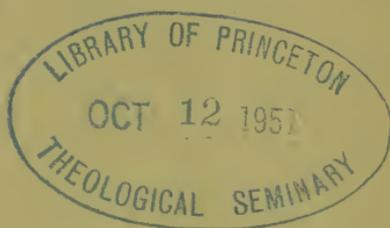


Burdett Hart

Our Pulpits
and the
New Theology

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Concio ad Clerum

Our Pulpits and the New Theology

*Delivered at the 177th Annual Meeting
of the General Association of Connecticut
at Norwich June 15 1886*

BY BURDETT HART

MINISTER IN NEW HAVEN

EDWARD P JUDD BOOKSELLER

NEW HAVEN CONN

BELOVED, WHILE I WAS GIVING ALL DILIGENCE TO WRITE UNTO YOU OF OUR COMMON SALVATION, I WAS CONSTRAINED TO WRITE UNTO YOU EXHORTING YOU TO CONTEND EARNESTLY FOR THE FAITH WHICH WAS ONCE FOR ALL DELIVERED UNTO THE SAINTS.

St. Jude.

NOW I BESEECH YOU, BRETHREN, MARK THEM THAT ARE CAUSING THE DIVISIONS AND OCCASIONS OF STUMBLING, CONTRARY TO THE DOCTRINE WHICH YE LEARNED: AND TURN AWAY FROM THEM.

St. Paul.



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2 Corinthians 4: 13. But having the same spirit of faith, according to that which is written, I believed, and therefore did I speak ; we also believe, and therefore also we speak.



HE pulpits of Connecticut have not been accustomed to an uncertain sound. Our ministers have been men of faith. They have known in whom they have believed and also what they have believed ; and they have spoken with undoubting confidence of one and of the other. Their theology has been a Biblical Theology. Their ethics has been based on holy Scripture. It has been enough for them to fortify what they had to set forth, by "Thus saith the Lord." Their hearers have

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not been wont to go away in wonder or in doubt, either as to the doctrine or the conduct which they intended to teach and enforce. The hearers have had convictions because the preachers had intense convictions. The supreme rule of faith and practice was formulated from the Word of God. Our forefathers, driven from cultured homes and ordered society to the loneliness of the wilderness, found a sufficiency of law and wisdom, both for the creed of the church and the constitution of the State, in the divine oracles. The "plantation covenant," which preceded all civic or ecclesiastic institution at Quinnipiack, provided "that as in matters that concern the gathering and ordering of a church, so also in all public affairs that concern civil order, they would all of them be ordered by the rules which the Scripture held forth to them." The Commonwealth, builded on the Bible, holds lucid ideas and clearly defined principles of belief and behavior. If in our day a doctrine of doubt has

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come to the front, it is not in accord with the traditions of the Commonwealth. If we are invited to welcome hypotheses and speculations that set aside or weaken the Scripture, we may feel that the invitation comes from an alien hand, from a mind foreign to the genius of our accredited theology. If it be claimed amongst us, that the Bible has become an antiquated Book and that it cannot be relied on either for science or religion, for geographical or spiritual teaching; that Christ had such limitations of human nature that He believed that which was not true and set forth radical error in His teachings; that the sacrifice of the Son of God for human guilt was a transaction for scenic effect; that men who do not attain salvation in this life will be accorded a future probation and that all souls will be eventually saved; that the Biblical statement of the separations of the judgment is a pictorial exaggeration; that no gospel of redemption is really needed for the heathen world;

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that correct theories of natural depravity and the regeneration of the soul are given in the old Unitarianism : we, on the other hand, can claim that our historic creeds include no such mis-beliefs ; that we have neither inherited them from the fathers nor permitted them to be taught in our schools. We can claim that the preaching of our pulpits maintains belief in the total depravity of human nature, in atonement as a vicarious sacrifice of a divine Person for the sin of the world, in regeneration as a radical change of character wrought by the Holy Spirit, in the melancholy eternity of punishment for those who end this life unsaved. Because we also believe and therefore also we speak, we want something more than the sound of orthodoxy with regard to the Bible, the holy Trinity, atonement, future punishment, while the substance itself is wanting. We want an atonement that will account for the communion table. We mournfully accept a doctrine of future punishment that

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cannot be dissolved into any hypothesis of restorationism. We hold a belief of Inspiration that gives us an undoubted Word of God, vital with authority and charged with infallibility.

