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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND FUNDAMENTALISM

In 1846 Abraham Lincoln was nominated by the Whigs of the 6th Illinois Congressional District to a seat in the National House of Representatives. His opponent, on the Democratic ticket, was Rev. Peter Cartwright. Mr.Lincoln was elected.

Soon after the opening of the campaign the story spread like wildfire through the district that Mr. Lincoln was an infidel. It was said that he had written an infidel book. It was known that he was not a member of a church, and had never made a public profession of religion.

Mr. Lincoln apparently gave no attention to these charges. He never referred to them in any of his public addresses, and only once during the campaign, so far as I have been able to learn, spoke in private of his religious views. Of this more hereafter.

Strange as it may seem, these charges were not repeated in 1858, during his contest with Mr. Douglas for a seat in the United States Senate, in which he was defeated, nor in the Presidential campaigns of 1860 and 1864, when he won. But a little more than a year after his death Mr. Wm.H.Herndon, his old law partner, delivered a lecture which was several

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times repeated, in which he said that Mr. Lincoln was an infidel. And in his "Life of Lincoln," published in the late 70's, he said that he was an infidel, to the point of atheism.

But now the charge did not pass without challenge. It was pointed out that in his tender farewell address to his old neighbors and friends in Springfield at the moment of his departure to assume the office of the Presidency, he had declared his reliance on that God who had sustained Washington in the far less difficult task than that which confronted him, Lincoln; that without that help he could not succeed; with it he could not fail. It was pointed out, further, that his messages and addresses breathe a spirit of broad and generous charity entirely consistent with the many Scriptural allusions and quotations which they contain, and that no one who knew the sincerity of Abraham Lincoln could for a moment entertain the suspicion that these texts were introduced to pander to a sentiment which he did not share.

These are strong arguments. But there were more to come, and of a more personal nature. Mentor Graham was still living, and published a letter in which he said that he had had in his possession the so-called "infidel book" or article referred to, for about ten days, and had read it carefully; that Mr.Lincoln was not an infidel; that he believed in God, and in Christ; that

he believed that God was not angry with His people, but that His punishments for sin were parental in their nature; that He would yet gather all men unto Himself; that "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

And Mr. Cogdall, of Pleasant Plains, Illinois, published a letter in which he told of a long conversation with Mr.Lincoln, in which the latter had expressed the sentiments attributed to him by Mr. Graham, at the conclusion of which Mr. Cogdall had assured him that he was a "sound universalist," but cautioned him, if he had any political ambitions, to keep it a secret.

One of the most valuable contributions to the subject may be found in Mr. Rankin's "Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln."

In 1860 Mr. Rankin was a student in the office of Lincoln and Herndon. His grandfather, Mr. Rogers, had come to the "Sangamo Country" about the time Mr. Lincoln had come to New Salem, and had bought land about six miles from the village; and young Lincoln was a frequent visitor at his home. During the campaign of 1846 Mr. Lincoln walked at the home of Mrs. Rankin in Petersburg in company with a Methodist minister, Mr. Jacquess, who made that home his headquarters. Mrs. Rankin had been very much disturbed about the reports, which she did not believe, and in the course of the evening asked her guest frankly about his religious views.

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He said that he was not an infidel; that he believed in God, and in Christ; that there were many doctrines advocated by the churches which he did not believe, but that if he could find a church which would plant itself on the sweet assurances and teachings of the Savior, ignoring these conflicting doctrines, he would gladly join it. He said that he had ignored the charges because he did not think his religious views had any proper part in a contest which was concerned only with matters of public policy, and he should continue to ignore them. He asked his friends not to repeat what he had said, and of course his wishes were respected.

