Religion

MADISON C. PETERS

*Author of "Justice to the Jew," etc., etc.*



BOSTON

RICHARD G. BADGER

The Gorham Press

1909

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## LINCOLN THE MAN

*Thou, too, sail on O Ship of State!  
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!  
Humanity with all its fears,  
With all its hopes of future years,  
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!*

*We know what Master laid thy keel,  
What Workman wrought thy ribs of steel,  
Who made each mast and sail and rope,  
What anvils rang, what hammers beat,  
In what a forge and what a heat  
Were shaped the anchors of thy hope!*

*Fear not each sudden sound and shock:  
'Tis the wave, and not the rock,  
'Tis but the flapping of the sail,  
And not a rent made by the gale!*

*In spite of rock and tempest's roar,  
In spite of false lights on the shore,  
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!  
Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,  
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,  
Our faith triumphant o'er our fears,  
Are all with thee—are all with thee!*

*Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

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## I

[Pg 1]

## LINCOLN THE MAN

The name of Abraham Lincoln is imperishable, immortal; can never fade from the pages of history or grow dim with the lapse of time.

Had this lowly born Kentucky boy been ushered into the world centuries ago in England, doubtless he would have become the father of a royal family, the founder of a kingly dynasty, the pioneer of a courtly line whose proudest boast would be to acclaim him their progenitor.

Fortunately he belongs to modern time and sprang from the loins of a democratic race in a young and democratic country, around whose virgin brow he twined the garlands of a never-fading luster.

His fame is America's, but his glory belongs to the world, and humanity is proud to honor him as one of the noblest among the sons of men. [Pg 2]

He founded no royal house to perpetuate his name on its escutcheon, yet no Caliph or Conqueror, no Emperor or Excellency, no Master or Monarch, no Prince or Potentate, no Prelate or Pontiff, no Saladin or Sultan has left behind a name so dear to the hearts of posterity as that of this plain man of the people, this champion of human rights, this friend of the down-trodden and oppressed, whose heart went out in sympathy and love to all mankind, irrespective of race or religion.

No character in American history or, perhaps, in the world's history stands out so clearly silhouetted against the background of time as Lincoln; none so free from defect or flaw, with no irregularities to mar its outlines, no inequalities to detract from its perfect formation; its every curve and section a symmetry of proportion. [Pg 3]

Born, February 12, 1809, as lowly as Jesus of Nazareth, in a one-room, shackling Kentucky cabin, the child of a poverty-stricken man, whom misfortune had seemingly chosen for her own, and whose ambitions were blighted and hopes almost dead, he conquered every environment of an

untoward fate, burst every link that bound him to the misery of his surroundings, and came forth in invincible majesty to write his name in letters of adamant on the walls of Fame.

Reared in gripping, grinding, pinching penury and pallid poverty, amid the most squalid destitution possible to conceive, successively a choreboy, common laborer, rail-splitter, river pilot, and country storekeeper, he made his way through trials and difficulties that would have overwhelmed the bravest spirit; broke down every barrier, turned all obstacles into stepping-stones to progress, until he entered the arena of public life as a lawyer, commanding the confidence and respect of all who knew him and the terrible odds he had to fight against to win out in the battle of life.

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Practically an unknown man when nominated for the Presidency, his election due to factional strife among his opponents, the people of America when approaching the greatest crisis in their history, turned as if by chance, and Providence that chance did guide, to this comparatively obscure man of the prairies, and with one bound he took his place with the world's greatest statesmen, the leader of his party, the real ruler of a mighty nation.

Led as it were by an Unseen Hand to the front, he solved problems that staggered the wisest minds of the nation, directed military campaigns, and conducted diplomatic relations with such skill as to astonish the most astute statesmen, cabinet ministers, and army generals. The rail-splitter of the Sangamon had become at the supreme moment the man of destiny to whom the nation looked in the most crucial period it had yet encountered.

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Such a man is not an accident,—he is more than a circumstance. He is sent upon a mission and bears his credentials from a Higher Power than that of earth,—there is a purpose and a plan in his existence, the latter is mapped out, the former must be fulfilled.

In view of the fact that Lincoln had barely a year's schooling, where and how did he acquire his profound wisdom and his depth of knowledge?

That he was a God-ordained man, raised up to accomplish a divine design, few, who have closely studied the character and work of the man, will gainsay.

As the early prophets were inspired by God to utter golden words of divine wisdom, so Lincoln was inspired from the same source to speak, and act in conformity to divine intention. The keynote of this idea is forcibly struck by Henry Watterson, when he writes: "And a thousand years hence, no tragedy, no drama, no epic poem will be filled with greater wonder, or be followed by mankind with deeper feelings, than that which tells the story of his life and death."

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Lincoln was a Providential man,—of that there can be little question, but every man has it in his power to be Providential also, though not in the same way, by being the deliverer of a race and the saviour of a nation, but by living up to the promptings of his better nature and seizing the opportunities God sends his way. Any man can thus be Providential in the full length and breadth and sweep of his life.

Next to Washington, Lincoln stands out the most colossal figure in American history, and is pre-eminent to Washington in the affection with which his memory is enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen; though Washington, as the Father of his Country, must always be given the more exalted place.

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Washington gave us a country; Lincoln preserved it; Washington wrote the first page of our history; Lincoln was called upon to write another, and at a period which covers the most momentous crisis the country had witnessed since Liberty Bell proclaimed the birth of a separate and independent nation. He wrote the page and he kept it clean, though to do so he had to wash it in rivers of human blood, the warm heart's blood too of the countrymen he loved, but he would have willingly washed it in his own also, had the sacrifice been necessary. Alas! Lincoln's blood was shed in the end, not on the altar of his country, but by the hand of an assassin; not for the glory of the flag, but for the sorrow of the nation.

