Sound Learning, Vital Piety: The Life and Legacy of Charles Hodge

Steve Curtis
Sound Learning, Vital Piety:  
The Life and Legacy of Charles Hodge

By 
Steven Curtis

July 2, 2010
CONTENTS

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 1
The Life of Charles Hodge ....................................................................................................................... 1
  Childhood .............................................................................................................................................. 1
  Conversion ........................................................................................................................................... 3
  Family .................................................................................................................................................. 4
Academic Career ........................................................................................................................................ 5
Pastoral Ministry ......................................................................................................................................... 6
Influences ................................................................................................................................................ 6
The Impact of the European Experience .................................................................................................. 9
Controversy .............................................................................................................................................. 11
  Slavery ............................................................................................................................................... 11
  Darwinism ......................................................................................................................................... 12
  Summary ............................................................................................................................................ 14
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 15
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 16
Biographical Outline of Charles Hodge .................................................................................................... 17
INTRODUCTION

On a tombstone north of the campus of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey, there can be found an epitaph that reads:

Charles Hodge
Beloved teacher of more than 3000 students
He stood for sound learning and vital piety

This is the legacy left by one of America’s first full-time academic theologians. It is not unreasonable to suppose that most are familiar with Charles Hodge primarily through his magnum opus, *Systematic Theology*. This is certainly a significant example of his “sound learning.” Many, however, because of the polemic nature of most of his writings, may not be as conscious of the “vital piety” that was of such significant note as to be immortalized together with his scholarship upon that stone. The words derive from Hodge himself, who wrote:

“Wherever you find vital piety, that is, penitence, and devotional spirit, there you find, the doctrines of the fall, of depravity, of regeneration, of atonement, and the Deity of Christ, I never saw nor heard of a single individual who exhibited a spirit of piety who rejected any one of these doctrines.”

In this quote, then, the connection drawn by Hodge between doctrine (“sound learning”) and devotion (“vital piety”) is evident. These dual principles guided and, ultimately, defined the life and the legacy of Charles Hodge. This paper will demonstrate that these two principles were inextricably expressed in Hodge’s long ministry as a pastor, professor, and follower of Christ.

THE LIFE OF CHARLES HODGE

Childhood

Charles Hodge was born in Philadelphia on the “late 27th or early 28th” of December, 1797. He was born into a family of some prominence, which boasted of Revolutionary War

---

heroes, senators, and justices. His mother was descended from French Huguenots, while, on his father’s side, his beloved “Aunt Hannah” had been converted under the ministry of George Whitefield. His father, Hugh, Sr., was a surgeon in the War and had been much engaged with the outbreak of the yellow fever epidemic. He eventually died from complications of this disease when Charles was less than seven months old. Mary, Charles’ mother, was thus compelled to raise both the infant Charles and his slightly older brother, Hugh, alone. This she did with apparent grace, for Charles later commented, “It is no marvel that mothers are sacred in the eyes of their children.” To her, Charles wrote that he and his brother “owe absolutely everything.”\(^2\)

Mary ensured that the boys were raised in a Christian environment. The family was active in the Second Presbyterian Church, which had been formed by a number of Whitefield’s converts. Second’s first pastor had been Gilbert Tennent, and the original ruling elders were Hodge’s grandfather, Andrew, together with Andrew’s brother-in-law and son-in-law. The family, then, already possessed a rich heritage in American religious history by the time Charles and Hugh were memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism under the instruction of the mother and their pastor, Ashbel Green.

Mary had inherited Hugh, Sr.’s wharf, which provided the small family with adequate financial resources to afford a comfortable life and to make it possible for the boys to anticipate a solid education, in keeping with the family tradition. In 1810, Charles entered the classical Academy in Somerville, and then, in 1812, Princeton Academy. Soon after, however, an embargo was put in place at the outset of the War of 1812, which led the family into financial straits, as the shipping business (on which the wharf depended) was severely curtailed. Mary persevered, however, electing to take in boarders and do laundry to generate sufficient funds to

allow Charles and Hugh to continue their education.\(^3\) This commitment on her part would be inextricably tied to the life and influence of Charles Hodge.

