

LINCOLN'S RESPONSE TO THE METHODISTS

JOHN LEO TOPOLEWSKI

A simple task at the Owego United Methodist Church, Binghamton District, Wyoming Conference, leads to a thirty-five-year-old mystery, not yet fully resolved. During the pastorate of the Rev. Rondall I. Woodall (1969-1972), Mrs. Leonard (Marion) Miner, formerly the church's part-time secretary, went searching in a cupboard, located in a small room off the rear of the sanctuary, for candles. There she discovered a framed letter addressed, "Gentlemen," dated May 18, 1864, and signed "A. Lincoln." Over the passage of years any number of attempts have been made to authenticate the document, purported to be in the President's own hand.¹

I

In May 1864, the General Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church was in session at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The following Resolution was adopted by the body on May 16, 1864, and a committee was deputized to present it to Mr. Lincoln:

Philadelphia May 16, 1864
To his Excellency Abraham Lincoln,
President of the United States.

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, now in session in the City of Philadelphia, representing nearly seven thousand ministers, and nearly a million of members, mindful of their duty as Christian Citizens, takes the earliest opportunity to express to you the assurance of the loyalty of the Church, her earnest devotion to the interests of the country, and her sympathy with you in the great responsibilities of your high position in this trying hour.

With exultation we point to the record of our Church, as having never been tarnished by disloyalty. She was the first of the Churches to express, by a deputation of her most distinguished ministers, the promise of support to the Government, in the days of Washington.

In her Articles of Religion, she has enjoined loyalty as a duty, and has ever given to the Government her most decided support.

In this present struggle for the nation's life, many thousands of her members, and a large number of her ministers, have rushed to arms to maintain the cause of God and humanity. They have sealed their devotion to the country with their blood, on every battle field of this terrible war.

We regard this dreadful scourge now desolating our land, and wasting the nation's life, as the result of a most unnatural,—utterly unjustifiable rebellion, involv-

¹See Tom Cawley, "Is Lincoln Paper the Real McCoy?" in *The Sunday Press*, Binghamton, NY, November 14, 1971, 1B.

ing the crime of treason against the best of human governments, and sin against God. It required our Government to submit to its own dismemberment, and destruction, leaving it no alternative but to preserve the national integrity, by the use of the national resources. If the government had failed to use its power to preserve the unity of the Nation, and maintain its authority, it would have been justly exposed to the wrath of Heaven, and to the reproach, and scorn of the civilized world.

Our earnest and constant prayer is, that this cruel, and wicked rebellion may be speedily suppressed; and we pledge you our hearty co'operation in all appropriate means to secure this object.

Loyal, and hopeful in national adversity,—in prosperity thankful, we most heartily congratulate you on the glorious victories recently gained, and rejoice in the belief that our complete triumph is near.

We believe that our national sorrows and calamities have resulted in a great degree from our forgetfulness of God, and the oppression of our fellow men. Chastened by affliction, may the nation humbly repent of her sins, lay aside her haughty pride, honor God in all future legislation, and render justice to all who have been wronged.

We honor you for your proclamations of liberty, and rejoice in all the acts of the Government designed to secure freedom to the enslaved.

We trust that when military usages, and necessity shall justify interference with established institutions, and the removal of wrongs sanctioned by law, the occasion will be improved—not merely to injure our foes and increase the national resources, but also, as an opportunity to recognize our obligations to God, and to honor his law.

We pray that the time may speedily come when this shall be a truly Republican and free country, in no part of which, either State or Territory, shall Slavery be known.

The prayers of millions of Christians, with an earnestness never manifested for rulers before, daily ascend to Heaven, that you may be endued with all needed wisdom and power. Actuated by the sentiments, of the loftiest and purest patriotism, our prayer shall be continually for the preservation of our country undivided, for the triumph of our cause, and for a permanent peace, gained by the sacrifice of no moral principles, but founded on the word of God, and securing in righteousness, liberty and equal rights to all.

