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Brian Osner

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Lyman Abbott: How Beecher Influenced Him

By Brian Osner

Senior Thesis for Honors 499

John 10:12 “He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters {them.}

In the late 1800's, the face of Christian theology began to change. A new movement called the "Social Gospel" came into existence. Considered to be composed of liberal theologians, these men were inspired to reform Christianity in light of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) recent studies.

Darwin's theory had shocked the world by proposing natural selection and survival of the fittest as the main agents in the evolutionary process. The group of reformers who accepted the Darwinian theory included a middle-aged pastor by the name of Lyman Abbott. He began the work of defining and relating this new theology to the public, to scholastic theologians, and to fellow clergy. Understanding Lyman Abbott's life up to his change of theology, the form his beliefs took at that change, and how Henry Ward Beecher influenced this change will give clear insight into how the Social Gospel movement altered Christian thought. At the same time, it will prove the profound influence Henry Ward Beecher had on Lyman Abbott

Orthodox Christianity in the late 1800's is easy to define and understand. Christ was fully God and fully man at the same time. He rose from the dead on the third day and was the only way for man to come into a relationship with God. Christ became the propitiation for the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit was the divine comforter and equal entity in the trinity. The father was the first person of the trinity he was creator of the world and father of Christ. A Right relationship with God, or salvation, came only through repentance of sin and acknowledgement of Christ as

Lord of one's life. The Bible was the holy inspired in errant word of God. All stories within it were taken to be actual historical events. Christianity was at a very basic easily understood level, that with the right wording could be distorted.

In Massachusetts, on December 18, 1835, a child was born who changed the future of Christian thought. His name was Lyman Abbott. His father, Jacob Abbott (1803-1879), was a devout member of the Congregationalist church, originally founded by the pilgrims of Plymouth Colony. They had strong Calvinist Puritan beliefs. They believed in all major tenets of the Protestant Christian faith, but differed from others in their strong deterministic theology. Jacob Abbott was not a theologian, but an author of popular children's literature. His stories incorporated strong Puritan morals and values. Yet on a deeper level, this Congregationalist did not agree with all that his denomination taught. According to noted religious historian Ira V. Brown, Jacob Abbott's writing expressed "viewpoints of liberal congregationalism."¹ Jacob was liberal in regard to predetermination and the depravity of man, but not on any of the cornerstones of the Christian faith. It is apparent that Jacob had a strong influence on his son's theology because upon examination of Lyman Abbott's theology one is led to the conclusion that he also lived a life of "liberal congregationalism." However, his liberalism was different from his

¹ Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist: A Study in Religious Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 3

father's in that Lyman left many of the old doctrines behind.

When Lyman Abbott was still young, his mother died. His father, busy with writing, sent Lyman to be raised by other family members. His family members were Congregationalists, who began Lyman's training in the Christian faith. Eventually Lyman attended New York University, and while there he began his life-long process of self-education in theology.

The first two books of theological interest that he read were Bishop Pearson's Exposition of the Creed, a simplistic writing on the Christian faith. The other book, On the Freedom of the Will, was written by one of the fathers of American Puritanism, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1785). These authors led him to two conclusions. First, he did not agree with deterministic theology. This type of theology had been made famous by Jean Calvin (1509-1564) who believed that Scripture teaches that God predetermined before the creation of the world whether an individual would become a believing Christian or an unbeliever. Therefore a man is determined by God to spend eternity in heaven or hell. The second conclusion that Abbott came to was that mankind is not fully depraved, and has the ability to do good.

At this time in his life, Abbott had not diverged from orthodox Christian belief. He was however beginning to soften in his stance toward the predetermination of God and the depravity of man. There were three beliefs, in existence since the reformation, concerning the

predetermination of God. Abbott agreed with Wesleyans who believed that man had the ability within himself to decide on his salvation and was capable of doing good on his own. Secondly, there were the Lutherans who believed that mankind is determined by God for salvation, but not hell, and that mankind was unable to do good on his own. Finally, there were the Calvinists who believed that man is totally depraved of the ability to do any good and was chosen by God either for salvation or for eternal punishment.

During college Lyman Abbott continued to train himself theologically and he started by studying contemporary theologians: Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) and Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), both of the school of "New Theology." They, like Abbott, were against belief in the total depravity of mankind.² Thus, before leaving college Abbott had begun to develop his own theology different from his heritage.

Abbott and Beecher met when Beecher was in his early years at Plymouth First Church. Abbott was fresh out of college when he started to play the organ occasionally for Plymouth First Church. Also during this time after college, A significant event in church life was beginning. In 1858 a revival swept the nation and one of its starting points was Plymouth First Congregational Church of Brooklyn. One of its leaders, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) from his pulpit at Plymouth First Congregational Church in Brooklyn was having a profound effect on

² *ibid.*, Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist, 15.

Americans. His weekly sermons were published in most American newspapers for all to read. In Beecher's church service on a Sunday morning there was standing room only. The church had a membership of around 500 members before he came and quickly swelled to over 2000 members. Among those attending were the newly married Lyman and Abby Abbott. Lyman Abbott wasn't immediately captivated by Beecher's sermons that included Darwinian adaptations and liberal theology, but within the next twenty years he would become it's biggest advocate. Beecher's personal advice, inspired Abbott to go into full-time ministry.

