Seeking God’s Will: President Lincoln and Rev. Dr. Gurley

JOHN A. O’BRIEN

Historian of religion Mark Noll wrote of Abraham Lincoln, “It is one of the great mysteries of the history of Christianity in America that the most profoundly religious analysis of the nation’s deepest trauma came, not from . . . a theologian, but from a politician who was self-taught in the ways of both God and humanity.”¹ Lincoln’s use of religious language, reflecting a believer’s understanding of God’s presence in the world, grew increasingly sophisticated during his presidency, particularly after the first year of the war. In the study of Lincoln’s faith “the missing part,” wrote biographer Ronald C. White Jr., “is his four years in Washington, where he did attend, more and more regularly, the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.” White states that “an often overlooked person in the story is Rev. Dr. Gurley, the pastor of that church.”²

The strength of President Lincoln’s relationship with the Reverend Phineas Densmore Gurley, D.D., is not well described in the literature. The last significant and researched portrayal of their story was published in 1948. The author of that study, David R. Barbee, relied largely on anecdotes from Lincoln associates and twelve letters he found in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln that had been released by the Library of Congress the previous year.³ Barbee concluded that Lincoln’s connection with Gurley was limited to “pleasant official, if not pastoral relations.” But new-found information, including letters, observations by diarists, and other documents provide richer context for their friendship. These documents support Gurley’s own assertion that he and Lincoln were

intimate friends and that Lincoln “expressed his views to his pastor as to no one else.”

There is now an inventory of fifty-two letters between Gurley and Lincoln. While the majority of the letters are in either the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) or the Library of Congress (thirty-two), internet searches have found another twenty letters in as many history organizations, universities, and private collections throughout the United States. Twenty-eight are recommendations from Gurley for administrative or chaplaincy appointments. Gurley requested pardons or clemency in nine. Nine more are purely personal notes and six are responses to requests for information from Lincoln. Lincoln agreed with nearly all of Gurley’s requests. Furthermore, the president encouraged far more correspondence from Gurley than he did from any other individual who was not connected with the government or the war effort.

Phineas Gurley was a man of intellectual power and modest demeanor who enjoyed a substantive and influential relationship with President Lincoln. Their relationship developed as Lincoln responded to Gurley’s pastoral concern for his family and his work. Gurley earned trust by helping Lincoln resolve a controversy concerning hospital chaplains during the first months of the war. The president then began to regularly accept Gurley’s judgment when the pastor suggested talented and loyal men for government positions from his large network of friends and colleagues in New York, New Jersey, Indiana, Ohio, and the District of Columbia.

After the death of Willie Lincoln, Gurley used his formidable knowledge of Old School Calvinist doctrine to guide the president’s faith inquiries. Lincoln soon adapted this language to express a personal view of God’s presence in the war that many of the nation’s Christian majority population found compelling, particularly in regard to emancipation. Lincoln first used these doctrinal concepts in his private statement of faith, “Meditation on the Divine Will.” From September 1862 onward, Lincoln used arguments with visiting clergy that were based on these faith observations. Lincoln’s conclusions in the “Meditation” regarding the mysteries of God’s will influenced many of his speeches and letters up through his second inaugural address.

4. Gurley, “Mourns for His Dead Boy (#10),” in Phineas D. Gurley Collection of notes (1861, Oct. 2—1865, May 9), Lincoln Manuscripts, Lilly Library Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington. This is a seven-page document certified by his second daughter, Emma, in 1914, to be a transcription of brief, numbered anecdotal notes written by Dr. Gurley.
The President Chooses a Pastor

The first people Abraham Lincoln wanted to meet with after he arrived in Washington on February 23, 1861, were Francis P. Blair and his son Montgomery. The Blairs were well connected through family and business ties with opinion leaders in Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky—slaveholding states Lincoln needed to keep in the Union if he was to win a potential civil war. No summary of their discussion was prepared that day, but afterward, Montgomery let it be known that Lincoln had expressed his desire to attend a church in Washington whose pastor was “aloof from politics.”

Seven southern states had already seceded before Lincoln’s inauguration on March 4. As president-elect, Lincoln had no way of stiffening the passive policies of President James Buchanan, nor was he willing to say anything that might be interpreted as waver ing on his campaign position that slavery not be allowed to extend beyond where it currently existed. Lincoln knew that while he had no electoral support in Kentucky, voters there were inclined to stay in the Union. The Blairs advised that religion was a major factor in Kentucky politics. The most influential clergyman in the state was Rev. Dr. Robert J. Breckinridge. He happened to be the uncle of one of Lincoln’s defeated presidential opponents, John Cabell Breckinridge, and was a cousin to Montgomery Blair.

Dr. Breckinridge was the acknowledged leader of the Old School Presbyterians in Kentucky. He had published arguments that had been persuasive to many Kentuckians, stating that because slavery was permitted by both the U.S. Constitution and the Bible, their “domestic institution” should be defended while staying in the Union. The Old School church was the last Protestant denomination in the country that had not yet split between North and South. Its tenuous unity was maintained through an agreement to preach only the Bible and the path of salvation through personal spirituality, thereby remaining aloof from any discussion of divisive political issues. This convention kept Old School churches from having to take sides in the slavery debate until states actually began to secede. The Blairs knew that Lincoln had attended an Old School church in Springfield. The simple act of publicly identifying himself with the Old School faith arguments and conventions in Washington, the Blairs suggested, would help to


embolden Kentucky’s powerful Presbyterian faction. Lincoln agreed and allowed Montgomery to make known this signal of support to Dr. Breckinridge. Further, Kentucky Unionists would now be assured that the new president was unlikely to embarrass them by associating with an abolitionist preacher. The Old School Presbyterians did help to keep Kentucky loyal. Three years later, Lincoln would show his appreciation for Dr. Breckinridge by inviting him to chair the convention that nominated the president for his second term.7

The Blairs confidently directed Lincoln to the nearby New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and its Old School pastor, Phineas Gurley. Gurley was highly regarded by the most respected Old School pastors and theologians for his preaching ability, his personal piety, and his talent for keeping a congregation of national leaders together despite their extreme political differences. Prominent theologian Charles Hodge had, six years earlier, arranged for Gurley to join the governing board of Princeton Theological Seminary. Gurley had been one of Hodge’s outstanding students there, and the professor often had Gurley as a guest in his home. Gurley was also well known to Dr. Breckinridge, who had tried to recruit him to the faculty of his new theological seminary in Kentucky.8

The forty-four-year-old Gurley led the delegation of Washington clergy to Lincoln’s first public reception on March 8. When John Nicolay introduced Gurley as chaplain of the U.S. Senate, Lincoln joked that he had not been warned that his new pastor was as tall as he.9 Two days later, the entire Lincoln family, along with visiting relatives, secretaries, and military aides, all attended Dr. Gurley’s church.10 Lincoln would spend more Sunday mornings at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church than in any other church during his adult life. Gurley’s preaching goal was to appeal to his listeners’ reason and intellect, which would have appealed to Lincoln’s own sensibilities. The pastor was convinced that intelligent people would more willingly accept God by examples of His love and less by fear of eternal damnation. Other ministers would often portray Calvinism with an

emphasis on God’s unknowable and arbitrary designs, which could easily lead to a mechanistic view of divine will, or fatalism. Gurley presented a learned and affectionate view of Calvinism that taught “the awful mysteries of Divine sovereignty were only a dark background on which were revealed more strikingly the light and glory of God’s redeeming love.” 11 This style created a place where Lincoln could go to hear a good sermon and avoid the clamor of politics.