Conversion

In his unfinished autobiography, Hodge makes two simple yet telling remarks concerning his journey toward faith in Christ. “Our early training was religious” and “Our mother was a Christian.”\(^4\) Mary’s faithfulness, through the use of the Catechism and through regular church attendance insured that young Hodge was thoroughly familiar with the Word of God. It was, he suggests, quite natural in such circumstances, to gravitate toward thoughts of God. In his words:

There has never been anything remarkable in my religious experience, unless it be that it began very early. I think that in my childhood I came nearer to conforming to the apostle’s injunction: ‘Pray without ceasing,’ than in any other period of my life. It seemed natural.\(^5\)

This spiritual comportment, though not yet rooted in a saving faith in Christ, dominated his life throughout. Demonstrating his endearing innocence at the time, he relates that he cursed but once in his life, upon hitting his foot on a stone. According to Hodge, it didn’t hurt and he wasn’t angry. In fact, he says, “I cannot tell why I said it… I am thankful that no similar experience ever occurred to me.”\(^6\)

Yet there came a day, in 1815, when Charles did attain an awareness of his need for a Savior, and he publically professed his faith in Christ. An elder at the church noted how a young companion of Charles came running up to him and declared “Charles has enlisted!” As the War with Great Britain not yet ended, the elder asked in astonishment, “Is it possible that Hodge has

\(^3\) Ibid., 10.

\(^4\) Ibid., 12.

\(^5\) Ibid., 13.

\(^6\) Ibid., 13-14.
enlisted?‖ “Yes,” was the young man’s reply, “he has enlisted under the banner of King Jesus!”? In a letter to his brother Hugh, Charles described the event: “I cannot tell you how it made me feel. I was rejoiced; for I knew that “he that seeketh findeth,” and “he that asketh receiveth.”

Family

Throughout his life, until her death, Hodge was especially endeared to his mother. Likewise, his brother, Hugh, was a close friend and confidant with whom he shared extensive correspondence. In June 1822, Charles married Sarah Bache, the great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, in a ceremony officiated by Right Reverend Bishop Dr. William White, the first American Protestant Bishop. Charles and Sarah would have eight children, two of which (Alexander Archibald and Caspar Wistar) would themselves become theologians. Early in his marriage, he lightheartedly concluded a letter to his brother: “People say I am a little foolish, and I think it quite likely. But I have a good excuse. With every desire that you may be as foolish, as happy, and a thousand times better than your brother.”

His son recalls the regular times of family devotion, saying that his father taught them to pray with “soul-felt tenderness, that however bad we were our hearts all melted to his touch,” and declaring that what made those days “sacred” was the “person and character of the father himself… all radiant as that was with love, with unwavering faith, and with unclouded hope.”

In the summer of 1849, Sarah became quite ill. Charles, always conscious of the most important things, asked her earnestly three questions: “Do you love the Lord Jesus?” “Do you

---

7 Ibid., 30.
8 Ibid., 34.
9 Ibid., 97.
10 Ibid., 227.
trust Him?” and “Is He precious to you?” With each answer, she reflected her faith, declaring that Jesus was her “all in all.” She died soon after and, upon her tombstone, Hodge had written: “An humble worshipper of Christ, she lived in love and died in faith.”

Three years later, Hodge wed the former Mary Hunter, who had been a close friend to Sarah, and familiar to and loved by all of the Hodges. A. A. Hodge remarked that Mary “assiduously attended to [Charles] with her tender ministrations until his eyes closed in death.”

ACADEMIC CAREER

At roughly the same time as young Charles had entered into the Princeton Academy, the Princeton Theological Seminary was founded. Hodge recalled attending the inaugural address by the seminary’s first professor, Archibald Alexander, “as a boy of fourteen, lying at length on the rail of the gallery.” This would prove to be the first encounter in a life-long relationship with the seminary, as well as a long and meaningful relationship with Alexander.

After the Academy, Charles entered the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University). In 1815, the same year as his profession of faith, Hodge graduated from college. The next term he entered the graduate program at Princeton Theological Seminary.

In the fall of 1819, nearing the end of his seminary program, Alexander unexpectedly asked Hodge if he would like to teach in the seminary and, within a year, he was installed as a teacher. In 1822, he was appointed to a newly-established professorship, as Professor of Oriental

11 Ibid., 369.
12 Ibid., 370.
13 Ibid., 392.
14 Ibid., 18.
and Biblical Languages. Apart from a two-year trip to Europe to study languages (1826-1828), Hodge would remain on the faculty of Princeton until his last days.

**Pastoral Ministry**

After completing his course at seminary, Hodge was licensed to preach and ordained in 1819. In July of that year, he was installed as supply of the church in New Brunswick, and various other congregations in the region. He was also appointed to do missionary work in the communities lining the Schuylkill River. During this last posting, Hodge kept a diary in which one may glimpse the nature of his relationship with God. In one prayer, as he suffering from a drought of “spiritual enjoyment,” he prayed, “Oh, Holy Spirit, return unto Thy rest! Deign to make my bosom Thine abode – and O attend my feeble preaching by Thy almighty energy, for Jesus’ sake.”