Against the better judgment of his Congregationalist relatives, Lyman Abbott in 1859, decided to enter the ministry. He believed that God was calling him into the ministry and that call had more power in his life than his family's suggestions. His father gave him one piece of advice that profoundly changed the young pastor's ministry. His father believed that most controversies within Christianity were of a semantic nature. He suggested not using words like "Trinity, Atonement, or Regeneration."³ Jacob feared that using these words might alienate his son from some of his congregation, making it harder to have unity of opinion under his leadership. He also believed that many churches suffered from church splits because of these very issues.⁴ Abbott took this advice to heart and, as a result, was cautious later in his ministry when explaining his theology

³ *ibid.*, Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist, 15.

⁴ *ibid.*, Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist. pg 5.

to congregations and eventually to the wider world.

At this point it is necessary to introduce who Henry Ward Beecher was on a much deeper level. Henry Beecher's father was a prominent American minister, Lyman Beecher. Henry's father was a professor of theology at Lane theological seminary and a devout congregationalist. The effect on Henry was an early influence of the Christian tradition and theological training. Even in his early years during college, Beecher began to deviate from his church's established dogma. Calvinism and its predeterminist foundations were not well received by the young theologian. Beecher, like Abbott, had strong convictions in favor of man's free will and the ability to choose his own eternity. However, Beecher believed in some of the old theology despite his liberalism. The divinity of Christ was one part of the orthodox theology he held onto. He had a strong stance on the accuracy of the Gospels, believing that they affirmed explicate details and an uncompromising faith in the miracles performed by Jesus while on this earth. While in college, he also affirmed the trinity as valid dogma. Both of these beliefs were parts of orthodox Christianity.

During his early years as a pastor, Beecher was being influenced by the works of many higher critics of the Bible. The higher critics of the Bible were "Those interested in reason and attacked the miracles of the Bible, including the resurrection, as mythological."⁵ This influence was so

⁵ Frank Hugh Foster, *The Modern Movement in American Theology; sketches in history of American Protestant thought from the Civil War to the World War*, (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 84

profound that according to theologian and historian James Foster in his book The Modern Movement in American Religion, “Beecher was, therefore, constantly moving on the theological plane towards a freer position, but the steps of the progress it would be difficult, if not impossible, to trace.”⁶ On the theological plane through his life Beecher went back and forth. He was wavering in over faith and reason. Faith told him to believe in the resurrection and reason telling him not to. Foster notes this movement, “[Beecher] He expressed himself differently at different times, and often seemed to contradict himself, so much so as to gain the general reputation of “having no theology”.⁷ Claims about his “having no theology” came when he emphasized some beliefs over others. Beecher also wanted to cast away the “rubbish” of old doctrines that “work mischief.”⁸ He wanted to “reveal their true nature” to help his congregation live out the Christian life. The old beliefs included each major tenet of the Christian faith.

The relationship between Abbott and Beecher began to develop while Abbott attended Beecher’s church and flourished over five years of editorial co-labor on the leading Congregationalist publication, *The Outlook*. During this time, “[their relationship] was unmarred by a single collision, and has left behind not the memory of a single jar.”⁹ Lyman Abbott had a

⁶ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

⁷ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

⁸ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

⁹ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

very intimate and personal relationship with his mentor; that began to show signs that Beecher had finally broken through to Abbott to affect what Abbott believed about Christianity

Lyman Abbott's showed his affection for Henry Ward Beecher in the preface to Abbott's book Henry Ward Beecher(1903), he stated, "It cannot be questioned that no other man has exerted so wide and profound an influence on the progress of thought..."¹⁰ He went further to esteem Beecher when he said, "The more I have known him the more I have seen to admire, to honor, to love[Beecher]." ¹¹ The main point of Abbott's popular biography was to let the masses know who Beecher was. Abbott's goal was that the reader might get to know the orator on a more personal level. It is also obvious that he wrote this book to come to the defense of his mentor, who had been under attack for an alleged affair with a member of his congregation. The picture painted in the biography by Abbott, conceivably was intended to cover up for the affair.

In his book, Abbott attempted to explain away the controversial doctrines that Beecher was advocating via his pulpit and the popular press. Abbott believed that there were four things that made Beecher above the heads of his contemporaries, "His opalescent nature, his kaleidoscopic moods, his profound intellectual and spiritual insight, his impatience of the mere mechanics and formularies of religion which are of larger importance

¹⁰Lyman Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1903), 1

¹¹ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 1

than he realizes...”¹² Abbott went even further to defend Beecher when he spoke of Beecher’s opponents saying “...because the weak [opponents of Beecher] need props which the strong [friends of Beecher] do not need...”¹³ Beecher was made out to be a defenseless child who was being attacked by the bully’s on the playground. Abbott went further to try to relate the personality of Beecher to the masses when he said, “[Beecher has an] intensely emotional nature, and his utter disregard of his own reputation, make him often an enigma to his friends, and always an easy subject for the misrepresentation of envy, malice, and uncharitableness.”¹⁴ Lyman Abbott and Henry Ward Beecher had a deep relationship that obviously deeply affected Lyman Abbott.

