

# The Gospel of Lincoln

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has achieved a status as American Scripture equaled only by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Washington's Farewell Address. In merely 271 words, the wartime president fused his epoch's most powerful and disruptive tendencies—nationalism, democratism, and German idealism—into a civil religion indebted to the language of Christianity, but devoid of its content.

That the Gettysburg Address achieves so much in so little space has a lot to do with what Lincoln didn't say on that November day in 1863. An odd vacancy runs through the speech. Pronouns without antecedents carried Lincoln's words away from the things he was supposedly talking about. The speech was abstracted from the place where he stood and the suffering he memorialized. Lincoln mentioned "a great battle-field" but not the town and surrounding farms of Gettysburg. He invoked the "fathers" but left them unnamed. He extolled the "proposition that all men are created equal" but left the Declaration of Independence implied.

He honored "brave men" but not a single commanding officer or soldier by name. He spoke of a "nation" five times but avoided anything as definite as geographic America, the United States, the republic, the Constitution, the North, the South, or even the Union. The Union was the very thing he had been insisting since 1861 that he fought to preserve. Perhaps most striking of all, even though this speech followed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation by nearly a year, he never mentioned slavery. Instead, we have "freedom."

Lincoln omits these tangible details of place and moment with such skill that readers do not notice the empty spaces. For anyone who does not already know something specific about the Civil War, the speech creates no picture in the mind. It could be adapted to almost any battlefield in any war for "freedom"

in the 19th century or thereafter. Perhaps the speech's vacancies account for its longevity and proven usefulness beyond 1863—even beyond America's borders. Lincoln's speech can be interpreted as a highly compressed Periclean funeral oration, as Garry Wills showed definitively in his 1992 book [\*Lincoln at Gettysburg\*](#). But unlike Pericles' performance, this speech names no Athens, no Sparta, no actual time, place, people, or circumstance at all.

Into this empty vessel Lincoln poured the nineteenth-century's potent ideologies of nationalism, democratism, and romantic idealism. Together, these movements have become inseparable from the modern American self-understanding. They have become part of our civil religion and what we likewise ought to call our "civil history" and "civil philosophy"—that is, religion, history, and philosophy pursued not for their own sake, not for the truth, but deployed as instruments of government to tell useful stories about a people and their identity and mission. Polybius praised Rome's forefathers for having invented religion for just this public purpose. Religion, history, and philosophy can all be domesticated to make them tools for the regime.

In 1967, sociologist Robert Bellah launched the modern career of "civil religion" as a concept, a way to examine how, on the one hand, the state adopts religious language, ritual, holidays, and symbolism to bind a nation together and how, on the other hand, it elevates its own values and ideas to the status of holy doctrine. Regarding the first type, University of Toronto political theorist Ronald Beiner recently defined civil religion as "the appropriation of religion by politics for its purposes." Lincoln had been doing this to the Bible since at least 1838. He ended his Lyceum Address by applying Matthew 16:18 to American liberty: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." More famously, in 1858 he quoted Matthew 12:25 to characterize the precarious state of the Union: "A house divided against itself shall not stand."

Such an appropriation of Christianity for politics dominates the Gettysburg Address, from its opening “four score” to its closing “shall not perish.” In the 1970s, literary scholar M.E. Bradford, in his essay, “The Rhetoric for Continuing Revolution,” identified the Gettysburg Address’s “biblical language” as the speech’s “most important formal property.” That is undoubtedly so. Lincoln drew from the King James Version’s archaic words and cadences, as he opened with the biblical-sounding “four score,” an echo of the Psalmist’s “three score and ten” years allotted to man on this earth. He continued with “brought forth,” the words in the Gospel of Luke that describe Mary’s delivery of Jesus—the first instance of what turns out to be a repeated image of conception, birth, life, death, and new birth, culminating in the promise of eternal life in the words “shall not perish”—a startling echo of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:16 (“whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life”).

Lincoln’s speech also engages the other side of civil religion—not the appropriation of the sacred for the purposes of the state, but the elevation of the secular into a political religion. Early in his career, Lincoln had explicitly promoted this kind of civil religion. Again in his 1838 Lyceum address, he called for fidelity to “the blood of the Revolution” and the Declaration, the Constitution, and the laws to serve as America’s sustaining “political religion” now that the founding generation was passing away. In 1863, Lincoln filled the Gettysburg Address with the words “dedicated,” “consecrated,” and “hallow.” The cumulative effect of this sacred language was to set the American Founding, the suffering of the Civil War, and the national mission apart from the mundane world and to transport the war dead and their task into a transcendent realm.

Bellah, a defender of American civil religion who wanted to globalize it in the post-Kennedy years, claimed that Lincoln and the Civil War gave America a “New Testament” for its civic

faith: "The Gettysburg symbolism ('...those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live') is Christian without having anything to do with the Christian church."

