

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

THE
BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

ARTICLE I.

THE ALLEGED COLLAPSE OF NEW ENGLAND
THEOLOGY.

THE collapse of New England Theology has been principally inferred from the alleged fact that it is no longer taught in any or in most of the Congregational seminaries in America. But if this be so, it still may be questioned whether this proves the collapse of the theology or of the seminaries. For, a theology which is full of truth is not collapsible.

“Truth crushed to earth shall rise again:
The eternal years of God are hers.”

If the New England theology incorporates into itself in usable form of statement the great body of biblical truth, then it has not collapsed, and it will not collapse; while, if the seminaries have turned their backs upon the central luminary and are walking in the light of “sparks of their own kindling,” the question of *their* collapse is one of only a very short time.

Considered, also, from the viewpoint of actual facts, it is not clear that New England theology has collapsed, or that it is in the way of collapsing. Certainly the seminaries that have discarded it are not in a specially flourishing condition; while preaching of the Old New England type was never more effective than it has been during recent years. Witness the revivals which have attended the preaching of Moody, Pente-

cost, Torrey, Chapman, Campbell Morgan, and a host of other less well known but equally effective preachers.

The New England theology is a modified form of Calvinism, originating, about the middle of the eighteenth century, in the fertile mind of Jonathan Edwards during the great religious movement in America of which his ministry was the center. For more than a century and a half it has dominated the preaching of nearly all the denominations in the United States, and has been the mainspring of the home and foreign missionary efforts which have attained such wide-spread influence throughout both our own country and the world. In reality it does not differ much from the modified Arminianism of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America; while Andover Theological Seminary, which was its chief representative, furnished theological instruction for half a century to the most active minds of the Presbyterian, the Reformed, the Baptist, and the Protestant Episcopal, as well as of the Congregational churches. If a tree is ever recommended by its fruits, New England theology is worthy of preservation and nurture. At any rate it should not be cast off without much prayer and fasting, and urgent supplications that Divine wisdom may give us something better in its place. In view of these things, it is important for us to consider first, what the theology is which the age is said to be discarding; and secondly, what the would-be new leaders of thought are putting in its place.

Five great truths are made prominent in New England theology. These are: (*a*) the authority of the Bible; (*b*) the greatness of man; (*c*) the depth of man's depravity; (*d*) the exalted nature of Christ; and (*e*) the entrancing sublimity of the love of God as shown in the forgiveness of sin through the atoning work of Christ.

(a) No one can deny to the New England theologians great intellectual power and philosophical acumen. Nowhere at any time has appeared a brighter array of rational religious philosophers than that which adorns the pages of the history of New England theology. The works of Jonathan Edwards, father and son, of Hopkins, Emmons, Bellamy, Burton, Taylor, Tyler, Woods, Stuart, Smith, Beecher, Park, Finney, and Fairchild cannot be excelled in the boldness and power with which their authors face the rational problems underlying all theology. They were *rationalists* in the true sense of the word. But they subjected their reason to the Bible. They recognized it as the highest act of reason to accept the well-accredited testimony of witnesses better informed than they, and to incorporate the wisdom that is from above into their own systems. Under the influence of these men, therefore, biblical scholarship flourished as it had never done before in America, and as it is not likely to do again if the Bible ceases to be regarded as the highest source from which to derive knowledge of man's condition and of God's interest in his deliverance and development. Whatever else the New England theology was, it aimed to be biblical.

(b) According to the New England theologians, the greatness of man reaches its climax in those powers which render him a moral agent, capable of choosing between right and wrong. The freedom of the will is fundamental in the New England theology. This was a most important element of power in its preaching. Whatever may be said about the success of Jonathan Edwards in endeavoring to harmonize the freedom of the will with Divine foreknowledge and foreordination, the freedom of the will to choose between right and wrong was insisted upon in all his preaching and in that of his successors. Whatever punishment is threatened against man is deserved

by his voluntary rejection of the great law of love. In the New England theology, love is the fundamental law of the moral universe. Man knows by intuition that he should love all things, both great and small, according to their amount, and susceptibility of being. This comprehensive statement of the ground of obligation was formulated more fully by the New Haven and Oberlin theologians as the intuitive obligation to choose the good of being, instead of one's own pleasure, as the regulative rule of conduct. The possession of this power of choice is the highest attribute that can be conferred upon a created being. It is this which completes that image of God with which the Creator endowed our first parents.