Henry Ward Beecher showed signs of influencing Abbott when examining Beecher’s views on many theological topics. The first belief He stressed was the divine love of God. It quickly became the main focus of his thoughts. In his resignation from the Boston Ministerial Society, Henry Beecher made his beliefs evident when he said, “I believe in God, and never for a moment have faltered in believing in a personal God.”¹⁵ He went on to describe his personal God when he said “I mean personal, not as if He were like us, but personal in such a sense as that those that know personality in men cannot make any mistake in attempting to grasp and

¹²ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 2

¹³ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 2

¹⁴ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 3

¹⁵ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 494

conceive God.”¹⁶ He went further to describe God as “a personal Being, and accessible as other persons are accessible, to the thoughts, the feelings, the wants, the cares of men.”¹⁷ Beecher wanted men to know that God was able to have a personal relationship with humankind. Likewise, man is able to relate to God. In order for him to give his beliefs credibility, it was important that people knew they could relate with God on a personal level. If Beecher did not support this view, then his whole theology would be unacceptable because if God is not personal then he is not the God of the Bible. More importantly, he was not the God of Orthodox Christianity, who was an intensely personal being.

The Trinity was a doctrine where Beecher was specifically attacked by his peers for his beliefs, or more to the point his beliefs were questioned. He made his beliefs clear to all when he stated rather convincingly, “I accept without analysis the tri-personality of God. I accept the Trinity; perhaps because I was educated in it. No matter why, I accept it.”¹⁸ Two things about the Trinity that he did not agree with were, “the theories, such as, for instance, in part are hinted in the Nicene Creed and out spun with amazing ignorance of knowledge in the Athanasian Creed, I do not believe.”¹⁹ He believed that arguments about the trinity never focused around God the Father, but rather around the other two persons of

¹⁶ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 496

¹⁷ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 496

¹⁸ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 496

¹⁹ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 497

the Trinity. Christ being the first to suffer attacks from liberals. He believed and knew that many sects questioned the divinity of Christ, but for Beecher this was not an issue. He laid out his thoughts about this when he said, "But the substance of His [Christ] being was divine, and He was God manifest in the flesh."²⁰ It is clear that there must have been attacks on his faith in Christ because repeatedly during his resignation speech he made statements like, "this is my faith and I have never swerved from it."²¹ and, "I believe fully, enthusiastically, without break, pause, or aberration, in the divinity of Christ."²² Henry Ward Beecher knew Christ was divine and the trinity existed. Beechers beliefs as stated to this point were perfectly in line with the orthodox Christian views. Beecher began to diverge from the orthodoxy when he described the working and nature of the Holy Spirit.

According to Beecher, the Holy Spirit was a full member of the Trinity. It seems, however that he did not believe as strongly that the Holy Spirit had a personality as Christ did and God the Father. This is how he described the Holy Spirit "And in regard to that I believe that the influence, the Divine influence, the quickening, stimulating influence of the mind of God proceeds from the Holy Ghost, and that it is universal, constant, imminent."²³ He believed that man received all that man needed

²⁰ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 497

²¹ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 497

²² *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 497

²³ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 497

for physical existence from those things that are around him and in the world. The Holy Spirit comes into man's life when he "reaches toward holiness-aspiration, love of truth, justice, purity-feeds upon the spiritual nature and is developed by the down-shining of the Holy Ghost." He went further to compare the Holy Spirit as being similar to the sun. When the sun shines on a flower it is as if the Holy Spirit has the same effect as the sun. The Divine Spirit as Beecher said is working in mankind to produce righteousness in mankind. Beecher believed in the Trinity, but it like Abbott's Trinitarian doctrine was not the Trinity of church history. The orthodox Trinitarian belief is that the Holy Spirit is equal in power and nature as God. He had a special role as comforter, but that is not separate from assisting growth in Christians.

Miracles to Henry Beecher were very real to those who experience them when they occur and miracles occur in the natural course of the world. Two miracles were believable for Beecher. First, is the virgin birth of Christ. Second, would be Christ's resurrection on the third day after his death on the cross. When discussing this topic he went so far as to say "When I give those up the two columns [Virgin Birth of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ] on which the house stands will have to fall to the ground."²⁴ These tenets about Christ are key to established Christianity. Without both of these, Christ would not have been the Messiah. Again, Beecher professes to believe the same as orthodox Christians.

²⁴ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 498

Another topic of great interest is man's relationship with God and how it affects regeneration. Beecher believed that "Man is a being created in imperfection."²⁵ He also went on to say "I believe man to be sinful..."²⁶ On the surface this would seem to be in line with what mainline Christian theology taught about original sin. All men after Adam are born with an innate sinful nature. What Beecher said at the end of the above comment shows what identified him with liberal theology. He clarified this belief when he said that mankind is not totally depraved, but man is universally sinful. According to Beecher, no man ever born has not been in need of transforming from a lower state to a higher more spiritual state. This is how he described being born again. It was not in the traditional sense that man was in need of having his heart transformed by God from a sinful nature to a righteous one that desires to please God. Rather, man needs to be transformed from an animalistic tendencies to a higher spiritual nature where man walks with God.

