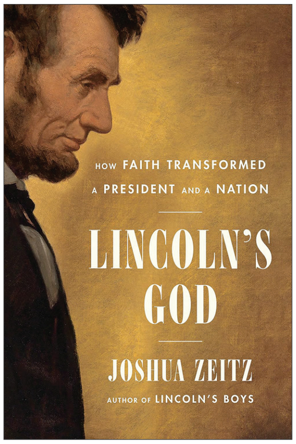
Lincoln's God: *How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation*

by Joshua Zietz

Reviewed by Dr. Richard Grippaldi



Whether a bookseller devoted to Abraham Lincoln could go bankrupt is an open question. Perhaps, for lack of customers; less plausibly, for lack of books. Americans continue to explore what Lincoln meant to his times, what his times meant to him, and what they mean to the present. Joshua Zeitz is among the most recent explorers. In *Lincoln's God: How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation*, he argues that evangelicalism led Protestants to seek abolition, along with other political reforms. The peak of this activity took place during the Civil War, which led Lincoln to re-consider his life-long agnosticism. He chose, instead, to embrace the older, Calvinist theological outlook the evangelicals had abandoned. Zeitz is persuasive regarding evangelicals' evolution and influence. Accepting his argument about Lincoln's conversion, in full, requires a leap of faith.

Zeitz ignores how Catholics and Jews drew on their faiths to seek change because evangelism was "the predominant spiritual and intellectual framework" in antebellum America.[1] The beginnings of evangelism lay in the Second Great Awakening, which turned away from Calvinist doctrines. Baptists and Presbyterians softened in their beliefs. Methodists outright embraced salvation by works. Numerous splinter sects sprouted as lay people mastered their Bibles and founded their own churches. This met the mood of a people buffeted by political democratization and the Market Revolution, many of whom sought to control their destinies. As Anders Stephanson put it almost thirty years ago, "Christianity, democracy, and Jacksonian America were essentially one and the same thing, the highest stage of history, God's plan incarnate."[2]

Evangelicals, having to make their way through an uncertain earthly life, could help construct their postmortem future. But unlike political economy and the broader culture, which reinforced one another, evangelicals pursued their religious goals in isolation from politics and society. Pre-millennials aimed to make the United States the new Israel, one soul at a time. Some of this self-segregation, ironically enough, stemmed from just how many Americans embraced evangelism. Millions of believers belonged to the Whig Party, which advocated for government-led transportation improvements, institutions for self-improvement, and social reforms. Millions also belonged to the Democratic Party, whose tolerance for local circumstances and customs restricted government action in those areas. The parties were evenly balanced during the life of the Second Party System, in their religious adherents as everything else. Speaking from the pulpit could only offend one's congregants.

Zeitz also notes that Protestant ministers held their tongues on whether slavery was a sin. Certainly, calls for abolition would drive southerners out of the church. This essentially happened anyway. The Presbyterians split geographically in 1837, the Methodists in 1844, and the Baptists in 1845. Nonetheless, even northern pastors generally declined to call for political action against slavery until the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. By then, the Whigs had already split over slavery. As the act repealed the Missouri Compromise, numerous northern Democrats consequently left that party. Former northern Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, and free soilers came together in a new Republican Party. The Republicans, at minimum, stood against slavery's spread. Some of them also called for slavery's extinction. As the whole country came apart, evangelical pastors threw their overt support behind the Republicans; the Union, once the Confederate rebellion began; and eventually, behind abolition as a war aim.

Lincoln did not, could not, stand apart from society. Whereas the evangelicals abandoned pre-destination, the young Lincoln abandoned the church. His father, Thomas, was a physical laborer who remained loyal to a Calvinist Baptism. Thomas accepted predestination in his spiritual life. Zeitz holds that this led him to accept his corporeal life as it was. Abe chose to rebel against his father on both counts. As a teen, he chafed under his father's control, and his agricultural chores. In his twenties, as the Whig Party emerged, he joined, believing in the power of commerce to improve the nation, and education to improve the individual. Whether Lincoln truly flirted with atheism at this time, his neighbors came to suspect him of agnosticism. Running for Congress in his thirties, Lincoln grudgingly declared he believed in what he called the Doctrine of Necessity: "the belief that one's personal agency was governed by invisible influences and boundaries, determined in some fashion by divinity or nature."[3] Not entirely incompatible with the new evangelicalism, the Doctrine of Necessity nonetheless conceived of life as "the sum of a greater design that defied human understanding."[4]

As slavery moved the country, so it moved Lincoln. His opposition to slavery was lifelong and sincere. Lincoln himself oft cited his father hiring him out for physical labor until he gained his majority as its source. Yet the younger Lincoln's support for Whiggery stemmed from many things. Zeitz notes that anti-slavery, even more than the Republican Party at large, became Lincoln's cause in the final decade or so of his life. Before the Civil War, he rooted his arguments in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's attitudes towards Black people, incorrigibly racist by twenty-first-century standards, nonetheless recognized Blacks as people. Enslaved men were men, entitled to self-governance.

