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With Charity for All

Matthew S. Holland

At the invitation of Associate Dean Scott Cameron, I am here to talk to you about some things that I've recently published in a book called *Bonds of Affection: Civic Charity and the Making of America*. I'm coming at this as a political scientist—in particular, a political theorist—but there are lots of interesting connections, I believe, to the study of law. I want to talk about an important moment in the development of American political life and culture in Lincoln's second inaugural speech—one of his last and, I believe, very best speeches. To appreciate what he has to say here, though, we must first consider one of his very first speeches.

Lincoln's speech to the Young Men's Lyceum on January 27, 1838, is one of his earliest published speeches, given just after he moved to Springfield, Illinois, to open what would become a very successful law practice. In the heart of this speech, he said:

Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother . . . ; let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.

Lincoln greatly admired and loved the law. He thought it was absolutely essential that the rule of law prevail, even to the point of declaring that we must obey bad laws, or unjust laws, because to just choose which laws we will live will exacerbate tendencies to mob rule. Accordingly, he urged that America adopt a "political religion." By this he meant that the country should collectively work at giving reverence to the law, preaching all over the land—in churches and schools and homes—how critical it is for everyone to obey the law at all times. This political religion was a kind

of extra resource he thought was needed to preserve democratic order and freedom.

In Lincoln's view, political religion was not dependent upon a robust view of the god of the Bible or upon any of the other doctrines found in scripture. The fact is that most evidence suggests Lincoln was not much of a Christian believer in his youth. Political religion was purely about bringing a sense of sacredness to the law and fostering a religious commitment to it. He thought it necessary because of a tendency of what he called "our baser passions" to get the best of us. We are given to hatred, and we are given to revenge, and these passions, if not kept in check, will overwhelm the system. They will cause us to skirt the law or carry out our hatred upon another person. And if that happens, he said, we will lose our affections for government and the law and we will be ripe for tyranny. Lincoln began his speech saying that the only way we could lose our liberty in America is internally. We'll always be strong enough and protected enough through our geography, through our natural resources, and through our latent sense of patriotism to rebuff an outside attack. But we could become vulnerable to tyranny if we become detached from a fervent commitment to due process and the substance of duly passed law.

This was the early Lincoln. But then a remarkable change came over him. By the time of the Civil War, Lincoln had gone through a religious transformation. He never joined a particular church or confessed Jesus as his savior, but by the end of his presidency, he had developed what could only be considered a robust biblical sense and faith. And this newfound faith caused him to urge a kind of political religion. For Lincoln, America was in critical need of a civic faith that not only would foster reverence for law but would more actively encourage a Christlike spirit of love, concern, and forgiveness.

Now, let me say a word about the Bible and charity and the Civil War. One of the key influences leading the North into the Civil War was a piece of literature: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. It was the single most important political novel that had ever been written. The first year it was published, the only book to outsell it was the Bible. It was a blockbuster; there had been nothing like it before in the history of the country. Why did this book have such a profound effect? In my book I argue that it was the nature of the chief protagonist, Uncle Tom.

In our culture *Uncle Tom* is a pejorative term. It conjures up an image of a shuffling, self-loathing, subservient soul who is trying to cater to his white master in order to get ahead within plantation life. That's a very different view than you get if you read the novel itself. There, Uncle Tom is a strong, powerful character who repeatedly makes great efforts of self-sacrifice to protect his family and other slaves on the plantation, finally giving up his own life and emerging as what can only be read as a Christ figure. This had a dramatic effect on northern Protestants who read about

this slave figure from a population that heretofore had not been considered on a par with fellow whites. The readers saw this black slave practicing Christian charity with a kind of Christlike quality superior to anything they saw among themselves, and they said, “How is it that this man could do that in slavery and be treated in this way?” So, at some level then, I argue that it was distinct ideals of charity and Christianity that took us into the Civil War. Such ideals, triggered by this powerful move, were critical to prompt Northern determination to end the grossly uncharitable and unjust practice of slavery. Thus, when Harriet Beecher Stowe came to the White House and Lincoln purportedly said, “So here’s the little lady that started this Great War,” he was not exaggerating too much.