As early as the first month of the Lincoln administration, John Nicolay was aware that Lincoln held Gurley in high regard, evidenced by the weight Nicolay gave to a recommendation Gurley had written for Edward C. Carrington as District of Columbia attorney general. Of Carrington’s many endorsements Nicolay listed for Lincoln, Gurley’s appeared second only to that of General Winfield Scott, and Carrington won the appointment.12

Lincoln attended church on April 14, 1861, the same morning of news that the national flag had been brought down at Fort Sumter. It was reported that the president heard “the eloquent and estimable minister speak with an almost inspired power . . . as he deprecated an appeal to the sword.” Gurley urged peace saying, “God has afforded another opportunity for pause, for appeal to Him for assistance before letting loose upon the land the direst scourge which He permits to visit a people—a civil war.” But after this stirring appeal, Gurley prayed that the eventual decisions of the federal administration “might be sanctified and blessed.”13 Lincoln appreciated these sentiments and invited Gurley to pray with him at the Executive Mansion that

13. “Congress versus the Constitution,” Southern Review 7 (July 1868), 72. Gurley had been appealing for peace as secession threats followed Lincoln’s election. In his November Thanksgiving sermon, with President James Buchanan and several southern congressmen present, Gurley reminded them that “God has been good to us as a nation, and that our souls know right well.” Though he attempted to mollify the southerners by describing the nation as “a mighty confederacy of free and independent states,” he declared that if our blessed country, “the modern Israel shall divide,” we would defy the will of God. See “A Patriotic Invocation,” National Intelligencer (Washington, D.C.), December 1, 1860, 3. Now, after the Fort Sumter attack, Gurley continued to plead for peace, but understood that he could not condemn Lincoln for acting to preserve God’s favored land. Although the account of Gurley’s April 14, 1861 sermon only appears in the Southern Review, which had a strong pro-Confederate bias, editor Albert T. Bledsoe was in Washington at the time and the sentiments expressed are consistent with Gurley’s earlier sermon.
afternoon. This began a practice that would continue frequently over the coming year.14

The Lincolns became regular church attenders and would chat after services with the pastor’s wife, Emma, and nineteen-year-old daughter, Fannie. They grew fond of Fannie and were very interested to learn of her engagement to William Elderkin a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy. The president expressed concern when told that a wedding might be delayed because of the prospect of war. He invited Gurley to bring Fannie to the White House so he could encourage her.15

Dr. Gurley called on the Lincolns in early June 1861, to thank them for their recent commitment to rent a pew at church.16 He also let them know that newly commissioned Lieutenant Elderkin had arrived in town with the West Point artillery and that there would be a simple, private wedding service on the coming Sunday.17 Having approved the match themselves, the Lincolns requested that their friends and cabinet officers attend the wedding and suggested special items to outfit the bride.18 The result of their efforts was described by the press: “Quite a fashionable wedding came off at this church yesterday. The daughter of the pastor was married after the service to a lieutenant in the army. Miss Gurley is quite a belle, and was elegantly dressed. . . . A great crowd saw the ceremony.”19 Elderkin wrote the news to his parents: “Fannie and I are married. . . . We had neither bridesmaids nor groomsmen, nor did we make the matter public—yet, it became known by some unaccountable means and to our surprise more than eleven hundred persons witnessed our marriage. President Lincoln shook us both by the hands and wished us much happiness—also Secretaries Cameron and Bates and other ‘big guns’ and nearly all the distinguished citizens of Washington.”20

15. Ibid.
19. “Letter from the Twelfth Regiment,” New York Times, June 12, 1861, 3. A local paper also noted that the Lincolns and cabinet officers were present for the “somewhat novel ceremony which was witnessed by an unusually large number of persons.” National Republican, June 11, 1861, 3.
20. Lt. William Elderkin to Mr. and Mrs. Noble Strong Elderkin, June 12, 1861, Potsdam in the Civil War Collection, Potsdam Public Museum, 2 Park Street, Potsdam N.Y.
There were several reasons aside from Gurley’s preaching style that made Lincoln comfortable with his new pastor. People who Lincoln respected, such as Attorney General Edward Bates, Lincoln’s Illinois friend Orville H. Browning, Secretary of War Simon Cameron, and Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institution, were already part of Gurley’s congregation. Furthermore, Gurley was active in the American Colonization Society and the temperance movement, as Lincoln had also been for years. For his part, Gurley was a well-educated man from upstate New York who had spent fourteen years in Indiana and Ohio, where he developed an appreciation for Lincoln’s style of western manners and speech. Gurley had experience with the demands of Lincoln’s office through his counseling and preaching for presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan. Lincoln encouraged his wife when she began sending gifts of flowers and food to the Gurley family, and Willie was active in the church’s youth group. Two weeks after Fannie’s wedding, Lincoln signed an executive order reappointing his pastor to continue as president of the oversight board of the Government Hospital for the Insane (St. Elizabeth’s). A warmly respectful relationship between the president and his pastor was quickly developing.

The Chaplains Problem

The president brought General Winfield Scott with him to church on July 21. The old commander was heard to say that he “pitied the ladies who were sitting in front of him, as their husbands were engaged in battle probably at that very time.” The fight that day at Bull Run in Virginia was a disaster for the Union. Gurley returned home late in the evening and told his wife he heard that their son-in-law’s battery (Rickett’s) had been “cut to pieces.” Though Lieutenant Elderkin returned safely, Gurley could not forget the anxiety his family felt and the sorry sight of lost, straggling soldiers sleeping in the streets and


23. Farley, Civil War outside My Window, 40.
begging for food for days afterward. He determined that he would do something to provide for the soldiers’ needs, restore their morale and encourage their faith.  