More, perhaps, has been written concerning the illustrious martyr President than of any other national character, and nearly all of this writing has been eulogy approaching almost to deification. We have enshrined Lincoln in a Pantheon of Glory, all by himself, for the praise and emulation of future ages, just as we have placed Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr in a Pillory of Shame to be held up for the scorn, execration, and anathema of all time.

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The beatification of Lincoln, especially by Northerners, is due, in a great measure, to his devotion and loyalty to the cause of the Union. The issue of the war was to amalgamate the contending parties into a unified whole under one flag, but Lincoln was not to see the full fruition of his mighty work, the final triumph of his policy. The hand of the assassin fell upon him just at the very zenith of his fame, the meridian of his greatness, a time when public sentiment was at the boiling-point. He had struck the shackles from the limbs of four millions of people, brought order out of chaos, planted the banners of victory on the broken ramparts of defeat, and had done it in such a way that the vanquished almost fancied themselves the conquerors, and willingly, proudly, saluted the flag of a cemented Fatherland.

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He had brought together the warring elements into a splendid and invincible Union; he had become the idol of his people as Washington had once been; he had been hailed as the Messiah of the slave and the Saviour of the oppressed, and then, in a moment, his great light was extinguished in the gloom and darkness of universal sorrow. With all that he had accomplished,

nevertheless, he went down to the grave, like another Columbus, unconscious of the great work he had consummated.

His Emancipation Proclamation not only melted the manacles of the slaves by its electric touch, but it freed the whole nation from the bondage of years. Free speech had been suppressed, men dared not utter their convictions, the pulpit had been overawed, the press had been shackled, we were being reproached by the nations of the earth for violating the first principles of freedom by holding men in bondage. Europe was in transports of laughter at a country proclaiming human liberty, while clinging to all the traditions of slavery, and her risible faculties were really excusable in face of such a paradox. Lincoln keenly felt the sneers and taunts, and in the indignation of his mighty manhood he arose and freed the nation from its incubus of shame. He made its soil too hot for the feet of slaves; he unshackled the pulpit; he unmuzzled the press; he removed the dark blots from the national honor, and united and free he placed his country greatest among the nations of the earth.

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The immortal Proclamation linked his name with the rights of man, the cause of personal liberty, and the progress of humanity. This is why Lincoln is enthroned on so high a pedestal; this is why the great War President is enshrined in the heart of hearts of his countrymen.

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Some are of the opinion, that had the illustrious Tribune been spared, his plans of Reconstruction would have antagonized the best men of his party, and instead of coming down to posterity as the most revered and popular President, after Washington, he would have left his name in our annals as probably that of the most unpopular Executive we have had. But such surmise is a piece of far-fetched anticipation very remotely removed from the boundary of probability. Lincoln would not have antagonized, he would have converted and brought men to the same viewpoint as himself.

As it is, he towers so majestically above our horizon, that in his great and commanding national role, we are apt to quite forget his character as an individual, his personality as a man and what it represented in the domain of private life.

That Lincoln was a man of strong character and tenacious purpose, rather than brilliant and intellectual, is a point conceded by all who have studied him in the calm of impartiality and in no sense indulged in hero worship. Despite the claim of his divine mission, his greatness was service in loyalty to an ideal and it was subordination of the personal self to his ideals rather than any extraordinary gifts with which nature had endowed him, which gives glory to him and the men who stood with him.

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He has been contrasted with Napoleon, whose star was just sinking below the horizon as his was ascending above it, but it is rather invidious to contrast two so widely divergent actors on the stage of fame. The difference between them is the difference between the iron heel and the helping hand, between tyranny and freedom, between a man living for self and glory, and a man living for the broadest kind of cosmopolitanism and the widest type of humanitarianism.

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Lincoln's whole career is a manifestation of his absolute integrity of purpose, of his fearless honesty in all things, of his considerate feeling for others, of his profound respect for conscience, and his reverential fear of God.

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## WAS ABRAHAM LINCOLN A CHRISTIAN?

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*God give us men! A time like this demands  
Clean minds, pure hearts, true faith, and ready hands.  
Men who possess opinions and a will;  
Men whom desire for office does not kill;  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;  
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;  
Tall men; sun-crowned men; men who will live above the fog  
In public duty and in private thinking;  
Men who can stand before a demagogue  
And denounce his treacherous flatteries, and without winking.  
For a while base tricksters with their wornout creeds,  
Their large professions, and their little deeds,  
Wrangle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,  
Wrong rules the land and waiting Justice sleeps.*

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—J. G. Holland

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## II

[Pg 17]

### WAS ABRAHAM LINCOLN A CHRISTIAN?

In regard to his religious views, Lincoln was always exceedingly reticent, but this reserve gives

but greater force to the striking proof of the deep faith professed in his proclamations and public addresses, and that his life was actuated by high religious principles. He was too broad, too big brained, to care for doctrinal beliefs or sectarian differences.

His mother and father were Free-Will Baptists in Kentucky. In Indiana they became members of what was then known as the Predestinarian church, not from any change in belief, but because it was the only denomination in the neighborhood. When Thomas Lincoln removed to Illinois he united with the Christian church, commonly known as "Campbellites," and in that faith he died.