Now let’s turn to Lincoln’s second inaugural speech at the end of the Civil War. I want to share some assessments of the speech and then explain why I think it is the most remarkable speech ever given in American political life.

First of all, Alfred Kazin, a noted public intellectual on the left, calls this speech the most remarkable address in our history and the only one that has reflected literary genius. And George Will, from the right, calls it “the only presidential inaugural that merits a place in the nation’s literature.” You can, I think, read the second inaugural like you would read a classic piece of literature; it operates on that profound level of depth and wisdom.

The speech opened in an unexpected way. Lincoln began by saying that this was not the occasion for a long speech, like his first inaugural. For that speech, Lincoln noted, there was good reason and real need to lay out a detailed argument concerning what the country was facing and where it should go. Consequently the speech was a finely tuned piece of jurisprudence, a careful reading of the constitutional prerogatives Lincoln thought he had as president. In short, it was a clear and crisp summary of the constitutional limits on what he thought the North could and couldn’t do vis-à-vis slavery, and it was also a constitutional argument about what the Southern states could and couldn’t do vis-à-vis succession. At the time of the second inaugural, Lincoln suggested there just was not as much to say. After four years of war, the war was still going. And while he stressed that victory depended on the progress of arms and that things seemed to be going in a reasonably satisfactory way, he gave no ultimate prediction of what would happen. Now this was just remarkable. Why? It had something to do with the setting. At the moment he was speaking, Lee was pinned at Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. Grant was dug in to the west; Lee obviously couldn’t go into the North; and Sherman was marching through the South with his swathe of destruction in an unstoppable fashion. So the biggest army, the best general, and the capital of the Confederacy were right there in the clutches of the North, and everybody knew it. Four years of the costliest war we had ever fought and the enemy

was within our clutches, and Lincoln refused to predict victory and say anything in concrete terms about what the country would need to do after victory.

How many politicians do you know who would not take every opportunity possible to claim credit and predict victory, especially in such a costly cause at what appeared to be such a triumphant moment? But Lincoln wouldn't even say it looked like they were going to win. He made no prediction; he just didn't speak about it. Why not? Well, I think this odd start has something to do with the unprecedented ending of his speech. What was that unprecedented ending? Why was it unprecedented? Well, again, let me build this up a little bit more. Let's talk about the costs of the war. These are statistics I've pulled from the federal archives put out from the Department of Defense about casualties associated with each of our wars up until the most recent one.

The Civil War had 364,000 casualties. You've probably heard all your life that there were more people killed in the Civil War than all other wars put together, but these statistics do not bear that out. What is going on here?

Student: It's a proportional figure.

We can say something even stronger than that.

Student: It's only soldiers?

Okay, you're getting warmer.

Student: It's just the Union forces.

Yes, it is just the Union forces. The Confederate soldiers did not fight for the U.S. Army, so their deaths are not counted. So what you have to do is take that number and double it. Then, if you extend the analysis out a year or two and count soldiers who died after the war from disease or amputation, you get about a million deaths. So there truly were more people killed in this war than all other wars put together. Proportionately it's astounding, but even in raw numbers alone it's astounding. And that's just the death figures; that's not the number wounded and that's not saying anything about the women and children who were left behind to fend for themselves. It's not saying anything about the damage done, especially in the South after Sherman's marches: the farms that were ripped up, the railroads that were destroyed, the homes that were blown up, the economy ruined. So many people's lives were ruined. It's just hard to calculate and fathom the price we paid as a country for these four years of war.

So that was going on at the moment when Lincoln stood up to give this address. I also want to personalize it a little more and talk about the war's cost not just to the country but to Lincoln himself. Lincoln was savaged in the press—not just the Southern press but also the European press and even the Northern press. In one cartoon he was made out to be a vampire figure hovering over the pure figure of Columbia representing America. In another cartoon he was personified as death itself, but death attired in a

Caesarean wreath as a Roman dictator, depicting that the bloodshed and war were from Lincoln's evil ambitions for power and domination. On the other hand, there were images that captured the view many people had that Lincoln was not a commanding figure at all, showing him as a pathetic middle-of-the-road character, a cross between a baboon and a hellish imp. These depictions were what he saw when he picked up the paper in the morning even as he was doing everything in his power to hold this country together and eliminate the great injustice of slavery.