As a sort of text for his chapter on "What Religion Meant To Lincoln," Mr. Rankin quotes a paragraph from "The Inner Life Of Abraham Lincoln," by F. B. Carpenter. I have not seen the book, and can not tell just how the statement was obtained. But it is made in the first person, and is in quotation marks, therefore must have been taken from Mr. Lincoln's dictation, or written by his own hand. The words are as follows:

"I have not united myself to any church because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. But when I find a church which inscribes above its altar, as the sole qualification for membership, the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of the Gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,

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and thy neighbor as thyself," that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul."

These two statements, the one made at Mrs. Rankin's home, the other in Mr. Carpenter's book, at times long separated and without the possibility of collusion, are so identical in spirit, and at times in phraseology, that they form a demonstration of the substantial correctness of both of them.

And who can read that touching story told by Miss Ida M. Tarbell in her book,"He Knew Lincoln, and Other Billy Brown Stories," of Billy Brown's visit to his old friend--who can read that without being convinced of Mr. Lincoln's belief in God?

"Billy Brown" was a druggist in Springfield, at whose store Mr. Lincoln was a frequent visitor. In the rear was a corner where he had often sat with his friends through the long winter evenings. Many were the issues, State and National, which were there discussed; many were the good stories told, and many the pretentious bubbles pricked by their keen wit. And it was there that he had first learned of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Billy, who was a Democrat, and a staunch personal friend of "Little Doug," had cried "Hooray!" The others dis not seem seriously concerned. But Mr. Lincoln, after assuring himself of the accuracy of the report, had grown stern of face, and gone out without another word.

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During the summer of '64 Billy longed with a great longing to see the face of his old friend, and after consulting "Ma" and receiving her hearty approval, went to Washington. Mr. Lincoln received him joyously, and when the day's tasks at the White House were done, took him out to the Soldiers' Home, where it was his custom to spend the warm nights of the Washington summers. And it did Billy's heart good to see the lines of care vanish from his old friend's face as he listened to the latest and funniest stories of the folks back home whom he loved so dearly.

About midnight, Billy rose to go, declining an invitation to spend the night there, for the train would leave for the west early in the morning; Mr. Lincoln went out on the lawn with him, and they sat down for a few minutes under the stars, minutes which lengthened into hours, for now Mr. Lincoln was talking. And to this tried and true friend, who had deserted his party because he saw that slavery was wrong, and who had come all the way to Washington, not for an office, but just to see him, he bared his heart and unburdened his soul, as he talked of the war; of the nightmare of horror; of the ceaseless stream of sick and wounded men; of the countless dead, and of the breaking hearts at home, nort and south. And he lifted his face to the silent stars and cried out in his agony: "Oh, My God, why hast Thou placed this burden on me!"

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I don't envy the man or woman who can read that story without a vast tenderness of heart, and a firm conviction of Abraham Lincoln's reliance on God.

Yet William H. Herndon says that he was an infidel to the point of atheism.

Never had man more loyal friend than Abraham Lincoln had in William H. Herndon. David and Johathan--Damon and Pythias--Lincoln and Herndon--these friendships are all in the same class. Mr. Herndon tells, in his book, of his last interview with Mr. Lincoln in the old office the day before his departure for Washington. They had gone over the business of the partnership to the last detail. Mr. Lincoln was lying on the couch. "Billy," he asked, "how long have we been together?" Herndon told him, "Seventeen years." "And," rejoined his companion, "we have never had a difference." Then he said that they would not consider this the end of the partnership; that if he lived through his term, he would come back to Springfield, and they would go on again, just as if nothing had happened. But something else was said, which Herndon does not tell in his book. He told it to Mr. Welks, many years afterward, who tells it in his book, "The Real Lincoln." "Billy," asked Mr. Lincoln, "how often have yuu been drunk?" For Herndon sometimes exceeded. Herndon told him, and braced himself for words of admonition. They never came; instead, Mr. Lincoln told him of the offers of partnerships he had had, which

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Herndon knew would have brought him a far more lucrative business, and which he had rejected.

I think that the explanation of these contrasting opinions much have already occurred to you. It is simply a matter of definition. What was an"infidel?"