Gurley joined with several members of his church who were leading an effort by the Young Men’s Christian Association to collect and distribute comfort supplies, Bibles, and religious tracts for the soldiers in and near Washington. They asked the pastor to use his influence to bring the entire community together for a more efficient effort. At the conclusion of a well-attended community prayer meeting on September 6, Gurley announced his intention to form an Army Aid Association and charged several leading businessmen to write a constitution. A public meeting was held at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church on September 16. The large audience that evening unanimously adopted the proposed constitution, agreed to a financial subscription and elected Gurley as president. Before the end of the year, the association would merge with similar programs in other major cities to form the U.S. Christian Commission. This commission raised millions of dollars from churches to provide chaplains, faith literature, and personal care supplies to Union soldiers.  

Dr. Gurley immediately enlisted fellow clergy to work for the association. These included Rev. G.G. Goss, formerly an army chaplain during the Mexican War, and several of Gurley’s local pastor friends: Presbyterian ministers John C. Smith and William Y. Brown, and Lutheran minister John G. Butler. The clergymen quickly organized and alerted the nation of their willingness to work with anyone who shared their determination to support the soldiers in the many regiments arriving in the city.  

24. Farley, Civil War outside My Window, 41.  
26. Clergymen had accompanied the first regiments from New York to Washington in May 1861. They assessed that the soldiers would need the support of a permanent volunteer organization. Invitations were sent to the YMCA-related organizations in eight major cities that had already begun collecting supplies. They convened in New York City on November 14 to form the U.S. Christian Commission. The commission met on December 13 in Washington, where it received a strong endorsement from Lincoln, and began operations on January 29, 1862. By the end of the war, $6 million in services and forty million Bibles, books, and religious tracts were distributed to Union soldiers. See Lemuel Moss, Annals of the United States Christian Commission (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1868).  
27. The D.C. Army Aid Association published notices in Boston and New York papers to announce it would cooperate with any individuals, or organizations “to promote the physical and religious welfare of the army.” Packages “intended for soldiers should be sent to the Patent Office, corner of Ninth and G streets.” Rev. G.G. Goss was the agent. Notice signed, “By order of the Executive Committee, P.D. Gurley, Chairman; G.W. Samson, Secretary.” See, for example, Christian Watchman (Boston) October 23, 1861, 2.
The Army Aid Association staff quickly discovered that they were trying to work within a system to serve the many new volunteer regiments that the War Department itself was ill-prepared to manage. Because military units were being developed in haste, there were substantial differences in the regulations pertaining to the regular army and those for the regiments of the new volunteer soldiers being rushed to defend Washington. One such difference was in the organization of hospitals that were established to care for the wounded volunteer soldiers. The association ministers were shocked to learn that the government had made no arrangement for providing chaplains in these hospitals. They declared they were ready to fill the need if Gurley would bring the issue to the attention of the president.28

Unbeknown to them, Lincoln was already frustrated by issues arising from the appointment of chaplains. No legal definition existed for volunteer regiment chaplains, and every point of conflict regarding them, no matter how minor, was directed to the president of the United States. Secretary William Stoddard reported that during the summer of 1861, this was “a source of great annoyance to Mr. Lincoln . . . as an endless train of broken down ‘reverends,’ men who could not induce any respectable church to place itself under their charge, crowded forward, clamorous to be entrusted with the spiritual interests of the grandest of all congregations—men going out to die. Mr. Lincoln said to me one day, ‘I do believe that our chaplains . . . are the very worst men we have in the service.’”29

Gurley now proposed to further complicate Lincoln’s concerns about chaplains by suggesting he create another category lawmakers had not anticipated, that of hospital chaplain to attend wounded volunteer soldiers. Stoddard’s anecdote portrays a president who did not appear eager to go farther with this issue. Unless Congress passed a law to guide him, Lincoln believed he had no authority to appoint chaplains at hospitals other than those caring exclusively for the regular, nonvolunteer army. Gurley implored Lincoln to reconsider what he saw as an urgent issue. To him, the volunteers were the


very soldiers who required and deserved the best possible pastoral care. Gurley assured Lincoln that he would only recommend the best prepared and honorable ministers. Lincoln finally agreed to accept Gurley’s assistance and worry later about getting authorization from Congress.

Lincoln appointed the first two recommended ministers, Goss and Butler, on September 25, and had them assigned to the hospital in Alexandria. The following week, Gurley recommended a third chaplain,

30. Gurley would soon write to Lincoln that it is “highly important that the 200 sick and wounded” in the area hospitals have a minister of the gospel for their comfort. See Gurley to Lincoln, October 5, 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Lincoln may not yet have been sensible to the power that religion exerted on the newly enlisted soldiers. It is estimated that after a wave of religious revivals in the late 1850s, as many as 80 percent of all Americans had some interaction with a church; the income of the nation’s churches and religious voluntary societies nearly exceeded the revenue of the federal government; and religious writings and music were among the strongest influences on popular culture. Mark A. Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 12–13. Soldiers often observed that their religious faith was a chief resource for enduring combat stress and recovering from wounds. James M. McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76. During the debate in Congress on the hospital chaplain issue, Abram Olin of New York predicted outrage from soldiers’ families if chaplains were not available in the Washington hospitals. See Cong. Globe, March 5, 1862, 2:1086.

31. Lincoln states in his annual message that he responded when he was “solicited by Christian ministers.” See “Annual Message to Congress,” December 3, 1861, Basler, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. The only ministers named in the record were associates under Gurley’s leadership of the Army Aid Association; Gurley authored the only correspondence discovered in the matter; and the Congressional debate transcript identifies Gurley as Lincoln’s spokesperson for the chaplain issue. See Cong. Globe, March 5, 1862, 1085–86.

32. The actual transmission of recommendations requires interpretation. No document has been found that recommends the first two chaplains, Goss and Butler, who were appointed on September 25. But in a letter to Lincoln a week later, Gurley thanks him for the opportunity “to appoint a third chaplain” (Hopkins), which suggests that he was being asked again (Gurley to Lincoln, October 5, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress). Nor has a document been discovered that recommends Smith and Brown on November 7. There is a second letter on the matter from Gurley. On November 22, he wrote to Lincoln, saying “the names you wish to obtain are these: Rev. John G. Butler of this city and Rev. Henry Hopkins of Williamstown, Mass.” Butler had been appointed on September 25. There is a receipt note on the envelope that these chaplains had been “recommended by Gurley.” Presumably, Lincoln was preparing the “Form Letter to Chaplains” for his annual message and had asked to be reminded so that the names of his appointees would appear correctly. Gurley to Lincoln, November 22, 1861. NARA Microfilm Publication M725, Indexes to Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series), 1846, 1861–1889. This is the first published use of this recently discovered letter.
Rev. Henry Hopkins, the son of the president of Williams College in Massachusetts. The pastor gave his highest level of assurance to the president, saying that Hopkins would be successful because “his heart is in the work.” Gurley continued to use this phrase in other recommendations to show he had not forgotten Lincoln’s original concern.  