It may be well that we should now consider some things which, at the present juncture, impose responsibility, and promise invigoration, in our pulpit work.

I. There should be, in our pulpits, an avoidance of the taint of agnosticism. As ministers of Christ, and teachers of the people, we have to do with *known* truth. There are realms of mystery; but our course does not run into them. There are problems that are unsolved; it is no part of our task to break down in their attempted solution. There is criticism which is destructive; but we are called to the better work of salvation. Our ministry is a Christian ministry. Our ministry is a New Testament ministry. We are the preachers of divine revelation. We are the ordained servants of

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Him who said, "We speak that we do know, and bear witness of that we have seen." His charge to His servants is, Go unto all the world and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. "Go ye and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." Our instructions are plain and they are concerned with plain things. It is no part of our calling not to know whether apparent discrepancies of the Scriptures can be removed. The ministry is not set to promulge unknown and unproved inaccuracies of the inspired Word. Their credit would not be increased by announcing the refutation which the gospels give of their own infallibility. "Illogical inferences from negative evidences" are not the substance of gospel preaching. We put confidence in Christ. We give credit to St. Paul. We take the truth that "men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit," and *that truth* we give to those who hear, believing

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that "every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for instruction which is in righteousness." Our hands and our hearts are full of that which is well known and which is of vastest concern to all men. Our work is with that which is openly revealed; for "the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever." The agnostic has no proprietorship in the Connecticut pulpit.

II. Our pulpit work must stand on a clear conviction of the place which a biblical theodicy holds in a faith that is true and saving. We may not have a philosophy that can indicate the ways of God with men. We may not be able by our subjective methods to construct a system that shall be satisfactory. We may lose ourselves when we appeal to, and rely on, any ethical principle. But we have something better. Philosophy is not Scripture. Psychology is not Revelation. We want the Biblical terms. We must be taught by inspiration. "Even as the Holy Spirit saith"

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must be the preamble to our conclusions. We want a system that in its drift, in its solidarity, is a compact deduction from Scripture. Sentimentalism will not do. A rose-water theory is not strong enough for the demand. In this case we want the nerve and muscle of the fathers. We want the courage of convictions that are forced and enforced by revealed truth. We cannot accept of propositions that either subvert or weaken the Word.

The attractive side of our faith falls in with the tendencies of our times. Men who minister to men would win them on the plane on which they live. So we have had set forth a gospel of affectionateness, and the world has been sought through the gentler and milder aspects of the divine administration. God is love, but "righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne."

Dr. Watts, who wrought the diction of the Hebrew Psalms into the meanings of Christianity, near the close of his life, said, that of

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all the converts to spiritual religion whom he had known, only *one* had been led to his first awakening by the amiable aspects of Christian truth. The history of all great awakenings confirms the principle so stated. Men must have some adequate sense of the need of salvation before they will earnestly seek salvation. They must appreciate their guilt before they will value redemption. They must feel the awfulness of doom before they will fly to the Saviour. The true theodicy must find its bearings in all the attributes of the Almighty. If it has stayed on a partial support, it must be righted to the needs of the times and of the souls of men. The preaching of the great Evangelists, as of the successful pastors, has its substratum in a doctrinal theology that sweeps the field of revealed truth. Amidst the mysteries in which the divine government of the world is shrouded, our prayer should rise, "Teach me thy way, O God."

