

ALVAH HOVEY AS THEOLOGIAN AND  
TEACHER.

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IT is difficult to estimate personal influence, to measure the results of a single life, to determine the value, absolute or relative, of service rendered to the cause of Truth, and to the progress of the kingdom of God among men. But it is safe to say that the influence of no man in the Baptist denomination in this country during the last half-century has been more beneficent and far-reaching than his, who for fifty-four years was officially connected, as Professor and President, with the Newton Theological Institution; that no man's labors have been more abundant or more abundantly blessed than his, and that no man's service has surpassed his in its ministry to the intelligent piety, the growth and the commanding position of the Christian body with which he was connected. As the respected and beloved teacher in Theology of nearly two generations of students who have gone forth from his class-room to be the teachers and leaders of a great and growing denomination of Christians, he sat at the fountain head of human influence, the streams of which have blessed not only every section of our own land, but well nigh all lands.

Alvah Hovey, D.D., LL.D., was born in Greene, N.Y., March 5, 1820. He graduated at Dartmouth College, in 1844, and at the Newton Theological Institution in 1848. He was Assistant Instructor in Hebrew in his theological Alma Mater from 1849 to 1854, Professor of Church History from 1853 to 1854, Professor of Christian Theology from 1854 to 1870, Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics from 1870 to 1900 and Professor of In-

roduction and Apologetics from 1900 to September 6, 1903, the date of his death. He was acting Professor of New Testament Interpretation from 1892 to 1894, and President of the Institution from 1868 to 1899. His public service was all rendered in connection with this Institution, except that he was pastor for a single year (1848-1849) of the church in New Gloucester, Me.

It will be seen that for forty-six years he occupied the chair of Christian Theology, during which his labors were devoted almost exclusively to that department. For five years he gave instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures, and for two years, by reason of some exigency in the Institution, he gave instruction in the Greek Scriptures. But during all the years of his life, spent in ministerial education, he was a most diligent student and careful interpreter of the Word of God, and could pass from one chair to another in the Seminary with the utmost ease and success. His extensive work as editor and author of commentaries was most congenial to him, and revealed the ability and the habit of a skilled interpreter. His Commentary on the Gospel of John, for whose spiritual understanding and unfolding few men have had such eminent qualifications of insight, sympathy and personal likeness to the author as Dr. Hovey possessed, will always remain a monument to his wide and thorough scholarship and his rare ability as an exegete.

It is, however, as a student and teacher of theology that Dr. Hovey is best known and will be longest remembered. It was in this department that he especially served and honored the Institution, and achieved the success of his life. He cannot be said to have bowed to the authority, and accepted the theological system of any human master. He was familiar with all phases of theological thought, ancient and modern, Athanasian and Arian, Calvinistic and Arminian, Evangelical and Rationalistic, and reached his own conclusions, and formulated his own doctrinal

views independently of all. Perhaps he may be most accurately described as moderately Calvinistic and thoroughly evangelical. He had no such peculiarities of doctrine as made him the creator or founder of a special school of thought, which should bear his name. He discovered no new truth, and originated no formula of truth, which distinguished him from other theological teachers. He placed no such emphasis upon any one truth as to exaggerate its importance, and make it the center of a system, around which all other truths must revolve, or in relation to which all other truths must be interpreted. Some teachers, who have secured wide reputation, would have lived and died unknown, had it not been for their advocacy of some peculiar view or for some theological aberration, which attracted attention for a time, and then was quietly laid away in the cabinet of abandoned beliefs. Schools of theology, of respectable size and considerable influence, are sometimes founded upon half-truths, or the over-emphasis of one truth to the neglect of other truths clearly revealed and equally important. The fame and the great influence of Dr. Hovey were achieved by other methods. He had no theological fad or hobby. To him all revealed truths were sacred, to be rightly apprehended, to be implicitly accepted, to be held in right relations, and to be lovingly and fearlessly taught, for the enlightenment, the conversion, and the sanctification of men.

