On Lincoln's "Instrumentality" to End Slavery: Meditation on the Divine Will and the Emancipation Proclamation

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On November 17, 1903, Secretary of State John Hay stood to address a meeting at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. President Theodore Roosevelt was seated beside him in what was once the Lincoln family pew.[1] The event honored President Lincoln's four-year association with the church and his friendship with the late pastor, the Reverend Doctor Phineas Densmore Gurley. Hay declared that "Abraham Lincoln, one of the mightiest masters of statecraft that history has known, was also one of the most devoted and faithful servants of Almighty God who has ever sat in the high places of the world." Hay held up a note he said was written by Lincoln when he was "perplexed and afflicted beyond the power of human help, by the disasters of war, the wrangling of parties, and the inexorable and constraining logic of his own mind . . . as he struggled with the greatest decision of his life." Lincoln's former secretary then read aloud:

> The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be, wrong. God cannot be *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed*

1. "President Attends," *Washington Evening Star*, November 17, 1903; Wallace Radcliffe, ed., *Memorial Volume, 1803–1903, Our 100th Anniversary, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church* (Washington D.C., 1903), 97–99. Transcription of Hay remarks with entire Meditation.

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> the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.[2]

Hay was reading a note that he found among the papers in Lincoln's desk after the president's death. He gave it the title "Meditation on the Divine Will" and made it public in 1872 to refute William Herndon's depiction of Lincoln as a religious skeptic. Hay said that the note represented the president's "double sense of responsibility to human duty and divine power. It shows the awful sincerity of a perfectly honest soul trying to bring itself into closer communion with his Maker."[3]

Hay speculated that the Meditation was written near the end of September 1862. He reasoned that the note reflected Lincoln's anxiety over recent battle losses and pressures over issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, editor Roy Basler instead gave weight to the observation of Attorney General Edward Bates that Lincoln "seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish" after the Battle of Second Bull Run and adjusted Hay's guess to September 2, 1862. Hay's description of what the Meditation represented is useful but not sufficient. The close connection between religion and culture of that period made the use of doctrinal concepts especially powerful in political arguments. There is reason to doubt that the Meditation was as Hay insisted: "absolutely detached from any earthly considerations."[4]

2. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 403–4 (hereafter cited as *CW*). As I will show later, a more reasonable date for the Meditation is on or about July 18, 1862. For an assessment of the Meditation by Lincoln's secretaries, see John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century Co., 1890), 6:341–42. Today, the document resides among Lincoln Manuscripts, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. The title is shortened to Meditation for this paper.

3. Radcliffe, *Memorial Volume*, 98. John Hay's first public reading of the Meditation, in 1871 or 1872, can be found in a speech not published during his lifetime, "The Heroic Age in Washington," n.d., in Michael Burlingame, ed., *At Lincoln's Side: John Hay's Civil War Correspondence and Selected Writings* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 127. On Herndon's view of Lincoln as a religious skeptic, see, for example, William H. Herndon to Francis E. Abbot, February 18, 1870, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press for the Knox College Lincoln Studies Center, 2016), 77–81(hereafter cited as *HOL: Letters*).

4. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, *CW*, 5:404n; Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 6:342. For Bates's comments, see *CW*, 5:486n.

Modern writers agree that the Meditation represents a studied faith awareness that was different from any pre-presidential sentiments, and they suggest alternative purposes and dates. But was it a venting of anguish and frustration at inexplicable battle losses, according to Roy Basler and his editorial staff; a "scribbled" exercise to sort out his anxieties about the direction of the war, as Allen Guelzo argues; a pious draft of a grander work, as Douglas Wilson suggests; or simply a devout reflection on God's mysterious intentions, as William Wolf maintains?[5] This paper proposes something else. John Hay's many listeners at the New York Avenue church who had been raised in the Old School Presbyterian faith tradition would have heard what other analysts have not. They would have appreciated Lincoln's shrewd affirmation of how God had shaped his life to be a divine agent for a great moral purpose.

Abraham Lincoln's religious faith was a matter of continual intellectual struggle. The man had trained himself to think his way through every important aspect of his life, while repressing the formidable instincts of his heart. He entered adult life during a powerful upheaval in American religion. A resurgence of evangelical Protestantism that has been called the Second Great Awakening unfolded over the first half of the nineteenth century. It enabled free-thinking philosophies that undercut the predominant subculture of conservative Calvinism. This meant the freedom to interpret the Bible less literally and more for its "substance." Arguments over the scriptural status of slavery led to the most populous Protestant denominations dividing into northern and southern sects before 1850. When the Civil War began, the largest cohesive church with congregations throughout the country was the Old School Presbyterian.[6] Lincoln remained aloof from the most tendentious of the debates through his generic belief in fatalism. His practicable faith was in the Founders' inspired vision that "all men are created equal." To this Lincoln coupled a corollary that slavery, though

5. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, *CW*, 5:404n; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: the End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 150; Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 256; William J. Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), 148.

6. Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 1–5. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 391–96, shows the divergence of Bible interpretations over race and slavery as a prelude to the Civil War.

legal, was immoral. He would only engage more fully in theological reflection when he reentered politics after 1850.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Lincoln demonstrated an evolving appreciation of a "higher power" governing the world.[7] His profession of fatalism has been well documented. This philosophy held that that the universe operated by fixed rules and laws of nature established by the Creator. Under these laws, all human behavior was animated by self-interested motives. Lincoln's fatalism derived from his family's early church experience and his difficult life on the frontier. The hard-shell Baptist religion was deeply rooted in conviction of utter human depravity and inability to achieve salvation without divine assistance. But God was a remote and foreboding force in the backwoods that, through the arbitrary infliction of disease and death, made any form of personal redemption seem unlikely.[8] When Lincoln was confronted over his views in the 1846 Illinois election campaign against Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright, he asserted that his fatalism was the "same opinion held by several of the Christian denominations." The foundation of Christian beliefs is a personal relationship with God who is involved with every creature and in all events, and to whom all are morally accountable for their actions. Lincoln seemed to disregard these critical attributes. Theologians of that era described fatalism as "a distinct scheme of unbelief" and "antichristian."[9]

For years, Lincoln labored under the certainty that he was so spiritually depraved that he was unable to make choices that could redeem him in the eyes of God. He told his law partner William Herndon that men were captive to their own corrupt character and self-centered motives; that "there was no freedom of the moral will." God's foreknowledge of events meant that He operated everything. Humans were powerless to act independently. Lincoln's spiritual helplessness persisted even as his personal prospects began to thrive. Herndon described Lincoln's ambition as "the little engine that knew no rest." Lincoln acknowledged his desire for advancement in the world. It must have seemed to him that even his work to undermine the immoral practice of slavery only came from a motive to feed his

7. Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William E. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 152–55.

8. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 29–38, 119.

9. Francis Wharton, *Treatise on Theism and on the Modern Skeptical Theories* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1859), 330, 336; Charles Hodge, "The Latest Form of Infidelity," *Essays and Reviews Selected from the Princeton Review* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 120–21 (hereafter cited as *Essays and Reviews*).

insatiable desire for fame and was therefore damning in the eyes of God.[10]

Rather than allude to any denominational faith, Lincoln preached Whig Party politics. Its policies linked a concern with individual development and morality to the obligations of citizenship. The Whigs embraced a Calvinist view that required the truly conscientious individual to be simultaneously self-interested and principled, economically motivated and culturally committed. Lincoln lectured that it was vital for the nation to make respect for law and constitutional institutions a "*political religion*." His principles mirrored what the Old School Calvinists described as good Presbyterian behavior. Lincoln was likely aware of this when he concurred with his wife's decision to rent a pew at the Old School First Presbyterian Church in Springfield in 1852.[11]

Lincoln's views on important social standards aligned with the teachings of the Old School's most prominent theologian, Charles Hodge of the Princeton Theological Seminary.[12] Hodge asserted that passion had no place in religion or civil discourse because it distorted the truth and prevented genuine understanding. Unimpassioned reason was the only hope for preserving our legacies of law and sacred texts for future generations. Social order was to be protected through education, temperance, and respect for traditions. In all vices, including slavery, hate the sin and not the sinner. Lincoln differed from Hodge on slavery. To Lincoln, it was a wholly immoral practice. To Hodge, slavery was not forbidden by the Bible and therefore not sin per se. But enslavers, Hodge wrote, had a responsibility to God to

10. William H. Herndon to Jesse W. Weik, February 6, 1887, *HOL: Letters*, 231; William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln* (Cleveland, Ohio: Fine Editions Press, 1949), 304.

11. Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838, *CW*, 1:112; Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 53–56. Carwardine notes that the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield drew supporters of the conservative south while the Second Presbyterian Church attracted the radicals from the New England diaspora. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 53. See also Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 195; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 418–19.

12. Carwardine describes Hodge's political philosophy and his effective means of projecting influence through Princeton graduates (such as Phineas D. Gurley). He argues that Hodge's "many Presbyterian colleagues helped to establish the Whigs as the party of moral order, benevolence, respectability, and social harmony." Richard J. Carwardine, "The Politics of Charles Hodge," in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 268. See also Charles Hodge, "Emancipation," *Essays and Reviews*, 534–37.

follow rules of decency in the practice. Therefore, religion should not proscribe all slaveholders, but only those who denied their bondsmen access to the Bible and violated the sanctity of the family. When Lincoln had to separate his "oft-expressed *personal* wish" from his "*official*" view of slavery, the official position lost its moral indignation. He held back from publicly judging slaveholders and sounded like Hodge.[13]

Lincoln decried what appeared to be Old School situational morality, but only in private. In notes that were never used in speeches, he practiced arguments against southern Presbyterian authors who justified slavery as the best way to organize society. Lincoln railed that "the sum of pro-slavery theology seems to be this: "Slavery is not universally right, nor yet universally wrong; it is better for some people to be slaves; and, in such cases, it is the Will of God that they be such." Lincoln sarcastically noted, "certainly there is no contending against the Will of God; but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases."[14] But by common agreement, the Old School simply refused to mention slavery from the pulpit and focused on presenting scripture as the guide for personal life choices. Lincoln recognized that this was the preference of most Americans who lived in, and along the border with, the slave states. Historian Allen C. Guelzo writes that Lincoln's "idea of providence [and] his love for rationality and his cautious mainstream Whiggism pulled him to the Old School."[15] It was this Old School reserve on judgment, spiritual humility, and thoughtful reliance on God's influence rather than the passionate moral outrage of less conservative churches that proved an inviting association to the mature Lincoln.

The church bond was also helpful during his campaign for president. Lincoln's supporters pointed out the candidate's connection with the First Presbyterian Church to deflect charges that he was not "attendant on the preaching of the Gospel."[16] He was an infrequent attender who never became a church member, and his references to

13. Charles Hodge, "Slavery," *Essays and Reviews*, 127–29; Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, *CW*, 5:389.

14. Lincoln, Fragment on Pro-Slavery Theology, *CW*, 3:204–5; Ronald C. White, *Lincoln in Private: What His Most Personal Reflections Tell Us About Our Greatest President* (New York: Random House, 2021), 105–16.

15. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 154, 325; Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*, 195. Winger goes so far as to say Lincoln participated in Old School denominational politics.

16. Albert Hale to Theron Baldwin, May 31, 1860, in Michael Burlingame, ed., *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 95.

doctrinal matters were random. Lincoln once used the term "natural theology" to prove slavery was morally wrong. He observed, "God gave man a mouth to receive bread, and his hand has a right to carry bread to his mouth without controversy."[17] But, this was the doctrine of moral self-determination that antislavery religionists and abolitionists held. Lincoln was not an abolitionist and did not press the natural theology theme with any fervor. His understanding of God before his presidency seemed to be in the secular American tradition of "civil religion," as a socially expected acknowledgment of a Creator or mystical Ruler of Nations.[18] By the time he entered the White House, Lincoln was comfortable with Old School preaching and social traditions, while seemingly innocent of its faith dogmas.

In the months before his inauguration, Lincoln began to suggest his belief in the traditional Christian God who is always present. On the Springfield train platform in 1861, as he was leaving for Washington, Lincoln asked his friends to pray that he may be guided by that God who can "go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good."[19] This came close to the omnipresent God who governs all events in the world. Yet, even in his first inaugural address, Lincoln reverted to a description of God as a distant, judgmental force that would favor the goal of one or the other contestants in the impending war: Union with slavery, or separate nations with slavery. Historian of religion Mark A. Noll described this as an absurdly limited view of God's power as a sort of "cosmic referee," accepting whatever humans had decided.[20]

At the close of 1861, President Lincoln was confident enough to tell Congress that "the progress of [the war] is plainly in the right direction." He recommended that several temporary functions be created where normal government processes were disrupted. But, he insisted, as in the case of military civil courts in conflict zones, it was important that such changes cease when ordinary means could be

17. Lincoln, Speech at Hartford, Connecticut, March 5, 1860, *CW*, 4:3.

18. Melvin B. Endy, Jr., "Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion: A Reinterpretation," *Church History*, 44 (June 1975), 229–31. Endy defines civil religion as the political expression of "the mythic belief that the United States is the latter-day chosen nation brought into existence and providentially guided as a fundamentally new social order to serve uniquely as a 'city on a hill' for the rest of humankind. This nondenominationally specific notion was reflected in the Founders ideals for 'nature's God.'" On Lincoln's use of Whig religious rhetoric to appeal more broadly to Illinois voters, see also Jon Meacham, *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2006) 114–16; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 57–63, 120–22; Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 34–36.

19. Lincoln, Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois, February 11, 1861, *CW*, 4:190.

20. Noll, *America's God*, 430–31.

reestablished in peace. He reminded military officers that the laws of war mandated that any property confiscations for "military necessity" were not to be permanent and were only to last as long as the emergent need.[21] Twelve months later, events proved so disruptive that many measures had been taken that were previously unthinkable. Lincoln urged support for his new emancipation policies by reminding the nation that "the occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. . . . And then we shall save our country."[22] The events of 1862 were certainly dreadful enough to send the president in search of his own new dogmas to lead a traumatized nation.[23]

Before he became president, Lincoln's plan for ending slavery included terms he thought would encourage the South to voluntarily end the practice gradually, with compensation and colonization. He accepted that the Constitution protected slavery where it existed, leaving it to the states themselves to remove their peculiar institution. From this, Lincoln described a passive providential view of the actual end of slavery that relied on the natural laws and processes of his fatalistic beliefs. "It will occur," he wrote, "in the best way possible for both races in God's own good time," probably over 100 years. In this letter to George Robertson of Kentucky in 1855, Lincoln despaired of prospects for "peaceful, voluntary emancipation." This, Lincoln wrote, presented the political question: "Can we as a nation continue together permanently—forever—half slave and half free?" He admitted that "the problem is too mighty for me. May God, in his mercy, superintend the solution."[24] On reentering politics, Lincoln had developed a "right principle of action" on the vital issues of slavery and union. This was structured to affect listeners' motives and had two amalgamated sides. First, promote national unity and "faithfully observe" all constitutional guarantees that protected slavery. Second, the national government had to stigmatize slavery—to declare it immoral—by "treating it as a wrong that must and will come to an end."[25]

The first emancipation plan Lincoln devised as president was built on his fatalistic principles. He hoped to manipulate the financial

21. Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1861, *CW*, 5:49, 37.

22. Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862, *CW*, 5:537.

23. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 343. Describes the compensation amendment proposal in the 1862 Message to Congress as disguising the Emancipation Proclamation as merely an effort "to prod slaveowners into gradual emancipation."

24. Lincoln to George Robertson, August 5, 1855, *CW*, 2:317–18.

25. Lincoln, Speech at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, *CW*, 2:266; J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18–23.

motives of slaveholders in the loyal border states. In March 1862, the president proposed that the federal government buy their human property if those slave states abolished the practice over time.[26] The scheme complied with his concept of providence by creating a voluntary system within which God could peacefully superintend this very rational and reasonable extinction process. Lincoln urged acceptance of the compensation plan to demoralize the rebel states and end the war more quickly. The plan was certainly a creative and worthwhile effort for what had never before been proposed by a President of the United States. But there was no significant campaign to press for its acceptance. Apparently, Lincoln thought the proposal was so obviously reasonable and the motives so well addressed that further human effort was unnecessary.[27]

Most historical narratives show Lincoln moving readily from the failed strategy for compensation to general emancipation, as if on a natural decision continuum. But Lincoln well understood that the proposals were not related. His decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation would make it impossible to meet his commitment, his duty, to restore the Union under the Constitution as it was in 1861. The likely permanence of this decision ran counter to everything Lincoln stood for in claiming to act for the inviolability of the Constitution and the rule of law. It would amount to a rejection of his lifelong commitment to work within the uniquely American, if morally defective, legal structure. But the times were desperate.[28] Lincoln later recounted for artist Francis B. Carpenter his extreme concern for the state of the war; that we had to "change our tactics or lose the game."[29] Under this pressure, Lincoln was also beset by the effusion of petitions from Christian evangelicals demanding, with their scriptural arguments, that it was "God's will" for total emancipation. This rising element of political activism required Lincoln to understand better the faith implications of his policy convictions.