Signed in behalf of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia May 14th 1864,

T. A. Morris, Pres[iden]t

A true Copy

Attest

W.L. Harris, Secretary

[Endorsed on Envelope by Lincoln: Methodist Conference.] ²

II

Such resolutions of encouragement and promises of support were not at all uncommon. Annual Conferences, in both their northern and southern expressions, often approved such documents and sent them on to either Richmond or Washington as testimonies of sectional loyalty during the time of conflict. In some respects both this resolution and the President's response are carefully crafted, and in today's lexicon, politically correct.

²The Library of Congress. *General Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church to Abraham Lincoln, May 14, 1864*. In Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. Transcribed and Annotated by Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Retrieved February 14, 2005, from <http://memory.loc.gov/>.

1864 was an election year, and due to a number of factors, Lincoln's election to a second term was by no means assured. The document beginning, at least by today's standards, with the florid salutation, "To his Excellency Abraham Lincoln," expresses "sympathy with you in the great responsibilities of your high position. . . ," "congratulate[s] you on the glorious victories recently gained" [Gettysburg, Chattanooga?]" and "honor[s] you for your proclamations of liberty. . . ." It is a constrained affirmation and lacks the kind of ringing endorsement which might, by some, have been interpreted as a witness in favor of re-election. On November 8, 1864, Lincoln was elected. He received 2,000,000 votes, to George McClellan's 1,800,000, but in the pivotal states of New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, strongholds of Methodism, the total margin of victory was only 86,400 votes.³ Perhaps the restraint shown in the resolution was a reflection of the denomination's rank and file, as well.

The delegation comprised of the Rev. Edward R. Ames, D.D., Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church; the Rev. Joseph Cummings, D.D.; the Rev. George Peck, D.D.; the Rev. Charles Elliott, D.D.; and the Rev. Granvill Moody journeyed from Philadelphia to Washington and were received by President Lincoln at 11:00 AM on May 18, 1864.⁴

The meeting had been arranged by William H. Seward, Department of State, by a handwritten note to the President. (One might speculate that Seward had received a "heads up," then a confirmation of the Conference's resolution, as his note to the President is dated the same as the adoption of the same by the Conference. Furthermore, the President must have read the resolution prior to its formal presentation, as his remarks make reference to its contents.)⁵

In light of their presentation, the President made the following brief comments:

Gentlemen:

In response to your address, allow me to attest the accuracy of its historical statements; endorse the sentiments it expresses; and thank you, in the nation's name, for the sure promise it gives.

Nobly sustained as the government has been by all the churches, I would utter nothing which might, in the least, appear invidious against any. Yet without this, it may fairly be said, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the rest, is, by its greater numbers, the most important of all. It is no fault in others, that

³Samuel Eliot Morrison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 695.

⁴The Library of Congress, *General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to Abraham Lincoln, May 14, 1864*. Retrieved February 14, 2005, from <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/>.

⁵The Library of Congress, *The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Series 1, General Correspondence, William H. Seward to Abraham Lincoln, May 16, 1864. (Meeting with Methodists)*. Retrieved February 24, 2005 from <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/>.

the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to Heaven, than any. God bless the Methodist Church—bless all the churches—and blessed be God, who, in this our great trial giveth us the churches. [Endorsed by Lincoln.]⁶

III

The President's response was likewise guarded. Although recognizing the numerical support of the church, Lincoln was very careful to avoid giving offense to others, "I would utter nothing which might, in the least, appear invidious against any."

With the exception of the fact that in the church's copy the pronoun "who" in the last sentence (whose antecedent is "God") is capitalized, and in the same sentence, there is a comma following "great trial," the church's copy is identical to both the above transcription and a copy of Lincoln's response, in a secretary's hand, held by the Library of Congress.

It was a common practice on such occasions for the President's secretarial staff to provide a number of "fair copies" of his remarks for distribution to the members of these delegations. This was obviously the case on May 18, 1864.⁷ The church's copy, however, is not in the same hand as the document on file with the Library of Congress, admittedly the work of an amanuensis. In addition, the church's copy is in a hand not at all unlike that of the President's signature, or other samples of his handwriting, leading to speculation concerning its authenticity.

