

ABRAHAM

A Real Christian?

LINCOLN:

by Glen Moyer

I recently attended a fundraiser for a Christian ministry whose mission is to reach college students for Jesus. “There are thousands of students attending our university,” the director said in his motivational speech, “the vast majority of them are lost and walk in darkness seeking only to satisfy their own sinful pleasures. We want to reach them because they do not know the truth and they are far from God.”

To prove his point and get us to open up our wallets to support his

ministry he played a series of interviews his ministry recorded with several of those “lost” students. Each was asked their thoughts about who Jesus was and what he taught.

“I don’t think Jesus was about organized religion,” one student said, “I think he was more about loving others unconditionally.”

“I don’t like Christianity,” another student said, “it’s too judgmental and exclusive; but Jesus was all about justice and peace and caring for the poor and that’s all pretty cool with me.”

“I don’t know about Jesus being God and all,” one last student testified, “that seems a little weird. But Jesus always seemed to get in trouble with the religious people because he hung out with ‘losers’—like me—so whatever he was, he was a pretty neat dude.”

By the time the interviews were over I’d almost put my wallet back in my pocket. Sure, these students may not be part of an organized church or hold to the exact same beliefs as this particular Christian ministry, but does that really mean

they are all “lost” and have no connection with God?

We Christians can tend to think we have the corner on the market when it comes to morality and truth. We’re often guilty of thinking we alone have access to God and his wisdom. But what do we do when we come across those examples all around that fly in the face of such thinking?

Lincoln: A Real Christian?

Abraham Lincoln is often adopted by Christian religious groups as being the ultimate example of a “believer” being led by the Spirit of God to do great things. “If only we could again have a president as devoted to God as Abraham Lincoln was,” a fellow pastor said to me not so long ago. “We need a president who is led by God the way Lincoln was led by God regarding the Civil War and slavery.”

Lincoln’s father was a member of Regular Baptist churches in Kentucky and Indiana. Yet it seems his mother was more influential regarding his faith. She raised Lincoln with a respect for the Bible. Apparently, before she died when Lincoln was just a young boy, she made him promise that he would live as she had taught him and to keep the Lord’s commandments. Lincoln did read the Bible regularly throughout his life, and of course, his morality is legendary.

While George Washington is credited with saying the famous line, “I cannot tell a lie,” it was Lincoln who was fondly nicknamed “Honest Abe.” He was famously honest in paying all of his debts. He was deeply sympathetic to the widows and orphans created by the Civil War as well as toward soldiers who had been sentenced to death for relatively minor wartime offenses.

One of the greatest examples of Lincoln’s wisdom can be found in his second Inaugural Address, widely accepted as one of the world’s greatest speeches. Mind you, unlike many of today’s presidents and politicians, Lincoln wrote his own speeches and addresses. In this excerpt from that

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great speech, listen to his brilliant analysis of the Civil War and his tender leadership and guidance which helped hold the nation together after such a bitter conflict.

“...Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

...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; 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

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which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations” [March 4, 1865].

After reading these amazing words anyone could easily conclude that Lincoln was a Christian. Ah, but that is where the mystery of faith in general, and Lincoln’s faith in particular, comes to play.

Did Lincoln’s Doctrinal Beliefs Fail to “Make the Grade”?

Mark Noll, in *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, says Lincoln’s friend Jesse Fell noted that the president “seldom communicated to anyone his views” on religion, and he went on to suggest that those views were

not orthodox: “on the innate depravity of man, the character and office of the great head of the Church, the Atonement, the infallibility of the written revelation, the performance of miracles, the nature and design of...future rewards and punishments...and many other subjects, he held opinions utterly at variance with what are usually taught in the church.”

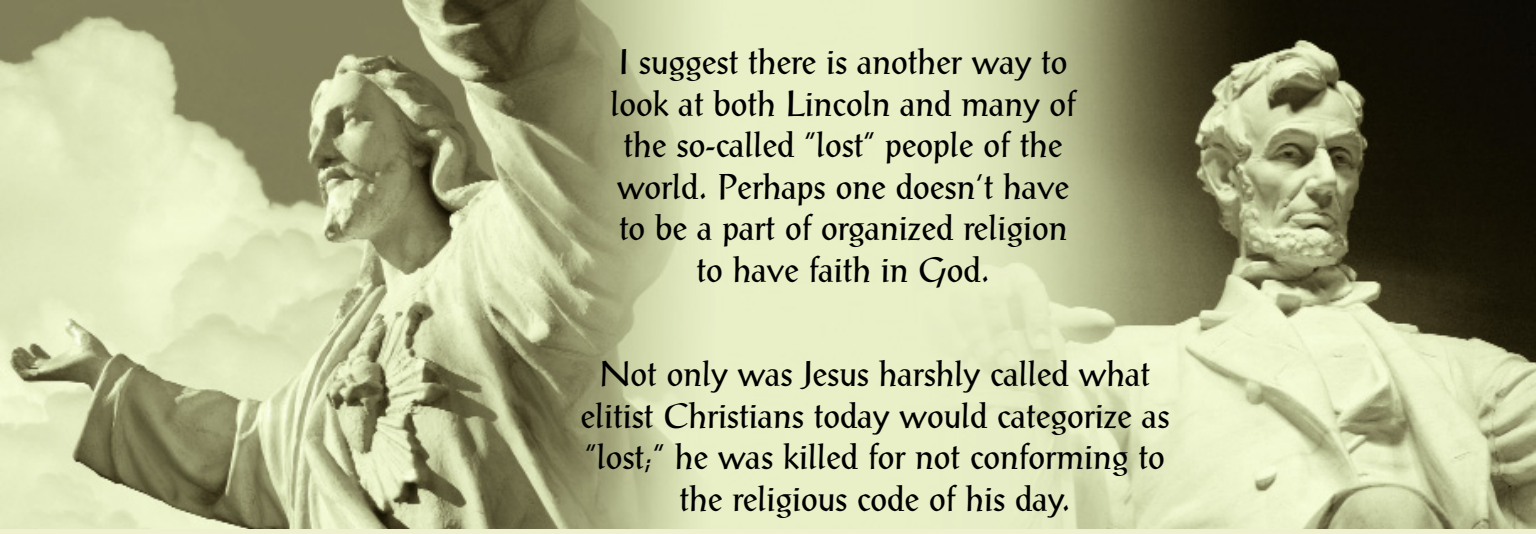
Most people today don’t realize it (including myself before researching this article), but Lincoln never joined a church and never professed to be a Christian; although, during his years as president he did regularly attend the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Historians acknowledge that Lincoln was turned off by organized religion at an early age; it seems primarily over the bitter infighting among Christians. He was never comfortable with all the dogmas and creeds that the denominational churches of his day required.