Beecher believed that this transformation could not occur with man working towards it on his own and of his own volition. He needs the help of three things in order for him to achieve this higher level. First is upbringing and discipline given by parents. Next, is the "reflected light of Christianity upon the morals, customs, and spirit of the age in which he lives..."²⁷ Finally, man needs to be educated for this process to be carried

²⁵ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 498

²⁶ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 498

²⁷ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 498

out in full. Beecher did make it clear however; that it is not man that can complete the process on his own. He must rely on these other outlets, reflected light of Christianity and education to bring mankind to God. What really clarifies his position on the topic is his belief that man must choose the process. It can not be chosen for him he must take the initiative. The belief that man could start the process was not out of line with mainline Christianity, but what was was the belief that education would bring someone to Christ. Regeneration and salvation were clearly not the same thing to Abbott and Beecher as it was to the rest of Christendom.

It is also of great importance to know how Beecher viewed man's need for atonement and the death of Christ. This helped reconcile his beliefs related to regeneration and salvation. In one very real sense Henry Ward Beecher did not think that Christ's life was about atoning for the sins of mankind. He believed that because the New Testament only used the word once that no one could assume that this was the overriding theme of the life of Christ. He made his views abundantly clear when he said, "We hear nothing of a plan, of an arrangement of a a scheme of salvation, of an atonement, but everything of Christ's work."²⁸ He did however believe that Christ, himself, was the atonement for mankind and the only way for mankind to know of his sin and to be moved to the higher plane of living

²⁸ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 499

that Beecher had mentioned earlier, during his speech on regeneration. Beecher also believed that Christ was the one “prepared and empowered to save men, to remit the penalty of past sins, and to save them from the dominion of sin.”²⁹ He made his faith more clear when he equated Christ with atonement. He went on to say that Christ is, “a group of attributes , a group of qualities, a character, a divine nature....”³⁰ Christ was the atonement, but he was also characteristics of those things that were of righteousness according to Beecher. A belief that Christians in general held. Yet, they did not believe that attaining these characteristics was equal to atonement. Accepting Christ became not so much the belief in him, but rather the yielding to those qualities and dispositions that make Christ the name “to be above every name.”³¹ As stated before, this belief was starkly different from that of the tradition of the church. He reinforced this principle when he spoke of faith; he conceded that faith is not how the Bible describes it in Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”³² Faith to Beecher was the belief in Christ in such a way as to change the way that we live our lives in order that our life might be lived like his was. The Christian life was not by faith, but by works for Beecher. It became even more clear that Beecher did not believe in the atonement in the traditional sense

²⁹ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 498

³⁰ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 505

³¹ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 505

³² *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 505

when he spoke more of Christ's claim to be the only way for someone to come into salvation. He made references that other faiths were equally valid for salvation by emphasizing the character traits of the individual over faith.

One effect of regeneration and salvation in Christianity is the impact salvation will have on the afterlife. Beecher believed in an afterlife, but he did not clarify whether he believed in it in the same sense as mainline Christianity . He was vague on what he thought about the subject. He did believe that the Scriptures teach that the way a man lives in this life has a direct impact on how that man will live in the afterlife. He also went so far as to say that it was dependent on a mans actions while on the earth that will decide how he will exist in the afterlife. He believed that the actions indicated whether the afterlife would be a better place and time or whether it would not be. In other words, the effects of his life on the earth directly affected how he would live once he went on to the other world. Beecher had theories about what the afterlife would be like for those that live a horribly wicked life while on the earth. He said that it had been revealed to his mind from the Scripture that "man's punishment in the life to come is of such a nature and of such dimensions as ought to alarm any man and put him off from the dangerous ground and turn him toward safety."³³ He obviously affirmed that some type of hell existed.

Unlike mainline Christians he did not believe that scripture gave the

³³ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 499

authority to say that it is “endless in the sense in which we ordinarily employ that term.”³⁴ Beecher believed that those sent to hell would not spend an eternity there.

Furthermore, he established two sacred things, the living soul of man and the living soul of God. He went so far in establishing these that he stated “To everything else I am indifferent, except so far as it may be used with reference to the good of the one[human soul] and the glory of the other[the living God].”³⁵ This is significant because it established two things that Beecher firmly held to. He believed that Gods nature and man’s were the same, but had different levels of influence in the life of the individual. He went so far as to say ”It [soul] is as like it as the son is like his father.”³⁶ The nature of man and God are the same to Beecher. From this, it is clear that Beecher was putting forth the theory that God was equal to man and that man was equal to God. Beecher was fluctuating between orthodox theology to utter liberalism.

