

Samuel Hopkins
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No Date

We are approaching a critical and a disintegrating period in the history of New England theological thought as it has developed within the Congregational Churches.

We have already seen how the movement has exhibited two tendencies. One marked by Chauncy and the liberals, and the other by Edwards and the reactionists. In Edwards we have seen a tendency towards speculative theology which gave rather undue freedom to the imagination, and left out of consideration the facts of life, and had no place for the ordinary commonsense. In Samuel Hopkins of Great Barrington we have a man who carried this speculative unreal system of theology to its full limit. In his theological system sometimes spoken of as the Berkshire Divinity, there is a system of Thought about as removed from human life as one could wish. Edwards represented two ideas. (1) his emphasis upon the ethical side of religion, i.e., the moral fruits of the spirit. (2) his mystical idea of man's relation to a sovereign God. Hopkins follows in Edwards' path, emphasizing the moral fruits of the spirit in what he calls disinterested benevolence.

Hopkins wrote an account of his own life and I quote his own words.

I was born at Waterbury Connecticut on the Lord's day, Sept. 17, 1721. My parents were professors of religion; and I was descended from Christian ancestors, both by my father and my mother as far back as I have been able to trace my descent. ... As soon as I was capable of understanding, and attending to it, I was told that my father, when he was informed that he had a son born to him said, if the child should live, he would give him a public education, that he might be a minister

or a Sabbath day man, alluding to my being born on the sabbath. (pp 23-4).¹

At the age of 16 he entered Yale, and thus speaks of his college life.

While a member of the college, I believe I had the character of a sober studious youth, and of a better scholar than the bigger half of the members of that society; and had the approbation of the governors of the college. I avoided the intimacy and company of the openly vicious; and indeed kept but little company, being attentive to my studies. In the eighteenth or nineteenth year of my age, I cannot now certainly determine which, I made a profession of religion, and joined the church to which my parents belonged in Waterbury. I was serious, and was thought to be a pious youth, and I had this thought and hope of myself. I was constant in reading the Bible, and in attending on public and secret religion. And sometimes at night, in my retirement and devotion, when I thought of confessing the sins I had been guilty of that day, and asking pardon, I could not recollect that I had committed one sin that day. Thus ignorant was I of my own heart, and of the spirituality strictness, and extent of the divine law!!²

After his graduation he went to No. Hampton to live with Edwards, and finish his preparation for the ministry.

In July 1743, he began his duties as pastor of the church in Housatonic, later known as Barrington. It was a most unpromising community in which to begin work. His parish consisted of thirty families, half of them New Englanders, and the remainder New York Dutch, who could not understand English. They were a poor people, lax in their religious and social habits, and the fact that the Dutch could not understand his preaching, and were still forced to pay for

¹ *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D.*, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin. 1805.

² *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D.*, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin. 1805, p. 27-28.

the support of the church, was a source of discord in this church.

Indeed his own characteristics were not such as to have great influence among such a people. Of himself he says, "I have loved retirement, and have taken more pleasure alone than in any company. And have often chosen to ride alone, when on a journey, rather than in the best company."³ He was an ascetic also in his diet, living on the most frugal fare. He never took any exercise, and worked in his study from 14 to 18 hours each day. Aside from that he was a poor preacher. Channing said of him that "he was the very ideal of bad delivery." This limitation, Hopkins himself realized, and in his old age said, "My preaching has always appeared to me as poor, low, and miserable, compared with what it ought to be. ... I have felt often as if I must leave off and never attempt any more."⁴

Such was Hopkins from one point of view, if we look at him from another point of view we feel very different about him. His other side appears in his devotion to duty, the practical application of his great theme of disinterested Benevolence.

The natural disadvantages of his parish coupled with the bitter controversies into which his theological opinions carried him led to an unsatisfactory relationship in the church, and he sought for new fields of work. On April 11, 1770 he became formal pastor of the church at Newport, R.I.

It is during this pastorate that the very noble characteristics of his personality appear. The Revolutionary war had a very disastrous influence on the trade at Newport, and he was forced to be absent from the town from 1776-80. When he returned to his parish in 1780 he found it entirely scattered, the parsonage burned, and the meeting house unfit for use. In the face of all these difficulties, to which was added the further consideration

³ *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D.*, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin. 1805, p. 86.

⁴ *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D.*, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin. 1805, p. 88.

that his invalid wife and family must be cared for, he refused a call to a very comfortable parish in Middleborough, and took up his duties at Newport, relying upon the weekly contributions for his support. At times these amounted only to about two hundred dollars per year.

Not only was Hopkins church in poor condition but he was not afraid of losing his most substantial supporters financially in his severe and persistent attacks on the slave trading interests. Newport was of course the most important slave trading port of New England, and the wealth of the city was due to this business. But Hopkins' disinterested benevolence would hardly permit him to view with complacency such an institution. While other ministers of New England were tolerating, and even taking part in the slave institution, Hopkins was denouncing it from his pulpit, and working every possible effort to secure freedom for individual slaves, and out of his scanty salary he contributed over \$100 lump sum to a missionary society for carrying the Gospel to Africa.

From this point of view we can see that Hopkins was a great man, and did much to start the philanthropic reform of the 19th century. There is suggested something of grandeur of character in the man in the following sentences taken from Walker's lecture on Hopkins. He is speaking of the closing years of his life.

For him they were years of trial, and of increasing feebleness due to old age. His congregation was small and composed mostly of the advanced in life. His church membership included few men. His sermons were reputed 'dry and abstract' by the young people of his flock who wandered to other churches. His unanimated delivery became less attractive with years; and his bodily weakness was greatly augmented by a paralytic stroke which he suffered in January 1799. Still he continued to preach till October 1803, though with feeble voice and needing the assistance of his colored protégé, the sexton, Newport Gardner, to enter the pulpit, and

sometimes even to rise to deliver the sermon.

(*Ten N. E. Leaders*, p. 356).⁵

Dec. 20, 1803, he died.

Such was Hopkins' life, but his theology was not so attractive, although it was quite as severe. {??} {??}, or the Berkshire Divinity is Calvinism calvinized. There is a great deal of light thrown on his theology by the following from his "Inquiry concerning the future state of those who die in their Sin." He says,

Eternal punishment reflects such light on the Divine Character, government and works, especially the work of redemption; and makes such a bright display of the worthiness and grandeur of the Redeemer, and of divine love and grace to the redeemed; and is the occasion of so much happiness in heaven; and so necessary in order to the highest glory, and the greatest increasing felicity of God's everlasting Kingdom; that should it cease, and this fire could be extinguished, it would, in great measure, obscure the light of heaven.

But his strong emphasis upon the power of the regenerate for disinterested benevolence is his great contribution, and marks a long step in advance of Edwards. It is at this point that Channing touches upon Hopkins.

⁵ *Ten New England Leaders* by Williston Walker. New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1901.