Even in his later years Lincoln never credited any teacher, mentor, church leader, community leader, or peer as a strong influence

on his intellectual development. Though lacking a formal education, Lincoln’s faith seemed to be shaped by an amazing memory and a passion for reading and learning.

A “Self-Taught” Jesus Follower—Uncomfortable With Dogmas and Creeds

“It is one of the great ironies of the history of Christianity in America,” Noll writes, “that the most profoundly religious analysis of the nation’s deepest trauma came not from a clergyman or a theologian but from a politician who was self-taught in the ways of both God and humanity. The source of Lincoln’s Christian perception will



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probably always remain a mystery, but the unusual depth of that perception none can doubt.”

If we were to use the measuring stick of the ministry leader who is trying to reach “lost” university students, Lincoln was no more a Christian and no less a pagan than the students who are described as “walking in darkness seeking only to satisfy their sinful pleasures.” Yet, I don’t think anyone, including this ministry leader, would make that assessment of Abraham Lincoln.

It’s sad and embarrassing to say, but for many of my years as a church member and pastor I sized people up just like this ministry leader.

I ascribed to a fear-based, religious Christianity that was long on rules and short on grace. It was more important that I give others my truth than to give them my love and acceptance. The only listening I did was with the goal of finding an opening to talk.

It was this same exclusive, narrow minded attitude of many Christian churches and ministries that caused Lincoln to reject organized religion in the first place. Who can blame him? Furthermore, I think it can be reasonably argued that Lincoln was a better leader because of this rejection.

Had he adopted the ever popular arrogant, us/them theologies could he have negotiated the delicate nuances of leading a civil war and post civil war America to the place of reconciliation?

Consider, for example, this July 15, 1863 declaration by Lincoln.

Notice the inclusive, compassionate tone of this address that is so unlike the divisive, exclusive nature of the religious of his day. Remember, this was given during, yes during, the Civil War.

“I invite the people of the United States [on August 6]...to invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit...to guide the counsels of the government with wisdom adequate to so great a national emergency, and to visit with tender care and consolation throughout the length and breadth of our land all those who, through the vicissitudes of marches, voyages, battles, and sieges have been brought to suffer in mind, body, or estate, and finally to lead the whole nation through the paths of repentance and submission to the Divine will back to the perfect enjoyment of union and internal peace.”

Even more stunning to me is the following declaration that affects every American to this day.

“It has seemed to me fit and proper that they [gifts of God] should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens” [October 3, 1863].

Many days of Thanksgiving had been proclaimed by presidents before this one, but this is the one that finally turned into the national holiday that we celebrate annually. But note that this proclamation

took place nearly three years before the end of the Civil War.

Faith in God Outside of Organized Religion?

I suggest there is another way to look at both Lincoln and many of the so-called “lost” people of the world. Perhaps one doesn’t have to be a part of organized religion to have faith in God. You’ve probably already gone there, but it is fascinating to notice the similarities between Lincoln and his walk with God in his day and Jesus’ relationship with God in his time. Not only was Jesus harshly called what elitist Christians today would categorize as “lost;” he was killed for not conforming to the religious code of his day.

Jesus soundly rejected religion and its lording over people with impossible-to-keep rules and the assigning of extreme and exclusionary penalties for those who failed to comply (see Matthew 23:4). Unconditional love was to be the new way of life between fellow humans and God.

Somehow, without a church affiliation, without any theological training whatsoever, Lincoln discovered Jesus’ way of life and led our nation into it. Amazing. □

Glen Moyer is a pastor and author—a gifted communicator of the gospel, a storyteller whose insights illuminate the depths of God’s mercy and grace. Clothman is the name under which Glen writes his often humorous columns. You can discover more adventures of Clothman at www.Clothman.com.