III. The great central truths of our pulpits

live and act in power only by constant and explicit teaching. That which we also believe we must also speak. And we must speak, as the Apostle said he spoke, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; and our gospel must come unto the people not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. Christianity is not builded on negations. The gospel of our Lord will not make conquests by implications. The great preachers, from the days of St. Paul to these times, have done something more than to assume the truth. They have put it before men in terms that were explicit, in language that could not be misunderstood. They shrank not from declaring the whole counsel of God; and this whether men would hear or forbear. At all events the truth must be uttered. They did not emasculate the Scripture for the sake of ears that were too polite to hear the language of the Son of God! They did not neutralize

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the revealed facts by the soft diction of a feeble age. They preached the preaching that the Lord Jesus preached, and they witnessed the pentecostal results.

If there has been a dereliction of sinewy speech in the pulpit in this respect it may explain the defection of the times. The faintness of utterance has resulted in faintness of faith. The feebleness of preaching has deadened in the minds of the hearers the inherited sense of the weightiest facts which God has revealed to influence human conduct. Belief will die in no surer way than of inanition. The Apostle tells us that "solid food is for full-grown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil." And solid food will produce full-grown men. The sturdy faith of our fathers came from the stalwart doctrines of our pulpits.

The opposition to our faith is urged with no lukewarm spirit. We are not assailed with implications. We are boldly faced, in front.

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If we are to maintain ourselves we must hold forth the truth with "answering courages." We must push to the front the heaviest battalions. We must adopt the policy which carried Waterloo, of pounding the hardest and the longest. Sin must be regarded as exceeding sinful. Hell must be regarded as a fact. The errors that are sapping the foundations of our ecclesiastical structures must be sternly rejected. We must have a holy ardor, a prophetic passion, for the truth, which will necessitate positive deliverances. We must have the Biblical afflatus for the things that are revealed of God. The Bible is explicit. The old art of war, by which Elijah and St. Paul wrought victory, needs restoration.

IV. The policy of our pulpits needs to be adjusted to the fact that, before the people, the whole system of Biblical truth depends for its intensity and its hold on the doctrine of endless retribution. The mass of men come at it through that avenue. The faces of men

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look forward. What is to be is paramount with them. The stupendous argument of an eternal doom prostrates all human logic and answers all the lies of sophistry. It is the one thing that wickedness shudders before. It is the first thing that skepticism assails. Christ announced it with tones that have tears in them. He reiterated it as though no amount of warning could be too great. The creeds of Christendom have taken it from His divine lips. To-day our Christianity is weakened, is, in some quarters, paralyzed, by the virtual denial of this terrible truth; and not our Christianity alone but our social morality also.

The meaning of the Gospel, in the popular conception, depends upon the human need of what the Gospel should be. If men are not in so bad a plight as to deserve endless penalty, they do not see the emergency which the Bible seems to urge. If the Gospel does not find men in a state in which they must have it, it lacks hold on them. If the alternative be not,

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the salvation of Christ or the perdition of the lost, there is no extreme exigency which compels choice. And if the sense of that is relaxed the whole system cools in point of intensity. Pressure at all points is let up.

It is in the inevitable course of things that if the doctrine respecting the state in which men are is diluted, all cognate doctrines will be also. Depravity becomes emptied of meaning. The atonement is changed. The work of the Spirit is reduced. Saving the soul becomes a vastly less intense business at all points, whether in intellectual convictions or in religious life. Spiritual conditions are all revolutionized by this result, and men feel it to be so if they do not logically prove it. It is not enough to retain the old names; men need the Scriptural ideas. The suggestion of a post-mortem probation, the argument for a final restoration,

“That good shall fall
At last—far off—at last to all,”

antagonizes the entire system of Biblical truth.