He made his theology more clear when reading from the Westminster Confession of faith Beecher clarified his beliefs. He agreed with a particular section of the Confession that states, that ”the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God who is truth itself”, the author thereof; and therefore it is to be

³⁴ *ibid*, Henry Ward Beecher, 496

³⁵ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

³⁶ *ibid*, The Modern Movement in American , 84

believed because it is the word of God.”³⁷ He had no argument with this statement at all. He also believed that Scripture teaches that mankind has the proclamation of God in his conscience.³⁸ He did not agree that the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for man’s salvation, faith, and life”³⁹ was contained in the Bible as the Confession professed. He also believed that man could go to the Scriptures on his own with his reason and believe what instruction man needs. He very strongly believed this enough to insult those that believe otherwise by asking the rhetorical question “Must we not use our reason to know what the word of God is?”⁴⁰ He believed that man needed his reason in order to fully develop all doctrines of the church. His argument for this centered around the idea that man must take previous knowledge because from the Bible alone man can not discern these things. He believed that scripture must be balanced with reason and he affirmed this when he said, “It is absurd to say that the Bible must be its own sole expounder.”⁴¹ He made this point even stronger when he said that, “no man can interpret it without a knowledge of what lies outside of it. That is the very medium through which any man comes to understand it.”⁴² Beecher obviously did not believe the Bible was as applicable as orthodox Christians said it was. The Bible was not the sole authority of life that stood alone as far as understanding its application

³⁷ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 493

³⁸ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 493

³⁹ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 493

⁴⁰ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 494

⁴¹ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 494

⁴² ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 49 4

goes. Rather it is a manual that must be examined with human knowledge and then be applied.

One thing is clear from the thought of Henry Ward Beecher. His desire was to get rid of controversial topics within Christianity that he might focus on the major tenets of the faith. He made this clear when speaking at a meeting of the Brooklyn Association of Congregational Ministers. He asserted belief in “conviction of sin, conversion, faith, dominant love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the building up of the Christlike character.”⁴³ Foster notes that during this speech he also “affirmed his belief in a personal God; in the Trinity, which he accepted [without analysis], although rejecting the theories [hinted in the Nicene Creed and out spun with amazing ignorance of knowledge in the Athanasian Creed].”⁴⁴ He still was not clear on what he believed especially when he wrote *Life of Christ* (1871). In this work he clearly rejected the established belief in Christ’s two natures, human and divine.

In 1869, Lyman Abbott received ordination and a position as pastor of a New England church. While there he began his long writing career. During the early years of his tenure as a writer, he wrote within traditional Christian thinking. *Jesus of Nazareth*, was his first book. In it, he affirmed belief in the Bible as the inspired word of God and the historical accuracy of the Gospels.⁴⁵ Later in 1875, and for years afterward

⁴³ibid, *The Modern Movement in American*, 84

⁴⁴ ibid, *The Modern Movement in American*, 84

⁴⁵ ibid., *Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist*, 91

Abbott published commentaries of the New Testament. These works also contained a firm faith in “old dogmatic apology for the Bible and its doctrines”⁴⁶ . He also asserted faith in all the miracles that Christ performed walking on the water, the changing of the water to wine at Cana, and the feeding of the five thousand. This was one way Lyman Abbott showed that he had some orthodoxy in his theology.

During the 1860’s while serving in the ministry as a pastor and then working with social agencies in the south, Abbott came to two conclusions. First, that the Bible was no longer without error, or even the Word of God. Secondly, Henry Ward Beecher’s new theology made much more sense than when originally presented to him. After his conversion to being a student of Beecher’s, Lyman Abbott began to pave the way for new thought among theologians. For him to accomplish this task, he needed to change the way Christians thought about evolution, science, theology, religion, the Bible, and the Life of Christ. Without changing perceptions of these topics, fellow Christians couldn’t come to accept what science seemed to be proving about creation and at a more critical level what Christianity means in the life of an individual.

1885 was the year that Lyman Abbott publicized his belief in Darwin’s theory of evolution. In this year, he published *Evolution and Religion*, a collection of sermons about evolution. In it, he clearly established himself as the first liberal theologian to base views on the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, Lyman Abbott Christian Evolutionist, 91

basic principle of evolution. In the first sermon of the work, he showed his favoritism of the theory. In the preface he states, "Slowly, and through a whole fifty years, I have been under the influence, first obscurely, imperfectly, of the great doctrine of evolution."⁴⁷ He believed that evolution was like leaven or a grain of mustard seed that slowly is working its way through all of humanity. He postulated that all of the people of God up to now were under the influence of this theory. They were slowly coming more and more into an understanding of what God was doing. He equated the peoples development to their understanding of God as time and change occurred in their lives. Truth did not come to the Hebrew people without revelation, but the revelation was dependent on man experiencing truth, and through study of mankind. Beecher believed in evolution, but Abbott took it a step more by adding revelations dependence on evolution.