As president, the pressure of quelling the rebellion breached the spiritual foundations Lincoln laid for himself. He had company. Millions of Americans had to come to terms with the burdens of death and the meaning of soldiers' sacrifices. Zeitz suggests that, in bearing his burdens and searching for that meaning, evangelicalism flowed forth into Lincoln. In the war's first year, evangelicals had called for abolition as an end in itself. Lincoln felt constrained by both law and the need to keep loyal slave states in the Union, but he too forcefully embraced abolition by the war's end. Beyond the Emancipation Proclamation, the president also pressed for what would become the Thirteenth Amendment, a seemingly unnecessary political risk as the war ground forward through 1864 and into 1865.

Zeitz' attempt to prove out his subtitle—how faith transformed a president—comes into play here. Ordinary Americans used faith to strengthen and rebuild their private worlds. Again, Lincoln was no different in this, but his transformation only went so far. His acceptance of God was the "deeply-seated fatalism of a president who remained drawn to his parents' faith, with its denial of human agency and belief in a distant and impersonal God whose will was inscrutable to human beings."[5] God had a role for him, but Lincoln had no idea if Union victory was his–His–purpose. Thus, it was left to grieving Americans to note that, like Christ, Lincoln died on Good Friday. The war won and the Thirteenth Amendment circulating among the state legislatures, Lincoln had served the Almighty's purpose, and had been called home.

Lincoln's God is both religious and cultural history. Zeitz traces denominational changes and differences, along with the sermons and writings of leading figures within them. In analyzing Lincoln, Zeitz persuasively draws upon the president's letters, public and private, as well as speeches and proclamations. Lincoln's contemporaries across his life comment on his religious feelings, or lack thereof.

Zeitz is not breaking new ground. Twenty-five years ago, Allen Guelzo briefly examined the Doctrine of Necessity in the context of Lincoln's fatalism.[6] In the past decade, Jon Meacham sought how Lincoln and the Union made sense of the Confederate rebellion.[7] Diana Schaub used the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural to help show Lincoln's evolution on abolition.[8] Martha Hodes wrestled with the contemporary importance of Lincoln's death and life.[9] Zeitz's contribution weaves all this together, in an attempt to show just what Lincoln took from society, and society, from Lincoln.

Zeitz asserts boldly that by the end of Abraham Lincoln’s life, his God was the same God as his father Thomas. Of necessity, Zeitz’ reasoning draws on Lincoln’s public persona. That the Doctrine of Necessity had been Lincoln’s attempt to quell voters’ doubts about his religious beliefs while staying true to his own agnosticism is reasonable. As Zeitz writes, “He stood deliberately aloof from the evangelical backdrop of his age, even when other men on the make might have found it easier to join a church, offer a token nod to commitment, and feign belief.”[10] Similarly, even as Lincoln decried slavery in the 1850s, he did not point to Scripture as the ultimate justification for its end.[11] It follows, convincingly, that Lincoln’s increasingly open wartime references to the Almighty in his speeches, writings, and everyday conversations were sincere.

Zeitz’ insistence that Lincoln fell back on the “hard shell” Baptism that his father practiced, however, is a leap of faith. At best, as Guelzo noted, it relies on William Herndon’s determining such, yet Zeitz himself references Herndon’s statement that “Lincoln was ‘simply a Theist – an unbeliever in Christianity.’”[12] Even then, Lincoln never repudiated ideas about commerce, education, and slavery that he had developed, by Zeitz’s own argument, in direct opposition to his father’s positions. In the absence of proof that he reconsidered and subsequently adopted the Calvinist teachings of his youth, Lincoln cannot be assumed to have reconciled himself to this aspect of his father’s life when he did so with nothing else.

This, however, is simply Zeitz’ reach exceeding his grasp. *Lincoln’s God* is a wonderful introduction to these topics. The place and power of religion in antebellum and wartime America are not widely understood today given the great span of years between then and now. Zeitz writes cleanly and accessibly in describing the impact of the Second Great Awakening on Protestantism, the prewar reluctance of the evangelical churches to use politics to wash the country of its sins, how slavery sat in the country’s churches, and evangelicals’ eventual and full-throated embrace of the United States government to destroy slavery. Just as importantly, Lincoln is clearly shown to be outside mainstream Christianity, and himself unwilling to use the government to destroy slavery until its importance to the rebel war effort revealed itself. Zeitz perceptively chronicles the country’s faith, and Lincoln’s, at the most trying time in their respective histories.