Dr. William S. Draper tells us, in his great work, "The Conflict Between Religion and Science," that during the Middle Ages there were eleven different spears in as many European monasteries, each one of which was said to be the identical spear that had pierced the side of the Savior as He hung on the Cross. To doubt this, in any case, was equivalent to declaring one'sself an "infidel." In a Palestine monastery a mummified human finger was exhibited to the faithful as the little finger of the Holy Ghost. To express a doubt of this was a confession of atheism. Today, in Roman Catholic France and presumably in other Catholic countries, the non-Catholic is an "infidel." And while all of you would doubtless resent the suggestion that you condemn freedom of thought, I should not be surprised to find that with some of you at least, the term "free-thinker" is synominous with "infidel."

The Reformation put an end to much of this relic worship, and Luther declared the Bible to be the sole rule of faith and practice, subject to individual interpretation. And a hundred and fifty years before Wyclif had said that God does not censure

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any man for not believing what he does not understand.

It would have been good for the Protestant churches and for humanity in general if these views had prevailed more widely. Perhaps this was too much reasonably to expect. For ages men had been speculating on such fantastic themes as the number of angels that could stand without crowding on the point of a cambric needle, and whether or not a disembodied spirit could go from one point to another without passing through the intervening space. Full grown men--grave and reverend men, debated these and other fantasies warmly, and believed that correct views upon such subjects were necessary to salvation, and to the preservation of the purity of the religion of Jesus Christ.

And they continued to speculate; and some of these speculations, or theories, became doctrines, and were written into creeds, assent to which was necessary to membership in a Christian church.

Among these was the doctrine of the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible; that is, that the whole Bible is inspired, to the very words used; that holy men wrote the words at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and another, which is really a corollary of the first, is the absolute accuracy, or inerrancy of the Scriptures. One who did not believe everything contained in the Bible was therefore an unbeliever, or "infidel." As the Mosaic account of creation is a part of the Bible, he must therefore

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believe that the sun was created three days after the earth was called into being. As the history of the Jewish people is a part of the Bible, he must believe that the sun stood still at the bidding of Joshua. And so of other prodigies. He must believe that Jonah sojourned three days in the belly of the great fish; that the Noachian flood covered the whole earth, fifteen cubits above the tops of the highest hills, though this would mean many times the volume of water now contained in the seas, and would necessitate a rainfall of more than thirty feet an hour for the entire forty days of the flood, and an evaporation of eighty-eight feet every twenty-four hours during the eleven months required for the subsidence of the waters. He must believe all these and many other things equally incomprehensible, or be an "infidel." He must accept the genealogies of Matthew and Luke as absolute truth, however much they might seem to conflict. And I fancy that if anyone had had the temerity to suggest that the phrase: "Son of David," as applied to the Savior, was inconsistent with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, he might easily have been subjected to the charge of arch-atheism.

From the viewpoint of the doctrinaires, which was the viewpoint of most of the people of that day, whether in the church or out, Mr. Herndon was right--and Abraham Lincoln was an "infidel; though from the viewpoint of loyalty to God, and

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fellowship with Jesus Christ in a blameless life of loving service to his fellow men, he was a sincere and earnest Christian, whether he knew it or not.

But there were other things than these conflicting and unbelievable doctrines, perhaps corollaries of them, that must have vexed the friendly and companionable soul of Abraham Lincoln. One of these was the attitude of the denominations toward each other; often, apparently, as antagonistic as their attitude toward their common foe.

Rev. Julian M. Sturtevant, who came to Jacksonville in 1829, one of the Yale band that traversed mountain ranges and forded rivers in order to establish a school of Christian education in the wilderness, tess, in his autobiography, of the first sermon he heard in his new field.

