A Lincoln parable

Civil War historian Allen Guelzo documents Lincoln’s faith—not in God but in the American experiment.

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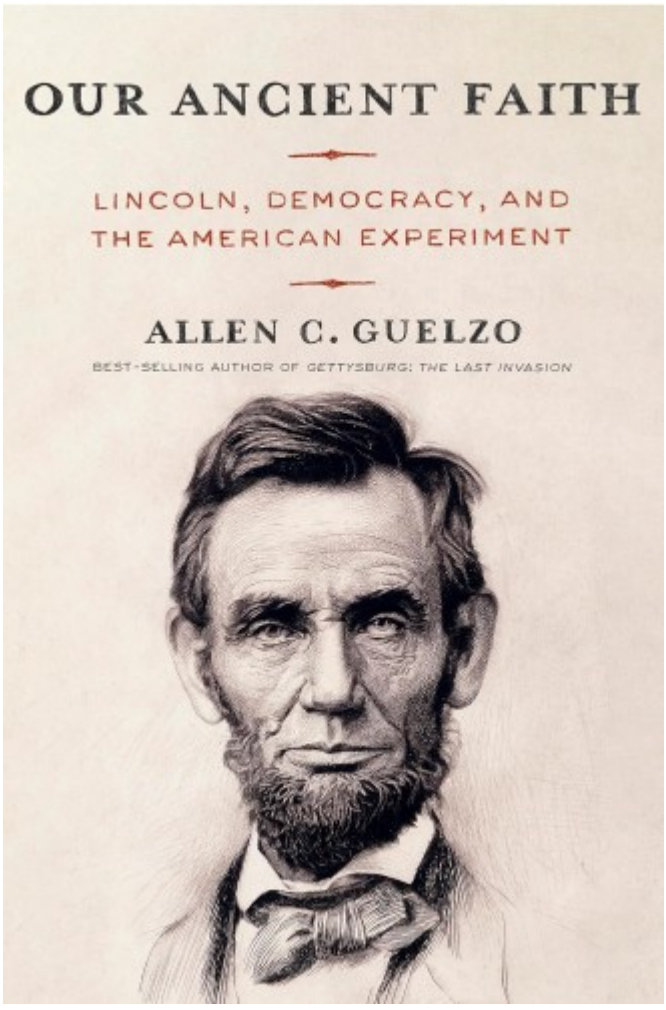
In Review



Our Ancient Faith

Lincoln, Democracy, and the American Experiment

By Allen C. Guelzo
Knopf
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Karl Barth, who believed God's word meets and saves us within our historical circumstances, famously opined that preachers should hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. American journalist Alan Barth (no relation to the Swiss theologian) held that news is only the first draft of history. With the advent of social media, news cycles, and the proliferation of tendentious news outlets, the views of both Barths have become increasingly problematic. In a news landscape that is increasingly formless and void, an essential Christian task is still to respond to our troubled ethos with a two-handed proclamation. If the Bible is in one hand, the other should hold whatever gives us insight for this task.

Eminent Civil War historian Allen C. Guelzo, a distinguished research scholar at Princeton University, has written a book-length essay worth commending to your second hand. Marshaling a lifetime of learning and reflection, *Our Ancient Faith* reviews Abraham Lincoln's life, thoughts, speeches, and outlook to reveal the riches of American democracy. With a wink to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Guelzo writes to American democracy's "cultured despisers." The result is a timely and convicting parable for our time. Guelzo shows how Lincoln's life and words demonstrate the opportunities and demands of democracy, the values needed to sustain it, and the actions required to keep it.

Our Ancient Faith is titled with a phrase drawn from Lincoln's 1854 speech at Peoria, in which he stated that "according to our ancient faith, the just powers of governments are derived from the consent of the governed." The faith under review throughout the book is not Christianity but rather, as the subtitle puts it, faith in the American experiment. As Guelzo says, Lincoln had a "cagey relationship with American religion." Able to quote the Bible at length, tolerant, and broad-minded, Lincoln refused to mock American religion and was unwilling to support those who did. But his own religion was that of Paine's and Voltaire's rationalism, blended with an action program of political economy and an ethic of self-making.

"It must seem uncanny that so many of our current frustrations with democracy were actually encountered by Abraham Lincoln more than a century and a half ago," writes Guelzo. For instance, some Americans now claim that our country is a

republic, not a democracy. This thinly veiled statement holds that minority rule by powerful White men represents the country's identity. Entailed here is a question about human nature that Christians have debated since the second century: Are all equal before God?

In eminently readable prose, Guelzo shows the country's foundation to be an admixture of mob-phobic republican and more egalitarian democratic ideas and practices. The 18th-century founders' concerns about mobocracy, on the one hand, and populist authoritarianism, on the other, were baked into the constitutional separation of powers, bicameral legislature, and limitations on the executive branch. The country's underlying democratic culture (with its mores, religion, toleration, and passion for elections) allowed the more egalitarian thread of democracy to flower.

Against democracy's 19th-century cultured despisers stands Guelzo's Lincoln, a man of modest origins, shaped by legal training and commitment to the rule of law, possessed of ethical convictions about the need to make the most of opportunities. Lincoln embodied the promises of democracy: that all are equal under the law, that no one ought to be subject to the whims and caprice of another, and that consent of the governed is essential. In Lincoln's vision, Guelzo writes, there would be "neither slaves, nor masters." While St. Paul knew this sentiment to be true in Christ, democracy shows it to be true in time.

And yet Guelzo's Lincoln suggests how urgently necessary grace is for Christians responding to the country's original sin of slavery and its legacy of racism. Lincoln was no saint. Guelzo points out "an uncomfortable zigzag in much of Lincoln's thinking on racial issues." Readers may be surprised by Guelzo's observation that Lincoln either ignored or joined much of the racism of his day. He enjoyed blackface minstrelsy, praising its crude jokes and portrayal of what he called the "negro as man monkey, a thing of tricks and antics." Though he found slavery revolting, Lincoln did not aim to destroy Southern slavery but rather to preserve the Union, almost regardless of the cost. Political pragmatism, not an ethic of emancipation, guided his decisions. And after Lincoln's assassination, Guelzo reminds us, White racial supremacy was restored remarkably quickly in the former Confederacy.

Lincoln's experience helps raise questions for Christians. As we approach November, how should we frame our political thinking? Is Christian life necessarily aligned with a political outlook, or is it politically agnostic and neutral? Does God prefer democracy? How should we think about the politicization of news and media, the

ominous likelihood of open conflict and violence, and the country's terrible legacy of slavery and race? How should Christians engage the country's civil religion and its national myth? Guelzo neither asks nor answers these questions, but his treatment of Lincoln will deepen our reflection on all of them.

Social evils, then and now, do not call us to hand-wringing or fatalism. They call us to both collective and individual action. Though it may be hard to imagine a greater person than Lincoln, his life shows that we are saved by grace or we are not saved at all, and while we may know much, we do not know all. Our actions will likely mean more and may require more than we can imagine. Our lives are never so perfect that we are exemplars for others. Our lives may be in tension with the very causes we embrace and the justice we seek.

Lincoln probably knew more about the Bible than most of us do. He faced unbearable pressures and did not yield to them. Through his role in emancipation (whatever the pragmatism behind it), he was an agent of the Divine. If for no other reason than these, we should reflect on his life as we consider ours.