Before the end of October, Gurley responded to the increasing numbers of Union casualties by offering two additional names for Lincoln’s consideration. Gurley recommended ministers John C. Smith and William Y. Brown. Dr. Smith was the pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington. He and Gurley covered for each other’s absences from their churches, and Gurley knew of his commitment to care for the soldiers.  

Reverend Brown was new to the city but his credentials had recently been accepted by Gurley for the local presbytery. Lincoln appointed both in early November. In July 1863, Brown would publish a handbook for hospital chaplains that was the first military work to offer standard “techniques and advice for chaplains.”

Lincoln subsequently realized that he was neglecting the needs of Roman Catholic soldiers. He wrote to Archbishop John Hughes in New York City on October 21, asking him to suggest chaplains to work in the Washington hospitals. Hughes recommended local priests, Matthew F. Magrath and Francis E. Boyle.

Lincoln included the names of all seven of these new chaplains in the first of his annual reports to Congress on December 3, 1861. The five Protestants on the list were all recommended by Gurley. Without Congressional authorization, Lincoln had taken a risk with these appointments, seeking retroactive approval. That he did so shows that Lincoln took Dr. Gurley’s requests and recommendations seriously.

34. Notices appeared frequently in newspapers announcing that Gurley and Smith were preaching at each other’s churches. An example is “The Union Prayer Meeting at Dr. Smith’s 4th Presbyterian Church was filled. Dr. Gurley was the featured speaker,” Evening Star, March 23, 1858, 3.
36. Lincoln to John J. Hughes, October, 21, 1861, Basler, Collected Works, 4:559. This is the only evidence in the record where Lincoln went outside the Gurley-Army Aid Association network for chaplains.
Prompted by Lincoln, Congress soon took up the necessary legislation. William Dunn of Indiana reported a bill from the House Committee on Military Affairs that would authorize the administration to appoint and pay hospital chaplains. During the debate on March 5, 1862, several representatives expressed concern over the proposed pay rates, and Dunn sought outside advice. Knowing Lincoln was preoccupied by the recent death of his son, Willie, Dunn instead approached Gurley. The reverend asked a colleague pastor to summarize the case for the pay rate from the experience of his army friends and forwarded this report to Dunn, along with his own note agreeing with the explanation. Gurley added that Lincoln would be willing to discuss it, if necessary. Dunn reported to the House that he did speak to the president, who confirmed that Dr. Gurley represented his views on the matter.

In May Lincoln signed the legislation confirming his appointments and creating a process that relieved the president of any further responsibility for chaplains. Because of Lincoln’s positive experience with Gurley (and Archbishop Hughes) the bill stipulated that chaplains must receive the endorsement of an authority in their denomination. The way was now clear and, by June 14, thirty-five additional chaplains were commissioned with the original seven. In total, 281 hospital chaplains were commissioned under this law by the end of the Civil War.

Secretary Stoddard observed that few people could get Lincoln to act on their particular requests. “The number of men who really had influence with the President, or could obtain favors from him by purely personal application, was by no means large,” Stoddard wrote,


39. Dunn had contacted Gurley in late January while the bill was being drafted. Gurley asked a friend, Rev. George Samson, to gather information for a response. Samson sent his advice letter to Gurley on February 3. Gurley sent this and his own letter agreeing with the information to Dunn on February 4. Dunn specifically credited Gurley as representing the president’s position. Cong, Globe, March 5, 1862, 1085–86.

40. NARA, RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Register of General and Staff Officers of Volunteers, 1:58–70.
“They were a class of men who seldom troubled him with personal applications, and when they did come, or write, we knew very well that what they came for, if reasonable, was pretty sure of accomplishment.” 41 Stoddard would have placed Gurley in this category. The process of appointing these first hospital chaplains confirmed for Lincoln that Gurley could be trusted to make good recommendations. That Gurley was prominently mentioned in Congress as having Lincoln’s confidence made the pastor a sought-after intermediary. Thus encouraged, Gurley would go on to make fifty-two known requests of Lincoln for administrative appointments, pardons, and meetings. At least forty requests were granted.

Struggles with Grief and Faith

Dr. and Mrs. Gurley attended the Lincolns’ Grand Presidential Party on February 5, 1862, held as both Willie and Tad Lincoln were ill with typhoid fever. 42 Gurley would attend their sickbeds that month as the disease ran its course. While Tad recovered, newspapers announced on February 17 that there was no hope for Willie. The pastor reported that “as Willie Lincoln lay dying, he said to me, ‘Doctor Gurley, I have six one dollar gold pieces in my bank over there on the mantel. Please send them to the missionaries for me.’” Willie participated in the Youth’s Missionary Society at Gurley’s church, which sponsored clergy in China. The contribution was duly noted in the church accounts book. 43

Willie Lincoln died on February 20. For his father, the blow was overwhelming. Nurse Rebecca Pomroy was moved by the depth of Lincoln’s despair and, before the funeral, asked if he “could not trust God.” She recorded that he answered “with deep religious feeling saying, ‘I think I can and I will try. I wish I had that child-like faith you speak of, and I trust He will give it to me.’” 44 Indeed, Lincoln would spend many hours with Gurley over the next few months in

42. “Invitations issued by Mr. & Mrs. Lincoln (#37)” in Gurley Collection of notes, Indiana University. Card reads: “The President & Mrs. Lincoln request the honor Dr. & Mrs. Gurley’s company on Wednesday Evening February 5th at 9 o’clock.”
conversation about faith and the learned doctrines associated with anticipating God’s purposes on earth.

The East Room of the White House was crowded with dignitaries for the funeral on February 24. Gurley gave the eulogy, which described Willie’s precocious personality and many virtues. The pastor placed the parents’ grief in the context of Lincoln’s “unprecedented weight of civil cares” and the trials of thousands of other families during terrible war who had taken comfort in their faith. Gurley declared that Willie was now experiencing new life with the Redeemer, “and with a little brother [Eddie] he never saw on earth.” He then reminded the gathering of the importance and beauty of faith in coping with crisis and loss. The pastor encouraged Lincoln to have faith in God’s unknowable plan that sometimes appeared as a “mysterious dealing.” Gurley counseled that “God’s ways are not our ways.” He laid out key elements of Old School doctrine relating to the attributes of God: “His kingdom ruleth over all. . . . What we need in the hour of trial, and what we should seek by earnest prayer, is confidence in Him who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well. . . . A mysterious dealing they may consider it, but still it is His dealing. Only let us bow in His presence with a humble and teachable spirit, be still and know that He is God; let us hear His voice, and inquire after His will.”