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In his early days Lincoln had little opportunity for the practice of religion, and his parents, though religious enough in themselves, as has just been pointed out, took little trouble to inculcate its precepts on his youthful mind. The charge has been brought against him that he was an agnostic, but this arose from the fact that when a young man at Salem, in 1834, he prepared a review of Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason" and Volney's "Ruins of Empires," with a view to reading it before a literary society that had been organized in the neighborhood. A friend of his—Sam Hill—burned the manuscript, which made the young man very indignant, as he had spent much time in its preparation. He had, to an extent, indorsed the views of these deistic writers, and their works had made a deep impression on him, but he came to realize their specious sophistries at their true value and turned away from them with feelings of strong aversion, so that he thanked Sam Hill for the service he had done him in destroying the manuscripts of approval and thus turning his thoughts in the right direction which led him to see the evils of infidel teachings.

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He never was an unbeliever, and as he advanced in years his religious conceptions deepened and his faith and reliance on the Divine Power strengthened with time.

In common with those reared under similar circumstances in rural localities he was highly superstitious, and this superstition he was never able to shake off in after life, though to offset it and counteract the morbid influence it exerted over him he had recourse to humor and tried to look on the bright side of everything, often on the ludicrous side, and gave such free rein to his inclination in this direction that he gained for himself something of the reputation of a humorist and wag, but in reality his love for jesting and telling humorous stories came to him as a second nature, an inheritance from his father, who was renowned in his section for droll sayings, funny anecdotes, and striking illustrations.

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He was also somewhat interested in spiritualism, but as the occult art of communicating with the denizens of the unseen world had not attained such a degree of perfection in his day as in ours, his opportunity for investigation was limited to a few seances given by peripatetic mediums, which, however, instead of increasing his faith in intercommunication with the *manes* of the departed, only excited his disgust for the fakirs who laid claim to the power of summoning spirits to mortal presence.

All his life Lincoln was a man who thought for himself; he would not allow the opinions of others to obtrude themselves on him, he investigated for himself, and his intellectual honesty would not permit him to make pretense to faith or simulate what he did not feel.

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Some writers would have us believe that he was not a Christian at all, in fact, was an out and out infidel of the stripe of Voltaire and Paine; but we have seen what gave rise to this misconception of his character and caused it to gain circulation. The works of Paine and Volney were the only books of an infidel tendency that he ever read, and when he saw his error he tried to disabuse his mind of their teachings as quickly as possible.

To get at a right consideration of his religious beliefs, we must go back to those early days in the life of the future statesman after the family had removed from Kentucky to Indiana. It was a wild place in which his boyhood was spent; the primeval American wood which was only beginning to hear the voice of a crude civilization, and had not, as yet, heard the sound of a church bell. There were no places of worship; there were no schools or even stores or shops; in truth, so isolated and primitive was the location of the Lincoln camp that the necessities of life were many miles removed from it.

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His father, Thomas Lincoln, though a good man in a general way, was but an indifferent parent, and consequently a poor guide or mentor for the youth. The poor man had received many hard knocks from the iron hand of misfortune and had become almost wholly disheartened, which led to carelessness and thriftlessness, and besides, he was illiterate and unpolished. It could not be expected that a man thus handicapped himself could give his boy good training, either morally or intellectually. The mother, too, had been ground down by poverty to such a degree as to lose almost all interest in life; her burden soon became too heavy to bear, and she had to lay it down before coming to the middle milestone of life. It is not to be wondered that, under such circumstances and amid such surroundings, the boy Abraham grew up after the manner of a wild, strong weed, following the bent of his own rugged nature.

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It was a dark time and the Lincolns were in dark struggles. Their abode at first was a rude hut, a mere shed of rough poles, open to the suns of summer and the snows of winter. Even when a cabin was at length erected, there were neither doors nor windows in it. The beds were composed of dried leaves and their coverings of the skins of wild animals. Food was scarce and of the coarsest kind and had to be brought from a long distance. In after years Lincoln never cared to refer to this period in his career.

In 1818, when Abraham was nine years old, his mother died and was buried in a cleared space a

little beyond the cabin, without any religious ceremonies or observances whatever. However, there was a service held over the grave some months afterwards by an itinerant preacher who came at the request of young Abraham. The prayers that Parson Elkin said above the mound of Nancy Hanks were the first public prayers to which Abraham Lincoln listened.

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After a time Thomas Lincoln went back to Kentucky, and shortly returned with a new wife, Sally Bush Johnson, widow of the jailer of Hardin County. She had three children, and these, with the Lincoln household, which included two Hanks boys, kin of the late Mrs. Lincoln, formed a somewhat heterogeneous family.

They were, however, extremely domestic and tenderly attached to one another, which is very seldom the case in mixed households, but they were all of the same class, born and reared under similar circumstances.

The two branches even united in religion and joined the little church a few miles distant, which had as the seat of worship a small frame building lately erected in that region. Young Abraham, however, did not affiliate and follow the example of his kin. He had to work hard, and religion at this time seemed to give him little concern, for, as before observed, he had little opportunity to cultivate it had he desired to do so. At an early age he was cast upon the bitterness of the world, and in the sweat of his brow had he to earn his daily bread. With him the stern battle of life began early; he had to gird on his sword for the combat at an age when the cares and shadows of the world are in the far perspective of the future and the sunshine of happiness illumines the morning of life with its brightest rays.

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The specter of poverty was at his side; he could not get away from it; his only hope to exorcise it from his presence lay in unremitting toil, constant endeavor to overcome its influence on his career, and with this end in view he sternly resolved to do all that hard work, patience, and perseverance demanded to free himself from its sinister companionship.

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The story of his thirst for knowledge and the limited means at his disposal for assuaging it need scarcely be repeated, for it is a pathetic story familiar to almost all, and becomes hackneyed with repetition.