But (c) the human race has betrayed its trust and sold its birthright. Everywhere man is in rebellion against his Creator, and is setting at naught the most sacred interests of the universe of which he is a part. Love is not the law regulating human conduct. Instead, everyone has gone his own way and is seeking his own pleasure, rather than the good of being. This truth is indeed taught with great clearness and force of statement throughout the Bible, but it is taught with equal clearness on the very face of human society and in all human history.

**“Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn.”**

Man nowhere trusts his fellow-man. All nations are in an attitude of defense against the anticipated depredations of their neighbors. France distrusts Germany; Japan fears Russia; England must have a navy, for self-protection, as large as that of any two of her rivals combined. Notwithstanding the effect of the benign influence of Christianity upon the nations of Europe for two thousand years, the dawn of universal peace is not yet even in sight.

Jails and state prisons everywhere abound, and are crowded with occupants. In organizing a new county, the first thing to be done is to establish courts, and to provide all the machinery necessary for the punishment of crimes, which, without believing in the doctrine of foreordination, all men know will be committed by some of the free moral agents with which we are associated. All sorts of checks have to be devised to keep cashiers from absconding with bank funds. Bell punches have to be used to compel conductors to turn in the money they collect from passengers, and uniformed spies have to follow them and keep a sharp lookout, to see if the protective device is really employed. The Government has to appoint inspectors to see that manufactured articles are kept up to standard quality, and that meat is not rendered indigestible by the use of chemical preservatives, and milk diluted with impure water from the sewer or drawn from cows fed on distillery slops. Nothing but the force of government will compel mine owners and railroad magnates and manufacturers to take proper care of the lives and health of their operatives. Both parents and employers will combine to reap profit from the labor of children which dwarfs their bodies and stunts their minds. The sins of gigantic corporations have been too much in evidence the last few years to need more than a mention. The New England theology has not exaggerated the extent and depth of human depravity. It has done well to emphasize the "exceeding sinfulness of sin." The disease is deadly, and calls for a heroic remedy. No punishment is too severe for a man, made in God's image, who in selfish disregard rides roughshod over all the interests of those for whom Christ has died, and refuses to keep God in all his thoughts.

(d) It is quite the fashion nowadays to say that this dark view of human depravity has led to the construction of a me-

chanical theory of the atonement, in which a remedy was devised to be commensurate with the disease. The truth is, that orthodox theories of the atonement and the doctrine of total depravity support each other. The darker our conception of sin, the greater the necessity for a Divine mediator who can make atonement for it. On the other hand, the higher our conception of the nature of Christ and of the extent of his humiliation and suffering in man's behalf, the greater must seem the sin for which such a remedy had to be provided. The divinity of the suffering Saviour is a correlate to the deep view of sin which the New England theologians have ever maintained. The struggle to maintain the doctrine of the divinity of Christ which was so successfully carried on for three-quarters of a century at Andover, was not for the sake of a mere theory. The unfolding of Christ's nature and character in the Bible is a work of supererogation, unless there existed a reason for it in the wants of a lost race of godlike beings whose greatness was evidenced in its ruins.

(e) This leads naturally to a refutation of the oft-repeated slander that the New England theology represents God in the gloomy character of an arbitrary despot, whose laws are like those of the Medes and Persians which must be kept to the letter, no matter if it exacts the last drop of blood from the cringing defendant. So far is this from the truth, that we do not hesitate to say that the love and mercy of God are set forth in the New England theology with a strength and tenderness that are unequalled in any other literature of the world.

The earlier forms in which the doctrine of the atonement was set forth by Christian writers were under figures of speech which easily lead to much misapprehension. Yet, in all fairness, we should allow to them the benefit of supposing that they had some common sense, and that they expected their rep-

resentations to be understood as figurative. It is hardly fair to the great theologians who have from time to time formulated the doctrinal statements to believe that they thought that we were in a literal sense "sold to Satan," so that we had literally to be redeemed as an ordinary piece of incumbered property has to be redeemed, or that the sufferings of Christ were identically the same as those would have been of the sinners whom he saved. Surely we should know enough of language to recognize figures of speech, and not compel them to go on all fours.

