



### The Faith of Abraham Lincoln

“. . . and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people . . .”

Speech to the New Jersey Senate, February 21, 1861

Abraham Lincoln's life was one of constant struggle from a hard-scrabble frontier to the presidency, from a log house to the White House; it was also a struggle for faith. Even at a young age, he did not rest comfortably in the intensely Calvinistic Baptist heritage of his parents. At times he amused himself and others by comic caricatures of the hellfire-and-brimstone preachers of his day. As a young man, he may well have passed through a period of skepticism. Rumors to this effect surfaced during his congressional race in 1846 against the redoubtable Peter

Cartwright, a popular Methodist circuit-rider. Lincoln distributed a handbill in rebuttal, which is a carefully phrased denial of the charge rather than an affirmation of faith.

The question of Lincoln's religion was a point of issue at the time, and so it has remained. Lincoln's acquaintances and even close friends gave widely varying statements, locating him at many points on a broad spectrum from unbeliever to devout Christian. Several things seem clear. Lincoln had no patience for the intense sectarian squabbling and doctrinal debates among the various denominations of the time. He frequently attended church, usually with his wife, but he never joined one. It is also true, however, that he was intimately acquainted with the Bible, reading it often and quoting and alluding to it frequently. Many observers, furthermore, have asserted that Lincoln's faith deepened under the burdens of the presidency during which he bore the weight of personal and national tragedy. His public statements and private reflections provide evidence of this.

There is another aspect to this question, hidden in plain sight. Lincoln's character glowed with a diamond-like radiance during the nation's darkest hour. In the bitterest of times, he lived "with malice toward none, with charity for all." What was the source of his luminous compassion? The doctrinal content of Lincoln's faith will never be fully known, but his way of life has been rightly revered from his time to our own. It may well be said that no American president has dealt less in conventional, self-serving religious platitudes—or followed the teachings of Jesus with greater fidelity.

Peter Cartwright, date unknown  
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