The comfort that Gurley offered that day represented the essential difference between Presbyterian faith and the fatalism to which Lincoln had previously been inclined. Presbyterian teaching places humankind and their destiny in the context of the eternal plan of a loving, personal God, who is present in all creation and in all history. While we may not now understand God’s purpose, we know that every life has a role under His providence. There is little solace in a fatalistic view that a death was simply necessary. For Presbyterians, this chance “necessity” denies “the foresight of God’s plan . . . and the


46. Richard Carwardine cites numerous contemporary testimonies as well as Lincoln’s own admission of his belief in a “Doctrine of Necessity” in which “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.” There is no free will, and “all human action was shaped by motives,” or self-interest. The role of providence was limited to having set the universe in motion according to natural laws that serve completely predetermined purposes. Fatalism was resignation to one’s inability to alter these predetermined ends. Lincoln claimed that these ideas were consistent with religion. Many theologians, however, classified fatalism as a form of unbelief. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 40, 44, 313.
adoption of means for its accomplishment." Man uses his free will to prepare himself to act as God’s grace provides light for him to see the right path. But the result of man’s efforts will occur within God’s mysterious providence, in His time, not ours, and according to His will.

Willie Lincoln’s death moved his father to take a renewed interest in his faith. Biographer Ida Tarbell concluded that this was “the first experience of [Lincoln’s] life which drove him to look outside of his own mind and heart for help to endure a personal grief. Religion up to this time had been an intellectual interest.” Mary Lincoln concurred with this assessment. After Willie’s death, she wrote, her husband “increasingly turned to religion for solace.” Lincoln, she said, “first thought about this subject . . . when Willie died.”

Mary Lincoln was unable to grieve with her husband. She did not attend Willie’s funeral service and secluded herself in her room for a month afterward. The president turned to his pastor for solace and counsel. He drew on Gurley’s education and experience to delve more deeply into his own relationship with his Creator. Friends of the Lincolns from Illinois, Senator Orville H. Browning and his wife Eliza, stayed in the White House for several days after the funeral to help comfort the family. Browning wrote that during his stay he did not speak with the president about his “feelings,” but recalled that Lincoln “had several interviews with Rev. Dr. Gurley.” In the weeks following, John Defrees of the Government Printing Office also observed Lincoln entering into “several conversations with Rev. Dr. Gurley on the subject of religion.” Lincoln now had the benefit of personal counseling by an experienced pastor who had been described by a congregant as especially gifted at soothing pain by making anyone feel “that he understood all about their troubles and could sympathize with and encourage them better than anyone else.”

51. John D. Defrees to William H. Herndon, December 4, 1866, *Illinois during the Civil War*, University of Illinois Digital Collections, Item 392, http://civilwar.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-civil%3A15340. Defrees described his observations as he was helping Lincoln prepare his March 6 message to Congress and its later publication. Defrees had also done printing work for Gurley in Indiana.
Even the church experience took on more importance in Lincoln’s healing process. Lincoln said that he liked Gurley and appreciated the way he preached the gospel.\(^{53}\) Dr. Gurley took pains to create a reflective, spiritual atmosphere at his Sabbath services. The pastor wanted his church to be the place where people could hear the “word which Christ Himself has inspired” and allow it to “enlarge your views, strengthen your faith, confirm your hopes, elevate your affections, enliven your zeal, and build you up in faith and holiness unto eternal life.” Gurley expected people to leave their worldly cares at the door. “God through the Holy Spirit,” he preached, “communes here with his people. . . . He opens the eyes of the blind, breaks the chains of the captive, gives courage to the timid.” Church should be the place where you can examine your motives and listen for God’s encouragement to do right. “The promises of the Bible are not made equally or indiscriminately without regard to character,” Gurley said. “You should first inquire ‘what have I been prepared to do?’ and, then, do that which God’s grace inspires you.” The church ethos Gurley created was to prepare his listeners to go into the world without fear, to “demonstrate God’s power in love.”\(^{54}\) Gurley’s sermons often resonated with Lincoln because they used terms Lincoln had used himself but in the context of fatalistic belief. Words like “motives” and “character” were utilized very differently by Gurley, in the context of free will, inspiration, and a liberating faith. Gurley reported that the president continued his reflections on the sermons when he returned to the White House by reading and marking the text of the Bible chapter. Lincoln would later ask Gurley to comment on these notes.\(^{55}\)

Several of Gurley’s sermons and publications from the early war period dealt with doctrine themes that Lincoln began to use with increasing effectiveness beginning in the autumn of 1862. It cannot be determined which sermons Lincoln actually heard, because the archived Gurley sermons do not bear specific dates, but Gurley would have had these doctrine topics in mind during his many conversations with the president between Willie’s death on February 20 and the fall of 1862.

53. “I like Gurley. He don’t preach politics. I get enough of that through the week. When I go to church, I like to hear the gospel.” Schenck attributed this Lincoln quote to “a distinguished friend.” Though this is a commonly cited Lincoln observation of his pastor, this is as close to the source as exists. Schenck interpreted this as appreciation for Gurley’s intellectual and genteel delivery. “We doubt not that many a public man has had the same feeling about Dr. Gurley’s preaching.” Schenck, *Discourse*, 29.


55. “Observance of the Sabbath (#34),” *Gurley Collection of notes.*
Lincoln endured many sleepless nights during that spring and summer. In those trying times, the president often sent his valet, William Slade, to bring Gurley to the White House. The two men would talk on the south portico until dawn. The pastor rarely spoke specifically of his times with the president other than to note their continuing conversations on faith. Gurley did tell one anecdote about a seminal moment that most likely occurred on July 17. Earlier that day, Lincoln had received delegates from the Reformed Presbyterian Church who pressed him for immediate emancipation in the name of God. With this group, as with the Delegation of Progressive Friends three weeks earlier, Lincoln had replied that perhaps God had a different way in mind of dealing with the issue. The president then invited Gurley to the White House in the evening. Mary Lincoln was away, so, as the night grew late, Lincoln invited his pastor to return before breakfast to resume the conversation. When Gurley was leaving the next morning, he encountered one of his congregants who was curious about the early visit. Gurley explained that he and the president had again been discussing faith, but unlike during their many previous meetings, this time “Mr. Lincoln did all the talking.”