The toll all of this took on Lincoln was vividly captured in Lincoln's own face. Compare the photograph of him taken just a few months before he became president with one of the last known photos we have of him taken just four or five years later. You can see what this experience did to him physically, adding deep subcutaneous lines of worry. He looks 20 years older, if not more. That is the Lincoln I want you to have in mind: that war-weary, melancholy, devastated Lincoln who led this country through this incomprehensibly costly war. And now finally the South was in the country's grasp. If ever there was a moment to gloat or to speak out in tones of vindication and revenge not only against the South but also against his own political allies—including cabinet members, several of whom had been disloyal to him and publicly ridiculed him—this was it. Yet what did he say? He looked out at that audience and said:

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 which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace.

I have read a fair amount of American and world history. And nowhere in that reading have I come across anything like this. There Lincoln was, standing not just as the president or leader of a country but as a military leader leading a country in the middle of civil war. And there, in the middle of all the bloodshed and personal abuse, Lincoln stood up and said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all." It was just an absolutely breathtaking, unprecedented moment in human history to have a military leader stand up and say something like that. Where on earth did he find the power, the strength, and the direction to do this?

Let me just boil it down to two things. One comes from what I would call his anthropology, his view of human nature. All through his life Lincoln saw people as the same. He saw that human nature was relatively consistent wherever you were. If you saw significant differences in behavior, you should chalk things up primarily to the environment people were in and thus be quite generous in your assessments of others. All through his life he effectively said to the North: "Don't get on your moral high horse. If you lived in the South, you would probably be proslavery too. There are such

strong incentives financially; there is such a strong culture and tradition of it; be a little bit careful about being morally self-righteous.” Lincoln efficiently emphasized this sense of human sameness and unity in his extensive use of pronouns throughout the second inaugural address. First there was the repeated theme of “all.” Speaking of the war, Lincoln indicated that *all* thoughts were anxiously directed toward it. *All* dreaded the war. *All* sought to avert it. *All* deprecated war. *All* thought the interest of slavery was somehow the cause of war. This theme of “all” was followed by repeated references to “neither,” “each,” and “both.” Neither party expected the war to last as long as it did. Neither anticipated that slavery would end before the war would. Each looked for an easier triumph. Both read the same Bible. Each invoked God’s aid. The prayers of both could not be answered; neither side’s had been answered fully. Again and again Lincoln put the North and the South on the same moral footing. But this alone fails to explain the depth and power of Lincoln’s sense of mercy and forgiveness.

The second and most critical key here comes from Lincoln’s religious transformation. This was the mature Lincoln, the believing Lincoln, the biblical Lincoln who got to the point of charity in part because of his relatively new biblical outlook. Here Lincoln advocated a kind of political religion that went well beyond a simple, sacred reverence for law. What he came to see and teach for purposes of political and national well being was that there was a God with His own purposes, and if God punished people according to injustice, which the Bible said that He did, then those who introduced and brought about those injustices had better watch out. And it seemed to Lincoln very likely that slavery was one of those offenses, and thus the North and the South should be expecting retribution. Why? Why could Lincoln say that God gave this awful war to both the North and the South if most of the North, at the time, had eliminated slavery? In part it was because Northern economic interests still depended upon and did business with Southern, slave-owning powers. Furthermore, the North, even if mostly free of slavery at the time, had practiced slavery for a long time. Lincoln wasn’t just talking about the payment for slavery now but for 250 years of slavery. For more than two centuries many of the Northern states had practiced slavery. If there was a God of justice—and every drop of blood drawn with the lash of a slave master had to be paid for with another drawn by the sword of the soldier—then God was still just. Thus Lincoln concluded that God was likely giving this war to both the North and the South.