To this civil religion, Lincoln added his distinctive civil history and civil philosophy. Subtracting the "four score" years from 1863 takes us back to 1776. America was "brought forth" in 1776—not in 1787 or 1788, when the Constitution was ratified by state conventions. In his First Inaugural in 1861, the Republican president had insisted that the Union was older than the states: it had formed at least as early as 1774 and had organically "matured" through the war years. But now at Gettysburg, the Union vanished and the claim appeared that a "new nation" was born in 1776.

Lincoln's exclusive use of "nation" in this speech for the thing that was founded, tested, and awaited rebirth deserves careful notice. In the domestic and international context of the 1860s, this was a powerful word. In the first place, it answered the most contested political question from 1787 to 1861—and not just between the North and the South but between anyone who argued over whether a citizen's allegiance belonged first to his state or to the Union. "Nation" swept aside all other options. Secondly, the mid-nineteenth century was the age of Europe's wars of national unification. To be a "nation" in 1863 meant something quite different from what it had before the French Revolution. It now signified an organic "people," unified at the core, and raised up by a Providential history to fulfill a unique mission.

Key to understanding that mission is the idealism embedded in Lincoln's civil philosophy. That philosophy relied on what Lincoln famously called a "proposition," a word exposing Lincoln's highly abstract and ahistorical way of talking about America. He took the Declaration's affirmation that "all men are created equal," turned it into a proposition, dedicated the nation to it, and then pulled all of American history through and from that proposition.

Lincoln's propositional apriorism mirrors the German idealism imported into the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century (at times secondhand via France and England). We know from Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, that Lincoln admired Boston's radical Unitarian and Transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker. Parker, who died in 1860, had been one of the principal conduits of avant-garde German philosophy and theology into New England. We also know from Herndon that in 1858 he brought Lincoln a copy of Parker's 1850 sermon "The Effect of Slavery on the American People." Herndon recalled that Lincoln "liked especially the following expression, which he marked with a pencil, and which he in substance afterwards used in his Gettysburg address: 'Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people.'"

Just above these words, which Herndon paraphrased, Parker referred to the "American idea." Parker warned of "two principles" struggling for "mastery" in the United States—only one of them was truly the "American idea." "I so name it," he said,

*because it seems to me to lie at the basis of all our truly original, distinctive and American institutions. It is itself a complex idea, composed of three subordinate and more simple ideas, namely: The idea that all men have unalienable rights; that in respect thereof, all men are created equal; and that government is to be established and sustained for the purpose of giving every man an opportunity for the enjoyment and development of all these unalienable rights. This idea demands, as the proximate organization thereof, a democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a government after the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God; for shortness' sake, I will call it the idea of Freedom.*

Read alongside the Gettysburg Address, Parker's contribution

to the speech is unmistakable. At points the wording is nearly identical. This is not to say that Lincoln plagiarized from Parker, the point is to draw attention to how much Lincoln compressed into his brief speech. His civil philosophy, indebted to German Idealists like Parker, distilled something as complex, diverse, untidy, and contested as the formation of the American republic into one proposition, and then from that fragment of a fragment of the past extrapolated both the essence of America in 1863 and its purpose in the future. No part of any sentence of any document, even if that document is the Declaration of Independence, can carry this load.

Embedded in the Gettysburg Address, the proposition defined the making of America and why it fought a costly war. We cannot know how Lincoln would have wielded the proposition in pursuit of America's postwar domestic and foreign policy; his death in 1865 left that question open, as Republicans and even Democrats used the martyred president and his words to endorse everything from limited government to consolidated power, from anti-imperialism to overseas expansion. Under all this confusion, however, Lincoln's propositional nation helped move America from the old exceptionalism to the new. He helped America become less like itself and more like the emerging European nation-states of mid-century, each pursuing its God-given benevolent mission.

A propositional nation like Lincoln's is "teleocratic," in philosopher Michael Oakeshott's use of the word, as distinct from "nomocratic." That is, it governs itself by the never-ending pursuit of an abstract "idea" rather than by a regime of law that allows individuals and local communities to live ordinary lives and to find their highest calling in causes other than the nation-state. Lincoln left all Americans, North and South, with a purpose-driven nation.

One hundred and fifty years ago, President Lincoln, in the midst of a long and brutal war, deployed a powerful civil religion, civil history, and civil philosophy to superimpose

one reading of American history onto any competitors. Ever since, generations of Americans have come to believe that we have always been a democratic nation animated by an Idea. The alternatives have been excluded from the national creed as heresy. The way most Americans today interpret the Declaration of Independence, the purposes of the War for Independence, the principles that underlie America's Constitution, the causes and consequences of the Civil War, and the calling of the propositional nation to the rest of the world comes largely from the Gettysburg Address. To the degree we allow Lincoln's words to mediate how we read American history, they will continue to settle, preemptively, the most contested questions about America's origin, purpose, and destiny.

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