

Fog of the culture war: Wisdom from Lincoln

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

The earliest occurrence of what church historians call a jeremiad happened before there was a United States. In 1670, only 50 years after the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Reverend Samuel Danforth offered a harsh assessment of the colonists' "errand into the wilderness."

The community had fallen into sin and disharmony, he said. It was wasting away in the grip of a "radical disease too tremendously growing upon us." Drawing on Isaiah 5, Danforth said the colony was a vineyard "all overgrown with thorns, and nettles cover the face thereof, and the stone wall is all broken down."

Throughout the following two decades, various New England clergy issued jeremiads in that mode: they called the community to mend its ways and promised that if it did, God's favor would again be showered upon it.

At its inception, the jeremiad was a matter of church politics: it was addressed to a Christian community. Before long, however, the American experiment as a whole became the subject of jeremiads. The call to repentance was not delivered to church communities as church communities, but to Americans as Americans. What began as explicitly Christian discourse slipped into the discourse of civil religion.

The development of the jeremiad can be traced yet further, to what is indisputably its apex: Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, delivered on March 4, 1865, just weeks before the end of the Civil War.

As he spoke, the Lincoln family Bible was nearby, opened to Isaiah 5. Was Lincoln offering a tip of the hat to Danforth's earlier jeremiad and its biblical basis? We don't know. What we do know is that the American vineyard was filled with broken walls and overgrown with thorns. Around 623,000 Americans were dead—a number 200 times greater than the 3,000 who died in the horrors of September 11, 2001.

In the third paragraph of his address, referring to the North and the South, Lincoln said:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The almighty has His own purposes.

This brief history of the jeremiad may help us deal with our current civil war—the culture war, a war so far fought mainly with words and not bullets. What if current Christians were to apply the profound theological truth of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address to the culture war? In approaching abortion, homosexuality and other intensely fought topics, Christians on both sides “read the same Bible and pray to the same God.” Each may find the other's positions “strange,” but they might still be slow to judge ill of the other's motive, lest they themselves suffer judgment.

Lincoln cut even deeper when he argued that the “prayers of both could not be answered,” because they were flatly contradictory. So does one side clearly triumph? No. The scholar Ted Widmer calls Lincoln's oration possibly “the least triumphant speech ever delivered by a conqueror.” Lincoln no sooner recognizes that the prayers of North and South are contradictory than he adds that no one's prayer “has been answered fully.” Both sides suffer a kind of judgment. And neither fully fathoms God's purposes.

Though many of us know exactly where we stand on various contemporary and divisive issues, it is the nature of all wars, including the culture war, to be fought in a fog of confusion and ambiguity. Clarity, if it ever arrives, will be discerned only at a later point in history.

Recognizing as much, we might bring the American jeremiad back into the ecclesiological context in which it was originally proclaimed. That step will not miraculously resolve the culture war that pits Christian against Christian, church against church, but it might remind us that we do not know exactly how the culture war will be resolved. All we know, finally, is that after denominations are split and the ecclesial damage is done, God will have acted according to God's sometimes mysterious purposes. And there will be no ground for triumphalism, no matter who

declares victory.