

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD RELIGION

The recent discovery of a printed statement by Abraham Lincoln with respect to his attitude toward Christianity and the letter which accompanied it are two of the most valuable contributions available on the much discussed subject of Lincoln's early reaction to religion in general. The remarkable find was made by Dr. Harry Pratt, executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, and published in the March 1942 number of *The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*.

The occasion for the writing of the letter and the printing of the handbill grew out of some apparent misrepresentations in the congressional campaign of 1846, when Lincoln and Peter Cartwright were candidates for office. On August 8, five days after the election was over and Lincoln had won the contest, an article appeared in the *Illinois Gazette* of Lacon, Illinois which Lincoln felt called for a statement from him and accordingly he wrote to Mr. Allen N. Ford, the editor, on August 11 and, the letter and enclosed handbill were both printed in the issue of the paper for August 15.

Lack of space will not allow the printing of the letter written by Lincoln to Mr. Ford and but one paragraph can be exhibited. It follows:

Shortly before starting on my tour through yours, and the other Northern counties of the District, (July 18 at Lacon) I was informed by letter from Jacksonville that Mr. Cartwright was whispering the charge of infidelity against me in that quarter.—I at once wrote a contradiction of it, and sent it to my friends there, with the request that they should publish it or not, as in their discretion they might think proper, having in view the extent of the circulation of the charge, as also the extent of the credence it might be receiving. They did not publish it. After my return from your part of the District, I was informed that he had been putting the same charge in circulation against me in some of the neighborhoods in our own, and one or two of the adjoining counties. . . . After some reflection, I published the little handbill, herewith enclosed, and sent it to the neighborhoods above referred to.

Just one statement in the letter need be noted. Lincoln says that he wrote a letter contradicting the claim of infidelity brought against him. That one statement should settle a lot of controversy.

The handbill referred to by Lincoln was apparently printed on Friday, July 31 just three days before the election on the following Monday, August 3, so it could not have had a wide circulation. The handbill is copied here in full.

To The Voters of the Seventh Congressional District
Fellow Citizens:

A charge having got into circulation in some of the neighborhoods of this District, in substance that I am an open scoffer at Christianity, I have by the advice of some friends concluded to notice the subject in this form. That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scripture; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion

in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the "Doctrine of Necessity"—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument—The habit of arguing thus however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years—And I add here, I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations. The foregoing, is the whole truth, briefly stated, in relation to myself upon this subject.

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion.—Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his Maker, I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live.—If, then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who should condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.

A. Lincoln

July 31, 1846.

Possibly the most important statement made in the broadside is the admission over Lincoln's signature that he was not a member of any Christian church, of course nearly all students of Lincoln have known this to be a fact, but until the discovery of this broadside there was no direct statement by Lincoln himself of his "non church affiliation."

One other admission is also made in which he says that in early life he believed in "The Doctrine of Necessity." This fact has also been known to Lincoln students who have always looked upon him as a fatalist. These two confirmations settle two things at least: first, that up to July 31, 1846 he was not a member of a church and second, that his religious concepts of fatalism were not unlike those held by "several of the Christian denominations."

Aside from two very positive affirmations there are two very explicit denials in the broadside which should settle for all time the continual controversy which has been waged about Lincoln's attitude toward the Bible and organized religion. He said: "I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures," and "I have never spoken with unintentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular."

Lincoln not only makes these two unqualified statements about the Bible and his attitude toward organized religion, but he takes one-third of the broadside in condemning those who are open enemies of and scoffers at religion, and reaffirms that if he was guilty of such conduct he should be condemned. He concludes the broadside by blaming those who with respect to scoffing at religion "falsely put such charges against me."