Now this, I argue, helps explain not only the remarkable, charitable ending but also the unprecedented start of this speech. Lincoln couldn’t predict the end of the war, even though all signs were pointing toward it. Why? Because it was not his war; it was God’s war. God was in charge. God had His own purposes. They were not always fully fathomable—rarely are they fathomable to the human mind. God was doing something here, and

so we had to be patient and let it unfold. That was the kind of faith Lincoln came to by the end of the war. And, by seeing both the North and the South responsible for the war and the war as a matter of God's judgments against both sides, he took away from the North a moral high ground from which to seek revenge on the South for starting and sustaining the war, and he took from the South the low ground of resentment and retaliation against the North for the brutal, bulldog tactics finally required to end the war. What Lincoln accomplished in this masterpiece of literature and political thinking was to take away the impetus for both of these hateful impulses so that both the North and the South had to come together, forgive each other, and move forward in unity. To say all of this while still effectively leading the troops in battle, was, again, a kind of unmatched moment in political and military history. Also, it bears repeating that, as in his address to the Young Men's Lyceum, Lincoln was still concerned in the second inaugural address with the threats that human hatred posed for democratic health and survival. The big difference now was that he went beyond just making human law sacred as a way to minimize the effects of human hatred. Rather, he employed a recognizably Judeo-Christian worldview and ethic to try to root out hatred itself.

What Lincoln tried to do in the second inaugural address—heal a nation through notions of mercy and love—was cut short by his assassination a month later. But in some ways, at least in the long term, Lincoln's untimely death only added to the power of his second inaugural message. Within hours of his death there developed around Lincoln what I call a Christological myth. This myth used to be a lot better known in our American culture than it is today. Frederick Douglass, a noted black abolitionist, was the first one to foster this notion. When called upon extemporaneously to say some words at a hastily called memorial for Lincoln, he said that while Christ's blood atoned for our sins, perhaps Lincoln's blood was required to atone for the sin of slavery in this nation.

There are some remarkable similarities between Christ and Lincoln. Christ was born in a manger; Lincoln, a log cabin. Both had rustic beginnings in life. We know there are traditions of Christ's saintly mother; Lincoln famously speaks of his "angel" mother as the most important influence in his life. Christ grew up in Nazareth; Lincoln, on the American frontier. Christ was a man of sorrows; in that last picture of Lincoln you can see the heaviness and the burdens he suffered regularly from depression. Christ made a triumphant entry into Jerusalem a week before He was crucified; Lincoln made a triumphant entry into Richmond exactly one week before he was killed.

Lincoln was in Richmond with his son Tad. He came off a boat unannounced, slipping down without fanfare. Slave populations now freed gathered around him and started to call him "Messiah," started to kneel down before him. Lincoln said, "Don't kneel to me. Save that for your

Maker, who made you free. That is not me.” But their impulse was to see him as their savior and to worship him. Christ was crucified; Lincoln was shot. Lincoln was shot on Good Friday, the day the traditional Christian world recognizes as the crucifixion day of Christ. He didn’t die immediately. It was a long, slow, painful death just like crucifixion was. The bullet went into the back of his head and lodged behind his eye. He was in immense pain. He was attended to through the night while his wife and various figures of government kept watch. He moaned and labored and breathed through the night and didn’t die till seven o’clock the next morning.

At the turn of the century the most famous man in the world was a man of letters, author of some of the world’s finest novels. Among his words, Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Lincoln was . . . bigger than his country—bigger than all the Presidents together. Why? Because he loved his enemies as himself. . . . He was a Christ in miniature.”

The image of Lincoln as a second Christ is a two-edged sword for Latter-day Saints. On one hand we have to remind ourselves that there is one God and we are to have no other gods before Him. Lincoln was not a god. He did not atone for the sins of America. That was done by somebody else long ago and in an infinite way that Lincoln never could. We must not fall into the trap of revering him as a kind of deity or a god that he wasn’t or worshipping him in a way that would be blasphemous. On the other hand, to do as so many people have done and try to make Lincoln just a man, an ordinary politician driven by shameless self-interest and self-advancement, is to miss this great figure who is great because he saw something powerful in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

As citizens of this great country, we must learn from Lincoln. In moments of dissension and difficulty—moments you will face as you practice law—you must, even as you fight with a “firmness in the right” as Lincoln did, remember that your highest and holiest obligation is to love your enemies as yourself. And the greatest exemplar and teacher of that is Christ, of whom I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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