Later, and for most of his life, Hodge would preach at the seminary, being active in the pastoral conferences that were held every Sunday afternoon between the professors and the students. Many of his sermons are preserved in the Speer Library at Princeton.

**Influences**

Despite his real and meaningful work as a minister of the Gospel, Charles Hodge is best known for his written work. To understand the nature of that work, it is helpful to consider his chief influences in this regard, which may be summarized in this way: Hodge received his rational theology from Protestant Scholastic Francis Turretin; he received his unswerving

---

15 Ibid., 73-74.

commitment to the veracity and authority of Scripture from Calvin; and he received the philosophical framework for it all from the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid. From Calvin, Hodge was also influenced in the preeminent importance of piety, for Calvin “had set the tone for all who would adhere to his Biblical view by unequivocally stating in the opening pages of the Institutes that piety is the prerequisite for the knowledge of God.”

Yet none placed so great an imprint upon the heart and mind of Hodge as did his mentor, Archibald Alexander, of whom Hodge wrote, “Dr. Alexander, in the opinion of all who knew him, was second to no one in piety and zeal.” Likewise, Hodge’s son (and Archibald Alexander’s namesake), A. A. Hodge, reiterated that his father “always affirmed that he was moulded more by the character and instructions of Dr. Archibald Alexander, than by all other external influences combined.”

Though Alexander often dissented from Turretin, the latter was nevertheless the “basic framework” for Hodge’s theological education. Alexander’s thought was in the tradition of Reid’s Common Sense philosophy, and he taught that “self-evident or intuitive truths are prior to reasoning,” and thus, “No doctrine can be a proper object of our faith, which it is not more reasonable to receive that to reject.” Of course, Alexander sought to avoid the charge of rationalism by stressing that sound reason would, in fact, lead us to expect that a revelation from God would contain much that was incomprehensible.

---

18 Hodge, 17.
19 Ibid., 47.
20 Wells, 18.
21 Hicks, 95.
For his part, Hodge did not refute Alexander in this regard. In fact, “he was to echo it himself on occasion, though never as enthusiastically as Alexander.”\textsuperscript{22} For Hodge, evidences and arguments did indeed have a place; but “they were not an end in themselves; they were not the heart of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{23} However, as Peter Hicks rightly notes (and as a casual perusal of his \textit{Systematic Theology} will attest), while Hodge stressed the necessity of the Holy Spirit in convincing man of truth, he “at times forgot this principle and used his rational argumentation as though it was a means of convincing his readers of the truth,” much like Luther, who also objected often to philosophy, yet just as often employed it in his polemics.

Hodge seems to have matured in his thought in later years. Though he began with a belief in the primacy of the heart (or, the work of the Holy Spirit) over the head, he later came to an understanding of the two (head and heart) as more interrelated. In 1843, he declared, “There is always an exercise of will in thought, and an exercise of feeling in cognition.”\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, he was not merely a cerebral scholar with no interest in the matter of the heart in worship. A careful study of his works reveals a deep and abiding affection for Christ, such as when he wrote: “The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is made so clear that we are ravished by it, delivered thereby from the love of sin and of the world.”\textsuperscript{25} So, while the theology of Turretin informed his thought, the piety of Calvin informed his heart, creating a synthesis that, though unstable at times, was very much integral to his identity.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{25} Hoffecker, 123.
THE IMPACT OF THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

Hodge began his professional career as an instructor in biblical languages. This seems to have been where he initially saw himself primarily gifted. It was, in fact, to perfect his language skills (Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, and French) that Hodge requested and was granted a two year sabbatical from Princeton to travel to Europe to study languages. Indeed, upon his return, it was said that those who studied Hebrew under Hodge had studied with one of the most qualified Hebrew teachers in early nineteenth-century America.”26

The European theological climate at the time of his stay was moving in the direction of higher criticism, dominated as it was by the presence of such formidable minds as Hegel and Schleiermacher. Hodge wrote of these that they both “deny the personality of the Deity and the individuality of the soul of man.”27 While he was thus disaffected by the unorthodox scholarship which he witnessed in Europe, the time was not without significance in Hodge’s spiritual life. After attending a communion service in Berlin, Hodge wrote:

I have recently been more than ever . . . affected by a sense of the indescribable excellence of our adorable Saviour, his character has appeared to me in a purity and beauty which my blind eyes have been long in discovering. Oh, that I should see more of this loveliness everyday that I live and be more transformed into his image.28

An even more lasting effect occurred at Halle, where Hodge began to be drawn more toward theology and less toward the philology that had led him there. This was due in no small part to his close association with August Tholuck, a German “pietistic confessionalist” who


27 Hodge, 119.

would become a lifelong friend. Hodge was impressed by Tholuck’s “theological posture,” and saw in him an evangelical theology that “went a long way to qualify Tholuck as a person to be praised for piety.” Hodge would also publish a commentary of Romans, following Tholuck.