Abbott's belief in the inspiration of the Bible makes his brand of Christianity more clear. He believed that "The Bible is the record of the steps of God in revealing Himself and His will to man."⁴⁸ He went further to clarify his conception of inspiration when he said, "inspiration of men, not inspiration of a book and that the book is the record of that inspiration that has been taking place from generation to generation."⁴⁹ He makes it clear early on that the Scriptures themselves are not inspired, but rather

⁴⁷ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 492

⁴⁸ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 492

⁴⁹ ibid, Henry Ward Beecher, 492

the writers were inspired and wrote a history of that inspiration in their lives. Henry Ward Beecher believed that the word of God was not inspired or a record of mans progress Abbott added this part Beecher did believe that the authors were inspired and of course this took place by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Charles Darwin believed that evolution had two primary agents. The first was natural selection and the second was survival of the fittest. Lyman Abbott defined evolution similarly to the historian John Fiske (1842-1901) because Abbott knew the average Christian was opposed to belief in Darwinian evolution. Fiske made his explanation of evolution non-threatening by claiming it is "God's way of doing things." Abbott used this same statement as a way to convince other Christians of God's hand in the evolutionary process. Obviously the delineation made Darwin's theory more palatable and easier for churchgoers to understand and believe. Evolution was no longer threatening because it was not a tool for the agnostic or the atheist to take God out of the creation of the world. Lyman Abbott agreed with Fiske's statements, but believed he would have to modify evolution further to make it more appealing to Christians. In order to do this he had to change the traditional view of creation. According to Abbott, one view of creation believed humankind is a mass-produced and is a carelessly manufactured product. In other words, God making humans was a careful process, not like making automobiles, as this old view

claimed. Rather, God did it as a gradual process of growth from lower stages of development to higher. He equated this view of creation with an artist sculpting clay from a lower form of nothingness to a higher more developed piece of work, like a statue.

Another aspect of creation that Abbott had trouble with was God's role in creation. Lyman Abbott had to make his beliefs clear about divine intervention in the world, or else he would be categorized as an agnostic, atheist, or Unitarian. Abbott brought to light his view about God's role in creation when he said, "God is continually pouring the energies of his divine will into created forms, and carrying them forward to their further development."⁵⁰ He proved that he was not like an agnostic who took God out of the process of creating the world.

After making evolution appealing to fellow believers, Abbott went a step further to reconcile science and theology. According to Abbott, without bringing these two institutions together, disagreements between them would hinder further development in scientific and theological studies. Abbott began to defend science by talking about what it had already proved that didn't contradict faith. Abbott believed that science believed in a single force making itself known in varying manifestations. Also this force is never adding to or subtracting from itself, only changing forms.⁵¹ Finally, it is reasonable to believe that this force can account for

⁵⁰ Lyman Abbott *Theology of an Evolutionist*, (New York, The Outlook Company, 1925), 10.

⁵¹ *ibid* *Theology of an Evolutionist*, 10

any and all distortions, such as miracles, that occur in nature. Abbott attributed to God these elements of science. These statements made it easier for Abbott to bring science and Christianity together. Also, this showed that God still gave personal attention to his creation, which always helped Abbott in relating his new theological views.⁵²

The theologian, Abbott went on to build agreement with science when he talked about Divine Immanence. According to Lyman Abbott scientists believe certain forces in the universe have always been at work. Scientist call these forces “Resident forces.”⁵³ Lyman Abbott calls them “Divine Immanence” and claimed they [divine immanence and resident forces] “are different forms of the same statement.”⁵⁴ This definition served two purposes for Lyman Abbott. First, it helped explain scientific jargon to laymen. The second function, it served was that this explanation put science and religion in agreement about founding forces in the universe.

Abbott no longer preferred science over theology where the two clashed, but he became a supporter of science in order that he could further sway churchgoers and theologians. He showed his faith in science when he said, “I assume the correctness of their [scientists] conclusion [about evolution].”⁵⁵ He openly sided with science, something Beecher

⁵² ibid theology of an evolutionist 10

⁵³ ibid, theology of an evolutionist, 13

⁵⁴ ibid, theology of an evolutionist 12

⁵⁵bid, theology of an evolutionist 8

hinted at, but was unable to do. Especially when faith and science were in conflict. Finally, with his strong desire to reconcile science with religion, Abbott needed to change his definition of theology to bring these two competing interests together.

According to Abbott, theology in its most basic definition is the scientific study of religion.⁵⁶ Theology no longer meant the study of God. Abbott added to his definition by stating his belief that theology was not only man trying to apply scientific method, with its formulas and strict record keeping to the study of God, but it also was the study of how God works in the soul of man. He went on to modify it even more when he stated that theology was also “ God’s way of doing things.”⁵⁷ This last modification came about as an attempt by Abbott to further change Darwinian evolution to Christian dogma. After changing his definition of theology, Abbott changed the meaning of religion.

Religion had a unique definition for Abbott he said, “religion is the life of God in the soul of man... it is a personal consciousness of God”⁵⁸. It is not a well structured belief system for people to live by, like theology, religion has a very personal tone. Abbott knew a personal God who was right there with him. He made this clear in one of his later books, The Great Companion. Throughout the book, he speaks of God as being there

⁵⁶ ibid, theology of an evolutionist 22

⁵⁷ ibid, theology of an evolutionist 15

⁵⁸ ibid, theology of an evolutionist 51

with him, like a faithful friend who never left his side. Abbott laid a clear foundation for how he viewed religion, and he used this for further exploration into Christian dogma.

