



SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

DISCIPLESHIP

THE EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY OF AUGUSTUS HOPKINS STRONG AFTER A CENTURY

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The following conversation was repeated at least two dozen times: “What is the subject of your dissertation?” “The theology of Augustus H. Strong.” “Was he the *Strong’s Concordance* guy?” “No, that was James Strong.” James Strong (1822–94) and Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921) were contemporaries. Both were New Yorkers. James was born in New York City; Augustus was born in Rochester. James was a Methodist; Augustus was a Baptist. James wrote the *Exhaustive Concordance*; Augustus did not. So, who was Augustus Strong and why is he significant?

Augustus Hopkins Strong was a Baptist pastor,¹ seminary president, theologian,² author, and denominational statesman. He is variously described as “perhaps the most notable Baptist theologian of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries,”³ “one of the most influential conservative Protestant thinkers in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,”⁴ and “one of the most influential Baptist theologians of the twentieth century.”⁵ Through his students he influenced many states and nations. “For forty years many of the most influential and educated Baptist ministers of the North sat in Strong’s classrooms at Rochester and learned their theology from him.”⁶ In 1918 Strong noted, “The forty years

¹First Baptist Church, Haverhill, MA (1861–65); First Baptist Church, Cleveland, OH (1865–72).

²President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Rochester Theological Seminary, Rochester, NY (1872–1912).

³Kurt A. Richardson, “Augustus Hopkins Strong,” in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 289.

⁴Steven R. Pointer, “Augustus H. Strong,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 1.

⁵Gregory Alan Thornbury, “Augustus Hopkins Strong,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 139.

⁶*Ibid.*, 140.

of my presidency and teaching in Rochester Theological Seminary have been rewarded by the knowledge that more than a hundred of my pupils have become missionaries in heathen lands.”⁷ Further, his writing outlived both him and his students. Wacker notes that Strong’s *Systematic Theology* “may well have been the most widely read theology textbook in the major Protestant seminaries,”⁸ and this remained true for some sixty years after Strong’s death.

Thiessen observed, “Only a very small percentage of books survive more than a quarter of a century” and “a much smaller percentage last for a century.”⁹ Strong’s *Systematic Theology* is a rare exception. The first of eight editions, published in 1886, quickly became known as an orthodox, Calvinistic, Baptist theology. Few content changes were made through the first seven editions. The seventh edition of 1902 grew by two pages—from 758 pages in the first edition to 760 in the seventh. The eighth edition (1907–1909), however, contained major changes.

Modernism was in its ascendancy at the turn of the twentieth century. The Modernist/Fundamentalist Controversy among Northern Baptists was on the near horizon. Though Strong believed he was firmly lashed to the mast of orthodoxy, he was attracted to modernism’s Siren song. In fact, he made major shifts in his thinking around the turn of the century. Between 1902 and 1907 Strong determined to incorporate his new convictions into his *Systematic Theology*.

Strong expanded the eighth and final edition, originally published in three volumes, to 1166 pages and significantly altered the content. For example, he was an “immediate” creationist, but he became a “mediate and immediate” theistic evolutionist. He was an inerrantist; he became a denier of inerrancy. He previously rejected historical criticism; he then embraced its conclusions. Even so, Grudem states that Strong’s *Systematic Theology* “was widely used in Baptist circles for most of the twentieth century, until it was replaced by Millard Erickson’s *Christian Theology*.”¹⁰

Continuing Influence

Strong was a dominant figure in his day. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Strong’s influence, though much reduced, continues.

⁷Augustus Hopkins Strong, *A Tour of Missions: Observations and Conclusions* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1918), v.

⁸Grant Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 6.

⁹Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 45.

¹⁰Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1229.

He is often quoted in theological works. For instance, Thornbury notes, “Clark Pinnock has recently elicited Strong’s support in his advocacy of soteriological inclusivism.”¹¹ Aside from footnotes in scholarly works, Strong has another indirect present-day influence. Since his *Systematic Theology* was widely used in Baptist seminaries until the mid-1980s, several contemporary theologians, including Millard Erickson¹² and Paige Patterson,¹³ received their first theological training indirectly from Strong. Did Strong’s theology, therefore, play some role in the twentieth century in the Southern Baptist Convention? With 2007–2009 being the centennial of the publication of the eighth edition of Strong’s *Systematic Theology*, it is appropriate to reexamine the influential theology of Augustus Hopkins Strong.