Hodge did return from Europe with an appreciation for the art of biblical criticism, but always within a conservative theological context. Thus, in his exegetical works (all on the epistles of Paul: Romans, Ephesians, and Corinthians), it was Hodge’s practice to emphasize the substance over the form. Indeed, B. B. Warfield, a former student of Hodge’s, could say that Hodge “had no taste for the technicalities of exegesis,” while at the same time noting that “he seemed to look through a passage, catch its main drift and all its theological bearings, and state the result in crisp sentences that would have been worthy of Bacon.” His ability to convey his theology in a way that is “ disarmingly clear” explains why it has been said that,

Three thousand divinity students sat at his feet to learn their theology — more parsons, Presbyterian and otherwise, than were trained by any other American in the nineteenth century. Thousands more drank deep of his heavy Systematic Theology.

And, while many of those affected by his work undoubtedly came away with a deeper understanding of Hodge’s rational, common sense theology, his piety was influential, as well. Indeed, as Hoffecker notes, “His real and strongly emotional piety, the heart of which was vital apprehension of the love of God in Christ, wrought his most characteristic work upon his students.” His commitment to theology, then, was only matched by his sincere spirituality.

29 Noll, 530.


31 Hodge, 589.

32 Barker, 4.

33 Hoffecker, 117.
Over the years, Hodge’s emphasis continued the shift from a study of the languages to the field of didactic theology, culminating in his transfer to the Chair of Didactic and Exegetical Theology in 1840, which he held until his death. Nevertheless, it remained true throughout his career that Hodge was committed to a pious and reverent regard for the Bible. This conviction guided his life and his work, even as he confronted the complex social issues of his day.

Controversy

It is perhaps not surprising that a religious figure with a career as long and as formidable as Hodge’s was would become embroiled in the pressing discussions of the times, and his times saw two very significant issues rise to the fore: slavery and Darwinism. Reflecting an influence by William Paley, Hodge was convinced of a strong sense of the “harmony between natural science and religion.” Building on this, he would subsequently develop his parallel ideas that “the Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science.” This perspective would play heavily in his interaction with both slavery and Darwinism.

Slavery

On the matter of slavery, so explosive during the peak of Hodge’s career, the church itself was stretched to the point of division. Not one to shirk from lively debate, Hodge was quick to interject his position, basing it wholly upon his understanding of Scripture. Some have gone so far as to claim that his “record on slavery and slaveholding is poor enough to invite sarcasm.” Others, however, see greater complexity in Hodge’s view. Essentially, it may be said

---

34 Wells, 27.


that, for Hodge, “slavery per se (‘slaveholding in itself considered’) was not a sin and should not in itself be the subject of church discipline.”  

Thus, seeing slavery in the Bible, Hodge was reluctant to judge the practice as wholly evil. That being said, he also opposed slavery from the conviction of racial equality, denying the polygenetic theory that the races were, in fact, not created equally and Adam was not the common progenitor to all. Further, he was convinced that there were egregious inequities in the manner in which the practice of slavery was conducted in the American South. Commenting upon Hodge’s consistency on this issue, Barker says that Hodge was firmly settled in a moderate, middle ground, that deplores the agitation of the abolitionists and also expresses his abhorrence of the evils of slavery.”

Darwinism

In addition to the issue of slavery, Hodge is well-known for his strident objection to the rise of Darwinian thought. In a thoughtful analysis, Jonathan Wells argues that contrary to popular perception, Hodge did not believe in God because he saw design in nature; rather, he believed that there was design in nature because he believed in God.

Once again, Hodge here demonstrates his unswerving conviction that the God of Bible is who His Word declares Him to be; in this case, the Creator who is intimately involved in His


38 Barker, 6.

39 Torbett, 35. This view had been unapologetically held by Voltaire in the Enlightenment and, in Hodge’s day, was promoted by Louis Agassiz, among others. (Ibid.)

40 Barker, 6.

41 Wells, ix.
creation. In Darwinism, Hodge saw the denial of God’s very existence, saying that, in that system of thought, “God has no more to do with the universe than if He did not exist.”

Relying on the veracity of Scripture, Hodge argued that the Bible indicates that Adam was a perfect and singular creation. This, to Hodge, meant two important things: 1) Adam was not at the front of a long evolutionary line that would proceed through varying states of imperfections; and, 2) that Adam was the common ancestor of all humanity.