But the New England theologians successfully endeavored to introduce a higher analogy into the presentation of the nature and character of the Saviour's work. The New England theory of the atonement starts from our conceptions of the nature and character of government as obtained from daily and world-wide experience. Now, the highest attainment of human wisdom appears in our efforts to hold mankind up to the standard of duty for which governments exist. To restrain the lawless, to reform the vicious, to temper justice and mercy so that the first offenders shall not be wholly discouraged, and that the incorrigible shall not take undue advantage, and so that all shall be encouraged in obedience, are efforts in the highest range of human activity, and so the most appropriate field from which to draw our analogies for understanding the Divine government. These analogies have the advantage of being at once easily apprehensible, as expansive as the occasion may require, and in the highest degree effective. All are familiar with the fundamental principles underlying human government as seen in the family, the school, and the state. All are familiar with the danger which threatens the state when just laws are not enforced. All are more or less familiar with the hazards which attend the free forgiveness of offenders, and

the necessity of some corrective display of devotion to principle when pardon is granted to an incorrigible offender.

The law of self-sacrifice is the great mystery of the moral universe. We are so bound up with our fellow-men that all must suffer for the sins of others as well as for their own. The strongest motive which draws a wayward son towards virtue's path is the thought of the sorrow which his course is bringing upon the parents who have brought him into being and nurtured him in fond hope that he would have a noble career. The strongest general preventive to a wayward course is the spectacle of parents bowed down with sorrow for the ingratitude and heartlessness of children who have sold their birthright and are bringing their parents with sorrow to the grave. And so on every hand the innocent are called upon to bear the sins of the guilty.

To reform the slums some of the purest and most favored of their kind must go down and live with them, and by their own self-denial get underneath the lowest stratum of human depravity a leverage for love. In this mystery is involved that greater mystery which ever presses in all ages, "Why was it necessary for Christ to die to redeem sinners?"

This is by no means an idle question. Its answer involves the whole philosophy of existence, and all the puzzling questions which arise in trying to justify the ways of God in the creation of man. We must suppose that, in creating man with his superior intellect, and power of choice between good and evil, the Creator took into consideration all contingencies, and voluntarily assumed the responsibility of governing him as a free being. With such a being in it, persuasion must be depended upon, rather than compulsion, to preserve the interests of the moral universe. The incarnation, the suffering, and the death of Christ were not afterthoughts, but were provided for

at the beginning, and contemplated through all the previous ages of historical development. Because of the greatness of man, and of the grievousness of his departure from the paths of virtue, and of the seriousness of the calamities he was bringing upon himself, and of the disturbance he has created in the moral order of the universe, remedial agencies of the sublimest character were incorporated in the system by the Creator from the beginning.

It will not do to say that it is derogatory to Divine wisdom to suppose that remedial agencies were necessary for the perfection of the system which God has created. For, we cannot say that it is possible to serve all the interests of a race so highly endowed as man is without remedial agencies coming in to prevent irreparable loss when this highly endowed race goes astray. It is the same question that was raised by the Deists respecting Providence and miracles. If we consider mere mechanism, it is indeed derogatory to the wisdom of the mechanic that his clock should ever need repair and re-adjustment. But moral agents are not mere mechanism. They have the power of choice. They are in a most important sense the architects of their own fortunes. They must be governed by motives. They must not be left to remorseless destruction beneath the car of Juggernaut. That God undertook our deliverance through all the course of events which culminated on the Cross reveals love in its supremest aspect and degree, and manufactures a motive power surpassing in reality the highest flights of the human imagination.

"Oh, for this love let rocks and hills
Their lasting silence break,
And all harmonious human tongues,
The Saviour's praises speak."

To barter off this distinct, articulate, effective representation of God's love as revealed in the Bible, for the vague, hazy, and

diluted pantheistic conceptions of the New Theology, is worse than selling our birthright for a mess of pottage: it is parting with the substance of hope for the shadow of an illusion. It is exchanging gold tried in the fire for counterfeit scrip which nobody will honor, and which will not leave even ashes in the refining pot. For, what is the so-called Christianity which is being doled out to the sin-burdened, forlorn, sorrowing masses of mankind? It is a Christianity which belittles the authority of the Bible. It is a Christianity of their own manufacture, instead of the Christianity of the Gospels. They prate about the importance of coming under the influence of the "person of Christ," and yet through finical criticism discredit the history which gives us any idea of that person. For, all we know about the person of Christ comes from the Bible, and that, forsooth, we are told, is "merely a book." But, what higher product of the human mind is there than a good book? Does any one think we can keep a clear view of the person of Christ before the world by mere tradition, without the historical records of the Book? May we be delivered from bondage to the effusive lucubrations of the twentieth-century prophets, which the new theologians would fain substitute for the sure word spoken by the prophets of Israel, and by chosen apostles and companions of our Lord, the Christ of God!