The language which he employed as descriptive of the theological teaching of his intimate friend, Prof. Edwards A. Park, at a Memorial Service held in Boston, January 6, 1901, is no less applicable to himself. "The substance of his theological teaching was not a system of philosophy, though it was closely reasoned and profoundly philosophical; nor was it a system of ethics, though it was closely united with moral law and profoundly ethical in spirit; but it was the Gospel of Jesus Christ, lustrous and vital throughout with the living and loving personality of God,

and appealing to reason, to feeling, to imagination, and to will,—that is, to the whole spiritual nature of man,—thus proving itself to be in our day, as in Paul's, the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

Dr. Hovey's theology was pre-eminently Biblical, though the chair which he occupied did not bear that distinctive title. It had been dropped at the coming to Newton of Dr. Barnas Sears in 1835, Dr. Hovey's predecessor both as Professor and President. In Dr. Hovey's admirable *Life of Dr. Sears*, he says: "The title, 'Christian Theology,' was now given for the first time to a chair of instruction in this seminary. It took the place of the chair of 'Biblical Theology,' probably because the latter designation had begun to be used in a more restricted sense, to signify historical theology as taught in different books of Holy Scripture, rather than theology derived by synthesis from the teaching of the whole Bible. Christian theology, as understood by Professor Sears, was to be drawn primarily from the Scriptures, yet their doctrines were to be logically arranged, and, as far as possible, rationally supported."

In his Introduction to "Outlines of Christian Theology," Dr. Hovey defines his purpose in the following succinct statement: "Theology has been denominated Biblical, Dogmatic, Historical, Polemical, etc., according to the aim and method of its treatment by different writers. It will be our aim to make the following course *chiefly Biblical*. For only by so doing can we pay suitable respect to the Word of God, guard ourselves from the danger of interpreting that Word into harmony with our independent speculations, habituate our minds to a method of discussing Christian doctrines safe in itself and adapted to the pulpit, obtain the clearest and deepest view of religious truth, and derive the greatest spiritual benefit from our studies." The aim, as here deliberately expressed, was sixfold, viz., to pay proper respect to the

Word of God as an authoritative revelation of truth, to be saved from the too common peril of seeking to harmonize revealed truth with fanciful and foolish speculation, to learn to think of truth and discuss truth in a way to preserve its integrity, and also with a view to its most effective proclamation from the pulpit, which is to adhere to the truth as its supreme message, to allow the truth to shine in its own resplendent light with undimmed outline and unclouded fulness, and to secure for the spiritual life the richest results from its contemplation and study. No higher aim can be conceived in the study of theology in a Christian seminary. No other aim is justifiable or allowable in a teacher who is called to assist men in their preparation for the Christian ministry. No teacher ever adhered to that aim more firmly, or carried it out more successfully, than Dr. Hovey, from the beginning to the end of his long service.

His theology was drawn directly from the Holy Scriptures, and was determined by their careful and conscientious interpretation. However much he may have allowed his mind, in the quiet of his study, to soar in wild flights of speculation, or to philosophize beyond what is revealed, he never allowed the unsubstantial and unverifiable results of such explorations to take the place of the obvious teachings of the Word of God or to partake of their authority. It was this that made him always a close student of the Bible, that kept him familiar with every phase of modern Biblical criticism and its bearing upon the trustworthiness of the Scriptures (a familiarity that often surprised those who knew his busy life), and that caused him to place at the very beginning of his course in Theology, as absolutely fundamental, a carefully prepared chapter on Bibliology, treating the historicity of the New Testament, the infallibility of Christ as a Teacher sent from God and the impersonation of truth, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, and its ful-

filment, the endorsement of the Old Testament records as given by inspiration of God and worthy to be called the Word of God, and indeed the whole question of the nature and extent of inspiration.

Having thus laid broad and deep the foundation, he proceeded to build upon it his theological structure, or rather having established the credibility of the Scriptures as the source of Christian knowledge, he was prepared to draw from them the true doctrines of God and man, of salvation and destiny. He welcomed light from all quarters, from nature, reason, conscience and human history, so far as it shone upon the problems of God and religion. But the Bible he accepted as "the principal source of Christian knowledge, because the peculiar doctrines of Christianity are drawn from this Book, and stand or fall with its divine character." To undermine the foundation was to destroy the whole structure. To shake confidence in the authoritativeness of the source was to impair the validity of the doctrinal teachings drawn from it. Without the Scriptures there may be natural theology, but the vital element of Christian theology is gone. Christian theology is natural theology plus the divine Christ and his atoning work, miracle, inspiration and eternal redemption.

The theology of Dr. Hovey may be said to have been systematic as well as Biblical, though not in an objectionable sense. He declared "the Scriptures do not attempt to exhibit the truths of religion in a scientific form. They present these truths, as the works of God are presented in nature, to be examined and classified by us." Yet they are closely related to each other, suggestive of each other, and in some sense dependent upon each other. They are taught disconnectedly in the Bible; they may be arranged logically by the devout mind. The doctrines are divine; the arrangement is human, but that does not make the doctrines any less divine or less worthy of ac-

ceptance. Natural science is the human classification of the ascertained facts of nature. Theological science is the orderly arrangement of the truths of God and religion. Such an arrangement is possible, because truth is always self-consistent and harmonious, and kindred truths, that is, truths which lie within the same realm of knowledge, must ever bear some relation and proportion to each other. To seek to ascertain that relation and proportion, to discover the harmony of the truths of religion, is to study the science of theology, a science which has been denominated rightly "the Queen of all the sciences," for it furnishes the sublimest themes possible for human study and investigation.