This statement regarding the uniqueness of Lincoln’s active participation is intriguing. To have invited Gurley to return later, and then take over the conversation, suggests that Lincoln had been organizing his thoughts for a theological statement to test on his pastor. Lincoln created many of his most consequential documents through a process that included speaking aloud his argument in the presence of a trusted confidant. In this way, he could better judge the soundness of the logic

58. “Mourns for a Dead Boy (#10),” Gurley Collection of notes. The date of July 17, 1862, is calculated from Gurley’s statement that the event happened several months after Willie’s funeral, while “Mrs. Lincoln was away.” Abraham Lincoln went to Harrison’s Landing, Virginia, on July 7, and Mary Lincoln left for New York the following day. Abraham Lincoln was next in the White House office on July 11, but had an extraordinarily busy schedule related to military matters and his compensated emancipation proposal up to the adjournment of Congress the afternoon of July 17. See With Lincoln in the White House: Writings of John G. Nicolay, edited by Michael Burlingame (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 85. That afternoon Abraham Lincoln had time for a meeting with the Reformed Presbyterian Church delegation. Mary Lincoln returned to Washington on July 18. See National Republican, July 21, 1862, 2. The evening of the seventeenth and morning of the eighteenth seem the most likely dates for this sequence of Lincoln meetings with Gurley.
and the effect of his word selection. Lincoln just needed to hear himself speak the case before an audience.59 But Gurley could not know that Lincoln was now confident enough in his ability to use his pastor’s counseling about God and faith to begin himself to preach national salvation. Lincoln’s lecture on faith to Gurley in mid-July was likely a part of his process in composing his “Meditation on the Divine Will.”

My God and My Country

The president sent for Gurley on the last Sunday afternoon of August 1862. For the second time in two years, the rebels had routed a grand federal army near Washington at Bull Run. There had been a cabinet meeting in the morning and now the president wanted to pray. He and his pastor sat alone as they talked on the south porch of the White House. Gurley recalled that the sounds of battle were faintly audible from far across the Potomac River. The pastor told his family “that when the strain had become almost unbearable, he knelt in prayer and Mr. Lincoln knelt beside him and joined reverently in that position.”60 Within the next few days, Lincoln would complete the “Meditation on the Divine Will,” a short note that he reportedly never shared with anyone.

The “Meditation” begins with a simple affirmation of Lincoln’s faith in an overruling providence: “the will of God prevails.” This observation presumes, in Calvinist doctrine, a belief that God is in all creation and desires justice and love for all people. Lincoln builds on several other references to that doctrine, made more profound by their brevity. He refers to God’s “quiet power” to resolve the contest and relates it to his own responsibility for the war.61 This is the doctrine of the power of God’s grace to inspire men to act righteously. Lincoln reminds us that most people had believed the war could have been avoided or, once started, quickly ended by God’s mere subtle influence through grace. Gurley preached that grace “subdues the hardest heart, new creates the vilest character, and turns enemies . . . into devoted friends.” Men can be motivated to do right only as they have prepared their “character” to accept God’s grace to see the right.62 That grace, which Gurley first suggested at Willie’s funeral, can best be perceived in the

60. Barton, The Soul of Abraham Lincoln, 87. Army Captain William S. Gurley, grandson of Phineas, told this story to Barton prior to the original publication of the book in 1917.
attitude that Lincoln portrayed in his “Meditation,” with “a humble and teachable spirit, be still and know that He is God.”

Further emphasizing the new depth of his faith understanding, the “Meditation” speaks to Lincoln’s own motives in extending the bloody conflict. All the leaders in this affair, “the human instrumentalities,” he notes, “are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose.” Gurley preached that “God accomplishes His eternal purpose through the instrumentality of free, and accountable agents. He does it too without impairing their accountability or their freedom.” Gurley believed that people who are God’s chosen instruments are “perfectly fitted for their task.” Lincoln’s words confess that he is “of the best adaptation,” and thereby seems to accept responsibility to his God for acting on the moral purpose of opposing slavery for which he has spent his adult life preparing. This is well beyond the formulaic and benign acknowledgment of Lincoln’s “humble instrument of God” attitude from earlier speeches. Lincoln had declared in his debates with Stephen Douglas that slavery was wrong and immoral and now he had been elected to stop its spread. Did God expect him to do even more with his current position? Lincoln seems to be looking to the nature of God to understand what great end would be worth the shedding of so much blood. Lincoln’s “Meditation” concludes that God probably has some plan that the human participants may not yet have considered. Lincoln posits that this is the reason that God wills the war to continue. It might not be adequate for God’s purpose to simply restore “the Union as it was,” with slavery intact.

The theological depth of the “Meditation” comes from significant themes of Old School Presbyterian faith that Lincoln had not previously included in his writings. The “Meditation” is both a declaration of faith and an observation of the need for human plans to comport with God’s moral design. If the thoughts in this note were derived from having listened to Gurley explain Old School beliefs, these words were not meant to convey a sense of powerlessness or resignation to fate. Had he ever seen it, Lincoln’s pastor would have read the “Meditation” as a confidant statement of faith and personal accountability to God to seek justice for the world. Rebecca Pomroy, the nurse who tried to comfort Lincoln over Willie’s death, would have recognized in this the fulfillment of the president’s promise to try to look to God

64. Gurley, Man’s Projects and God’s Results (Washington: Wm. Ballantyne, 1863), 1.
for answers. Although the Bible was still a primary inspiration for Lincoln’s insights, Gurley was certainly the source for Lincoln’s newfound ability to speak in the language of Calvinistic doctrine.66

The “Meditation” displays the rapid evolution of Lincoln’s faith beliefs regarding God’s will as a force in history. As late as 1854, Lincoln had rejected the concept of a personal God who was actively involved in the affairs of the world.67 At his inauguration, Lincoln spoke of God as a still remote arbitrator who would merely select either that “his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South.”68 This was a shallow view of theology that put men in the position of limiting the scope of God’s will. This might easily have devolved into the standard wartime claim that “God is on our side,” but Lincoln resisted this path. His reasoning was not so much theological as rather asserting his position as “president of the whole country,” rather than one side.