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1 Zeitz, *Lincoln’s God*, xix.

2 Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 40.

3 Zeitz, *Lincoln’s God*, 66.

4 Ibid., 67.

5 Ibid., 239.

6 Allen C. Guelzo, “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 18* (Winter 1997): 57-81.

7 Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (New York: Random House, 2022).

8 Diana Schaub, *His Greatest Speeches: How Lincoln Moved the Nation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2021).

9 Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

10 Zeitz, *Lincoln’s God*, 70.

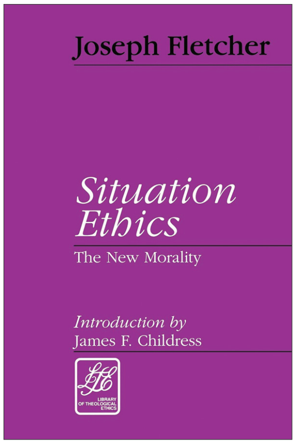
11 Lincoln’s famous phrase “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy” is clearly rooted in self-governance as a civic religion. Long assumed to date from his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, its actual provenance remains murky; see Christian McWhirter, “Lincoln Draws the Line on Slavery,” *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum*, https://presidentlincoln.illinois.gov/Blog/Posts/108/Abraham-Lincoln/2021/2/Lincoln-Draws-the-Line-on-Slavery/blog-post/, accessed 14 August 2023.

12 Guelzo, “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity,” 61; *Zeitz, Lincoln’s God*, x, citing Richard J. Cardwardine, “‘Simply a Theist’: Herndon on Lincoln’s Religion,” JALA 35 (Summer 2014): 20.

Situation Ethics: The New Morality

by Joseph F. Fletcher

Reviewed by Chaplain (Captain) Stephen Kim



The title of the book raises the question of whether a "new" morality exists. In 1966, Joseph F. Fletcher challenged ubiquitous morality by introducing the world to "situation ethics." Army professionals often use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably and while there is overlap, "Moral may be understood to refer to general right and wrong in the broadest sense. Ethical systems, codes, norms, and expectations for conduct should seek to be moral…. Ethics refers to a system of moral principles, or rules of conduct recognized in respect to a class of human actions, a particular group or culture."[1] Over the last sixty years, both within the Army and outside of it, there has been a tremendous rise in interest in situational ethics. Much of the groundwork for the system was laid by Fletcher.

Modern ethical persuasions generally categorize into deontological, virtue, or situational ethics. In Situation Ethics, Fletcher was convinced that, "Modern Christians ought not to be naïve enough to accept any other view of Jesus' ethic than the situational one."[2] Situational ethics is not utilitarianism, which aims to bring about the greatest good for the greatest quantity. The roots of these two schools of thought are quite different (situational ethics is likely closer to proportionalism). Fletcher, with situational ethics, was concerned with creating the greatest amount of love. To do so he also sought to raise doubts about the clarity of "good" and "evil":

> There is an old joke which serves our purposes. A rich man asked a lovely young woman if she would sleep the night with him. She said, 'No.' He then asked if she would do it for $100,000? She said, 'Yes!' He then asked, '$10,000?' She replied, 'Well, yes, I would.' His next question was, 'How about $500?' Her indignant 'What do you think I am?' was met by the answer, 'We have already established that. Now we are haggling over the price.' Does any girl who has 'relations' (what a funny way to use the word) outside marriage automatically become a prostitute? Is it always, regardless of what she accomplishes for herself or others—is it always wrong? Is extramarital sex inherently evil, or can it be a good thing in some situations?[3]

Situation Ethics, with such ruminations, moved the American societal needle way from a deontological perspective and towards relativism; "When love reigns, not law, the decisions of conscience are relative."[4] Fletcher shifted the basis for decision-making away from commandments onto personal assessments of love: "We are always, that is to say, commanded to act lovingly, but how to do it depends on our own responsible estimate of the situation. Only love is a constant; everything else is a variable. The shift to relativism carries contemporary Christians away from code ethics, away from stern iron-bound do's and don'ts, away from prescribed conduct and legalistic morality."[5]

At the heart of his work, Fletcher used pragmatism and relativism as his foundations for his theory. From those foundations, Fletcher formulates six “propositions” which form the crux of his book:

1) Love is the only thing that is intrinsically good—it is the only absolute;
2) The ruling norm of Christian decision making is love;
3) Love and justice are the same: justice is love distributed;
4) Love wills good for everyone, whether we dislike him;
5) Only the end justifies the means; and
6) Love is a decision made situationally, not prescriptively.