In 1873, at the Conference of the Evangelical Alliance in New York (the precursor to the National Council of Churches), international representatives from a number of disciplines assembled to discuss, among other things, evolution. Hodge rose to declare that Darwinism “is a denial of what the Bible teaches, and of what the reason teaches, and of what the conscience of any human being teaches.” Yet, while reason and conscience certainly played their part, the Bible (and Hodge’s commitment to its veracity) was the principle source for Hodge’s position.

Wells argues that this was an argument to design rather than from design, as is typically enjoined in modern times whenever apologists invoke the teleological argument. The significance of this distinction is best illustrated by the use of comparable syllogisms. The argument from design argues:

If living organisms are designed, then God exists.
Living organisms are designed.
Therefore, God exists.

Conversely, the argument to design may be understood this way:

If God exists, then living organisms are designed.
God exists.

---

42 Wells, 69.
43 Ibid., 77.
Therefore, living organisms are designed.\textsuperscript{44}

The first syllogism begins with man, the second begins with God. In the second premises, the first is contingent upon empirical observation, while the second simply declares that God is. For Hodge, Darwinism was saying:

\begin{quote}
If God exists, then living organisms are designed.
(According to Darwinism), living organisms are not designed.
Therefore, (according to Darwinism) God does not exist.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

While the accuracy of Hodge’s assessment is beyond the scope of this work, it is nevertheless helpful in understanding that, even in those issues where he is seen as most intransigent, one may readily discern an underlying passion for the Word of God and a willingness to defend it against attacks from any quarter. As he told his students, he was convinced that, “The truth has nothing to fear from the truth – God in nature can never contradict God in the Bible and in the hearts of his people.”\textsuperscript{46}

Summary

On the basis of his frequent and substantive interjections into social and cultural issues, Hodge may be seen by some today as a bit “radical.” This is owing, in part no doubt, to his conviction that “politics… when connected with morals and the character and interests of the country, is a subject second only to religion in importance.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus, while one may justly critique his position on slavery as misguided (however well-intentioned his exegesis), and while his position on Darwinism may not satisfy those either on his left or his right, it may be said that he

\textsuperscript{44} Wells, 98-99.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 49.

was at least consistent in seeking to honor Scripture (as he understood it) as the highest authority, to which all else—morals, ethics, cultures, and doctrine—must submit.

**CONCLUSION**

In a popular article, David Wells summarizes Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* by saying that Hodge “had seen the grace and glory of God” and, in this great work, he “turns to the world to explain his vision.”

It is perhaps fitting that the most influential work of his storied career would come near the end, after nearly fifty years of ministry. For while outwardly it reveals his substantial scholarship, it was conceived in the heart of a man who was not only a scholar, but a man who held fast to his Savior. And while the work is of course not a devotional, it would not be what it is had it not been born of a life that was.

On the 21st of April 1878, he partook of his final communion, and, the following month, Hodge left his study for the last time and retired to his bed. As his loving wife asked of his condition, he replied, “My Savior is with me every step of the way,” and to his daughter, he said, “Why should you grieve? . . . To be absent from the body is to be with the Lord, to be with the Lord is to see the Lord, and to see the Lord is to be like Him.” Thus, both the sound learning and the vital piety that guided and defined his life continued to sustain him to the end.


---


49 Hodge, 581.

50 Ibid., 582.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


1797, born, December 28th, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1815, Public profession of faith

__, Graduated from College of New Jersey (later, Princeton University)

1819, Graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary

__, Ordained and licensed to preach

1820, Installed as teacher of original languages at Princeton Theological Seminary

__, Installed as supply of the Church in New Brunswick

__, Appointed to missionary work along the Schuylkill River

1822, Installed as first Professor of Oriental and Biblical Languages

__, Married the former Sarah Bache

__, A Dissertation on the Importance of Biblical Literature

1825, Founded the quarterly journal, Biblical Repertory (later, the Princeton Review)

1826-1828, Studied in Paris, Halle, and Berlin

1832, The Place of the Bible in a System of Education

1835, A Commentary on Romans

1939-1840, Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States

1840, Transferred to Chair of Exegetical and Didactic Theology

1841, The Way of Life

1846, Moderator of the General Assembly

1849, Death of Sarah Hodge

1852, Married the former Mary Hunter

1856, A Commentary on Ephesians

__, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians

1857, Essays and Reviews

__, An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians

1868-1870, President of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions

1872-1874, Systematic Theology

1874, What is Darwinism?

1878, Died, June 19th, in Princeton, New Jersey

__, Conference Papers (published posthumously)