An Experiential Theology

A second and lesser-known work by Strong provides the key to interpreting the shifts in his *Systematic Theology*. Strong wrote his *Autobiography* between his sixtieth and eighty-first birthdays.¹⁴ He reviewed his life for his children and grandchildren, noting twelve theological lessons learned along the way. He wove these lessons into his life story, and they demonstrate his personal theological shifts.

Strong’s theological lessons grew out of his personal spiritual experience, as outlined in the *Autobiography* and admitted elsewhere. In the introduction to the eighth edition of his *Systematic Theology*, Strong expressed his thanks to God “for that personal experience of union with Christ which . . . enabled . . . [him] to see in science and philosophy the teaching of . . . [his] Lord.”¹⁵ On 13 January 1913, the alumni presented a bronze bust of Strong to the Rochester Theological Seminary. Strong had retired, but was on hand for the unveiling and delivered an autobiographical address, entitled “Theology and Experience.” He stated, “I have no message except the message of my personal religious experience. . . . [M]y views of evangelical doctrine have been necessarily determined by the circumstances of my individual history.”¹⁶

¹¹Thornbury, “Augustus Hopkins Strong,” 141; Clark H. Pinnock, “Overcoming Misgivings About Evangelical Inclusivism,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.2 (1998): 33.

¹²Millard J. Erickson, interview by Timothy Christian, 2 April 2005, Albany, NY.

¹³Paige Patterson, interview by Timothy Christian, n.d., Londonderry, NH.

¹⁴Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Autobiography of Augustus Hopkins Strong*, ed. Crerar Douglas (Valley Forge: Judson, 1981), 25, 348.

¹⁵Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., rev. and enl., 3 vols. (1907–1909; reprint, Valley Forge: Judson, 1993), viii.

¹⁶Augustus Hopkins Strong, “Theology and Experience,” in *One Hundred Chapel-*

Strong's twelve theological lessons were sin; regeneration; atonement; the church; union with Christ; Christ the Creator; prayer; Christ's race guilt; Christ's race responsibility; ethical monism; the unity and sufficiency of Scripture; and, divine immanence.¹⁷ This article will focus on seven of the lessons. These sufficiently illustrate the various ways in which personal experience formed and revised Strong's theology. We will note where Strong remained faithful to his Baptist heritage, and where he did not.

1. Sin

His first lesson in Christian doctrine was "the depth and enormity of sin."¹⁸ This realization began during the spring break of his junior year at Yale. Strong arrived home on 8 April 1856, ready to enjoy a spring break. He was disappointed to learn that Charles Finney was conducting his third revival campaign in Rochester.¹⁹ Strong was not interested, but his exuberant family convinced him to attend. That night, the church building was packed; Strong sat in a chair in the middle aisle. He recalled:

I remember nothing of the sermon or the service, until the very close. . . . I had no thought of personal responsibility or of being forced to a decision. . . . Mr. Finney . . . ask[ed] all who were convinced that they ought to submit themselves to God to rise from their places, pass through the aisles, and go into the room below. To me it was like a thunderclap from a clear sky. I knew that I ought to submit myself to God. . . . For the first time in my life I felt compelled to act.²⁰

The embarrassed but convicted collegiate, along with about fifty others, made his way to the basement room set aside for inquirers. The church's pastor, Frank F. Ellinwood, asked if he was a Christian. Strong confessed he was not. The pastor said:

Talks to Theological Students Together with Two Autobiographical Addresses (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1913), 4.

¹⁷Strong, *Autobiography*, 88–346.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁹Lewis A. Drummond, *A Fresh Look at the Life and Ministry of Charles G. Finney* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 189, 241. Finney's first revival campaign in Rochester was in 1830–31, in which Strong's father, Alvah Strong, was converted. The second continued for two months in the spring of 1843. The third continued through the winter and spring of 1855–1856.

²⁰Strong, *Autobiography*, 84.