When the war began, the north's political leaders were nearly unanimous in agreement that the aim was not to disrupt slavery in the states where it already existed. Both houses of Congress voted to affirm this principle in July 1861 with only three dissenting votes. But in August, Major General John C. Frémont's audacious proclamation

26. Lincoln, Message to Congress, March 6, 1862, *CW*, 5:144–46.

27. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 334–35.

28. Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, *CW*, 7:282.

29. Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2008), 44. Carpenter's book was first published in 1866.

of emancipation in Missouri inspired abolition activism within many northern religious communities. Lincoln rejected Frémont's plan, and then proclaimed a national day of prayer for September 25, saying "it is fit and becoming . . . to acknowledge and revere the supreme government of God, to bow in humble submission to His chastisements, to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions."[30] Many churches felt emboldened to tell the president that the greatest national transgression was slavery, and that God was holding the country to account.

Among the first denominational petitions to reach Lincoln's desk was authorized by the Illinois Methodist Conference on September 13, 1861. Bishop Edward Ames informed the president that his congregations "cordially approve of the recent proclamation of Gen. Fremont pronouncing the freedom of the slaves of rebels against this government."[31] After the Illinois Methodists, there followed petitions from the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania, General Assembly of the New School Presbyterians, Wisconsin Congregational churches, Reformed Presbyterians, Chicago Congregationalists, Evangelical Lutherans, United Presbyterians, and many other state and regional conventions.

The volume of religious petitions continued to swell into 1862. There was similar language in describing slavery as the cause of the rebellion and the basis of God's rebuke for our national sin. "We pray that an important result, which an inscrutable Providence may design to bring out of this national calamity is the end of slavery," wrote the United Presbyterians, "It is righteousness which exalteth a nation."[32] The Congregationalists called slavery inconsistent with their faith: "The Almighty has not a single attribute which can prompt Him to uphold us in the conservation of American Slavery . . . further, we love the Constitution and the Union but not with a blind devotion that would sacrifice for them all that would make them valuable; that we love them because we believe they mean Freedom."[33] The Reformed Presbyterians (New School) invoked God's will and His wrath for the peculiar institution writing that "the cup of our iniquity is full, God

30. Lincoln, Proclamation of a National Fast Day, August 12, 1861, *CW*, 4:482.

31. Illinois Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church to Abraham Lincoln, September 13, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Lincoln Papers, LC).

32. United Presbyterian General Assembly to Abraham Lincoln, May 30, 1862, Lincoln Papers, LC.

33. Cleveland Congregational Conference to Abraham Lincoln, April 18, 1862, Lincoln Papers, LC.

has by the present rebellion poured out the vials of his wrath upon us." God threatened to do this to Israel for the same crime: "Thus saith the Lord, ye have not harkened unto me in proclaiming liberty every one to his brother and every man unto his neighbor." They concluded with the resolution that "we believe that so long as slavery lives, no permanent peace can exist. . . . Success depends on Divine Agency. . . . Let justice be done though the heavens fall."[34] The many views came to a common scriptural and civic conclusion. The sovereign God of the universe was angry about slavery and demanded that "liberty be Proclaimed throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants thereof." They asserted that this was the time appointed by providence for change.

The conservative *New York Herald* expressed surprise in May 1862 that there had been a major shift in public attitudes for emancipation and attributed this to the northern churches. The newspaper described a meeting at a New York church where abolitionists were enthusiastically received. The *Herald* noted that "this meeting was not permitted last year. Since then, however, they have been allowed greater license to speak and gather here and in Washington."[35] Abolitionists were suspected by many people in the north as provocateurs of the south. John Hay observed how rapidly the shift had come, writing that "last year, Wendell Phillips was hissed and almost rotten egged in Boston for making an abolitionist speech [but] last week in Washington he was warmly received by a large crowd."[36] The *Chicago Tribune* took stock of the remarkable change in public attitudes on abolition over the year, "The issue has moved from being an abstraction to a practical question."[37]

Lincoln received delegations from the Evangelical Lutherans on May 13, 1862, Methodist Episcopal Churches of Baltimore on May 15, and the Progressive Friends (Quakers) on June 20. Their messages were alike in arguing that God would only end the war and preserve the Union if the president proclaimed an end to slavery. Lincoln was gracious but noncommittal as he acknowledged his need for God's assistance. In his interview with the Quakers, Lincoln agreed that slavery was wrong but doubted that a proclamation was the best way

34. General Synod of Reformed Presbyterian Church to Abraham Lincoln, May 20, 1862, Lincoln Papers, LC.

35. "Abolition Sedition Again Rampant," *New York Herald*, May 8, 1862.

36. John Hay, Washington Correspondence, March 24, 1862, Michael Burlingame, ed., *Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 233–34.

37. "Putting Down the Abolitionists," *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1862.

to be rid of it. Perhaps, the president said, "God's way . . . may be different from theirs." To his desire for divine guidance, Lincoln this time added that he hoped he "might be an instrument in God's hands for accomplishing a great work." The president was still negotiating with the border states, but he had begun to connect the importance placed on evangelical covenant doctrines with the triumph of freedom.[38]

The border states finally rejected voluntary emancipation on July 14, 1862. Their written statement insisted that Lincoln not meddle in state government issues and "confine yourself to constitutional authority." Lincoln lamented with two supporters that if only the border states had accepted the compensation proposal, then "the labor of your life, Lovejoy, and you Arnold, and all of us, would be crowned with success, we would have lived to see the end of slavery."[39]

By mid-July a series of significant setbacks had converged to make it appear that the Union might not be saved at all.[40] A Union victory at Shiloh, Tennessee, was gained with terrible slaughter. The grand Army of the Potomac had been defeated near Richmond. A steady stream of arguments claiming divine displeasure and asserting scriptural bromides badgered the beleaguered president. Lincoln was grieving for his recently deceased son and had been considering the mystery of God's intentions. Even before the border states finally rejected the compensation offer, Lincoln was thinking more deeply on his faith in God's providence and the course of the war. Nearly all of his religious visitors had preached to him from progressive doctrines that enabled people to believe they had the ability to move beyond God's word (and the Constitution) to effect their own moral sense to act for abolition. If Lincoln were to declare total emancipation, how would the rule of law be reestablished in a way that all parties would accept? Lincoln needed a less sanctimonious view of God's intentions.

President Lincoln began to demonstrate greater religious sensibility as he was taking office. On his first Sunday in the White House, the president and his family attended New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (Old School) to hear the Reverend Doctor Phineas D. Gurley preach. With the border slave states still considering secession, Lincoln wanted a pastor and church known not to be abolitionist.[41] Pastor Gurley had been a brilliant student who graduated at the top

38. Lincoln, Remarks to a Delegation of Progressive Friends, *CW*, 5:278–79.

39. Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2:356.

40. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 336–37.

41. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "Abraham Lincoln: A History," *Century Magazine*, 38 (August 1889), 561.

of his class both at Union College in his native upstate New York and Princeton Theological Seminary. He studied under Charles Hodge who retained an interest in promoting his student's career. Gurley was highly regarded among his Old School colleagues for his ability to explain Hodge's theology in elegant, well-structured sermons, which Lincoln enjoyed. At age forty-four, Gurley was an impressive figure in the pulpit; he stood 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with a robust frame, and a rich baritone voice. His Calvinism was couched in the beauty of Christian living and eternal glory, with little mention of predestination and the perpetual torments of hell. He was the acclamation candidate to represent the denomination among the country's great men in the nation's capital during the contentious decade leading up to the Civil War.[42]

The Lincolns' son, Willie, was almost twelve years old when he died on February 20, 1862. He was the most precocious of the Lincoln children and his father's favorite. Dr. Gurley led the funeral service in the East Room of the White House. In his sermon, he outlined a series of core Calvinist beliefs to show that God was an active and benevolent presence in the world. God was everywhere and always with each of us, he said. God had a plan for the universe that tended to demonstrate his attributes of mercy and justice for all and love for every creature. He assured Lincoln that Willie's death had a divine purpose for a reason yet known only to God. He quoted Christ on the puzzle of God's will, "What I do ye know not now, but ye shall know hereafter." When mankind finally understood the good He intended for us, people will eventually say, as did the long-suffering Job, that "it is good I have been afflicted." Gurley also invoked a church doctrine acknowledging that special prayers and deference were owed to the chief magistrate of the nation for bearing the unusual and sacred burdens of his office. The pastor was certain that Willie was in heaven with the brother who predeceased him. With hopes for Lincoln's eventual conversion, Gurley created the expectation that the president could see his children again in heaven if he humbly accepted the grace God offered to all to know His purposes and make righteous decisions.[43]

42. John A. O'Brien, "Seeking God's Will: President Lincoln and Rev. Dr. Gurley," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 39 (Summer 2018), 32–34; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 321–22; Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 402–3.