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V. It is a duty providentially assigned to the pulpits of Connecticut to arrest the present alien drift not only toward schismatic doctrine, but toward irreligious life. If we silently and supinely allow the threatening errors to have free course, God may allow us to live through their normal results. The new theology is an encroachment. It does not speak in our language. It is not in any harmony with the divinity that we inherit. It antagonizes the faith of our churches. If its invasion shall be a successful one we shall repeat the history of other times. A sickly sentimentalism will supplant our brainy and brawny belief. Revivals will grow scant in number as in power. The creeds of our churches, the rich legacies of former faith, will wax pretentious but will be emptied of meaning. An enervated system of missions will testify that the old fire is out. Experience will become flat. Preaching will lose its soul.

So God has commonly corrected pernicious

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errors in His churches. He has saved them, it may be, but by fire that has well nigh consumed them. Good men, at first, have adopted the error; it has descended to worse and weaker men; then it has borne fruits which could not consist with the renewed soul.

God forbid that to us should come such melancholy catastrophe! But if He does forbid it, it will be through our use of adequate corrective agencies. Our preaching must be in power, and the power must be that which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. And for this three things are demanded:

• *First.* Our ministers should not allow their hearers to think that they do not believe the important doctrines which they do believe, nor that they do believe doctrines which they do not believe. They should be, first of all, honest preachers.

Secondly. They should preach the truth because they will understand and appreciate it more fully if they preach it than if they do

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not preach it. And they should believe that which can be preached. It is poor advice that a minister of the gospel should not preach the doctrines that he surely holds. He is commissioned to believe and therefore also to speak.

Thirdly. They should deepen their belief and detect their errors by the test of preaching. Preaching that pleases the impious and dissatisfies the pious may serve to detect the error of the doctrine. Some clergymen have changed their doctrinal views by applying them to the hearts of their hearers. Human hearts are preordained touchstones of divine truth.

We, my brethren, may not fully appreciate the drift of perilous doctrine nor the tendency which comes from it to irreligious life. But the new theology is full of peril. It is lowering the inspired standard, making men's interpretations of nature, history, society, consciousness, equal to it. It sweeps away the time-relations of Scripture, which our Lord empha-

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sized. It emasculates the Word of God in that it minimizes the greatest and most awful truths. It breaks down the old faiths, creates doubt, and then enacts the abandonment of the truth that lost men need. It largely neutralizes the doctrines of depravity, atonement, regeneration, retribution. It lures men on blindly to a doom which they can neither adjourn nor evade.* It puts human reason into equality with divine Revelation. It lacks system, and lies loose in individual minds, and has no common consensus of belief. It starts, as if new, foreign questions, that former conflicts have settled with us. The President of one of our old Colleges has remarked: "The old Unitarianism is repeating itself in the same way in which it manifested itself seventy years ago."

It is alien to our churches. There is not a

* Until the gospel does fill the whole earth knowledge of it must be given after death to those who are deprived of its blessings before death.—*Progressive Orthodoxy*, p. 256.

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tang nor a tact of Congregationalism in it. It is antagonistic to "the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints." And it works out into practical badness. Lured by the idea of a continuous probation, or of a final restoration, the young, in harmony with what they are taught, are, at painful hazard, claiming that they will have a good time now and take the chances of the future. No preacher can effectively insist on immediate repentance who promises, or who is understood to promise, abundant opportunity for it in the future. Philosophy controls life. Doctrine will dominate conduct. The teachings of the pulpit, as heretofore, will report themselves in practical affairs. Said a business man to me, a member of one of our oldest churches, and standing in the very center of a great city's business: You, as a clergyman, can know little, as we in business know it, of the practical effect of the new theology upon business habits. From Monday morning till Saturday

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night we see the evil influence of these new doctrines on men who, to a greater or less degree, accept them, in the weakening of their sense of obligation and in their inclination to postpone their payments. And, to my question as to the certainty of this effect from the cause he named, he said: It is perfectly evident to us that these loose business habits are the consequence of these religious errors.