“You have some feeling on the subject of religions?” “No, I have no feeling at all.” “But by your coming here you have virtually said you know you ought to submit yourself to God?” “Yes,” I replied, “I know I ought.” “Will you, then, submit yourself to God, now?” “That is a great question,” I answered. “I do not know what it means, and do not know how.” “But you know that you have been doing wrong all your life; will you begin now to do right? You have been living for self; will you now begin to live for God?”²¹

Strong hesitated. What might God require? Could he promise to live for God without knowing what he promised? Even so, the promise was made. Later, he wrote:

I do not remember that the pastor prayed with me or said anything further except to express the hope that I would soon find the light. I went out from the inquiry room, and the darkness outside seemed the very image of the darkness of my soul. All the way home I was saying to myself, “What a fool I have been to promise I know not what!” But then the good Spirit within me led me to respond, “God knows, and God will show me.”²²

That evening, on his knees at his bedside, Strong promised to read the Bible and pray every day, vowed his faithful service, and asked God for wisdom and direction. “I had no feeling that God heard or that my prayer was answered,” he confessed. “All I knew was that I had done the best I could.”²³ Later, Strong observed:

I had no idea that night that I was a Christian, nor was I even sure that I had truly turned to God. But I now believe that night to have been the night of my conversion. It was indeed a very *unintelligent conversion*. I do not remember that I had any thought of the Lord Jesus Christ as the way to God or as the sacrifice for sin; much less did I regard myself as having come into any definite relationship of union or fellowship with him. Nor did I think of the Holy Spirit as in any way influencing me. . . . My conversion was a purely New School conversion. To my mind, coming to God was an affair of my own will alone, and conversion was simply the giving up of my sins and the

²¹Ibid., 85.

²²Ibid., 86.

²³Ibid.

beginning of a life of obedience. Yet I now see that here were *repentance and faith in the germ*. I did hate my sins and wanted to turn from them. I did cast myself upon God for help and salvation, and though *I did not realize it*, this was a casting of myself upon Christ, who is none other than God manifested to help and to save; this was *implicit reliance* upon the Holy Spirit, who is none other than God manifested to enlighten and to regenerate.²⁴

One is justified to query whether it is possible to receive salvation without a conscious faith in Jesus Christ. Is a desire to give up one's sins and a determination to live obediently an unconscious faith in Jesus Christ? Is a desire to live right, without any thought of Jesus Christ, implicit reliance on the Holy Spirit, or is it implicit reliance on self? No matter how he later explained it, Strong was not then confident of his salvation. He attended Finney's meetings, morning and evening, for three weeks. He responded to the invitation a dozen times. He asked Christians to pray for him. He prayed and read the Bible. He urged friends and family to join him in submitting to God. Still, he had no inner peace. Strong's spring vacation concluded, and he feared his religious resolve would dissolve upon returning to college life.²⁵ He confessed, "The train moved out of the station. I took my seat, buried my face in my hands, and said to myself, "This train is taking me to hell!"²⁶

On the first Sunday morning back at school, Strong attended the campus prayer meeting. His classmates were surprised, but welcoming. He told them he was determined to be a Christian if he could find the way. They prayed for him, but no one pointed him to Jesus Christ.²⁷ A month passed. As promised, Strong read the Bible and prayed daily. Still, he feared he was not a Christian. One day in May 1856, II Corinthians 6:16–18 gave him hope. He said:

The outer word seemed to be an inner word; God himself seemed to be speaking; light and power were communicated to me; I listened and believed. I said to myself, "I *have* come out from among them; I *have* bound my soul not to touch the unclean thing—sin. And here God himself declares that he will receive me and be a Father to me and that I shall be his son. The promise is mine; God, who cannot lie, has spoken it; I *am*

²⁴Ibid., 86–87 [emphasis added].

²⁵Ibid., 87.

²⁶Ibid., 88.

²⁷Ibid., 90.

a child of God!” And as I said the words, I felt that a tie was established between me and God more close and dear than any tie of blood. A thrill went through me as I realized my new relationship with the Eternal One. I could no longer keep from pouring out my soul in prayer. I shut up the book and knelt by my bedside, praising God for his mercy to me, a sinner. . . . At last, and for the first time in my life, I was right with God, and right with my own conscience.²⁸

Shortly before his death, Strong pointed to the memorable May evening, rather than to the emotional night at the Finney meeting, as the night of his conversion.²⁹ No matter which conversion sequence one follows, the profound effect of Strong’s personal religious experience upon his life and theology is indisputable.

