
Review Article: Two Worlds Collide— Postmodern Christianity and Princeton Theology

John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead Eds. *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*. (Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2002).

Princeton versus the New Divinity: The Meaning of Sin, Grace, Salvation, Revival. Articles from the Princeton Review (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001).

Few ideologies better demonstrate the evolution of Protestantism than those of Nineteenth Century and Twenty-first Century Princeton Theological Seminary. Nineteenth Century Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) pioneered the development of a robust Reformed American Calvinism, based on what became known as Inerrancy, the unapologetic Federal Theology of Calvin's successors and evangelicalism. The school's premier scholars, Archibald, A.A. and J.A. Alexander, B.B. Warfield and Gresham Machen formed one half of Reformed, conservative Presbyterianism along with Southern Presbyterians such as Thornwell, Dabney, Palmer and Girardeau. Perhaps more significantly for the church, they drove the development of American fundamentalism as a response to the surging tide of liberalism within mainline Protestant churches and established the ecclesiastical battleground through the present.

No single member of the Princeton faculty had a greater impact on Nineteenth Century American Reformed evangelicalism than Charles Hodge. Hodge's mastery of Biblical languages, Continental European training, theological acuity and combativeness made him a formidable opponent both to secular and religious modernism. The editors of *Charles Hodge Revisited* have attempted in this useful, uneven work, as leaders in the vanguard of surging postmodern Christianity to disinter Hodge from his tomb of perceived irrelevancy. All of mainstream Protestantism and much of Protestant evangelicalism has apparently moved beyond Hodge. They no longer fight the same battles, and on the rare occasions they do, they fight with completely different weapons. To put it plainly, Hodge seems, in light of the issues of the age to be hopelessly out of date and irrelevant. He fought liberalism with tools of modernism they find defective and aspects of modern liberalism they have long since taken for granted. Theirs is a Christianity fresh from its self-proclaimed victory over the excesses of the Enlightenment and modernism. Hodge, rooted in the Christianity of Turretin and what some of the contributors to this work loosely term Protestant Scholasticism evidenced a confidence in his beliefs not simply foreign, but offensive to postmodern sensibilities. He had a certainty which grates on postmodern ears used to reader response and Derrida. Hodge is out of touch with the world out there and the church in here.

Fortunately, postmodern overconfidence (in postmodern interpretation of course) has not relegated Hodge and his stalwart fellow-warriors to the rubbish bins

of triviality. In a sense, Hodge was far too formidable a scholar and saint for that. His life demands study and confrontation. Ours is a world that equates old ideas with old technology. They are simply not useful any longer, like typewriters and AM radios. How arrogant and how wrong. AM radios may be the stuff of jumble sales and quaint collections, but Hodge is still here, demanding to be read. It is greatly to Stewart and Moorhead's credit that they did.

The work is a confusion of different perspectives on his life and work. Some of articles confront Hodge's seminal works, others his often troubling personal life and politics, and still others which seem to me to be trivial, banal treatments such as his views concerning women. Must works concerning men or women of great weight and significance contain little offerings to political correctness? This work would have been better served by excising some of this. On the other hand, several contributors' observations concerning Hodge's troubling tolerance of slavery and his vigorous American whiggery proved highly illuminating.

Stewart's article, "Introducing Charles Hodge to Postmoderns" focuses on the underpinnings of Hodge's systematic theology. He mentions four primary sources and one work. The sources include Scottish common sense realism (truths are both self-evident and universal), the Bible mediated through the Westminster Confession of Faith as well as other statements of Reformed tradition, American Presbyterian ecclesial communities and the socio-political tradition of American whiggery. The work was Francis Turretin's *Elencitic Theology*, the standard text at Princeton. Stewart differentiates between Hodge's "scholastic" Calvinism and Jonathan Edwards' Lockean modernist tendencies. The latter Hodge deemed to flirt dangerously close to innovation and philosophy. Stewart uses the contrast to profile Hodge as an 'incisive and broad-ranging thinker,' rather than as an innovator. Stewart also addresses usefully the contrast between fragmentary postmodernism and Hodge's absolute commitment to the visible church.