Taking his father's advice not to use words that could start an argument, Abbott went on with his mission of relating his dogma to all aspects of traditional Christian doctrine. He did not limit himself to any one topic, but worked hard to cover the essentials of the faith. His desire was to accommodate the basic beliefs of Christianity to his new doctrine.

An underlying fundamental of faith changed by Abbott is how mankind receives revelation from God. Abbott knew this was important in the Judeo-Christian faith because it involves how followers have hear the voice of God. Abbott believed the opposite of orthodox theology concerning this point. He did not believe that God revealed Himself to mankind at different perfect points in history. An example of traditional belief would be God's interaction with Moses. God gave him the Pentatuach by revelation from Himself. Henceforth, all of mankind has been trying to understand what God is like through the writings of Prophets like Moses. That revelation was the beginning of many perfect ones to come through various prophets.

According to Abbott mankind did not receive God's law and then break it, like orthodoxy asserted. They are not working their way back to a right relationship with God. Both ideas originated in the speeches given

by Beecher. He believes that the human race has been growing to higher stages of moral development. At each stage, moral law changes according to the ability of the people to understand it. Mankind also is unable to understand religious truth without evolving to a higher stage in order to accommodate new revelation. Mankind is limited by his intellectual and spiritual condition. This being known, it emphasized a need for multiple revelations to occur, yet again Abbott showed Beecher's influence. Abbott believed each generation receives new laws from God. Abbott clarified this by saying, "revelation is unveiling, it is the disclosure of some truth not known before."⁵⁹ This idea is displayed perfectly by the Hebrews, who upon first revelation had certain laws to follow. Then with Christ came the people were now at a high enough level to receive another revelation.

The way Lyman Abbott made this idea of continuing revelation to mankind part of his theology was by using a quote from the apostle Paul. Paul says in his first letter the Corinthians that " he knows in part and prophecies in part."⁶⁰ Abbott took this verse to mean literally that Paul could only speak of what he knew to be true. Yet Abbott then took the verse a step further by believing that this meant that Paul and the church would learn more as God revealed himself more and more to mankind. Since the reformation of the 1600's, Orthodox Protestantism did not hold to Abbott's position. They believed that Paul was not insinuating that there

⁵⁹ *ibid*, theology of an evolutionist 54

⁶⁰ NASB 1cor 13.9

would be multiple revelations of God for each generation. They argued that Paul believed that he himself was receiving partial revelation from God and that he was responsible for communicating that revelation. Other Biblical writers like James, John and Peter would have other revelations that they were responsible for proclaiming. Then all of these revelations would combine to form the canon for all believers to follow. How Abbott dealt with revelation directly impacted his next change. Abbott did not end his criticism of Biblical text at this point. He also went on to attack the authorship of the various books of the Old Testament. Mainly that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but rather various tribes of Jews. Abbott took traditional thinking out of the Old Testament to make way for his own views.

Another key fundamental that Lyman Abbott changed was inspiration. Orthodox Christianity taught that the Biblical writers were inspired by God, who at the time of revelation took over the writers and guided them to the infallible scriptures. Abbott believed differently, he claimed that God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, came onto the spirit of these writers and as a result of this experience they wrote down their perceptions of God. Abbott believed inspiration could not happen without the revelation of God to these men, making the one dependent on the other. How Lyman Abbott understood revelation and inspiration influenced how he perceived the scriptures and other doctrines.

Lyman Abbott brought new purpose to the Bible what role it plays in the life of a Christian. Abbott wrote in *Century* magazine what the scriptures meant to him. Abbott said, "We accept the Bible as a standard, but not as the infallible, in errant standard that our fathers thought it."⁶¹ This view was contradictory to what orthodox Christianity believes, but exactly the same as hat Beecher believed. Lyman Abbott went further to change the way the Bible was used for preaching, worship, and private devotion. He proposed that the Bible was a record of man's experiments in his spiritual life. It also is a history of mankind's blunders, revelations, troubles, and errors. The Bible as a whole came to be nothing more than an erred historical text that proposed a good way to live and that is all.

Lyman Abbott modified traditional thinking about the Old Testament. He believed that it was strewn with historical inaccuracies, and full of contradictions that did not fit with what Christ taught. He did not believe that any miracles like Joshua making the sun stand still ever occurred. Abbott went on to give alternative explanations for things like the parting of the Red Sea. He believed that the Red Sea or what the Hebrew writer conceived to be the Red Sea was actually a swamp near the Sea. He believed Moses only led the Israelites through because the tides came in. Abbott also did not hold to the creation account in Genesis. He believed that the creation story in Genesis should not be acknowledged as

⁶¹ Lyman Abbott no theology new theology Forum, IX (April 1890), 189

a scientific authority.⁶² On this point, he went further than Beecher who believed in miracles, but only as they pertained to those involved.