Learning that there would be preaching at the Court House, he went, expecting to hear an exposition of Scripture and a call to higher spiritual life. What was his dismay as he listened to a vitriolic attack on a sister denomination! I heard a faint echo of this about forty years later, from the lips of the same minister. The superintendent of our Sunday School had called a convention of the Methodist Sunday Schools of the county, to meet at our church, the old West Charge, now Grace Church. It was the first meeting of the kind in that region, and excited widespread interest. The church was small, and many were unable to gain admission. I went very early on the afternoon of the

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second day, and got a seat. It was the last business session, and it was decided to repeat the convention the next year; and, as there was no more available place, to hold it at the same church. At this point Mr. Charles McDonald, one of the trustees of the Second Presbyterian Church, rose and asked to be heard. He spoke with high appreciation of the splendid work of the convention, of profound interest to Christians of all denominations, and expressed his regret at our limited seating capacity. Then, in the name of his co-trustees, who were erecting a new house of worship that would seat three or four times as many as ours, he offered the new building for the use of the convention the following year.

I think that many of you will be unable to understand the wave of surprise, one might almost say amazement, that swept over that audience at this act of simple courtesy from one denomination toward another. It was a pleased surprise--but none the less a surprise. A resolution was immediately framed, accepting the offer in the same fraternal spirit as that in which it was made, and there were speeches to the resolution, among them one from Edward Eggleston, minister, novelist, historian, who saw in it a prophecy of that better day when Christians of all denominations should be united in closer bonds of spiritual fellowship. Then a little white-haired man arose and vigorously protested against the adoption of the resolution, declaring that we should not be under obligation to another denomination for such favors;

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that we should rather go into the groves, God's first temples, and there worship Him in spirit and in truth. The resolution was carried with, I believe, but one dissenting vote; and when, a few years afterward, we decided to remodel our church, and went across the street to worship with the First Presbyterian, there was not so much surprise; and when, still later, the First people decided to rebuild, and came over to divide time with us, it was taken as a matter of course. And I think that the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, knowing of this change of sentiment, must have rejoiced.

It was about this time, the mid-seventies, that the churches seemed to grasp the idea of team-work. I have not heard a public debate on baptism in fifty years, though in my boyhood, and for many years before I appeared on earth as an interested spectator of events, they were common. I have heard them in hall and in grove. The Baptist minister would discourse learnedly on "Baptizein," and read passages in which the word was used, when it meant immerse, and could not mean anything less; and the Presbyterian or Methodist minister would discourse as learnedly on "Baptizein," and read passages in which the word was used, when it could not possibly mean immerse; and the Baptist would go away more a Baptist than ever--and the Methodist or Presbyterian would be more strongly confirmed in his faith. And so of "Election" and "Free Will." But now the churches seemed to

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realise the advantage to themselves and to humanity of emphasizing the things they held in common, and of allowing those on which they disagreed to sink, if not into a state of innocuous desuetude, at least to a position of minor importance.

Another thing that the generous and sympathetic spirit of Abraham Lincoln must have deplored, was the appeal to fear. In all the revival meetings the great theme was the wrath of God toward the unrepentant sinner. Now let me not be misunderstood. Fear is one of the most valuable elements of the human economy. Without it the race must long since have perished. And I believe that it has a proper place in the spiritual realm, as in the physical or natural. But here it was worn to tatters. Men were lashed into the Church. No doubt, some of them, once in, leanned that perfect love that casteth out fear; but it is equally certain that others did not, and that still others hardened their hearts and stiffened their necks against this ceaseless lashing, who might easily have been reached by other influences.

I shall not soon forget a sermon on the Flood, by Rev. E.P. Hammond, a noted evangelist of that day.

Mr. Hammond was a man of fine presence, of high intelligence and liberal education, of great earnestness and zeal. To a wonderful eloquence and great dramatic power he added a sweet dignity and kindliness of demeanor that endeared him to all.

There were in his sermons none of the questionable jokes and stories which later had such vogue with Sam Jones and his imitators,

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and the rudeness which has at times characterised Billy Sunday's manner was conspicuous only by its absence.