43. Phineas D. Gurley, Sermon delivered at the funeral of Willie Lincoln, February 24, 1862, typescript, Phineas Gurley Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa. (hereafter cited as Sermon (1862), Gurley Papers).

A president is not allowed time to process his grief. Lincoln was still managing a nation at war. But as a parent, he was enduring emotional devastation from the death of a child. It is a crisis that often drives a person either to or from religious faith. Historians rarely account for how Lincoln's world view and decisions may have been permanently affected by the persistent sorrow that shadowed him every day thereafter. For the next several weeks, Lincoln closed the door to his office on Thursday afternoons, the day Willie died, to mourn privately.[44] Nurse Rebecca Pomroy observed that the president's grief was overwhelming, and that he expressed a need for help from God.[45] Mary Lincoln wrote that this was when her husband first thought seriously about religion.[46] Lincoln began a series of private meetings with Dr. Gurley. In these consoling sessions, the pastor would have reviewed articles of Old School Presbyterian faith for Lincoln's spiritual solace and emotional recovery. At the moment when Abraham Lincoln was most despondent and receptive to God's comfort, Dr. Gurley was well-prepared and available.[47]

The meetings Lincoln had with his pastor over the following weeks seemed to bear immediate spiritual fruit. In his message to Congress on March 6, Lincoln declared his responsibility "to my God, and to my country." It was the first public indication in his life of a personal relationship with the Almighty.[48] Lincoln's grasp of the theology of God's intentions was then being challenged during meetings with religious delegations as he received their pleas for emancipation. In the face of unrelenting defeats and tragedy, Lincoln managed to steel his resolve. Five months after the death of his son, Lincoln privately told friends that he had decided to declare emancipation in the rebel states. During this turbulent time, writes historian Richard J. Carwardine,

44. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, 138.

45. Anna L. Boyden, *War Reminiscences: Rebecca Pomroy's Experience in War-Time* (Boston: D. Lothrop Co, 1884), 62.

46. David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 337.

47. Orville H. Browning to Isaac N. Arnold, November 25, 1872, Burlingame, *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln*, 131n. John D. DeFrees believed that Lincoln and Gurley met several times as he was helping the president prepare his March 6 message to Congress and its later publication. John D. DeFrees to William H. Herndon, December 4, 1866, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 497. William Slade was Lincoln's messenger who "would bring Dr. Gurley to the White House on nights when the president couldn't sleep. They would often talk on the south portico until dawn." John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 111.

48. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 334.

"Lincoln's providence become an active and more personal God, more mysterious and less predictable than the ruling force of his fatalism that it superseded."[49] This convergence of circumstances in mid-1862 moved Lincoln to a new reckoning of the needs of the country and of his moral authority to determine a new direction. This was a moment that drove Lincoln to discover new emotional, intellectual, and spiritual resources to lead.[50]

Elements of the Presbyterian theology that Dr. Gurley used at Willie Lincoln's funeral and in his private counseling of the president in the weeks thereafter represented the best scriptural logic for the most widely held Christian faith principles of the day. The Meditation is a distillation of doctrines from the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Calvinist interpretation of the Bible's guidance on core beliefs. Lincoln's pastor preached on these topics and would have certainly discussed them with him. Four doctrines are evident in the Meditation: (1) God's providential attributes as the sovereign of creation; (2) the necessity of God's grace for human moral ability; (3) God's preparation and use of human instruments; and (4) the Christian deference owed to the chief magistrate as God's representative over civil government. Lincoln's studied understanding of these faith dogmas was not previously evident in his private reflections on theology nor in his biblically themed writings and speeches. The Meditation is a tightly reasoned and theologically perceptive composition. It reveals Lincoln's profound new insight, in the distinctively Old School formulation, that through grace God had prepared him to serve a divine purpose.

In Willie Lincoln's eulogy, Gurley provided "a clear and a scriptural view of the providence of God." God was a personality with a will who was active in the world and present in all history. While divine purposes were unknowable by mortals, Gurley explained, humans can only try to understand them through knowledge of God's attributes. Scripture held that the qualities of God's personality include justice, mercy, and love for all creatures. The "Will of God" is the ultimate ground of moral obligation. It is the difference between right and wrong. People have a responsibility, and the ability, to surrender to

49. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 226. Ronald C. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 148–49. White also notes that in Washington, Lincoln "found himself exposed to new sources that would push him beyond fatalism" as he encountered and appropriated the ideas and language of providence.

50. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 336–37; Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (New York: Random House, 2022), 282.

God's will so that mercy and justice can be served. God's sovereignty is exerted using miracles, laws of nature, and through human agents.[51] Though God has foreknowledge of all that would occur, His human instruments were free and morally accountable for their actions. The goodness of God is unlimited, and while He may allow corruption for a time, all His purposes are holy. Gurley enjoined Willie Lincoln's grieving father to have faith that God had some beneficial purpose to come out of this tragedy, and when that became understood, he would be glad for the good it produced. The eulogy certainly brought Lincoln closer to Gurley's faith instruction. Lincoln came to appreciate that God has a will and the means to effect it.[52] The Meditation begins with the observation that God's purposes, with a preference for justice, would prevail. God had a reason for allowing the war that was likely different from the aims of either side. Lincoln noted that God could have "saved or destroyed" the Union without war. To destroy the Union was apparently not God's intention.[53]

The Meditation showed Lincoln's new appreciation for the importance of God's inspiring grace for his own moral ability.[54] Lincoln referred to God's "mere quiet power on the minds of the now contestants" that could have saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. The Old School was unique among the Calvinists in preserving the connection with Puritan Jonathan Edwards's belief in a relentless human dependence on God's quiet power of grace for all volitions.[55] As one of the contestants, Lincoln attributed God's "quiet power" to perceive that his life's work had made him "of the best adaptation" to act on a divine purpose.[56] This is the clearest indication that Lincoln had given up his fatalist view that God was

51. Gurley, Sermon (1862), Gurley Papers; Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, 4th ed. (London: Johnston and Hunter, 1850), 23–41, 65–72 (hereafter cited as Shaw, *Confession of Faith*). This copy of Shaw was once owned by Hodge associate and theologian B. B. Warfield at Princeton Theological Seminary. Shaw (1795–1863) was a Scottish Presbyterian theologian.

52. Gurley, "God Never Forsakes His People" (sermon on Psalm 37), ca. 1862–1864, Gurley Papers.

53. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 336–37: Since God had given no clear-cut victory to either side, "God had obviously not willed that [the Union] be destroyed. . . . Here was the moral of the summer of 1862 for Abraham Lincoln . . . the Union would [not] be saved unless Lincoln himself took note of providence's whispering."

54. Shaw, *Confession of Faith*, 116, 122, 165, 197–98.

55. Hodge, "Theology of the Intellect," *Essays and Reviews*, 539.

56. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 5:404; Gurley, "My Soul Thirstith for God, for the Living God" (sermon on Psalm 42:2), ca. 1862–1864, Gurley Papers.

a remote, impersonal force. It also adds the positive side of Christian belief to what Lincoln had from his youth considered his own abject depravity. Old School doctrine taught that it was only through the grace-enabled connection with God that a person has the ability and the obligation to make moral choices.