E. Brooks Holifield of Emory University picks up the contrast between Hodge and Edwards to show that Hodge cemented a tradition for the Nineteenth Century that largely overlooked Edwards. Holifield largely casts the intellectual relationship between Edwards and Hodge as one of disapproval and dissent. "He found a few redeeming qualities in the Edwardsean tradition, but for the most part saw it as a series of mistakes. Like Sherlock Holmes's dog that did not bark, what is not said here matters most. Postmodern scholars have done a great deal to revive theological interest in Jonathan Edwards. Hodge's general disapproval seems to confirm the appraisals of him as anachronistic and marginal. The difference expressed itself largely in a more severe Calvinism that saw as the end of creation the glory of its creator rather than the happiness of the created.

David Kelsey of Yale focused his attention on Hodge as an influential interpreter of Scripture. Kelsey views Hodge's approach to the development of Christian doctrine as fundamentally ahistorical. Every doctrine finds its uncontaminated origin in Scripture, particularly Romans Chapter Five. Scripture clearly and boldly reveals a redemptive plan in the folds of its propositions. He notes Hans Frei's contrast between Calvin's typology emerging from a narrative approach to Scripture

and the early Enlightenment's eclipse of just such a narrative. The Enlightenment was about immutable laws not unscientific stories. Hodge, though he strongly opposed much that the Enlightenment promoted was himself a child of the same. He then, according to Kelsey, viewed Scripture scientifically. The one thing that differentiates spiritual knowledge from any other is the need for the Holy Spirit to illuminate the truth personally for the believer. Though Hodge may have summarized Christianity as simple, propositional truth, he believed that personal devotion accompanied by the intercession of the Holy Spirit was necessary for people to fully apprehend this truth. This intercession served to renew the entire person, including the intellect, and linked the church together in common understanding.

Wheaton historian Mark Noll provided far and away the most valuable contribution to the work. Noll, in his own words, frames Hodge's life as a 'sympathetic account of a failure.' The failure Noll notes was Hodge's inability to coherently describe Christianity as both objective reality and subjective experience. It forced him to explain Christianity to an increasingly skeptical world in two seemingly contradictory ways. It was both a system of propositional doctrines testified to by Scripture which had to be personally affirmed and personal experiences expressing the presence of an infilling Holy Spirit. The dissonance made Christianity's appeal less persuasive. How does one become a Christian? Hodge seemed to say two things at once, believe the record God provided in the Bible concerning his son and trust in Jesus alone for his or her salvation. Part of this appeared direct and impersonal. The Scripture is a definitive, clear recitation of facts to believe. On the other hand, the faith is ultimately personal and relational. It means loving someone and trusting him more than anything else in life. Noll does not seem to insinuate that either is wrong in itself. Rather, he contends that Hodge's inability to integrate effectively the two muddled his message and blunted its impact on society and the church as both struggled with the onset of imperial modernism. There is, perhaps more than anything else in this work, real substance with which for us to contend. What exactly is the evangelical message?

While Noll views Hodge's theological promotion of Christianity as less than successful, there is a great deal that he appreciates, some of which serves to balance the more detrimental effects of his methodology. Hodge, unlike his evangelical adversary Charles Gradison Finney, glories in the role of the Holy Spirit. His dependency on the mysterious outworking of the Spirit modifies his overweening reliance on reason to explain the work of God. Noll, in other words, views Hodge's theological formulas as far too pat and clinical. Noll also points out that any tendency to scholasticism was more than offset by Hodge's passionate personal piety. In other words, Charles Hodge loved God. He loved him with fire, not ice. Noll alone of the contributors seems to see Hodge as a full-blooded follower of Jesus Christ, not just a professor espousing a discredited ancient art like alchemy. Even though Hodge had a definite propensity for casting Christianity in the guise of Enlightenment philosophy, his deep well of devotion never allowed God to be

obscured behind the words. It was always about God, Hodge knew it, and more to the point, we know it because Hodge did.