Dr. Hovey believed that there is a system of Christian truth, correlated and discoverable, in which God makes himself known, as truly as there is an animal system with parts mutually related in which the animal spirit lives and manifests itself. He did not hesitate to employ the familiar illustration of the distinguished scientist to set forth his belief—"From the peculiarities of a single bone Cuvier was able to conjecture all the other parts of an extinct species of animal." But Dr. Hovey did not lay as much stress upon the formulated system as he did upon the verity of the individual truths which in his judgment compose the system. He could see "a definite connection between righteousness, atonement and pardon; Christ's theanthropic nature, his vicarious suffering and his kingship; depravity, regeneration, faith, pardon and sanctification," and he believed that in due time every man accepting these great doctrines of grace would find himself holding them in one harmonious system of divine truth, each confirming and corroborating the other. To hold one truth in its integrity would be to find it easy to accept any and all truths of Christian theology. To be in error at one point is to be in danger of missing the truth at many points. To belittle human sin is to belittle

the divine Christ, his person and his atoning work, to belittle the Holy Spirit and his office in regeneration and sanctification, and to depreciate the whole character of divine forgiveness and human redemption. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

Moreover, Dr. Hovey's theology was not dogmatic, assertive without argument or evidence. It recognized the function of the human mind and its normal action in the consideration and acceptance of religious truth as of all truth. It made its first appeal to reason in establishing the claims of the Bible to be the Word of God, and sought ever to commend its doctrines to the intelligent acceptance of men.

Dr. Hovey never intimated that his *ipse dixit* was to be accepted as an authoritative statement of truth, or even that the teaching of the Bible was to be received without careful thought, and examination and the ordinary processes of acquiring knowledge. He had only contempt for the irrational confession *credo quia impossibile est*.

Making necessary allowance for human limitations, and the inability of the finite to comprehend fully the Infinite, e. g., the being of God, the modes of his existence, the method of his gracious activity and the mystery of his providence, Dr. Hovey held firmly to the conviction that the Christian system is a reasonable system of truth, that it commends itself to every man's enlightened conscience. Dr. Hovey believed no less strongly than Martineau that "second-hand belief asserted at the dictation of an initiated expert, without personal response of thought or reverence, has no more tincture of religion in it than any other lesson learned by rote." To him faith in the truths of Christian theology never demands intellectual inactivity, or the disuse, much less the overriding, of the faculties with which God has endowed man. It rather carries with it the consent of the whole mind in normal ac-



tion. As a man is to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, so a man is to believe in Christ and in the truths of the Christian religion with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.

Dr. Hovey saw no reason to question the harmony of Christian truth, when rightly understood, with the impartial reason and the enlightened conscience. They can never originate it or discover it; but they invariably confirm it. Amid the heated discussions that have been going on during the last half century as to the seat of authority in religion, and the frequent assertions that "As a religion of authority Christianity has finished its course," Dr. Hovey calmly maintained his unshaken belief in the infallibility of Christ, as claimed by himself and evidenced by his moral excellence, by the character of his doctrines, by his superhuman wisdom and power, and by his miraculous birth and resurrection, and so, accepting the fulfillment of Christ's promise of the Spirit of Truth to his disciples in the preparation of the New Testament, and his undoubted recognition of the Old Testament Scriptures as the veritable Word of God, he held fast to that system of truth of which Christ himself may be said to be both the center and the circumference, —and all this, in the full exercise of his highest reasoning powers. The seat of authority was outside of himself indeed, but voluntarily accepted and affirmed by his whole moral and rational being.

It may be asked, was Dr. Hovey's theology progressive? It may be answered, understanding the word in a true and proper sense, as indicating a deeper and fuller apprehension of the great doctrines of revealed religion and a clearer perception of their relation to each other, that it was. But understanding the word, as it is frequently used, to denote a departure from the fundamental and essential truths of Christianity, it can be said that Dr. Hovey's theology was not progressive. He is

known to have said at the age of eighty years, after a long life of unwearied and delightful study of Christian truth, that he knew a great deal more about the Word of God than he knew at thirty years of age. It could not be otherwise than that he had "grown in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ." A ripening character and a progressive life are dependent upon a progressive knowledge. Not in this life, however prolonged, will the soul be able to fathom "the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God." But Dr. Hovey never found reason to abandon the evangelical truths which he incorporated into his formulated system of theology. So far as known, not one of them did he repudiate in his later years, or modify beyond identification.