It was during the nationwide religious revival that ran through the 1830s that people raised on Enlightenment commonsense rationalism began to see themselves as responsible for the condition of their souls. Nathaniel W. Taylor and Charles G. Finney reasoned that people were able to act morally through the response of their senses to the stimuli of the world, and without such a close reliance on God as Edwards described.[57] They argued that free will was self-determined and not dependent on God's effectual grace. This system of beliefs was termed "common sense" or "New Haven" theology and was a rejection of traditional Calvinism.[58] It enjoyed wide appeal and was rapidly adapted by many northern evangelical churches, including by the New School Presbyterian Church. The new moral ability to make independent judgments led to progressive antislavery interpretations of the Bible. The Old School, almost alone, continued strict adherence to the Westminster Confession and a literal reading of the Bible that revealed God's grace as necessary for all moral motives. They adamantly opposed abolition as "unscriptural" and were a dominant influence on the culture of the border states and the in lower north.[59]

Dr. Gurley preached that God's inspiring grace was offered through the Holy Spirit to all people to encourage them to make righteous decisions. Man was free to accept or reject the influence of this mere gentle power as he chose. The cumulative effect of these grace-influenced decisions shaped a man's character, and character determined his motives. Because humans were free to accept or reject grace at any time, all were morally accountable for their actions. Congruity was necessary between the influence exerted and the character of the person on whom that influence was used. Gurley said that "God knows just what kind and degree of influence will be effectual . . . it may seem that this difference is determined by God. But really, the

57. Howard A. Morrison, "The Finney Takeover of the Second Great Awakening During the Oneida Revivals of 1825–1827," *New York History*, 59 (January 1978), 27–53.

58. Hodge, "Finney's Lectures on Theology," *Essays and Reviews*, 246. Hodge critiqued *Finney's Lectures on Systematic Theology* (1845).

59. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 285–92.

cause of the difference is the man himself." With the quiet power of grace, people could overcome all resistance to God's will.[60]

During the previous decade Lincoln had argued with Herndon that humans were powerless to act independently of God's predestined control. The vestiges of fatalism may yet have led Lincoln to consider "quiet power" to represent God's direct control rather than a spiritual influence.[61] But in the Meditation, he observed that voluntary beings served divine purposes. Lincoln continued to include this concept of God's influence in his conversation with the Chicago Christians in September 1862 and the letter to Eliza Gurney the following month.

Lincoln's Meditation on the Divine Will opens and closes with his acknowledgement of a theological axiom. God, Lincoln asserted, was actively involved in all history and had a purpose for the outcome of the Civil War. Lincoln referred to the two distinct and competing goals for the present conflict as he described them in his inauguration speech, Union with slavery or dis-Union with slavery. He formed the proposition that God favored neither. The Meditation was created with elements of Euclidian logic, Baconian method, and Old School Presbyterian doctrinal deductions. The precision of his word selection suggested Lincoln had "studied and nearly mastered" his argument as he would for other important papers.[62]

Lincoln affirmed a belief that God was directing events toward some righteous conclusion. He dismissed any prejudice he had for the Union's preferred outcome to avoid clouding his ability to discern God's desired end. Lincoln stated a proposition that God could have influenced the leaders on both sides to have either "saved or destroyed" the Union without war. By the summer of 1862, God had not allowed the Union to be destroyed and the evangelical campaign had elevated slavery, under providence, as the moral impediment to Union success. The flow of doctrinal logic in the Meditation makes the implication of Lincoln's insights evident. God had made Lincoln

60. Gurley, "Grieving the Holy Spirit" (sermon on Ephesians 4:30), n.d., Gurley Papers.

61. Hodge, "Theology of the Intellect," *Essays and Reviews*, 553, 558. See also Hodge, "Free Agency," *Essays and Reviews*, 133–35.

62. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 5:403–4; Roy P. Basler, *A Touchstone for Greatness: Essays and Addresses about Abraham Lincoln* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, Inc, 1973), 94.

"of the best adaptation" for the moral act of altering Union war aims and to reform the nation by confronting slavery.[63]

Lincoln observed that all the contestants were acting on motives exactly as they had accepted or rejected God's guidance. It was the influence of grace, wrote Charles Hodge, the Old School's most prominent Presbyterian theologian, that prepared the minds of men to perceive the light of righteousness. It was Lincoln's realization of his "instrumentality" to serve a greater moral purpose that energizes the Meditation. Lincoln did not claim a direct revelation of God's purpose, rather he trusted the motives of his Constitution-redeeming character. This belief in divine inspiration for justice was the force that sustained Lincoln, as God's instrument, in his enduring commitment to emancipation, and empowered his more assertive role in its promotion.[64]

By being "of the best adaptation," Lincoln was reflecting on both his life preparation and the value of his elevated position to do God's work. Phineas Gurley counseled that the president as chief magistrate of the nation had a special connection with God that flowed from his election by the people. This doctrine set forth that the president held an office as sacred as any clergy. The chief magistrate represented the authority of God and, when he acted for justice, bound the Christian to obedience for conscience's sake.[65] The Meditation showed Lincoln's deeper appreciation of the implicit moral power of his elected position consistent with Calvinist theology and mainstream Christian sentiment. Lincoln now understood that he was who God had made. He was obliged by virtue of his character and office to assert his authority to be God's agent. The observation that "God wills this contest" was both respect for divine authority and power and also a self-rebuke for any further delay in accepting the obligation of his instrumentality. Lincoln's anticipation of the centrality of faith considerations for his largely Christian nation was an essential foundation to his reasoned arguments for emancipation as the necessary means for saving the Union.[66]

63. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 5:404; Ronald C. White, Jr., *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words* (New York: Random House, 2005), 160–62.

64. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1872), 2:660–61; Nicholas Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation: Emancipation and War," *Civil War History*, 49 (September 2000), 227–53.

65. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 404; Shaw, *Confession of Faith*, 240–44. See also Lincoln, Order for Sabbath Observance, November 15, 1862, *CW*, 5:497–98.

66. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 5:404; Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 86.

God shaped Lincoln's character to oppose slavery on both policy and moral grounds.[67] What Lincoln once considered his shameful ambition he must have now believed was God's guidance to make him president. "I have never professed an indifference to the honors of official station, but I have never failed to remember," he wrote in 1860, "that in the Republican cause there is a higher aim than that of mere office." He was also envious of the lasting renown afforded to the international leaders of the antislavery movement. In that same private note he wrote "School-boys know that Wilberforce, and Granville Sharpe helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it?"[68] In the Meditation, Lincoln presumed his instrumentality to serve that divine purpose of perfecting the American project.

Lincoln's past expressions on instrumentality and his private reflections on theology had never explored or suggested any relevant doctrinal study that would have helped him compose the Meditation. Dr. Gurley's Old School Calvinism had given Lincoln a useful understanding of divine guidance for his role and rhetoric toward emancipation. Consider the logic of the longest sentence at the center of the piece: "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party." This profound wonder about God's intentions, however, is not the conclusion. There is no period or even a comma to separate this introduction from the essentially linked next thought. The sentence continues with a hyphen, a functional and literal bridge connecting to "and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose." God's will is certainly mysterious, but Lincoln's emphasis was on the imperative human moral duty to discern and act as best one can to achieve divine ends. What kept the other war leaders from discerning God's will was their obstinate focus on the original goals, convinced that God was on their side. Lincoln's next proposition connected human ability to comprehend better God's purpose with the power to bring the matter to a close. "God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet"—not until one of the human instruments makes a morally significant change.[69]

Old School Church polity continued to regard slavery as both legal and moral. But it also held that the preservation of the Union made all of God's earthly blessings possible and was the utmost secular

67. Lincoln, Protest in Illinois Legislature on Slavery, March 3, 1837, *CW*, 1:74–75.
68. White, *Lincoln in Private*, 213–14.
69. Lincoln, Meditation on the Divine Will, ca. September 2, 1862, *CW*, 5:404.

principle. Lincoln respected the tension in these now competing tenets by pursuing a plan that upheld the highest goal without implying moral judgment on slaveholders.[70] Lincoln determined a new definition for the sin of slavery, not as immoral in essence, but as the instrument of rebellion to destroy the Union. Emancipation would not be a moral crusade, but a controlled effort to finally put slavery on the path to extinction.[71] This delayed his potential violation of the Constitution for a later day, unless the Constitution could be amended. Lincoln relied on his benevolent intentions to justify his acts in the judgment of history and in the sight of God.[72] Lincoln's notion of his instrumentality was now informed by scriptural logic and was specific to the cause of the war.

John Hay wrote that the Meditation was Lincoln's "cold cross-examination of omnipotence." From that questioning, Lincoln determined that God had shaped his character and put him in a position to perform a great work. He was not prepared to be a great war leader. For that, others were better trained. Lincoln was "of the best adaptation" to manage political possibilities to vitiate slavery. The Meditation's scriptural tone is neither bleak nor anxious like Christ's anguished appeal to "let this cup pass from me," nor Job despondently questioning why he was being afflicted. Lincoln's use of theology suggests that his biblical model was Isaiah who also considered himself unworthy. But, with divine inspiration, the prophet accepted God's difficult task, saying "Here I am, Lord. Send me."[73]

It is striking that the Meditation's language about God's presence could connect it with either of Lincoln's inauguration speeches. He began his administration with the hope that unresolved differences could await the next election. "The only substantial dispute," he declared, was that "one section believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not be extended." Lincoln thought God should accept the binary choice he offered. "Whether God be on your side of the North or yours of

70. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 149–50, 201.

71. Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006) 182–84. The moral logic for emancipation was simply a means to the end of preserving the highest value objective, the federal Union. Using war for the permanent taking of (human) property was against both human and God's law. Hodge, "The War," *The Princeton Review*, 35 (January 1863), 166–68.

72. Hodge, "Free Agency," 426. The Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution, ratified in December 1865, made moot the constitutionality of the Emancipation Proclamation.

73. Isaiah, 6:8, KJV.

the South," the "will of the Almighty with His eternal truth and justice prevails, by the judgement of the great tribunal of the American people." He thought the secessionists would appreciate, as he did, the terrible and predictable results of war. "Suppose you go to war," he challenged, when at some point you cease fighting, "the same old questions are still upon you."[74] Lincoln's theology had progressed somewhat from his pre-presidency, but not sufficiently to encompass the moment. God was an interested but remote judge who would accept direction from American voters. It is also notable that Lincoln did not associate himself with the objective of either side in the First Inaugural Address or in the Meditation.

Lincoln's public views of God's power were consistent throughout the war, mostly expressed through his proclamations for public prayer days. There were two apparent changes to his beliefs beginning in 1862. First was his new sense that God was now a person with a will who was active in the war. Lincoln had made the first-ever mention of his personal relationship with God on March 6, that year.[75] The attributes of God who was always with him informed Lincoln's moral sensibilities to respect God's mysterious purposes, to strive for justice, and expect judgment for human failings. Second was his understanding of how God implements his will for the world by working through human agents.

It may not have been possible for Lincoln to separate matters of faith from earthly considerations, as Hay suggested. He had always approached religion more as a matter for his head than his heart. The importuning of faith leaders throughout 1862 raised awareness that his position gave him a favored connection with the Almighty. He explained in his 1864 letter to Kentucky editor Albert Hodges how urgently he felt the need to change the aim of the war in 1862, to end slavery in order to save the country.[76] Rejection of voluntary emancipation by the border states caused a crisis for Lincoln's war policy and faith. The president's war powers were, as Lincoln and others interpreted them, intended as temporary measures. Lincoln knew, however, that once he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he would never withdraw it. The one article of faith that Lincoln declared throughout his public career was that God created all as equal. Surely, he hoped and fervently prayed, this was God's will for the United States.

74. Lincoln, First Inaugural Address—Final Text, March 4, 1861, *CW*, 4:268–71.

75. Lincoln, Message to Congress, March 6, 1862, *CW*, 5:146; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 342.

76. Lincoln to Albert Hodges, April 4, 1864, *CW*, 7:281–82.

The doctrinally coherent formation of premises in the Meditation created a strong basis for the new intellectual means Lincoln used to recast his understanding of God's purpose for the war. This interest was piqued by his interactions with various religious representatives in 1862. The death of his son and his sessions with Dr. Gurley focused his empathetic attention to explore the spiritual logic of Old School doctrinal formulations. The results of this studied reflection were unmistakable in Lincoln's vigorous discussion with faith leaders just before he issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.[77]

Lincoln seemed assured of his moral instrumentality regarding emancipation in his meeting with the representatives of the Chicago Christians of All Denominations on September 13, 1862. Reports displayed his mastery of the religious implications of the Proclamation process. Lincoln was engaged and forceful in his faith-evoking arguments for and against emancipation. This was unlike any discussion he had before with faith leaders. Lincoln challenged the clergymen's assertion that they had better insight than he for knowing God's intent to eliminate slavery.[78] He pressed on the civil magistrate doctrine by declaring that God would most likely reveal to him His will "on a point so connected with my duty." He assured them that "if I could learn God's will I would certainly do it." But, Lincoln said, this was "not the age of miracles," and God would not directly communicate nor implement His will. The insinuation demanded support for his actions as if by God's human agent. Before he would make any decision, Lincoln stated a need to do what he had already done, "to study the plain physical facts of the case. . . and learn what appears to be wise and right" to make the policy successful. The president did not expect God to part a path through the perilous waters and keep his feet dry. He needed to consider the political realities. The delegates left reassured that Lincoln was under God's guidance.[79] Lincoln's verbal sparring with these clergymen just days before issuing the preliminary proclamation tactfully avoided any suggestion that he was morally superior to his pro-slavery constituents.

Lincoln met with his cabinet on September 22, 1862, prepared to release the preliminary Proclamation. He said he was doing so because

77. Hans J. Morgenthau and David Hein, *Essays on Lincoln's Faith and Politics*, American Values Projected Abroad, Volume 4, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 11.

78. White, *The Eloquent President*, 167–68.

79. "Emancipation Memorial: Report of the Delegation to President Lincoln," *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1862; Lincoln, Reply to Emancipation Memorial Presented by Chicago Christians of All Denominations, September 13, 1862, *CW*, 5:420–24.

the victory at Antietam showed that God was on the side of the slaves.[80] The comment has drawn criticism from writers who thought this was too transactional or even superstitious, and undercut the perception that Lincoln was becoming increasingly spiritual. John Burt, a critic of Romantic literature, has suggested a more likely opinion consistent with the president's view of his divine instrumentality: that Lincoln considered himself "under a moral obligation, a transcendent obligation to serve a historical process that he knew must unfold in time."[81]

On October 26, 1862, Lincoln's personal letter to Quaker leader Eliza Gurney revealed his newfound faith conviction. Lincoln had no doubt he was acting for a divine purpose. Here was his first presidential assertion of divine instrumentality as different from his earlier aspirational statements. "Being a humble instrument in the hands of God," he wrote, "I am to work out His great purposes . . . in the best light He affords me. If I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some great purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise." Lincoln also affirmed that he did not act on a divine revelation. "But it [the war] continues, and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of His own, mysterious and unknown to us we may not be able to comprehend." The Meditation created the informed framework for Lincoln's actions in presuming God's purpose but did not suggest God's ultimate judgment. In his second letter to Gurney, after two more years of terrible war, Lincoln still averred that "the purposes of the Almighty are perfect and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. . . . But we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains."[82] Though frustrated by the war's duration, Lincoln remained sure of his moral course but grew uneasy as he considered the wider historical bases for God's rebuke.

Douglas L. Wilson has contended that the Meditation was likely written near April 4, 1864, when the president wrote to Albert Hodges and "Lincoln [first] chose to speak of the will of God publicly." Wilson asserts that the "intellectual core" of both the Meditation and the

80. William E. and Erica L. Gienapp, eds., *The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 54; David H. Donald, *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1954), 150.

81. John Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 673. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 326, also shares this view.

82. Lincoln to Eliza P. Gurney, October 26, 1862, *CW*, 5:498; Lincoln to Eliza P. Gurney, September 4, 1864, *CW*, 7:535.

Second Inaugural Address was that "whatever was happening in the Civil War was exactly what God wanted to happen." He further suggests that Lincoln intended no substantial difference between the dichotomy in the Meditation that "both may be and one must be wrong," and the Second Inaugural's inclusive phrase, "He gives to both North and South this terrible war." Wilson writes that linguistically, the Meditation fits "seamlessly" into the period between the Hodges letter and the Second Inaugural."[83]

These assertions pointedly avoid the doctrinal language in the Meditation about the role of well-adapted "human instrumentalities" that Lincoln suggested were required to act "to effect God's purpose." A problem arises in trying to affix Lincoln's intent while disregarding half of a closely reasoned and terse theological thesis. The words Wilson disregards constitute the distinctive differences between the Meditation and the Second Inaugural that define their purposes. The theological message of the Meditation was about God's use of human agents, prepared to discern divine purposes, who are required to do what their grace-inspired consciences direct. It was about the moral compulsion for Lincoln to act.