In a feature article by Tom Cawley in the local section of *The Sunday Press* [Binghamton, NY], dated November 14, 1971, the story of the document's discovery is retold and the unsuccessful efforts to authenticate it recounted. Following its discovery it was placed for safekeeping and review at the Tioga County Historical Society in Owego and was examined by James Ekholm, book collector and seller; Kenneth Cooper, Owego antique dealer; and retired Cornell professor Louis Kaiser. No definitive conclusions were reached.⁸

When the church secured a fire-resistant safe, the document was retrieved from the Historical Society. Over the years, interest in the document has periodically resurfaced and new attempts made at authentication, all to no avail. The present inquiry was occasioned by the writing of a new history of the Owego United Methodist Church. The following observations, not all new, were made.

⁶The Library of Congress. Abraham Lincoln to the General Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church, May 18, 1864 (Reply to Address). Retrieved 14 February 2005 from <http://memory.loc.gov/>.

⁷Tom Cawley, "Is Lincoln Paper the Real McCoy?", in *The Sunday Press*, Binghamton, NY, November 14, 1971, 1B.

⁸Tom Cawley, "Is Lincoln Paper the Real McCoy?" in *The Sunday Press*, Binghamton, NY, November 14, 1971, 1B.

Although referred to locally as the "Lincoln Letter," it is not a letter at all, but a response to a presentation. It does not indicate an addressee; its salutation is simply "gentlemen"; and there is no complimentary closing over the signature.

What was it in response to, and why would such an instrument be located in the Owego Church? A review of the *Minutes of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* for 1864 did reveal a report titled, "on the State of the Country," dated March 28, 1864 and signed, along with others, by W. H. Pearne, Secretary, who had served at Owego in 1864. It was a patriotic declaration of support for the government containing seven resolutions. However, there is no indication that the report was sent to the President, and its content seemed weak with reference to "the accuracy of its historical statements," noted in Lincoln's response.⁹

A perusal of the Library of Congress web site proved productive. In its manuscript collection the information reported above was discovered. This was followed by an exchange of e-mails and faxes, culminating on March 16, 2005 in a phone call from John Sellers, Manuscript Historian, Library of Congress. Sellers stated the rubric that the Library was prohibited from authenticating or appraising manuscripts, but that the document in the church's possession "looked good," and was deserving of professional analysis. The name of Jonathan Mann of New York City was offered as a possible resource.

On March 21, 2005, telephone contact was made with Mann, who was most gracious and helpful. According to Mann, the document held by the church is a facsimile produced circa 1920 using a lithography process. He explained that the original would be on white paper with substantial linen content. The facsimiles are light brown, wood pulp in constitution, and often weakened along the edges, as indeed the church's copy is. Furthermore, the ink flow on the page of these duplicates is even. The original would show variation as the nib of the pen became dry and had to be dipped in ink in order to continue writing. Mann has had similar inquiries but attests to the document's relative scarcity, as questions of authentication to him have numbered no more than ten over the past decade. He stated that the original letter is in the Manuscript Collection of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

An e-mail exchange with John Rhodehamel, Norris Foundation Curator, American Historical Manuscripts at the Huntington on March 22, 2005 revealed that the original was not, in fact, in their collection. Referral was made back to Sellers at the Library of Congress and to Daniel Stowell, Director, The Papers of Abraham Lincoln, at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, in Springfield, Illinois.¹⁰ Phone contact was made with Stowell, explaining the steps of investigation to date.

⁹*Minutes of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Thirteenth Session, held at Waverly, NY, March 23-29, 1864, 17-19.

¹⁰John Rhodehamel, "Inquiry," personal e-mail, March 22, 2005.