He saw the drifting away from old landmarks even by some honored brethren, he watched closely the tendency of rash, destructive criticism, of which he kept himself fully informed, he listened attentively to every argument advanced in favor of a new and modified theology, he weighed carefully the claims of philosophy and rationalism as interpreters of religious truth, he accepted all well established truth of science or religion, but he remained steadfast in his adherence to the results of a sound exegesis of the Word of God, and loyal to the faith which he believed was "once delivered to the saints," and intended for the saints of all time, by which men were to be brought to a true knowledge of God, and sanctified and transformed into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He undoubtedly had new and clearer visions of old truth, and the clearer apprehension of an old truth is as valuable as the discovery of a new truth, especially if its truthfulness is doubtful. He saw the necessity of presenting truth in such a way as to meet the exigencies of modern thinking. He was alive to the conditions in which he lived, and ever open minded to the

light. He said, "It is not wise to leave out of sight the age in which we live, and the specialities of our own labor." He felt that special truths need to be emphasized at special times. He changed his forms of expressing truth and his theological definitions, as his own larger apprehension of truth and its clearer elucidation to others demanded. But his theology remained substantially the same year in and year out.

His theology was thus saved from being the uncertain, fickle, kaleidoscopic, ever changing thing which theology is sometimes represented to be, and even expected to be. We are told that "theology is human and variable, and religion is divine and permanent." That may be true or false according to the meaning of the words. If by theology is meant the systematizing of theological truths, the statement needs no contradiction. If by it is meant the whole content of theology, as sometimes seems to be intended, to the disparagement of theology, it is not true. Theology has its permanent, its unchangeable elements, otherwise it is all speculation, and unworthy to be called a science, or to be an object of human study. On the other hand religion, unless by it is meant the indestructible religious nature of man, which would be putting the faculty for its exercise, has its variable elements and is intensely human as well as changeable. "Religion, to be genuine, must be founded upon objective truth." It is born of theology, and receives its character and value from the theological conceptions that lie back of it. "As a man thinketh, so is he." The worst kind of confusion results from a lack of clear definition.

Again we are told that "the Bible is not a book of theology, but a book of life. Again it may be replied—True or false. True, if by theology is meant a formulated system, but false, utterly false, if it is meant that the aim and purpose of revelation is not to give to mankind a true knowledge of the being and character of God,

without which knowledge the world was in darkness and the shadow of death. "This is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." The Bible is a book of life, because, and only because, it is a book of theology. Paul had a theology, John had a theology, and Christ had a theology, not discordant, but harmonious. Dr. Hovey never spoke disparagingly of theology. He exalted it and the study of it to their proper place. To him Christian theology contained elements as permanent and unchangeable as God, which are unaffected by the conflicting thoughts of men or by the progress of the race, and the study of Christian theology was the sublimest and most beneficial occupation to which the human mind could devote itself.

As a teacher Dr. Hovey had certain characteristics which will be always remembered by those who had the inestimable privilege of sitting at his feet. Of course he carried into his class-room his profound reverence and love for the Word of God, which could not but influence the minds of his students. They were made to feel that the heart's desire and prayer to God of their teacher was, that he might know the truth and impart the truth, that he had no views, and taught no doctrines, which he did not believe to be contained in the Bible or in entire consonance with its teachings. He might possibly be in error as to the exact meaning of a passage under consideration, as he would modestly confess; but the inspired passage contained truth and not error. Man was fallible, but Christ was infallible. He honored, revered, bowed to, and loved God's Word, which to him was God's Word in no unreal sense, and his spirit was contagious. The atmosphere of his recitation-room was filled with the healthy oxygen of a devout reverence and affection for the truth of revelation. It was a place for inquiry, which he always welcomed, for honest investigation, and not for irreverent criticism. Above the teaching of human philosophy and

the conflicting testimony of human reason stood the divine Oracles. The supremacy of the Bible was an open secret in his instruction. If its doctrine tallied with the Christian consciousness, well and good. If not, then so much the worse for the consciousness. It needed more light. His students were taught that their message to men, to have convincing and saving power, must be born not of their own thinking nor of their teacher's thinking, and must come not from Newton Hill, but from high Heaven. Probably no theological Professor in this country has deplored the defection of fewer of his students from the truth than Dr. Hovey.