In August, 1831, at the age of twenty-two, being satisfied that he had fully discharged any debt which he owed his father for such rearing and opportunities as he had received, he left the parent cabin, and, as it turned out, forever. Deep down in his soul he had resolved to make himself something better and higher than his father was or ever could hope to be. From this stage onwards his career is a matter of national history; the man is almost lost sight of in the statesman, and his private life is submerged in the public eminence to which he attained.

We must, however, deal with those phases of his boyhood and young manhood which bear a relation and lead up to the illustrious heights he was destined to gain as the ruler of a nation and the emancipator of a race.

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We have said that most people believe that Lincoln was a Providential man, was called of God to be the preserver of a nation and the deliverer of the slave, and this really seems to be the explanation which accounts for the singular success of his unparalleled career; otherwise, how could this backwoods youth, rough, uncouth, little educated, reach the greatest eminence possible for an American; how could he have climbed the heights of fame until he arrived at the culminating pinnacle; how could he have become the recipient of the greatest and grandest honors his countrymen had in their power to confer upon him?

His accomplishments surely prove beyond question that this obscure, lowly born man was the chosen instrument of a Divine Wisdom, raised up to fulfill the designs of an all-wise Providence in freeing a race from bondage, just as Moses was raised up to lead 'the chosen people' from the land of their captivity.

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Despite his early training, or rather lack of training, regardless of his seeming early indifference to religion, and all for which it stood, Abraham Lincoln was on all occasions and at all times not only a good Christian and sincere believer, but a man of the deepest religious sentiments, imbued with a strong faith and earnest allegiance to moral principles; a man who all through life had the utmost dependence upon and reliance in divine guidance, and who undertook nothing without invoking God's assistance to enable him to determine what was right from what was wrong. Unwavering trust in the Almighty was the keynote to his success and the foundation stone of his greatness.

Let us pause to consider what really were the religious convictions of this wonderful man.

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That he was a true and sincere Christian, in fact, if not in form, is fully proved by many extracts from his letters and numerous addresses; his public utterances more than verify his belief in the intervention of a Supreme Power in the affairs of men.

Apart from this, however, we have explicit testimony of the sincerity of his convictions of the truth of religion by the fact that he was a faithful attendant on divine service. For four years in Washington he attended Dr. Gurley's Presbyterian church, and such attendance is certainly conclusive that he was in form, as well as in fact, a believing Christian.

That he attended church merely for the sake of appearance is not tenable, for his nature was too open and honest to do that which was not based upon sincere conviction.

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His reply to the negroes of Baltimore who, in 1864, presented him with a beautiful Bible, confirms his belief in the divine inspiration of God's word as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. On the occasion of this Bible presentation he said: "This great Book is the best gift God has given to man; all the good from the Saviour of the world is communicated through this Book."

He was an habitual reader of the Bible, more familiar with its contents than most ministers. His familiarity with its pages is shown in his literary style and in the frequent quotations from it with which his writings are interspersed. He once wrote his early friend, Joshua Speed,—“I am profitably engaged reading the Bible. Take all of this Book upon reason that you can and the balance upon faith and you will live and die a better man.”

To deny that he was a believer is to accuse him of hypocrisy and double dealing, an accusation which is made more emphatic in view of his regular church attendance and the fervent religious sentiments which characterized his public acceptance of the teachings of Christianity. [Pg 31]

When he left his home at Springfield, with a full appreciation of the grave responsibility devolving upon him, in bidding farewell to the Christian community in which he had lived for more than a quarter of a century, he gave expression to his sentiments in this pathetic valedictory: "I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. With the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him 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, I bid you an affectionate farewell." [Pg 32]

Such language does not sound much like that of an unbeliever, but on the contrary is pregnant with faith and hope in the guidance and watchfulness of a Supreme Being.

When requested to preside at a meeting of the Christian Commission in Washington, held February 22, 1863, he replied, "The birthday of Washington and the Christian Sabbath coinciding this year, and suggesting together the highest interests of this life, and of that to come, is most propitious for the meeting proposed."

In the February of the preceding year Lincoln was visited by a severe affliction in the death of his beloved son, Willie, to whom he was much attached, and by the extreme illness of another son, Thomas, familiarly called "Tad." This was a new burden and a heavy one, but through his firm faith in Providence he regarded the double visitation as direct from God, accepting the otherwise inexplicable affliction as a manifestation of the divine design in regard to himself. A devout Christian lady from Massachusetts, who was officiating in one of the hospitals at the time, came to attend the sick children. She reports that the President watched with her about the bedside of the sick ones, and that he often walked the room, saying sadly, "This is the hardest trial of my life,—why is it, why is it?" In the course of conversation with this nurse, he closely questioned her concerning her situation; she told him that she was a widow, and that her husband and two children were in heaven, and added, that she saw the hand of God in it all, and that she never loved Him so much before as she had since her affliction. [Pg 33]

"How is that brought about?" he inquired.

"Simply by trusting in God and feeling that He does all things well," she replied.

"Did you submit fully under the first loss?" Lincoln again inquired.

"No!" she answered, "not wholly, but as blow came upon blow, and all were taken, I could and did submit and was very happy." [Pg 34]

"I am glad to hear you say that," said the President, pathetically, "your experience will help me to bear my affliction."