A highly significant change in Lincoln’s faith expression appeared when, just two weeks after Willie’s death and for the first time in his life, Lincoln publicly acknowledged his personal relationship with God. In his message to Congress on March 6, 1862, regarding his desire for a compensated emancipation plan, Lincoln wrote, “In full view of my great responsibility to my God, and to my country, I earnestly beg the attention of Congress and the people to this subject.”69 This bold new description of an intimate need for God just two weeks after Gurley spoke Willie’s funeral sermon was a strong indication that Lincoln was open to the doctrinal belief system of Calvinist faith. His continuing references to a personal God caught the attention of two of Lincoln’s cabinet members again, in September, when he announced his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.70

Throughout most of 1862, Lincoln made emancipation a primary goal of his administration. The Emancipation Proclamation was intended to accomplish a temporary wartime end to the institution. Lincoln needed to gain the support of faith leaders to convince the

67. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 152–3. Lincoln had his law partner, William Herndon, remove a reference to a personal God from a speech Lincoln was to deliver because “no such personality ever existed.”
country that this action, though imperfect, was consistent with the
demand of God’s righteous will. He did this by asserting an alterna-
tive outcome for the war under the mystery of God’s design in the
accepted doctrinal context of His love and desire for justice for all men.
How Lincoln chose to communicate this plan had its foundation on
his expression of faith beliefs and moral values using the language
of Calvinist doctrine. While Gurley never stated that Lincoln had
accepted the Christian religion, he did pronounce that Lincoln had a
strong belief in God and that his knowledge of Presbyterian doctrine
was “sound.”

Lincoln’s manner of speaking with visiting clergy at the White
House took on a marked change after the summer of 1862. Along with
his adept use of scripture, he now began to use faith doctrine concepts
that communicated a deeper understanding of biblical meaning that
would resonate more forcefully with devout Protestants. Lincoln’s
many conversations with Dr. Gurley seem to have enlivened his ability
to speak more convincingly to Christians throughout the Union. As
Richard Carwardine has noted, Lincoln’s expression of faith beliefs
during this time became “much closer to the historic Calvinism that
profundly shaped most of northern Protestantism.”

Churchmen often visited and wrote Lincoln to insist that immedi-
ate and total emancipation was God’s will. Only then, they argued,
would God take the Union side and bless the army with success. At
some point in his earnest inquiries with Gurley, Lincoln seems to
have realized another purpose for the faith ambiguities with which
he struggled. It must have occurred to him that doctrinal themes and
language could be applied to reshape public attitudes on Union war
aims. The “Meditation” presented his argument as both logical and
theological. Lincoln then adapted the emotionally charged concepts
and vocabulary of religious dogma to engage with the Protestant
clergy who persistently challenged him on the basis of their superior
insights to the will of God. Lincoln was now prepared to adroitly con-
tend with clergy on slavery in the context of his faith in an authentic
and powerful voice. The propositions and language in the “Medita-
tion” became the foundation for his most culturally potent letters and
speeches on emancipation and national reconciliation.

71. James A. Reed, The Religion of Abraham Lincoln (privately printed, 1915), 38. In
this 1872 lecture, Reed quotes from an interview he had with Gurley at the New York
Avenue church in April 1868.
72. Carwardine, Lincoln, 225.
73. Carwardine, Lincoln, 278.
The change in Lincoln’s conversations with faith leaders was only just becoming apparent in the summer of 1862. The thought process underlying the “Meditation” was not evident in Lincoln’s discussion with the Progressive Friends on June 20. Furthermore, Lincoln did not say more than his standard hope for divine guidance with the Reformed Presbyterian Synod on July 17. By September 13, however, Lincoln seems to be testing his “Meditation” thoughts on the delegation of clergymen from Chicago. The president stated his desire to learn God’s will in the matter of emancipation. He explained that clergymen both for and against emancipation had told him they represented God’s will on the matter. “I am sure that either the one or the other class is mistaken in that belief, and perhaps in some respects both,” Lincoln said. “Whatever shall appear to be God’s will, I will do.”

Lincoln had finished a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation and told cabinet members of his intentions in mid-July 1862. He expected severe opposition to his showing that God’s purpose in the war was different from that held by most Union supporters. To help counter voter displeasure with emancipation, Lincoln prepared arguments to show that his views were consistent with popular opinion regarding the priority of saving the Union and submission to God’s mysterious will. After the Union success at Antietam on September 17, Lincoln finally announced his intention to issue the Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles reported the president as saying, “God has decided this question in favor of the slaves.”

The more fully developed expression of the “Meditation” argument first appears in Lincoln’s response to Quaker leader Eliza Gurney on October 26. He said that he was trying to do God’s will “best in the light which he affords me,” which now embraced the end of slavery. Lincoln continued that if “I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise.” Even though the immediate reaction against the preliminary proclamation resulted in public protests and in Congressional election losses, Lincoln’s manner and tone with Gurney reflect a learned and secure
faith. It seems that by then Lincoln felt that God’s will regarding slavery was pretty clear.

As New Year’s Day approached, Gurley began to realize his relationship with the president was well known. Many curious folks suspected that Gurley knew the contents of the closely held executive order. “The day before Mr. Lincoln signed and issued the final Emancipation Proclamation,” Gurley recalled, “I was besieged by persons who were anxious to learn something about the proclamation and who believed that I would know because of my intimacy with Mr. Lincoln . . . and though I knew its contents, none were the wiser for my knowledge.”

A Calm and Abiding Confidence

Gurley’s sermons were often aligned with Lincoln’s views. In his National Thanksgiving service on August 6, 1863, with Lincoln present, Gurley preached a variation on a frequent theme concerning the historic differences between men’s plans and God’s will for the outcome. Now, after Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and convinced that the Union would be restored, but not “as it was,” Gurley pronounced it a great irony that the rebellion “should be the device to result in slavery’s overthrow.” God gave us “the scourge of this bloody strife” in order “to purge away our sins” through the “purification of the country by blood.” Gurley went on to make optimistic assertions as to God’s will, saying “though we have offended Him, we cannot believe He will leave us to perish. He may purify in the ‘fire of trial,’ but He will not destroy us. And when the issue shall be decided, our nation will be re-established on a foundation of liberty and righteousness . . . and that the very efforts which have been made to divide us should lead to ‘a more perfect union.’” These sentiments also found their way into Lincoln speeches, but it was three months later at Gettysburg where he most clearly associated this new beginning of freedom with the powerful religious image of “new birth.”