I do not minimise the valuable work of these men, but their success was achieved, not by reason of these sometime gaucheries, but rather in spite of them.

This sermon was preached in the Second Presbyterian Church, the largest in the city; the last, I believe, of a series of Union meetings in which nearly all of the Protestant churches joined. A temporary platform had been built out beyond the pulpit, and on one end a great pile of wooden chairs had been assembled--many score, perhaps hundreds, to represent a mountain peak.

Mr. Hammond began by describing the wickedness of the people of Noah's time, and told of their contemptuous rejection of Noah's warnings, and their mocking jibes at his apparently foolish preparations. At last the Ark was finished, and the animals entered in pairs; Noah and his family went in, and the door was shut. It began to rain. Soon the rivers overflowed, and the people moved to the uplands. On came the waters, and they moved to higher levels. Still rose the threatening waves, and the now frightened people fled to the mountains. And men strove and fought for places of seeming vantage, and threw each other into the water. And tender women, with children in their arms, pressed on beside the tiger and the leopard, and the venomous serpent of the jungle, in the vain hope of safety.

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And as the preacher turned to that great pile of chairs, and with his wonderful eloquence and tremendous dramatic power, pictured the final scene in that great tragedy, one could almost see the swarming multitudes striving, struggling, cursing, fighting, shrieking, despairing, hoping, praying for a few moments, a single moment, of time--only to be overwhelmed by the devouring flood. And strong men wept, and women shrieked and fainted at the description.

There were 1300 professed conversions at that series of meetings, in a little town of seven or eight thousand. A few weeks later my pastor, Rev. Earl Cranston, told me that the results had been very disappointing. There had been very, very few admissions to the churches.

And the lurid descriptions of the lake of fire and brimstone! Jonathan Edwards had nothing on the ministers of that day in picturing the horrors that awaited the damned. No, I'll take that back. I am sure that I never heard any of them do anything quite as bad as Jonathan Edward's description of the unelected infant writhing and shrieking in the flames of hell, and doomed to suffer through endless ages. But it was bad enough, and was dished up to us with such regularity at the revival meetings that the subject was saved from triteness only by its horror.

Like other boys, I received certain doses of sulphur and molasses at the regular Spring housecleaning. It was "good for the blood." I never liked it, and am inclined to believe, after

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all, that I received greater spiritual than physical benefit when I learned that the sulphur was the Scriptural brimstone.

And again the churches learned the better way. They not only united in emphasizing the great fundamental truths which they held in common, and left in the background those on which they could not agree, but they learned the more effective appeal to the reason of men, to a sense of manly duty, and a decent gratitude to God for his generous care. And instead of the selfish reward of a crown of glory gemmed with stars, we heard more of the deeper joy of loving service, and the heartwarming sense of companionship and fellowship with Him.

And now, as was inevitable, the creeds came under criticism, and of course the doctrinaires fought back; and Dr.Swing was expelled from the Presbyterian church, and Dr. Thomas from the Methodist, because they disavowed their belief in doctrines which many had long secretly doubted. Then the Congregationalists threw down mahy of the barriers which had kept out of the church many men who loved God, and wanted to order their lives according to the precepts of the Savior; and after awhile the Presbyterians did likewise, though not in such a wholesale way; and in the course of time the great Methodist church made a bonfire of its creeds, and declared the New Testament the rule of faith and practice, subject to interpretation by the individual intelligence. Others followed, and if Abraham Lincoln had lived, he would have had no difficulty in finding his church. More and more the churches gave attention to the social activities of their members and

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their communities, and less and less to the doctrines which to an appreciable degree obscured the great revelation of Jesus that God is the loving Father of all men, who are therefore brethren. More and more they gave of their substance to spread the gospel throughout the world.

While the figures for the past half century are not available, at the moment, I think that there can be no doubt that the contributions of the churches to foreign missions during this period, have increased in a far higher ratio than their membership or wealth.