On the morning of his boy's funeral, when assured that many Christians were praying for him, the tears welled in his eyes as he faltered out to his comforter, "I am glad to hear that, I want them to pray for me, I need their prayers." When the nurse came forward to express her sympathy, the President thanked her and said, "I will try to go to God with my sorrows." A few days afterwards she asked him if he could trust God, and he answered, "I think I can and I will try." Continuing, he expressed himself more fully, "I wish I had that childlike faith you speak of and I trust He will give it to me." Then he went on to speak of his mother who, so many years before, had been laid to rest in the lonely Indiana clearing; the memory of her who had pillowed his head on her bosom came back to him with the tenderest recollections. Though, as has been stated, she had little time or opportunity to teach him the principles of her own simple faith and reverence, she did not wholly neglect him. She taught him a few short prayers and pious precepts, and these he never forgot in the after time. "I remember her prayers," said he, "and they have followed me; they have clung to me all my life." [Pg 35]

Some think that it was Sally Bush Johnson to whom he here refers, who was a good and religious woman, but there can be little doubt that the allusion is to his own mother, for whose early death he sorrowed deeply and whom he recalled to memory many a time, though he was but a lad when she passed away.

Many a time Lincoln sought the prayers of others, which proves that he believed in the efficacy of appealing to heaven when in doubt and difficulties. Bishop Simpson often called upon him, and on these occasions they would talk as brothers. On parting the President would say, "Bishop, [Pg 36]

don't leave without prayer." The doors would then be locked and the two great men, as little children, would unite their petitions.

General Daniel E. Sickles puts on record a remarkable interview with Lincoln, in which the latter expressed himself as follows: "When Lee crossed the Potomac and entered Pennsylvania, followed by our army, I felt that the crisis had come. I knew that defeat in a great battle on Northern soil involved the loss of Washington, to be followed, perhaps, by the intervention of England or France in favor of the Southern Confederacy. I went to my room and got down on my knees in prayer. I felt that I must put all my trust in Almighty God. He gave to our people the best country ever given to man. He alone could save it from destruction. I had tried my best to do my duty and found myself unequal to the task. The burden was more than I could bear. God had been often our Protector in other days. I prayed Him to help us and give us victory now. I felt that my prayer was answered. I knew that God was on our side. I had no misgivings about the result of Gettysburg."

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"How do you feel about Vicksburg, Mr. President?" asked General Sickles.

"Grant will pull through all right," returned Lincoln, "I am sure of it; I have been despondent, but am so no longer. God is with us."

Rising from his seat, the President took Sickles by the hand, and continued, "Sickles, I am told, as you have been told, perhaps, that your condition is serious. I am in a prophetic mood to-day. You will get well."

Do not such sentiments as these show conclusively his faith in divine power and his utter dependence upon God?

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To express such deep feelings of religious principles did not necessitate his being a sectarian or even an attendant at church.

Yet we know Lincoln did attend church. We have already mentioned that he went regularly to Dr. Gurley's Presbyterian church in Washington, but he was a regular worshiper long before he came to Washington. When in Springfield he was an attendant of the First Presbyterian Church, of which the Rev. Dr. James Smith was pastor. This clergyman aided Lincoln, who had then begun the practice of law, in an investigation into the claims of the Bible. The future President at that time made a frank acknowledgment of his belief that the Bible is an authoritative revelation of God.

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## WHY DID LINCOLN NEVER JOIN A CHURCH?

[Pg 39]

*Give us men!  
Men who, when the tempest gathers,  
Grasp the standard of their fathers  
In the thickest fight.  
Men who strike for homes and altar,  
(Let the coward cringe and falter—  
God defend the Right).  
True as truth, though lorn and lonely,  
Tender as the brave are only—  
Men who tread where saints have trod,  
Men for Country, Right, and God—  
Give us men!—I say again, again  
Give us men!*

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—Bishop of Exeter

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## III

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## WHY DID LINCOLN NEVER JOIN A CHURCH?

That Lincoln did not join a church is no reason for inferring that he was not a believer in Christianity. It was just the opposite in his case,—as the years passed his convictions and faith became stronger.

The warring creeds of Christianity looked to him like so many soldiers of the same army disagreeing among themselves as to the best way to win a battle. Lincoln would win in any way he could, and would look on that way as the best. In his day, even more than in ours, ministers fell out with one another touching the meaning of the Bible, and then, as always, weakened its influence and their own upon the public mind. Preachers and teachers even now devote their time to useless discussions which will never benefit any one, and to the investigation of controverted points in theology, deciding principles of interpretation and attacking chronological

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difficulties that have no more connection with winning men to right living than the battle of Lexington has with the reformation of drunkards.

The precious time that Lincoln saw wasted, the energies misspent, and the intellectual antagonisms begotten, which then, as now, divided the hearts of men, caused him to reject dogmas which were considered essential to salvation by the denominations of his day. They moved, as alas! too many of them still do, in the old rut of orthodox tradition, steeped in human creeds and almost incapable of an original idea.

Lincoln preferred new truths to old falsehoods, and, like Christ, was out of sympathy with men who swallowed dogmas whole and produced only pious platitudes. This very thing to-day accounts for the fact that so many brilliant men and interesting women are unconnected with the churches and therefore unreached by the pulpits. Everywhere, in increasingly large numbers, we find men, energetic, learned, and refined, humane, generous, reverent, open to argument and spiritual persuasion, moral men with religious sensibilities, who often set a worthy example to professors themselves, the very choicest spirits in the community, not identified with any church, but whose lives, we all must admit, are as much and often more Christian than those of professed church-goers.

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Mere water, whether a person is "buried in it," or whether it is applied at the tips of a bishop's fingers, makes no change whatever in character. Faith in religion as an institution is faith in a machine,—its application is what tells.

When a member of Congress, knowing Lincoln's religious character, asked him why he did not join some church, he replied: "Because I find difficulty without mental reservation in giving my assent to their long and complicated creeds. When any church inscribes on its altar, as a qualification for membership, the Saviour's statement of the substance of the law and the 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 will I join with all my heart and soul."