In his National Thanksgiving sermon, Gurley also declared that “the Southerners are still our brethren,” and we should prepare for reconciliation. For this, a correspondent wrote, “the sermon would be called by

79. Gurley, Man’s Projects and God’s Results, 16–17.
some disloyal, but its author has ever been considered one of the most loyal of men. The President listened attentively, though some of the audience thought he took some hard hits.”80 Lincoln told his secretary John Hay afterward that he thought it a good sign that Gurley seemed much more confidant in the ultimate success of the Union cause.81

In October 1864, Orville H. Browning observed that Gurley was overwrought with concern that Lincoln might not be reelected.82 The voting results soon brought welcome relief. Dr. and Mrs. Gurley were invited to dine alone with the Lincolns on November 18 to celebrate the first reelection of a president since Andrew Jackson.83 Lincoln attended the Thanksgiving Day service at the New York Avenue church on November 24. The church was highly regarded for the quality of its music program. Gurley made sure the choir was ready for this celebratory occasion with a special surprise. Lincoln listened with obvious delight as they sang “The President’s Hymn” and then led the packed church in the “Hallelujah Chorus.”84 Over the course of the Lincoln presidency, there were many simple acts of friendship between these men and their families. During the last year of Lincoln’s life, a presidential aide described Gurley as “one of the seven most frequent and welcome visitors to the White House.”85

Lincoln’s last conversation with Gurley occurred on April 9, 1865. “When Mr. Lincoln returned from Richmond,” Gurley wrote, he “told me he was very much pleased with his reception in that city. He said he could never forget how kindly he was received. ‘Why, doctor,’ he said, ‘I walked alone on the street, and anyone could have shot me from a second story window.’”86 Only five days later, Gurley was summoned in the middle of the night to pray over his mortally wounded friend.87 The pastor led the funeral services in Washington, accompanied the

82. Pease and Randall, Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, 1:691.
83. Basler, Collected Works, 8:567.
87. James Tanner, The Passing of Lincoln (April 15, 1865), the stenographer’s notes from the room in which Lincoln died; Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana. When Lincoln died at 7:22 a.m., “The Rev. Dr. Gurley stepped forward and lifting his hands began, “Our Father and our God”—I snatched a pencil and notebook from my pocket but my haste defeated my purpose. My pencil point (I had but one) caught in my coat and broke, and the world lost the prayer—a prayer which was only interrupted by the sobs of Stanton.”
body on the train back to Springfield, and was the last to pray over the casket at the gravesite.  

Gurley fell short of his personal goal for assuring Lincoln’s place in eternity. The pastor could have obviated the coming years of controversy over Lincoln’s faith if, during his eulogy in the White House on April 19, he had merely used his standard funeral language of “reunion with the Redeemer in heaven,” as he even did for young Willie. By his silence in this regard, the pastor seemed to acknowledge that Lincoln had not made a public confession of faith as required for salvation under Old School doctrine. When asked why he had not admitted him to church membership, Gurley said, “Mr. Lincoln never applied.”

Gurley had written that faith “adds a finishing lustre to a man’s character and tends to invigorate his courage because he is ready for the worst.” His counsel to the president served to enliven a religious context for the luster of Lincoln’s extraordinary intellect and charisma as it was displayed through the darkest days of the Civil War. Gurley was convinced that Lincoln was inspired by the Creator. He declared that “God raised him up for a great and glorious mission, furnished him for the work, and aided him in its accomplishment. . . . He gave him a calm and abiding confidence in the overruling providence of God and in the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness.” If Lincoln did not satisfy the formal requirement for eternal salvation through the main gate, Gurley tried to lead the appellate process for an alternative entry.

Gurley was a devoted friend who remained true to his obligation of confidentiality with the president. He declined many lucrative offers after the assassination requesting that he publish his recollections about Lincoln. In fact, the pastor seems to have been so concerned about avoiding the temptation of being indiscreet that he kept very few notes on which to base a memoir.

89. Chapman, Latest Light on Abraham Lincoln, 500.
90. Gurley to Lieutenant Elderkin, May 27, 1861, Potsdam in the Civil War Collection, Potsdam (NY) Public Museum.
91. Gurley, Faith in God: Dr. Gurley’s Sermon at the Funeral of Abraham Lincoln (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Church, 1940), 20–22.
92. For example, there are extant letters from two publishers exploring Gurley’s interest in a book deal. L.A. Elliot (Boston) to Gurley, May 5, 1865 (SC543) and, Moses Woodruff Dodd of New York to Gurley, May 16, 1865 (SC408), both in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Manuscripts, Springfield, Illinois. Another view of Gurley’s reputation for protecting Lincoln’s legacy from those who would try to profit from it came in a letter from Benn Pitman, stenographer at the trial of the conspirators, who asked the pastor’s help to keep P.T. Barnum from buying John Wilkes Booth artifacts that had been used in evidence. Raynors’ Historical Collectibles Auction Catalogue, “Dr. John Lattimer Lincoln Collection,” March 2009, http://hcaauctions.com/lot-21151.aspx.
Gurley was profoundly changed by his admiration for the man who applied the word of God to heal a nation. After Lincoln’s death, Gurley spent his three remaining years leading reconciliation initiatives across denominational, social and racial lines. As the elected leader of the Old School General Assembly, Gurley engineered the end of the great schism that had divided the Old and New schools of the Presbyterian Church since 1837. Gurley was forced by poor health to step down from his pulpit in February 1868. He died later that year on September 30, just a few weeks before his fifty-second birthday.

Well before meeting Lincoln, Gurley was nationally known within his influential denomination for his ability to effectively teach Presbyterian Calvinist doctrine. Lincoln may have connected with Gurley out of political expediency, but he soon enjoyed and benefited from the pastor’s talents. Before the end of the first year of the war, Gurley helped Lincoln to better appreciate the significance of religion in the lives of soldiers and the fortitude that they derived from their faith. Lincoln endured anguish following the death of his son Willie, and was near despair over the slow progress of the war and challenges to his emancipation policies in 1862. When the president was most in need of and most receptive to faith ideals and religious insights, Pastor Gurley had earned confidence and was there to help. Over a series of private conversations that became most frequent during the spring and summer of 1862, Gurley successfully helped President Lincoln to speak in a manner that reflected the highest expressions of reformed Christian beliefs on the mysteries of God’s providence. With these concepts Lincoln fashioned the arguments for peace and reconciliation that we readily recall as his contribution to the mystic chords of American memory. As a faith counselor and as a trusted friend, Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley helped Lincoln arrive at the ultimate theological insights regarding our country’s greatest crisis.

93. Gurley took the lead in organizing fund raising events “to relieve the suffering in the south,” bringing along many who were not ready to help former enemies. *National Republican*, March 26, 1866, 3. Gurley hosted the Union Christian Convention at his New York Avenue church where he predicted “the time was fast hastening when denominational lines would disappear, and all would be one Christian body in service to the Redeemer.” This was the first such meeting to have elected an African American man as an officer of the event, which provoked loud objections. Gurley was asked to lead prayer over the question in which he asked “for divine help for the Convention to do the best for our colored brethren, and take no action that they might be ashamed of hereafter.” The man retained his office. *Evening Star*, October 30, 1867, 1.

94. Gurley’s role over several years in healing the rift between the Old and New schools is described in the celebratory book created by the church. Samuel Miller, et al., *Presbyterian Reunion: A Memorial Volume, 1837–1870* (New York: DeWitt C. Lent, 1870).

95. Schenck, *Discourse*, 35.