It will work out more widely still. So far as the new theology has influence it will contribute to ecclesiastical rupture and to social demoralization. As a theology among us it cannot be permanently successful. It may succeed in weakening Congregationalism, possibly in dividing our churches. The division in sentiment is already an accomplished fact; the outward event only waits a fit occasion; and that occasion is challenged by the strange demands, by the open threats, of the new theologians. It may succeed in merging itself into Episcopacy, or into Unitarianism or Univer-

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salism. It has made the prospects of Episcopacy brilliant beyond all former precedent. And Universalism cherishes the proposal to abdicate in its favor. A leading layman writes to me: "It has seemed to many thoughtful men in the denomination, that if the present drift of opinion continued to gain, they should be driven from their long-cherished and revered church, to some other holding more firmly to the faith once delivered to the saints, and having a foundation that was not movable with every turn of the tide." An influential clergyman of the North-west writes: "I know of more than one Scandinavian church that would be Congregational to-day were it not for the harm thus done to our good name." This vague theology has in it the very elements which not only alienate fellowship and paralyze faith but which pervert practice.

Connecticut has been strong in virtue because it has been strong in the faith of infallible Scripture. Our churches and our ancient

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College have stood in the confidence of Christian men because they are planted on an inspired Bible as their basis. Timothy Dwight's Theology has been the bulwark of Yale College. The substantial orthodoxy of our pulpits has given our churches the sympathy of sister communions in other parts of our land.

Moreover, the old faith, in the old light, has been proved. The history of our churches, through many eventful years, is the grand memorial of it. Society among us, in our Christian homes, our institutions of learning and charity, our organizations of race-wide benevolence, in the intelligence of our people and in the character which the commonwealth has maintained, is monumental of this faith. It draws back our wandering sons, from the savannas of the South and the widely-horizoned prairies of the West, and from strange nations to this realm of the mountain and the sea-shore, that they may kneel once more on the graves of the forefathers, and hear the

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echoes from altar and from cliff and from thundering surf of voices that thrilled but are stilled, and catch the inspiration of doctrine which made our founders and our freedom and our glorious heritage what they were, and carry back to the waiting peoples fire from the beacon-lights that still blaze along our coasts, as the Aztecs carried to all their homes and shops blazing brands from the altar on which fire was kindled from the sun !

The splendid ascendancy which we have vindicated has its germ and life-force in this faith. The fine authority which we have carried forth into other spheres and other realms has come from enduring reliance on the authoritative word of God, and from the character which has been matured in that reliance. The power which we have easily wielded over men of alien blood and belief, and which is higher than any that is represented by scepter or that is conferred by suffrage, has been the product of our sinewy and masculine faith.

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No throne stands on such eternal principles. No aristocracy has such undisputed title. No lineage, traced by blood and sanctioned by deeds, gives such undoubted right.

The sway of opinion is continental: it is ethnic. We stand in our theological right because, in the judgment of our peers, we deserve to stand there.

All this we can throw away. We can misuse our position; but it will be by disloyalty to Him who has raised us to this rank, by treachery to the truth which is our choice inheritance. Our great past cannot save us. The glory of our early history holds no redemption for us. The great names of our fathers can confer no honor on our recreancy. The brilliant exploits which have illumined our career will shed no luster on our melancholy perversion. If we betray the faith, we shall lose our leadership; and shall deserve to lose it. We shall be no longer "the first-born of God" on this continent. The blessings pro-

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nounced upon our "ten thousands" shall dissolve and pass away. The old prestige shall be obliterated, and we shall sink to a common place.

But this need not be ; we cannot think that it will be. Rather, shall we stand by the tried ensigns ; rather, shall we build on the proved foundations. If our Lord, in His providence, is assigning to us, as a present duty, the upholding of the old standards of doctrine and of life, we shall prove that we, in our day, can meet our obligation, as our fathers, in their day, fulfilled the trust that God wonderfully committed to them.

Faith must speak. Faith in Christ must speak the words of Christ. Living faith must carry living words to the lost and the dead. And as we also believe, therefore also must we speak.

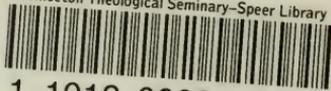
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