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John G. Nicolay, who probably was better acquainted with Lincoln and more closely attached to him than any one outside his own family and near relatives, writes: "I do not remember ever having discussed religion with Mr. Lincoln, nor do I know of any authorized statement of his views in existence. He sometimes talked freely, and never made any concealment of his belief or unbelief in any dogma or doctrine, but never provoked religious controversies. I speak more from his disposition and habits than from any positive declaration on his part. He frequently made remarks about sermons he had heard, books he had read, or doctrines that had been advanced, and my opinion as to his religious belief is based upon such casual evidence. There is not the slightest doubt that he believed in a Supreme Being of omnipotent power and omniscient watchfulness over the children of men, and that this great Being could be reached by prayer. Mr. Lincoln, was a praying man; I know that to be a fact. And I have heard him request people to pray for him, which he would not have done had he not believed that prayer is answered. Many a time have I heard Mr. Lincoln ask ministers and Christian women to pray for him, and he did not do this for effect. He was no hypocrite, and had such reverence for sacred things that he would not trifle with them. I have heard him say that he prayed for this or that, and remember one occasion on which he remarked that if a certain thing did not occur he would lose his faith in prayer.

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"It is a matter of history that he told the Cabinet he had promised his Maker to issue an Emancipation Proclamation, and it was not an idle remark. At the same time he did not believe in some of the dogmas of the orthodox churches. I have heard him argue against the doctrine of atonement, for instance. He considered it illogical and unjust and a premium upon evil-doing if a man who had been wicked all his life could make up for it by a few words or prayers at the hour of death; and he had no faith in death-bed repentances. He did not believe in several other articles of the creeds of the orthodox churches. He believed in the Bible, however.... He used to consider it the greatest of all text-books of morals and ethics and that there was nothing to compare with it in literature....

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"It would be difficult for any one to define Mr. Lincoln's position or to classify him among the sects. I should say that he believed in a good many articles in the creeds of the orthodox churches and rejected a good many that did not appeal to his reason.

"He praised the simplicity of the Gospels. He often declared that the Sermon on the Mount contained the essence of all law and justice, and that the Lord's Prayer was the sublimest composition in human language. He was a constant reader of the Bible, but had no sympathy with theology, and often said that in matters affecting a man's relations with his Maker he couldn't give a power of attorney.

"Yes, there is a story, and it is probably true, that when he was very young and very ignorant he wrote an essay that might be called atheistical. It was after he had been reading a couple of atheistic books which made a great impression on his mind, and the essay is supposed to have expressed his views on those books,—a sort of review of them, containing both approval and disapproval,—and one of his friends burned it. He was very indignant at the time, but was afterwards glad of it.

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"The opposition of the Springfield clergy to his election was chiefly due to remarks he made about them. One careless remark, I remember, was widely quoted. An eminent clergyman was delivering a series of doctrinal discourses that attracted considerable local attention. Although Lincoln was frequently invited, he would not be induced to attend them. He remarked that he

wouldn't trust Brother — to construe the statutes of Illinois and much less the laws of God; that people who knew him wouldn't trust his advice on an ordinary business transaction because they didn't consider him competent; hence he didn't see why they did so in the most important of all human affairs, the salvation of their souls.

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"These remarks were quoted widely and misrepresented, to Lincoln's injury. In those days people were not so liberal as now, and any one who criticized a parson was considered a sceptic."

An orthodox believer Lincoln may not have been, in fact was not, but he was better,—he had the spirit of Christ which manifests itself more peculiarly in actions than in words. Love to God and man was his creed, the world was his church, kindly words and merciful deeds his sermons.

In a certain formal sense the baptized man or woman is a Christian, just as all foreigners who have been naturalized are Americans before the law, but the simple act of naturalization will not make any man a good American. There is a vast difference between naturalizing a man and nationalizing him. He is an American who is an American at heart, who owes but one allegiance, is loyal to but one country, and is true to but one flag, whose sympathies and choices, whose heroic labors and sacrifices in behalf of his country make him deserve the peerless name of American.

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So the mere act of baptism or church membership gives a man but a poor title to the Christian name. Paul said, the man was not a Jew who was only one outwardly, that the mere rite of circumcision was nothing, that the true Jew was one inwardly and at heart. If Paul could thus express himself as to the qualifications which characterized a member of the Jewish church, which was avowedly a ritualistic organization, it must be safe to say the same thing about those who profess a belief in the Christian church, which differed from the Jewish, mainly in caring less for rites and more for rightness.

Faith has its fundamental place in the plan of salvation, but faith, according to some people's understanding of it, is a vivid perception of, or rather a subscription to truth as the church fathers, or, more likely the church grandmothers, defined it. Faith, in this sense of the word, makes nobody a Christian. The devils believe and tremble.

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It is of great importance to rightly believe the truth which relates to Christ and His kingdom, but the most unhesitating assent of the intellect to the most orthodox creeds, catechisms, commentaries, and systems ever framed will make no man a Christian. An upright and down square life is worth more than a whole ton of tall talk.

The grandest profession of religion is a life all devoted to glorifying Christ, by living in obedience to His commands, and thus making the world a little less accursed and more worthy of God.

A man may be a member of the most orthodox church in Christendom, he may sit at all the communions for a lifetime, but if he be mean and selfish and careless of the world's condition, he is no Christian. While, on the other hand, a man may, like Abraham Lincoln, have peculiarities of religious beliefs, and yet if he spend his whole life for others, as Lincoln did, then he is so much like Christ, emulating His example so well that he has good claim to be called a Christian.