One example of Strong’s personal religious experience seemingly forming his theology was his affirmation of soteriological inclusivism. As noted above, he described his initial religious experience as “repentance and faith in the germ.” He stated, “Though I did not realize it, this was a casting of myself upon Christ.”³⁰ Apparently, Strong considered his “very unintelligent conversion”³¹ to be a representative, perhaps normative, experience. He concluded that there are God-seekers among the “heathen” who are sorry for their sins and cast themselves upon the mercy of God. These are saved by Jesus Christ, he believed, even though they are unaware of their Savior or their salvation.³² He described them as “apparently regenerated heathen.”³³ A chart comparing Strong’s personal religious experience and his soteriological inclusivism is revealing.

²⁸Ibid., 90–91.

²⁹Augustus Hopkins Strong, *What Shall I Believe? A Primer of Christian Theology* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), 87. See also, Strong, “Theology and Experience,” 18.

³⁰Strong, *Autobiography*, 86–87.

³¹Ibid., 86.

³²Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 842–43.

³³Ibid., 843.

Strong's Personal Experience

"I did cast myself upon God."¹

"I did hate my sins and wanted to turn from them."²

"I do not remember that I had any thought of the Lord Jesus Christ as the way to God or as the sacrifice for sin."³

"I had no idea that night that I was a Christian.... though I did not realize it, this was a casting of myself upon Christ."⁴

Strong's Inclusivism

"God-seekers,
who are sorry for their sins,

even though they have never
heard about Jesus Christ,

may be saved by Jesus Christ
though they are unaware of
their Savior or their salva-
tion."⁵

Strong was baptized into the membership of the First Baptist Church of Rochester in August 1856. He then returned to Yale for his senior year, determined to do his duty and be a witness. During the year he led five classmates to profess faith in Jesus Christ.³⁴

2. The Atonement

Strong believed that "Christ's atonement is the only ground of acceptance with God and the only effectual persuasive to faith."³⁵ No one has "a right to believe in God as a Savior except upon the ground of the sacrificial death of Jesus."³⁶ This realization captivated him during his graduate school years. A call to preach accompanied his conversion.³⁷ He graduated from Yale in the spring of 1857, and entered the two-year course at Rochester Theological Seminary in the fall. Interestingly, Mrs. Charlotte Stillson was one of the greatest influences on his life and future ministry during his seminary training.

Preaching a Sufficient Savior

The Rapids was a squalid area three miles south of Rochester. Its residents were known for fighting, drinking, and gambling. "There were three grogshops, no church, and only one dilapidated schoolhouse."³⁸ An afternoon Sunday school and evening preaching service were held in the schoolhouse. Strong was the Sunday school superintendent and preacher for a year and a half.

³⁴Strong, *Autobiography*, 92–93.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 251.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

Mrs. Stillson lived in the only decent house in the Rapids. She was a joyful Christian servant, though her husband was an unbeliever. She visited the Sunday school children and encouraged their parents to attend the preaching service. She helped to clothe the ragged, taught mothers to sew, gave medicine to the ill and Christmas presents to the poor.³⁹

Each Sunday Strong taught a young women's Sunday school class at the First Baptist Church of Rochester. Following the morning service, he walked to Mrs. Stillson's home for lunch. They then led the Sunday school, returned to her home for supper, then again walked to the schoolhouse by lantern light for the evening service. Often they walked through rain, mud, or snow. The school was usually packed to capacity with some seventy-five people.⁴⁰

Strong said, "At the Rapids I seem to myself to have got my first glimpse of Christ as a conscious factor in my religious experience. I began . . . by recognizing that his atonement constituted the only ground for my acceptance with God."⁴¹ Through a thorough study of the book of Hebrews with his Sunday school class, Strong realized Jesus Christ was the ideal priest and sacrifice—He was divine and He freely offered up Himself. His experience at the Rapids made the realization practical rather than theoretical. When inquirers were troubled about their salvation, Strong directed them to Jesus Christ whose death on the cross paid their sin debt. Many found immediate peace through faith in Jesus Christ. Strong learned to give more helpful spiritual counsel than he had received.⁴²