All in all, *Charles Hodge Revisited* attempts to present the current evangelical mainstream with a view into its own antecedents. The results, though of often uneven quality, are worthy of sober reflection, not least because Hodge now seems so strange to so many of us now. The work gives valuable insights into the political, social and economic factors contributing to Hodge's theological understanding as well as his impact on Nineteenth Century America. In a sense, it goes beyond Hodge's time and helps us understand our own beliefs and our struggle with the alien theological climate of today. In other words, we often seem to feel out of step with the times. This may be perfectly appropriate. On the other hand, it may mean we have inadvertently crafted a view of Christianity which more resembles historical anachronism than timeless truth. Perhaps what it says most clearly about evangelicalism is that it has changed. Hodge's commentaries and his magisterial *Systematic Theology* fed generations of conservative evangelical Christians. These same texts now often seem antique to our eyes. Have we learned so much that we have left those such as Hodge and Alexander in the dust? Perhaps, we are just reflecting the arrogance of our youth and the seduction of the world. If the editors of *Revisited* are correct, Hodge reflected the worst of modernism's excesses, particularly with its love affair with the unambiguous appropriation of objective reality and rejected the best, its growing understanding of history. Perhaps. On the other hand, perhaps much of our own response to the Princeton School is reflect the external values of our own post-Christian age. Hodge's muscular optimism seems like arrogance to us. It may seem so, however, because we are reflecting life in a postmodern world cut loose from its solid, propositional underpinnings. We are a people adrift and may resent anyone who thinks solid ground still exists. My hunch is that both perspectives are probably true, at least in part.

Princeton Versus the New Divinity certainly stands a world apart from the previous offering. The editors of Banner of Truth Trust have in its pages presented the core of Princeton theology as it encountered the 'New Divinity' of Finney and Oberlin revivalism as it was expressed in the 1830s. The editors summarized the issues characterizing the movement as 'a revision of the teaching on the fallen condition of man, the nature of the atonement, and the extent of dependence on the Holy Spirit for regeneration.' Generally speaking, this meant a retreat from the Calvinism that developed as a result of the Protestant Reformation. The stress between these older and newer perspectives led to a division with American Presbyterianism in 1838. The work is not intended as a Twentieth Century critique of Hodge and other Princetonians. Rather, in reprinting articles of the Princeton divines, it adopts their views uncritically. Clearly *Princeton* stands as the Trust's endorsement of its opinions.

The book is a selection of articles that appeared in the *Princeton Review* between 1837 and 1842, several of which were contributed by Charles Hodge. In a critique of Dr. Samuel Cox, Hodge takes aim at Cox's understanding of regeneration. He reduces Cox's understanding to two points. The first point is that

regeneration is a moral rather than a physical change. In other words, regeneration is a choice you make. It is something initiated by the individual. The second point is that regeneration occurs 'accordant with the active powers of the soul.' Regeneration is activated in an individual by that person's active unassisted or unforced choice. Hodge is trying to say that the 'New Divinity' believed that man had within himself the capacity to choose a salvation found in Christ alone, without first dealing with a heart and will that Hodge believed were totally set against God. In this case, Cox believed that God did not have to overcome any barrier in us before we responded in faith and Hodge believed that God had to change our inner disposition before we could. This inner change was the work of the Holy Spirit. Hodge quotes John Owen, stating that the Spirit 'removes all obstacles, overcomes all oppositions, and infallibly produces the effect intended'. The article is interesting juxtaposed with *Charles Hodge Revisited*, in that it asserts with confidence a doctrinal perspective that strikes directly at the difference between traditional Calvinism and evangelicalism in dialogue with postmodernism. The traditional view, while being careful to distinguish in God's actions between force and influence (a non-coercive work of God which does not violate a natural freedom of the will-J. Owen), still proclaims a salvation accomplished and applied to quote John Murray. This is manifest as an irresistible grace which infallible overcomes our natural resistance through perfect persuasion. This is imperialism and tyranny imposed on free moral agents to the postmodern. It is a relief to the Calvinist. The impasse makes compromise problematic to say the least.