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"Blest is the man whose softening heart  
Feels all another's pain,  
To whom the supplicating eye  
Was never raised in vain;  
Whose breast expands with generous warmth,  
A stranger's woes to feel,  
And bleeds in pity o'er the wound  
He wants the power to heal;  
To gentle offices of love  
His feet are never slow—  
He views through Mercy's melting eye  
A brother in a foe."

Abraham Lincoln never joined a church, because the creeds of his day and of his community were too inclusive of detail in doctrine and exacting in their ritual and terminology. He had no sympathy with theologians. He frequently declared that it was blasphemy for a preacher to "twist the words of Christ around, so as to sustain his own doctrine and confirm his own private views," and he often remarked that "the more a man knew of theology, the further he got away from the spirit of Christ."

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Many preachers in the past have been strong factors in the march of civilization, but courageous preachers have always been scarce. As a rule, they have been more conservators of the past than moulders of the future, clinging with grim tenacity to the traditions and teachings of the early fathers.

Among the Church of England preachers in Virginia, while nearly all opposed separation from the mother country, there were few so militant as the famous John Peter Muhlenberg, who, from his pulpit at Woodstock, Virginia, declared: "There is a time for all things, a time to preach and a time to pray, but there is also a time to fight, and that time has now come," and suiting the action to the word, threw off his gown, disclosing a uniform beneath, and followed by three hundred men of his congregation, marched to join Washington's forces.

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In Colonial times in New England, the pulpit occupied a more general sphere and exerted more general influence than to-day. Ministers preached that the Hebrew Commonwealth was the model for the new Republic, and so strenuously that as an effect our government assumed that form which prevailed among the Hebrews under the judges and had the divine sanction.

In the agitation of the slave question, as a class, the preachers were mostly silent. Had they roused themselves to the defence of right, they could have created a public sentiment towards the inhuman and shameless traffic which would have destroyed slavery without the necessity of a civil war in which tens of thousands of lives were sacrificed and millions of money were lost.

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Theodore Parker, Bishop Simpson, Albert Barnes, E. H. Chapin, Rabbis Sabato Morais and David Einhorn, and above all, Henry Ward Beecher, constituted the few conspicuous examples of the preachers who came out strongly for abolition, but the stand these great men took was effective, and once the die was cast, practically all the preachers became leaders in the movement for emancipation.

The attitude of Lincoln on slavery was not determined by churchmen. Lincoln made a wide distinction between churchmen and Christians. Christianity is unselfish service born of love; churchianity is often a form without a God, a wearing of religion as a cloak and not as an armor, —it never obeys a command unless it is too feeble to resist, and in many cases, is a perfidy and treason against the law of Christ.

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In Springfield, when Lincoln found that twenty of the twenty-three ministers of the different denominations and the majority of the members of the principal churches were arrayed against him in his Presidential campaign, he drew forth from his pocket a New Testament, saying to some friends present: "I have carefully read the Bible and I do not so understand this book. These men well know that I am for freedom in the territories, freedom everywhere, as free as the Constitution and laws will permit, and that my opponents are for slavery. They know this and yet, with this book in their hands, in the light of which human bondage cannot live a moment, they are going to vote against me. I know that Liberty is right, for Christ teaches it and Christ is God. I shall be vindicated and these men will find that they have not read their Bible aright."

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Despite the great abolition preachers and those who followed their example, some of the churches in Lincoln's time made a choice of public favor and sided with slavery, though, as has been stated, the majority of the ministers were strongly moved to follow in the lead of their distinguished brethren who had unfurled the flag of freedom, yet withal the church did not exert sufficient force to make herself a power in determining the issue. At this time the opportunity was afforded her of moulding public sentiment, and it may be readily inferred that had she possessed the solid Christianity of Abraham Lincoln the terrible war could have been averted and the country kept from being plunged in blood and gloom, but in this, the greatest of all crises, the church failed to do her duty as she should have done, and as a result, the bloodiest war of history devastated and almost desolated the land. Of course, once the war was declared the church stood solidly behind the President, but she had no other alternative compatible with reason and common sense, not to speak of patriotism. At length the preachers recognized the manner of man the country had in its great leader, and so they looked to him for counsel and for guidance. Lincoln was practically demonstrating that his religion was as good as theirs, and they, in turn, were now trying to make their religion as good as Lincoln's.

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All along the Christianity of Lincoln had the true ring in it. It was of that type beautifully described in these lines:

"Creeds and confessions, high church or the low  
I cannot say; but you would vastly please us  
If some pointed scripture you would show  
To which of these belonged the Saviour, Jesus.  
I think to all or none. Not curious creeds,  
Or ordered forms of church rule He taught,  
But love of soul that blossomed into deeds  
With human good and human blessings fraught.  
On me nor priest nor presbyter nor pope,  
Bishop nor dean may stamp a party name,  
But Jesus with His largely human scope  
The service of my human life may claim;  
Let prideful priests do battle about creeds—  
The church is mine that does most charitable deeds."

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There was not a day, nay, not an hour of Lincoln's life but was devoted to some good work, some act of charity, some message of consolation or comfort or mercy to the miserable and the suffering; in short, Abraham Lincoln carried his religion into daily life; it accompanied him everywhere and on all occasions.