Nor is this all. As the churches emphasized the social side of Christianity, and gave less attention to the doctrines, by which the pure gold of the religion of Jesus had become encrusted, just as the law had been encrusted by the traditions of the elders, against which the Savior had fought with unflagging zeal, they increased in power and influence outside their memberships and elevated the moral standards of social life.

I am firmly convinced that much, very much, of the social betterment that has characterized the last quarter of a century is due to this emphasis on the humanitarian side of religion; as, for example, shorter hours of labor, safety appliances in dangerous employments, sanitation, the single standard of morality for men and women, the care and protection of childhood, etc.

And now, like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky, comes a recrudence of the same intolerant and intolerable spirit which, in the Middle Ages, sent many a devout, earnest Christian

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to the stake because he could not believe what he was told to believe by a dominant Church, and in modern, free America has hurled many a zealous, sincere Christian minister from his pulpit, because he could not believe what he was told to believe by a dominant Council, or Conference, or Assembly. Any many churches, instead of working harmoniously and joyously in spreading aborad the gospel of Jesus Christ, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself," are engaged in acrimonious discussions of the inerrancy of the Scriptures, and the miracles of the Savior, and the Virgin Birth, and His Second Coming, which have just as much to do with Christian living as had the physical space occupied by the angels on the point of a cambric needle, or the migratory power of the disembodied spirits, and no more. And we are told by an eminent (or shall I say prominent?) lay teacher that an evolutionist cannot be a Christian, though many eminent men of science, evolutionists, avow their faith in Christ, and are active in the work of their churches. And we are told by a great evangelist that Darwin and Huxley are roasting in hell, though these gentlemen, whatever may have been their theological beliefs or unbeliefs, were admittedly earnest seekers after truth. And we seem, in a night as it were, to be thrown back to the time when Abraham Lincoln was accused of being an "infidel."

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It is the same spirit which led the disciples to forbid one who was casting out devils, because he followed not after them; and you will remember that the Savior rebuked them for this intolerance, evidently regarding the other healer as a co-worker.

Why should Trinitarian and Unitarian look askance at each other, and give each other grudging fellowship, or no fellowship at all, when both of them are ordering their lives according to the precepts of the Great Teacher? Why should the believer in the resurrection scorn the doubter, when according to the very record the Savior had no word of censure for Thomas? Why should those who disagree as to the Virgin Birth remain estranged when both of them are walking humbly and devoutly in the footsteps of Him That Was Born? Why should men quarrel over the time and place and manner of His Second Coming, when hundreds of millions of their brethren have not received the glad tidings that He brought at His First Coming?

Let us have done with this folly--this worse than folly--this madness. Let every man be persuaded in his own mind. Let every man speculate, theorize and dogmatize as he will; believe what he will. But let no man who has taken on him t he name of Christ dare to erect a doctrine into a barrier to his fellowship with that other who sits at the feet of the Master.

You will remember, you that have read the story, and I hope that all of you have read it, that Carmichael, the young minister at Drumtochty, had preached certain sermons embracing the new

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theology, and that Lachlan Campbell, his old-school parishioner, had objected, and that Carmichael had answered impatiently. A coolness came between them, and both were pained, though neither knew that the other grieved. At last Carmichael went to Margaret Howe, a woman wise through communion with God, and at her suggestion sought out Lachlan. And when the two joined hands,and looked into each other's eyes, they knew that never again would anything come to pass to mar their mutual love; that never again would a doctrine come between them that worshipped one Lord.

"Lachlan," said Carmichael, "I must speak the truth as I see it." "Aye," replied the old Highlander proudly, "ye shall speak every word that God gives ye to speak, and I will take every word that He gives me, and there shall be a covenant between us." And when they knelt in prayer it was the young man who prayed that they might keep the faith once delivered to the saints, while the burden of the old man's prayer was that God would lead them into all truth.

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