A second characteristic of Dr. Hovey's class-room work was his admirable candor in the treatment of opponents and opposing views. There is probably no doctrine of revealed religion which has not been subjected to open denial or to different interpretations. It is not enough that a theological professor be able to show the Scriptural basis of the doctrine he teaches, but he must be acquainted with the whole range of theological discussion, which has been going on for centuries, and bring it more or less minutely under review. His position requires not only that he teach truth, but that he oppose error, and show it to be error. He must be not only an interpreter, but a disputant. No more fair-minded, just, honorable or conscientious disputant ever entered the theological arena. The *odium theologicum* never found a place in his bosom. No man ever knew him to take advantage of an opponent's absence to misrepresent him, or to give to his language the slightest shade of meaning different from what was intended. To him every man, however divergent and erroneous his doctrine, was an honorable antagonist, and deserved to be treated honorably. He was as careful of another's error, that it be correctly stated, as he was of Christ's truth. Every man was a real man to him. He had no men of straw, and it may be said of him,

what it is to be feared cannot be said of all instructors, that he never uttered a sentence in theological discussion, to whose spirit or fairness an opponent could take any exception. Such discussion, carried on in such a spirit of Christian candor, would have saved Christendom from much of the bitterness of its theological warfare; aye, possibly would have put an end to its warfare centuries ago.

And this same spirit made our honored professor exceedingly patient in listening to the threadbare objections and arguments which fifty classes of students, each possibly a little more disputatious than the previous one, brought forward. His soul must often have been tried within him by the persistent and unreasonable attitude of those who knew so much less, and thought they knew so much more, than their venerable teacher. Yet no one ever saw the outward indication of an impatient spirit, or a disposition to shut off discussion, until the objection was fully met and answered. Sometimes we may have thought that he was a little too patient with our classmate's stupidity, if not with our own; but later reflection has produced the conviction that it was safer and wiser to err in this direction than in the opposite. At any rate, no student ever went away from his class-room with a wounded spirit, because he failed to get a hearing, or was answered in a summary manner, or with a word of biting sarcasm. Dr. Hovey could not be otherwise than considerate and kind to the humblest seeker after truth and light.

Moreover, Dr. Hovey, as a teacher, was always clear and easily comprehended. No man of average mental ability ever found it difficult to understand the meaning of his language. Clear thinking produces clear speaking. His words were as free from ambiguity as they were from extravagance of statement. Coming to the class-room with well-digested views of Biblical truth, he ex-

pressed them in a style of wonderful simplicity and directness. Even the profoundest truths of theology were so clearly outlined that no student was left in doubt as to the position which the professor held. Sometimes, undoubtedly, by reason of his very simplicity and transparency of statement, he failed to make upon some minds the impression of his true greatness. There is a mistiness, an uncertainty, an obscurity, which passes in some quarters for profundity. A distinguished college president had a brother who was a clergyman, and who impressed some persons as being a far greater man than the president. Some one, in fact, is said to have remarked to him on one occasion, "Your brother is a very profound preacher; he dives very deep." To which the president replied, "Yes, and frequently comes up muddy." With Dr. Hovey in the chair of instruction, the deep waters of theological truth were as transparent as human language could make them, and always rolled over shining sands. If there was uncertainty in the mind of the student, it was owing to the mystery of the doctrine, and not to the vagueness of the language. In a science so involved, so far-reaching, so infinite as theology, which is the science of the Incomprehensible One, whose being and "whose ways are past finding out," in which, as Peter said of Paul's letters, are some things which will always be "hard to be understood," it is a chief glory of an instructor that in what he says, he not only can be understood, but cannot be misunderstood. It may be doubted if any class, or any member of any class, ever retired from Dr. Hovey's lecture-room perplexed as to his meaning. The doctrine may have been the doctrine of God, but the language was the language of a child.

In a word Dr. Hovey ever stood in the most friendly and helpful relations to his students, winning in a remarkable degree their confidence and affection, sympathizing with them in their doubts and difficulties and in

their eager quest for truth, helping them with outstretched hand up toward the serene and sunny height of his own faith, and moulding them by the influence of his Johannine spirit and transparent character, so that they have gone forth to the Christian ministry, not only well and soundly instructed in the Word of God, which they were commissioned to preach, but better men by reason of their student-life in Newton Theological Institution, with a deeper love of all truth and a higher ideal of Christian manhood. A thousand students and more, the living who are still proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ in many lands, and the dead who are resting from their labors, and share with him the undimmed light of eternal Truth, unite to bless the memory of their beloved teacher.