Abbott questioned key area's of doctrine concerning the New Testament. Three aspects of the doctrine of Christ were questioned by Abbott. The first involved the meaning of the life of Christ, next supposed translation inaccuracy's in the New Testament, and finally the belief that Christ was God. Lyman Abbott did not have any trouble believing in any historical facts of the life of Jesus. At one point, he went so far as to say that it is the most well documented historical event ever.⁶³ Yet, to him Jesus had a different purpose than he had been brought up to believe. He did have trouble with the traditional church doctrine established at the Council of Trent.⁶⁴ Church fathers taught that Christ came to earth for three purposes. One purpose was to become the propitiation for the sins of mankind. Next, as the Son of God his role was to come to earth and bring the message of how to attain a personal relationship with God. Finally, he was to create the church. Lyman Abbott had objections to this theology. Abbott had trouble with all of these beliefs and he believed the problem originated with improper translation of the New Testament. Abbott did not believe that the New Testament has been properly translated. Abbott, like Beecher, did not believe that the proper translation of the New Testament included the word propitiation. He believed that this word had

⁶² *ibid*, theology of an evolutionist 63

⁶³ *ibid*, theology of an evolutionist 8

⁶⁴ Larry Berkhof Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 550

been added to the text or created by reformation theologians. According to Abbott, Jesus is God's nature revealed to mankind. Jesus is a door to what God is like and was not responsible for any part of mankind's salvation. Christ did not come to save sinners from punishment for sin, but rather from sin. These translation problems changed the role of Christ in the world. He came to these conclusions because of how he felt about sin.

Sin to Abbott did not exist in the traditional sense. Abbott believed that it was not the breaking of God's law, but rather a reversion to animalistic tendencies. Abbott believed that because Christ lived a sinless life that he saved men from sin by demonstrating how to live. He defined being a Christian as obeying the moral standards that Christ has put forward.⁶⁵ Christ was still the giver of life, not the eternal life, but a bountiful and meaningful existence here on the earth.⁶⁶ The wonderful life lived by Christ was meant to create a better earth. The life of Christ according to Abbott showed men how they ought to live and how to treat one another. He also was here to create a brotherhood of mankind with a purpose to create a church. Jesus came to bring mankind together to see the kingdom of God lived out on the earth. In other words, Christ came to teach mankind about God, rather to acquaint mankind with who God is. The way Abbott viewed sin also changed the meaning of Jesus's role on earth.

⁶⁵ibid, theology of an evolutionist 41

⁶⁶ibid, theology of an evolutionist 41

Abbott did not agree with orthodox teaching on the deity of Christ. Despite early theology holding that Christ is God, Abbott claimed otherwise. He believed that in the New Testament Christ never claimed to be God.⁶⁷ This is where Abbott totally separated himself from Christian doctrine. He went further in later life to relegate Christ to the position of a social radical. In one of his later works, Abbott claimed Christ only came to establish a new social order.

The Old Testament was also a subject that Abbott commented on. From statements, it is logical to deduce that he believed the accuracy of the Old Testament. He made this more clear in his commentary on Matthew when referring to the Ten Commandments he talks about Moses. He said “whose (Moses) sole training was derived from a Hebrew mother, an Egyptian court, and the life of a Midianitish shepherd.”⁶⁸ It is easy to believe that he gave credit to the Genesis account of creation. More importantly one might also deduce that Abbott lent credence to the Sun standing in the book of Joshua. Both of these miracles, creation and the stopping of a star are beliefs that Abbott later discredits.

Before 1869 was a time when Abbott held to the teachings of the Orthodox Christianity . He did not waiver from what he learned as a youth growing up in Massachusetts. There were no major discrepancies between what he believed and what others like him had believed for

⁶⁷ibid, theology of an evolutionist 69

⁶⁸ibid, The Modern Movement in American , 86

centuries. It is hard to believe that a man who held to such beliefs could change them so drastically.

Looking at these theologies leads one to the conclusion that Lyman Abbott took Henry Ward Beecher's theology a step further or adopted it as his own. One sees this with close examination. Beecher might have wanted to go a step further with his beliefs, but chose not to. Abbott took them the extra step and related them to the professional theologians through two mediums. First, his major writings exposing what he believed are written for a largely academic audience. Secondly, his influence was far stretching. He had spent time as the head of major social reform institutions and by taking over at Plymouth First Church after Beecher both giving him access to the masses. He also had a great audience when one looks at the sheer numbers he reached with his periodical writings. He wrote in magazines like the *Outlook* a Christian magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Travelogues*.

Lyman Abbott grew up in a theologically liberal home. Henry Ward Beecher helped lead him into full-time ministry. After his conversion of thought, Lyman Abbott began to change the course of Christian thinking. He changed how people thought of evolution, science, religion, and God's revelation to man in Scripture, and Christ's life. He became the voice of the "Social Gospels" new dogma. In conclusion, it is clear that Lyman Abbott and Henry Ward Beecher were leaders of the "Social Gospel" movement.

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It is also clear that both had similar beliefs. Clearly, Henry Ward Beecher had a profound impact on Lyman Abbott's beliefs. Lyman Abbott was the man he was because of the direct impact of Henry Ward Beecher.

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