Every phase of his character was a demonstration of the Golden Rule. From boyhood to manhood, from manhood to fame, honesty was his distinguishing trait. As a lawyer all his transactions were above suspicion. He would not take a case to which there could possibly be attached any stain of falsehood or foul-dealing. To a man who once offered him a case of which he could not approve, he gave this explanation, quoted by his partner, Herndon, who vouches for it: "There is no reasonable doubt that I can gain your case for you. I can set a whole neighborhood at

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loggerheads, I can distress a widowed mother and her six fatherless children, and thereby get you \$600, which rightly belongs, as it appears to me, as much to them as it does to you. I shall not take your case, but I will give you a little advice for nothing,—you seem to be a splendid, energetic man,—I would advise you to try your hand at making \$600 in some other way."

Here is an example of how he brought his religion into politics. When he was in the legislature and the caucus sought to get him into schemes that were not creditable, in a discussion which lasted until midnight, contending that the end would justify the means, Lincoln closed the debate and defined his own position by saying, "You may burn my body to ashes and scatter them to the four winds of heaven; you may drag my soul down to the regions of darkness and despair, to be tormented forever, but you will not get me to support a measure which I believe to be wrong."

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Judged alone by his actions Lincoln was a Christian of the very highest type; his principles were founded upon the teachings of the Master. He was gentle, kind, loving, thoughtful, tender, his big heart overflowed at the sight of suffering and he alleviated it when he could. His sympathies went out to the poor in their afflictions. He tempered the harshness and severity of the great war by words of comfort and acts of mercy. He denied himself at the White House to no one, the poorest woman being as courteously received as the most distinguished statesman. On one occasion a heartbroken mother came to plead for the life of an only son who had forfeited it by some breach of discipline in the ranks. She was sent away rejoicing. Turning to her male companion on leaving the White House she indignantly exclaimed: "You said the President was an ugly man,—why, he's the handsomest man I have ever seen."

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Both by act and word did Lincoln try to emulate the Man of Galilee. Indeed few, if any, of the world's leaders followed so closely the precepts and example of the Saviour. He adopted the Golden Rule as his standard of conduct and lived up to it in every particular. He acted on "the square" to every man, so that he gained for himself the soubriquet of "Honest Abe," which was fondly applied to him all through his public career. He was just in his dealings with his fellow-men and never once was guilty of deception.

If the character of this man is to be estimated by the words of Jesus Himself, "By their fruits ye shall know them," then Abraham Lincoln was one of the highest types of Christian gentleman that ever trod the earth.

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During the four terrible years of the war he carried the sorrows of the people on his own shoulders and displayed the true qualities of a noble man and a Christian. He placed himself at this time absolutely in the hands of a higher power. Hear him make this confession: "I should be the most presumptuous blockhead upon this footstool, if I for one day thought that I could discharge the duties which have come upon me since I came into this place without the aid and enlightenment of One who is stronger and wiser than all others."

The light of Holy Writ was the beacon star that guided him through the darkness of trying days; not alone were the Holy Scriptures a guide for his actions, but they served as a model for his literary style. His education was defective, yet at times few of the great masters of literature could equal him in purity of language. High critics declare his second inaugural address to be one of the greatest masterpieces of English prose. Here are a few of the closing sentences: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that the mighty scourge of war may pass away, yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by 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.' With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in 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 lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

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Apart from the beauty and diction of the language there is a deep spirit of faith and dependence on God breathed throughout the whole of the address.

Surely the most sceptical must be convinced of the sincerity of Lincoln's religious belief from his words, from his actions, from his principles, from his prayers, from his confessions, in a word, from the rectitude of his life, and admit that he was, not only a fervent believer, but a practical Christian of the best kind, though he knelt at no denominational altar.

Such was our Lincoln. With wonder and admiration we stand in his presence and feel the magnetism that attracts us to the man. His goodness constituted his greatness.

As the world brings its frankincense of praise to offer as an incense at his shrine, in him men can see such an embodiment of true and glorious manhood that to him can fittingly be applied the word picture of Shakespeare's ideal:

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"The qualities are so blended in him that all the world can stand up and say, Here is a *man*."

A little doctor of divinity in a large Baptist convention stood on a step and thanked God he was a Baptist. The audience could hear him but not see him, so some one shouted, "Get up higher." "I can't," replied the minister, "to be a Baptist is as high as I can get." He was mistaken,—there is something higher than being a Baptist or any other kind of an enthusiastic sectarian, and that is being a man. It is quite possible to be a churchman higher than the highest steeple and yet not have the affections which cluster around the throne of glory and find their nutriment in the

bosom of God.

Lincoln's religion was that of character, the greatest force in the universe. He gave us a life by which to know him, a life overflowing with good works, full of that seriousness which comes from seeing and dealing with eternal realities, a continuous exhibit of unselfishness.

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The pure and unblemished character of this man, his integrity of deed, his honesty of purpose, his faith in God have given him an everlasting place in the affections of the people, and the example which he has left behind nerves the heart and strengthens the arm and inspires the courage of others to emulate him and follow in his footsteps. No higher or better type can be placed before American youth as an exemplar and spur for ambition.

He is not a Christian who, however orthodox in his beliefs, has not love and devotion, self-sacrifice and honesty, truthfulness and manliness.

No power is like character,—this was the power which Abraham Lincoln possessed and which carried with it the blessing of God, gaining for him the attachment of a continent and the personal love and loyalty of the Anglo-Saxon race.

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We may truthfully describe this man, whose greatness was his goodness, as Tennyson describes one of his heroes: he was

"Rich in saving commonsense,  
And as the greatest only are—  
In his simplicity sublime;  
Who never sold the truth to serve the hour,  
Nor paltered with eternal God for power;  
Whose life was work, whose language rife  
With rugged maxims hewn from life;  
Who never spake against a foe.  
Let his great example stand  
Colossal, seen in every land,  
Till in all lands and through all human story,  
The path of duty be the way to glory."

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