In Fletcher’s ethical framework, a woman is “good” in committing adultery if her aim is to reunite with her husband and young children via having sex with a guard in a prison camp.[6] The end state of Fletcher’s teaching could, perhaps, most lucidly be seen as he implemented his ethical perspective when advising a parent with a disabled son: “People [with children with Down’s syndrome] ... have no reason to feel guilty about putting a Down’s syndrome baby away, whether it’s ‘put away’ in the sense of hidden in a sanitarium or in a more responsible lethal sense. It is sad; yes. Dreadful. But it carries no guilt. True guilt arises only from an offense against a person, and a Down’s is not a person.”[7] The above examples give the texture to how Fletcher treats love, which is highly subjective.

The Chaplain Corps is well positioned to enter into questions about the nature of good and evil and their relationship to one another. Title 10 of the United States Code states: “All commanders and others in authority in the Army are required to be vigilant in inspecting the conduct of all persons who are placed under their command, guard against and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices, and to correct, according to the laws and regulations of the Army, all persons who are guilty of them.”[8] Earlier, I stated that utilitarianism and situation ethics are two different ethical systems. The United States Army utilizes utilitarianism—along with other ethical systems:

1) The virtue perspective, which looks toward desirable character traits of the individual to understand what is ethical in the form of desirable virtues such as courage, justice, and benevolence, and how best to instill such virtues.
2) The deontological perspective, which understands ethical outcomes derived from a set of agreed-upon values and rules rather than the consequences of the action.
3) The utilitarian perspective, which seeks decisions producing the greatest good and best outcome for the greatest number as most favorable.[9]

Military Chaplains serve as advisors to commanders on matters of morals and ethics. The United States Army declares that the Army ethic has “its origins in the philosophical heritage, theological and cultural traditions, and the historical legacy that frame our Nation”[10] A commonly held view is that ethics unanchored in God creates disequilibrium. Fletcher himself experienced just this. At age 65, he disavowed his faith in God: “In the late 1960’s, he renounced belief in God and publicly espoused humanism, although he maintained many of his ties to religious groups and members of the clergy.”[11] Upon renouncing Christianity, the former ordained minister would say that he took, “a hard look at Christian doctrine itself, on its own merits: God, Jesus, revelation, sin, salvation—the whole repertory. Looking at it like that, I said to myself what I no doubt often glimpsed along the way, that the whole thing was weird and untenable.”[12]

In *Situation Ethics*, Fletcher made love the guiding principle for his framework, but true to his own principles, Fletcher never provides an objective definition of his central term. For Fletcher, love is entirely subjective; each individual makes his or her own decision based on a pragmatic conjecture regarding future results. My own feeling or worry is that because humans do not have omniscience, we will have great difficulty in predicting and evaluating the consequences of our decisions. Actual outcomes are often surprises. (I often marvel that in God’s infinite wisdom, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ for sins resulted in unexpected, victorious, eternal salvation of human believers.) For my own part, I am thankful that God has not left morality to our subjective whims.[13] I believe that God has placed in the Bible, and upon all human hearts, “a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us.”[14] This “real law” is what enables me in my ministry as an Army Chaplain to confidently assert that the Army Core Values are *objectively* true values—worthy of every Soldier’s striving. It is what gives us the moral courage to advise with humble boldness.

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NOTES

1 Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 165-19, Moral Leadership (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, November, 2020), 2.

2 Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966), 139.

3 Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966), 17.

4 Ibid., 143.

5 Ibid., 45.

6 Ibid., 164.

7 Bernard Bard and Joseph Fletcher, "The Right to Die," *The Atlantic Monthly*: 59–64, April 1968.

8 Title 10, United States Code, 7233 (10 USC 7233).

9 Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 165-19, Moral Leadership (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, November, 2020), 2.

10 Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession (Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, July 2019), 1-7.

11 Peter Steinfels, "Dr. Joseph F. Fletcher, 86, Dies; Pioneer in Field of Medical Ethics," *The New York Times*, October 30, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/30/us/dr-joseph-f-fletcher-86-dies-pioneer-in-field-of-medical-ethics.html.