On March 23, 2005, Dr. Stowell e-mailed the following:

I've checked our files on the May 18, 1864 Response to Methodists document about which you inquired. We have not discovered a current location for the original document sent or given to Lincoln to the delegation. There is a handwritten copy (not by Lincoln) at the Library of Congress, which has a brief endorsement by Lincoln on it, but the location of the original remains a bit of a mystery.

In the files regarding this document, there are three letters from 1900 relating to the authenticity of the document. One letter by T.G. Calder to John Hay, one of Lincoln's private secretaries, states that the letter had been in his mother's possession since 1864, except for almost a year in 1876, when it was left with James Earle & Son of Philadelphia for framing. Apparently Mr. Earle displayed it in his store window, and it was published in the papers while on exhibition. Mr. Calder asked Hay if he believed it was an original, as some experts believed it was a lithograph. We have no reply from Hay.

There is also correspondence from 1950 between J. L. McCorison Jr., the minister of the First Congregational Church in Westfield, New Jersey, and Roy P. Basler, who compiled the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. McCorison had provided Basler with photostats of the letter, then in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wendell in Rahway, New Jersey. Mrs. Wendell was the granddaughter of Joseph A. Wright, former governor of Indiana.

I don't know that there is any relation between Calder and the Wendells, which suggests that there were lithographic copies circulating in the nineteenth century, perhaps as early as 1864.¹¹

The relationship between the Wendells and the Calders may not be known, but there is a generous relationship between the Wendell family and Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, the home of the General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church. A series of enquiries to the Commission's staff brought further insight.

Kenneth E. Rowe, retired Methodist Librarian, reported that:

We have one of the facsimiles at Drew which I have long distributed to United Methodist History classes. Ours may be a late 19th century lithograph rather than the 1920s facsimile. Our copy may be the one owned by the Wendells of Rahway, NJ. The Wendell family gave Drew a couple of million dollars around 1928 and were long-time benefactors of Drew. . . .

It is not surprising to me that the letter was many times reprinted in facsimile. Methodists were dam [*sic*] proud of it. They had made it to the top of the Protestant heap, lots of power along the Potomac during Lincoln's time. . . .¹²

L. Dale Patterson, Archivist, added the following:

. . . [H]ere is what we know about our Lincoln letter copies.

We have one on heavy cream colored slick paper which is a photo lithograph. We would estimate it to have been done in the early 20th century.

The other version is a photograph of the Letter. This was probably done on a glass plate on a 1 to 1 ratio. It may even have been the photograph on which the photo lithograph was done. . . .¹³

¹¹Daniel W. Stowell, "Response to Methodists Document," personal e-mail, March 23, 2005.

¹²Kenneth E. Rowe, "Lincoln Letter," personal e-mail, April 12, 2005.

¹³L. Dale Patterson, "Lincoln Letter," personal e-mail, April 26, 2005.

Furthermore,

One copy came from a book, I don't know when. It has the marks of having been "tipped in" to a book, a process of attaching printed images into a book. I don't know which book or how it was removed. It is now in a folder in our reference section. As for the older photographic one, it is in the Matthew Simpson collection. This is actually a Drew collection which we manage (we take care of their Methodist archival material). I'm not sure when it came to Drew.

Some think that the few Simpson papers we have (most are at the Library of Congress) may have been collected by Clarence T. Wilson and donated by his daughter. Drew has the Wendell papers, but they are not organized. . . . I had someone take a quick look and they don't think that the original, or a copy, is in that collection.¹⁴

IV

Great progress has been made, in that we now know about the circumstances which generated Mr. Lincoln's response, and we have also determined that what we have at the church is a facsimile produced by lithography, a labor-intensive process requiring a high level of artistic skill. The "Lincoln Letter" itself has been framed alongside an explanatory text and hangs in a place of prominence at the church, a gift of our church's Committee on Archives and History.

But . . .

Where did it come from? Who brought it to Owego, and why was it honored (framed) and then neglected (relegated to a back cupboard)? And perhaps most significantly, where is the original now?

A mystery indeed.

¹⁴L. Dale Patterson, "Lincoln Letter," personal e-mail, May 2, 2005.