In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln's instrumentality disappeared entirely. "Neither party expected the magnitude or duration of the war, neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully."[84] In spite of the actions taken to eradicate the sin of slavery, a terrible sin had been permitted and God's justice could not be avoided. Both sides shared fault. God was never on one side and His judgment over all American history was the purpose for the war. The Meditation was about discerning God's purpose as a guide for human action. The uniquely differentiated theology of the Second Inaugural, writes Ronald C. White, Jr., was about God's judgment on the past, and hope for the future.[85]

After writing the Meditation, Lincoln trusted in his instrumentality and took a leap of faith as to what God willed. In the campaign

83. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 252–53. Wilson's assertion that the Meditation was more likely written in 1864 cannot be substantiated. Without citing sources, he writes that the uniqueness of the stationery paper itself is evidence for the later date. No information has been presented to support this theory since it was proposed in 2006. Nineteenth-century paper experts have very few reference tools and think it is unlikely to date the paper with any degree of certainty.

84. Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, *CW*, 8:332–33.

85. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 203.

for emancipation he passed judgment only on the fact that rebellion was immoral and the necessary cause of slavery's removal. He finally discerned in his Second Inaugural that while slavery was the cause of the war, God's loving correction demanded more than the Thirteenth Amendment's promise to sin no more. As Gurley had explained at Willie's funeral and would often preach, God's ultimate justice was not readily apparent to mortals. While people were the instruments to effect His purpose, the projects of men, in their vanity, were "overruled by results ordained by God."[86] This is the vast metaphysical distance between the Meditation and the Second Inaugural. In his study of Lincoln's political philosophy, John Burt has found that the Second Inaugural makes a case for God's wisdom and justice that the Meditation does not make. The Meditation, he believes, only makes a case for God's power and agency in history.[87] The Meditation seems to define the beginning of a process of engagement with the Almighty by acknowledging God's intentional control of events. It would take until Lincoln's Second Inaugural before he could interpret the meaning of the war by crediting God's wisdom and justice in pronouncing judgment on the nation.

A determining factor in dating the Meditation would be when Lincoln began to demonstrate its empowering language and principles. It was the campaign for emancipation by the various religious denominations, the failure of voluntary emancipation, and the death of his son that challenged Lincoln to more deeply consider what God expected of him. This required the president to search for new intellectual resources to lead when God's will and the Constitution were in apparent conflict. Carl Sandburg wrote that over the summer of 1862, the president "grew immeasurably as he came to think of himself as an 'instrument of God's will."[88]

The second session of the 37th Congress concluded business on July 17, 1862. In a contentious mood, Congress had demanded that the president be more aggressive in taking the human property of

86. Gurley, Sermon (1862), Gurley Papers. See also Gurley, *Man's Projects and God's Results* (Washington, D.C.: William Ballantyne, 1863), a sermon on Proverbs 16:9, which Gurley preached on August 6, 1863, a day of national thanksgiving, praise and prayer, proclaimed by the president. Lincoln and Hay both attended the service. Hay described the president as very encouraged by his pastor's new optimism on the war and emancipation. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 70 (entry for August 6, 1863).

87. Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism*, 675.

88. Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1939), 1:501.

rebel sympathizers. That afternoon, a delegation from the Reformed Presbyterians (New School) called at the White House to present their petition to end slavery. Lincoln agreed with the clergymen that slavery needed to be excised. He did not make any theological points, nor did he challenge their interpretation of God's will. He refused their assertion, however, that he should end it by proclamation. He merely reassured them, "I will try to do my best, and so may God help me."[89] After they left, the president sent for Dr. Gurley.

Lincoln and his pastor spoke together well into that Thursday evening. As Gurley rose to leave, the president asked him to return early the next morning to continue their discussion. Gurley later told a friend that at breakfast on July 18, he was astonished when instead of a conversation, "for an hour, Mr. Lincoln did all the talking."[90] Gurley said he spoke about "the state of the soul after death." Whether or not the pastor was simply protecting confidentiality (which he spent the

89. Lincoln, Remarks to the Committee of Reformed Presbyterian Synod, July 17, 1862, *CW*, 5:327.

90. Gurley, "Mourns for a Dead Boy (#10)," Phineas D. Gurley Collection of Notes (October 2, 1861–May 9, 1865), Lincoln Manuscripts, Lilly Library Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington. This is a seven-page document certified by Gurley's second daughter, Emma, in 1914, to be a transcription of brief, numbered anecdotal notes that were written by her father. Dr. Gurley died in September 1868. The date of July 18, 1862, for this breakfast meeting is calculated. The Lilly Library text and other reports indicated that "Mary Lincoln was away" and that the breakfast meeting occurred "several months after Willie died and three years before they were reunited on the funeral train." Mrs. Lincoln traveled to New York on July 8 and returned July 18. She arrived home on the early train in time to greet the pastor as he left. Michael Burlingame, ed., *With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860–1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) 85. The president went to Harrison's Landing, Virginia, on July 7. Nicolay reported that, from the time Lincoln returned from Virginia on July 10, he was busy with the end of the congressional term until adjournment the afternoon of July 17. Only then did Lincoln have time to see the Reformed Presbyterians. Ervin Chapman, *Latest Light on Abraham Lincoln and Wartime Memories*, 2 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1917), 2:499–500. Chapman interviewed Gurley's daughter, Emma Adams. Chapman elaborates on the Gurley-Lincoln relationship, as does Barton, but there has been little interest by researchers since. William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: George H. Doan Co., 1920), 286n. Barton credits Chapman with the story of the Gurley interview with Lincoln. Barton describes this as an incident of "considerable value," in confirming Lincoln's faith in an afterlife. Barton wrote "It was much easier for a man of [Lincoln's] training and temperament to hold that article of faith than some others." Lincoln's state of mind is also a consideration for his reflections on God. Orville H. Browning reported on July 15 that Lincoln "looked weary, care-worn, and troubled." He added that the president "looked very sad, and there was a cadence of deep sadness in his voice," and he said, "I must die sometime." Theodore C. Pease and James G. Randall, eds., *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 1:559–60.

rest of his life doing), this general subject is derived from many aspects of human moral ability in the Westminster Confession. Gurley never claimed that Lincoln had accepted conversion, but he did affirm that the president was well-versed in Presbyterian doctrines.[91]

When Lincoln presented his first draft of the proclamation to the cabinet on July 22, 1862, he believed he had thought out all the related issues and had a plan to proceed, without their criticisms.[92] The political and military pressures during those first three weeks of July make it doubtful that Lincoln would have spent successive days in casual speculation on Calvinist principles with his pastor. Lincoln must have completed the outline of his intellectual and rhetorical foundation for the Proclamation before his presentation to the cabinet. The Meditation was most likely written after his lecture to Dr. Gurley on or about July 18, 1862.

A few days after meeting with Gurley, Lincoln summoned his Springfield friend, Leonard Swett. During their meeting on August 2, the president spoke to him for an hour covering "all aspects of the slavery issue." Lincoln read to him several letters he had received for and against emancipation. Swett asserted that Lincoln then began to debate the issue with himself. "When the president concluded," Swett reported, "he asked for no comment, and made no inquiry, but rising, expressed his hope that I would get home safely."[93]

Swett had an advantage over Gurley because of his long association with Lincoln. Swett realized that the president "was simply framing his thought in words, under the eye of a friend, that he might clear up his own mind." It is now understood that Lincoln created many of his most consequential papers through a process that included speaking aloud his argument in the presence of a confidant. In this way, he could better judge the strength of his reasoning and the effect of his

91. James A. Reed, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (privately printed, 1915), 38. In this 1872 lecture on Lincoln's faith, the Reverend Reed quoted from an interview he had with Dr. Gurley at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in April 1868.

92. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, 44–45.

93. Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 4 vols. (New York: Lincoln Historical Society, 1924), 3:178–80 (this biography's first edition was published in 1895); Conversation with Hon. Leonard Swett, March 14, 1878, Burlingame, ed., *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln*, 58–59. Swett told Nicolay he was certain that he had helped with the Proclamation process. Lincoln to Henry W. Halleck, August 2, 1865, *CW*, 5:353. This letter of introduction for Swett, dated August 2, 1862, is the likely date for Swett's meeting with Lincoln who was preparing what became the Greeley letter of Aug. 22.

word selection.[94] No reaction was desired, but Lincoln just needed to hear himself speak the case before an audience. It is probable that both Swett and Gurley had unwittingly participated in a process through which the president shaped his messages for the Emancipation Proclamation.

On August 22, 1862, Lincoln published his response to an editorial in *The New York Tribune* by Horace Greeley. The president wanted the public to know that his only policy was to save the Union in the shortest way possible. Lincoln reasoned in the Meditation that God seemed not to favor the North's stated goal of restoring "the Union as it was." In the Greeley letter, which the president knew would be published, he advised the nation that, despite his best efforts, this declared aim was slipping away. Lincoln demonstrated majestic authority over the slavery issue in how he presented what he was considering. He now placed himself, as God's instrument, as the sole decider of how the survival of the country was in thrall to slavery. Lincoln identified three options. He had already told his cabinet that he would free some slaves and leave others in the loyal states alone.