12 Accessed July 25, 2023, https://ffrf.org/ftod-cr/item/14814-joseph-fletcher.

13 The book of Judges ends with on an ominous warning: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own e*yes" (Judges 21:25).*

14 C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Harper Collins, 2001 edition), 20.

CURRENT THOUGHT

The Journal highlights interesting developments in culture, society, and current events that are relevant to the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps. This issue focuses on "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" from the U.S. Surgeon General.

Spotlight on the Surgeon General's Advisory on Loneliness

Americans today, many factors increasingly suggest, are disconnected from one another, a reality that has profound effects, ranging from how we form communities and relations within them to our individual and collective health. The Surgeon General of the United States in May of this year released: Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, an 82-page document that powerfully testifies to the omnipresence of loneliness among Americans today as well as ways to repair.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as the Advisory makes clear, did not precipitate, or cause the current epidemic, but it did deepen and accelerate it. The Surgeon General himself says in his letter accompanying the Advisory:

> In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.

Once we understand that this Advisory is not a narrow response to the events of Spring 2020 and beyond, it becomes important to grasp how it configures the idea of loneliness. An early and helpful description of loneliness is as a form of "social disconnection" that distresses the person experiencing it. That separation from one another has profound effects. In the Surgeon General's own words, "Loneliness far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health." The Surgeon General, in other words, makes clear that loneliness is an individual emotion and a strong one at that, but it much more than that because it encompasses issues at the very heart of how social bonds are forged, strengthened, and weakened, and the health outcomes associated with those matters. "Community" is an important word in the Advisory, but the even more crucial concept is "social connection," which the Advisory says is: "determined by three vital components: structure, function, and quality." Structure describes the volume and nature of relationships as well as how much people within these relationships interact with one another. Function is about the needs that are met in relationships. Quality captures the good and the bad of our relationships and interactions. The Advisory is clear that Americans' social, emotional, psychic, and even physical separation from one another is long-standing and severe, influencing almost every aspect of daily life.

If all of this sounds somewhat grim and dour, there is much more to the Advisory, a lot of which is rather more encouraging. The focus on repair, on health, and on how to constitute communities is actually quite moving and hopeful. The Advisory is broken into four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview to the Advisory by focusing on "Why Social Connection Matters." The second centers on "How Social Connection Impacts Individual Health and Well-Being." The third turns its attention to "How Social Connection Impacts Communities." The final chapter puts forward "A National Strategy to Advance Social Connection." By organizing the material in this way, the Advisory paints a sobering, sad picture of rising rates of disconnection, isolation and loneliness. And it does so in ways that center the individual first and then the community. The Advisory wraps up by focusing on solutions across many levels of society and community.

There is something immensely hopeful and even refreshing, in other words, about the Advisory. That hope is deep and abiding in part because the Advisory does not shy away from difficult subjects on its way to solutions. It is clear-eyed about even the most difficult trends that it presents. Here is one such example, “financial insecurity may require someone to work multiple jobs, resulting in less leisure time and limiting opportunities for social participation and connection—which, in turn, could provide fewer resources and financial opportunities.” This is compact, accessible description of a complicated, even heart-rending, cycle. But there is nothing fatalistic or resigned about the Advisory. In fact, its next line is: “While these cycles can be reinforcing, they are not always negative. There is, for instance, a virtuous cycle between social connection and volunteerism or service.” The balance between an unflinching look at Americans’ individually felt pain and even what we inflict on one another, and the insistence that good things already exist in the country and that even more good things can come our way is a hallmark of the Advisory. Because it takes seriously our national pain it also takes seriously our national healing and repair.

Chaplain Corps personnel are in the business of pain and repair, woundings and bindings, the dark and the light. Chaplain Corps personnel, by virtue of being in the Army, are also in the business of engaging these immensely consequential, immensely nuanced topics at the complicated intersections of individual well-being and community well-being. Army personnel exist within complicated, sometimes even overlapping, forms of community through being part of the Army enterprise, even as so many Army personnel work hard to maintain social networks with non-Army personnel despite challenges of geographic distance. Some of the specific health outcomes, such as rates of heart disease, discussed in the Advisory may not be strictly speaking applicable to Chaplain Corps personnel. But even these seemingly narrow considerations about medical conditions and trends feel are made relevant and important for non-medical personnel because of the holistic vision of human well-being put forward in the Advisory. Given the UMT’s role in supporting and developing community, f*ostering esprit de corps*, and advising on morale this rich vision of human flourishing makes me think that there is much in the Advisory that UMT members would find beneficial.

The Advisory, of course, does not deal with the transcendent or pretend that it has anything to say about ultimate things. It knows its own bounds and limits. And within those it goes deeply into discussions of what it means to live a fully rounded life as an individual human person in ways that are life-giving to those around us because we are sustained by those very same people.