

The Personal Faith of Washington and Lincoln

If you were to ask the leading historians to list the five greatest presidents of the United States, I am certain beyond a reasonable doubt, that Washington and Lincoln would always be included in that short list. I am equally certain that, for many, these two presidents would be numbers one and two on the list. In recent years there have been attempts by unbelievers and atheists to disavow the personal faith of our founding fathers and great presidents. Allow me to present you with some documentation that not only did Washington and Lincoln believe, but they made it personal.

Thomas Jefferson said of George Washington, "Never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance."

I submit to you that the greatness of Washington is anchored in his belief on the Lord Jesus Christ. Allow me to give you the exact words from personal prayers written by the hand of our first president himself: "Accept of me for the merits of Thy Son Jesus Christ...Cover my sins with that absolute obedience of Thy dear Son... for the sake of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, offered upon the cross for me. Direct my thoughts, words and work. Wash away my sins in the immaculate blood of the Lamb. And purge my heart by Thy Holy Spirit from the dross of my natural corruption. Increase my faith in the sweet promises of the Gospel. Thou gavest Thy Son to die for me...Pardon my sins for the sake of Thy Son, my only Saviour, Jesus Christ."

The late Dr. D. James Kennedy commented: "Perhaps the most precious collection of all of Washington's writings are in a little diary of prayers that he kept. He started them when he was twenty years old. He called them his daily sacrifice. These prayers perhaps reveal more about him than anything else. If a person is truly a Christian he knows that he is a sinner and he is not trusting in his own righteousness, but rather he trusts in the merits and the blood of Christ." These are not the prayers of a deist - these are the words of a truly penitent and believing Christian.

Abraham Lincoln, although not one who walked in the ivy covered halls of higher academia, was certainly one of the best-read presidents we have ever had. Through his journeys of cognitive perusing, he was given to doubt. If you study his personality, you'll understand that many with his temperament often develop skepticism. He went through heartbreaking times, such as losing his birth mother so early in life. Through his life he was often disturbed by the loss of family members. There came a time before he was president that he and Mary Lincoln were totally devastated by the death of their precious son, Edward. When we were in Springfield last summer we came upon this piece of information that you will find in the archives of the history of First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois: "On February 1, 1850, Abraham and Mary Lincoln's second son, Edward, died. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church was asked to conduct the funeral. The minister at that time was Reverend Dr. James Smith and his service made a deep impression on both of the bereaved parents. Shortly after Edward's death Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln made a visit to Lexington and while there Mr. Lincoln found in the Todd library a thick volume entitled *The Christian's Defense*. He became particularly interested in it when he discovered that the author was Dr. James Smith, the pastor who had conducted his son's funeral. When Mr. Lincoln returned to Springfield from Lexington he sought Dr. Smith to talk over with him some of the religious doubts he had entertained. Dr. Smith tells us that as a result of these talks, Lincoln's doubts were shattered and from that time on he was a believer in the Christian faith. Thus began what proved to be a close and lasting friendship."

Lincoln's belief in the premise of the Christian faith seemed to be settled just after Edwards' death. But the catalyst that seemed to drive him toward the personal commitment of his life to Christ was the death of his son Willie and Gettysburg. Allow me to give you the excerpt from a message by

the late Dr. Kennedy on this subject: "Dr. Francis Vinton, rector of Trinity Church, came down (after Willie's death) to Washington from New York. He was a friend of the family, and was allowed in to see the President. He said, "Your son is alive in paradise with Christ, and you must not continue (to mourn)." Lincoln sat there as though he were in a stupor, and then his mind caught on to the words that Dr. Vinton had said, and he exclaimed, "Alive! Alive! Surely, sir, you mock me." "No, Mr. President, it is a great doctrine of the church. Jesus himself said that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Lincoln leaped to his feet and threw his arms around this pastor. He wept openly and sobbed, saying, "Alive! Alive! My boy is alive!" From that day there began a change in Lincoln that even his wife Mary noticed. His religious views began to dramatically change." There is a fascinating letter that comes to us from an Illinois clergyman who talked to Lincoln after this time. He questioned the president: "Mr. President, do you love Jesus?" After a long pause, Mr. Lincoln solemnly replied: "When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. Yes, I do love Jesus" (from the Lincoln Museum, Washington D.C.; The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles in the O.H., Oldroyd Collection. Published in 1883, page 366). Sometime after that, Mr. Noah Brooks, longtime friend and newspaper correspondent, said, "I have had many conversations with Mr. Lincoln, which were more or less of a religious character, and while I never tried to draw anything like a statement of his views from him, yet he freely expressed himself to me as having a hope of blessed immortality through Jesus Christ." Lincoln said that he had found the peace that had eluded him all of his life." Therefore, being "*justified by faith*" he now had peace with God. When a lady connected with the work of the Christian Commission later came to see him, he told her, "I had lived until my boy Willie died without realizing fully these things [about the Gospel]. It showed me my weakness as I had never felt it before, and if I can take what you have stated [as to what a Christian is] as a test, I think I can safely say that I know something of that change of which you speak; [which is called the new birth, to which Lincoln alluded in that very speech: "that this country might have a new birth of freedom"], and I will further add, that it has been my intention for some time, at a suitable opportunity, to make a public religious profession." Dr. Gurley was pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, which Lincoln attended regularly, not only on Sunday morning but also on Wednesday night. One Wednesday night he sat in a little anteroom right off the chancel with the door halfway open so that he would not disturb the worship of others. Dr. Gurley said that Lincoln had wanted to make a public profession of his faith on Easter Sunday morning. But then came Ford's Theater. He had just been elected for the second time six weeks before that. His spiritual understanding had matured greatly in the year and a half since Gettysburg.

Lincoln was shot April 14, 1865, Good Friday; he died in the morning of April 15. April 16, 1865 was Easter. Although he was not able to celebrate his faith in the company of his friends at the church he was attending, we feel certain he had the best Easter ever with our Lord and loved ones who preceded him.

Should you go to Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon, you will find these words of Jesus inscribed from John 11:25 and 26, "*...I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die....*" You may have this same assurance of salvation by grace if you make it personal. It's not real until it's personal!

- Pastor Pope -

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