The forceful tone on the slavery issue in the Greeley letter was unusual for Lincoln and could only have followed the Meditation's thoughtful assumption of divine instrumentality. The letter was vastly different from his last slavery speech to the border states representatives. His appeal for them to accept compensation has been judged "conventional, devoid of force, and even lackluster."[95] Now, one month later, Lincoln was supremely in command of the issue. There was a divinely inspired quality in his "what I do or forbear" decree. What had been his speculation in the Meditation on God's preference to "save or destroy" the Union was now reframed to whether Lincoln should "save or destroy" slavery to save the Union. This was the rhetorical bridge from the Meditation to the Greeley letter. With this "save or destroy" theme, Lincoln transitioned God's reservations

94. Lincoln told Herndon that "When I read aloud two senses catch the idea: first, I see what I read and second, I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better." Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 268.

95. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 117.

about Union war aims in the Meditation to the president's powerful judgment on the future of slavery in the Greeley letter.[96]

Lincoln brilliantly used the Greeley letter to place the issue of emancipation at the center of any strategy that would restore the nation. He did it in a way that took him above mere politics and removed moralizing from the discussion. His decision would not be driven by preconceptions or ideology. He pointedly disagreed with the extremists in his war coalition, raising concerns among abolitionists and slavery supporters alike. Without a mention of God's purpose or justice, he challenged faithful Christians on their duty to support the authority of the chief magistrate on what they understood was a moral issue. This Solomonic asseveration takes a compromise position that was less than absolute emancipation, but that seemed like the will of God, a righteous course. Lincoln hoped this would attract a larger share of voters to support the impending Proclamation as being based on wise policy and Christian sentiment.

Lincoln knew that the Proclamation's acceptance would require a significant change in public opinion. He needed all of his considerable persuasive skills to convert voters on a question of vast significance for disrupting established legal and social norms. Lincoln was so skilled at the art of persuasion that he began his campaign for emancipation by assessing fundamental assumptions about his leadership authority in the spiritual environment of predominantly Calvinist America.[97] Lincoln needed to convert not only political and racial preconceptions, but also voters' consciences as well. He had sensed, as Carwardine writes, "the antislavery energy of mainstream Protestants even as they detested abolitionism." Carwardine has no doubt that the pressures of 1862 "swept Lincoln along to a new religious understanding, one

96. White, *The Eloquent President*, 146–48. Noting that Lincoln intended for the letter to be read aloud, White sees the "save the Union" and "destroy slavery" themes as the core of the message that by repetition would leave a powerful impression. Lincoln will save the Union, slavery was optional. My opinion is that it was more likely that Lincoln expanded this "save or destroy" motif from the Meditation into the Greeley letter, rather than contract it as an afterthought from Greeley into the Meditation, if it had been written later.

97. Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation," 227–53. Parrillo documents the path of Lincoln's Calvinist views over the course of his presidency. However, he omits the "instrumentality" center section of Meditation and does not discuss Lincoln's agency. Without a position on Lincoln's moral ability, God becomes more of the sole agent which makes this Calvinism hard to distinguish from fatalism.

much closer to the historic Calvinism that had profoundly shaped most of northern Protestantism."[98]

Congress was also among the "human instrumentalities" that were required to implement God's will. Lincoln reminded congressmen of this necessity as he solicited their support for his emancipation plan in his December message: "We cannot escape history. . . . No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. . . . We—even we here—hold the power and bear the responsibility." Lincoln told Congress that if it would support his emancipation policies, "the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless."[99] At Gettysburg the following November, Lincoln enlisted every American to be a divine instrument for securing and perfecting the United States. "It is for us the living to be here dedicated," he implored, to the continuing work of sustaining freedom and popular government "under God."[100]

President Lincoln's plan for voluntary emancipation in the loyal slave states was rejected just as northern public opinion was surging toward abolition. His proposal had complied with the obligations of his official duty and his belief in the fixed laws of the universe. He acted as if appealing to the financial motives of loyal slaveholders would be sufficient to put slavery on a course for the Almighty to then take over, to superintend, its extinction. When this failed, Lincoln's bedrock beliefs in the inevitability of reasoned argument within the law and in the overruling God of natural causes proved inadequate to the nation's needs. His "fatalism" died with his very rational proposal for compensated emancipation.

Lincoln firmly held to a policy of deep respect for the Constitution and traditions of the law from his first public remarks. In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln warned that when law is disregarded for the sake of justice, that provides license for those who would disregard law for purposes of their own.[101] At his First Inauguration, Lincoln swore a solemn oath to defend the rule of law. But he also began there to

98. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 225–26. This "religious transformation" did not cause the change in war policy, but it "represented Lincoln's need for new sources of philosophical support at a time when the old ones were losing their power." On Lincoln's power of persuasion, see Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*, 48–49.

99. Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862, *CW*, 5:537.

100. Lincoln, Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863, Newspaper Version, *CW*, 5:19.

101. Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, January 27, 1838, *CW*, 1:110–11.

address the ethical and political purpose of the Union. His rhetoric thereafter asserted that the physical grandeur of the United States was secondary to the moral magnificence of its free institutions. Military and personal crises in 1862, along with the political pressures from growing religious activism, drove Lincoln to examine his beliefs. In trying to discern divine intentions, Lincoln reconciled the struggle between his official duty to uphold the Constitution and his moral duty. He determined to risk an extra-constitutional social change to secure the "last best hope of earth" for future generations.

He did not suggest that he actually knew God's purpose for the war. He believed that "God's will" favored emancipation toward the ultimate goal of human equality. Just as Euclid had sharpened the logic of his political arguments, Lincoln relied on the canons of the Calvinist Westminster Confession to shape the moral and spiritual foundation of his commitment to emancipation. The Meditation was likely created on or after July 18, 1862, when Lincoln lectured Gurley about Presbyterian doctrines. A transposition of the "save or destroy" trope connects the Meditation with the Greeley letter, with which the president began his public campaign for emancipation in August. Lincoln's messaging thereafter reflected an authentic faith-inspired voice that resonated with his predominantly Christian nation.[102]

The Meditation should be interpreted as a synthesis of Old School Calvinist doctrines on human moral agency and statecraft. Its theological complexity suggests that it was the culmination of deep reflective analysis as Lincoln contemplated a transformative decision for his presidency. Lincoln took stock of the prevailing religious culture and allowed himself to grow in belief and to adapt theologically charged language and concepts to convey spiritual awareness. He would engage mainstream Christian antislavery sympathies in terms of God's benign sovereignty without resorting to divisive abolitionist moralizing. This stance justified and aided a change in his leadership demeanor that was more confident, assertive, and at times even magisterial, in managing the policy transition. The Meditation reflects what Doris Kearns Goodwin has described as "Lincoln's disciplined

102. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 10–16. "Religion," Parrillo affirms, "was central to the meaning of the Civil War, as the generation that experienced the war tried to understand it." He argues that "Lincoln's Calvinist-like convictions strengthened and legitimized his uncompromising stands on emancipation, no matter how risky, and on strategy, no matter how costly. This Calvinist transformation is another factor that contributed to the North winning the war." Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation," 253.

ability to use new information to confront his own imperfections and recast himself as the leader he wanted [and needed] to be."[103]

"Meditation on the Divine Will" is a masterwork among Lincoln's writings. It is a closely reasoned brief on a leader's ultimate accountability to do right as God had prepared him. Lincoln used guidance on God's intentions from conservative Old School theology to fire his resolve to unite freedom and Union as the overarching goal of the war. The Meditation revealed a culturally astute view of God as active in the world and expecting great works from human instruments in positions of power. Lincoln's private reflection supposed that God's will required him to assume the authority to achieve a greater moral outcome for the war beyond simply restoring the Union as it was. It marked his acceptance of an ability to act on the values that had excited him since he spoke at Peoria in 1854. Lincoln there proclaimed that if he were to make any adaptation to the end of preserving the Union, he wanted to diminish slavery. That would be, he quoted Hamlet, the "relish of salvation."[104] The Meditation was that ideal now tempered by a fiery trial and informed with a studied knowledge of God's preparation of human actors. It enabled Lincoln to embrace his antislavery character and loose the full power of his leadership skill for the most consequential social change in the history of the United States.

103. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 106.

104. Lincoln, Speech at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, *CW*, 2:270; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 3.