Interestingly, Hodge makes comprehensive use of Jonathan Edwards to prove his point, calling into question conclusions drawn by *Charles Hodge Revisited*. He observes that Edwards couches the issue of regeneration in terms of 'divine affections'. These arise from changes that must take place in the soul so that it can 'perceive the beauty of divine things'. In other words, God must work in advance of man by giving us new spiritual senses with which to perceive his goodness.

In a separate article by Hodge, 'The New Divinity Tried', the author reviews a pamphlet of Charles Finney concerned with the making of a new heart. The core of Finney's argument seemed to be that a nature cannot be holy. It and the entire person are morally neutral until moral choices are contemplated and made. Therefore, Adam's original disposition was neither sinful nor holy. Hodge counters Finney with an observation gleaned from Edwards noting that a disposition to love or not love exists prior to its voluntary exercise and indeed determines its character. Original sin, therefore exists as 'an innate sinful depravity of heart'. People are said to be sinful, not simply as a description of concrete choices that they have already made, but as an acknowledgment of internal dispositions which invariably drive their choices. Hodge implies that Finney's revivalism is driven by a belief in man's unimpeded ability to choose. Salvation, therefore, is about providing good information and packaging it persuasively enough to draw the listener. An article by Albert B. Dodd reinforces this understanding of Finney's view concerning human nature and the will. Dodd claims that Finney teaches that it is an insult to God to even pray for the ability to repent. This view is only possible without admitting the

comprehensive and debilitating nature of sin which always clouds judgments and frustrates decisions. It also limits the role of the Holy Spirit to presenting the truth to the mind, just as any good preacher would. One is struck throughout *Princeton versus the New Divinity* with the work's devotion to an active and powerful work by the Spirit. For that matter, the Calvinists recognized a robust role for each member of the Trinity. This seems in keeping with their proportionally less optimistic view concerning natural human ability. Finney, his colleagues and successors, by contrast, had, at the center of the debate concerning regeneration, human beings largely unimpeded by the Fall and, therefore, capable of exercising autonomous choice, aided only by good information.

Along the way, Hodge accused Finney of purely philosophical argumentation as well as playing 'fast and loose' with the Scripture he does provide. I suspect Mark Noll would enjoy the irony of the first part of that charge.

Revisited issues a cautionary note that is worth listening to. Reformed Christianity has not done its job simply because it has explained itself to its own satisfaction. The audience for its ideas is not meant to be those already converted, but a world, which hates it. Reformed Christianity emerged from a close association with prevailing authorities and culture. There was, even in its confrontations with Renaissance papacy, a common point of view over which to contend. We are facing a very different situation. We are in a post-Christian world that often resembles the pre-modern one. We do not share frames of reference with that world. Our presuppositions are different and largely mutually exclusive. Yet, we are commanded by God to speak and make his truth heard by those who no longer speak the same language. *Princeton versus the New Divinity* has much to commend it. Its pages evidence what it originally intended, clear thinking, cleansed hearts and transformed lives, but is it enough?

Is it enough to reprint these time-tested but also well worn pages? To whom do these words speak? Banner of Truth does indeed do us all a great service by publishing this work, but I cannot help but think that more is required. Let us be clear. Individuals such as the reviewer already accept a traditional Reformed view concerning soteriology. To whom is the book published? It seems to me that the vast majority of readers are already convinced of the truth of its arguments. In this sense, it seems to be preaching to the converted. Reformed truth must be reborn to confront postmodern man with an alternative to the watered down non-propositional faith it now endures. We need new voices to assist the old. We do not need a new love affair for the church. We have had more than enough of infatuation with and the yielding to fashion. On the other hand, we are not served well by insularity and nostalgia. We need to find new ways of expressing what we know and what we trust, absolute truth and an absolute King.

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