It was good that Strong's preaching ministry began among the poorly educated. Previously his public speaking tended toward a rhetorical display. At the Rapids, however, he learned the powerlessness of rhetorical display and intellectual appeal alone. People of all classes need a simple, clear presentation of "the gospel of Christ," which "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).⁴³

Further, Mrs. Stillson profoundly influenced Strong. She was his first acquaintance who seemed to live continually in intimate communion with the Savior. He stated, "I learned from her example the doctrine of a present Christ. . . . I could not thereafter either live or preach as if Jesus were a theoretical or distant Redeemer."⁴⁴

Strong's formal education at Yale College and Rochester Theological Seminary gave him credentials for ministry. His practical education at the

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 116.

⁴²Ibid., 116–17.

⁴³Ibid., 114.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Rapids gave him a message and method for ministry. His professors taught him philosophical and theological theories. Mrs. Stillson encouraged his personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ, the only ground of acceptance with God.

3. The Church

Strong also developed his doctrine of the church.⁴⁵ He was convinced the church is composed only of those who believe in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ He was convinced of the Baptist doctrines of a regenerate church membership and of a congregational polity. Historically, these were at the center of Baptist ecclesiology.⁴⁷ Strong agreed that one must profess faith in Jesus Christ before being baptized. Further, one must be a baptized church member before receiving the Lord's Supper.

Strong's *Systematic Theology* section on "the doctrine of the church" remained the same through all eight editions. Among Baptists, Strong may be best known and remembered for his ecclesiology. In fact, one suspects the reputation he maintains as a conservative, Baptist theologian is largely due to his ecclesiology.

Modernism seems to have had no affect on Strong's ecclesiology. His early soteriological understanding of union with Christ, however, greatly influenced it. The spiritual union of all believers with Christ and the consequent union of all believers with one another led him to two principles: regenerate church membership and congregational church government. All of his ecclesiology focused on and developed from these. Strong settled the doctrine of the church in his mind as he considered his life's calling and work.

In the spring of 1859, two months before seminary graduation, Strong sought treatment for a chronic respiratory condition. The family physician believed his condition would be terminal without immediate treatment, and prescribed a year of fresh air and exercise.⁴⁸ Apparently, the doctor was right; Strong fully recovered over the next fourteen and a half months as he hiked through Europe and the Middle East.⁴⁹ Strong returned home vigorous, healthy, and ready to begin his life's work.⁵⁰ But where? In which denomination? His Baptist seminary education had not

⁴⁵Ibid., 150.

⁴⁶Ibid., 251.

⁴⁷John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 57.

⁴⁸Strong, *Autobiography*, 123-24.

⁴⁹Ibid., 134.

⁵⁰Ibid., 124-42.

convinced him of a Baptist view of church polity or of the ordinances, and this proved to be an obstacle.

Ezekiel G. Robinson, the president of Rochester Theological Seminary, recommended Strong to the First Baptist Church of New York City. Strong preached to the church, but was disappointed when they did not issue a call.⁵¹ Next, Robinson recommended Strong to the First Baptist Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts, a church of 300 members. After Strong preached for them, the church issued a call. However, when he told them he was not certain baptism was required for one to receive the Lord's Supper, they withdrew their call.⁵² Strong was not disappointed. Haverhill was a factory town of about 10,000 people, some thirty miles north of Boston. He preferred a bustling city to Haverhill's conservative, small town atmosphere. After these two experiences, Strong realized his ambivalence about the doctrine of the church would be an obstacle in any Baptist church. He must settle the issue.⁵³

The next year, 1861, was eventful for Strong as well as for the nation. That year, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated President of the United States. That year, the Confederate States of America were formed and Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as President. That year, the War Between the States erupted. That year, Strong's denominational identity was settled. And that year, his engagement to one woman was broken, and he met and married another.

Strong spent a productive winter preaching for the North Baptist Church in Chicago.⁵⁴ During those months, he studied diligently and finally settled his ecclesiology. He wrote, "Though my worldly ambition and personal preference and college friendships and family relationships would have led me to be a Congregationalist or a Presbyterian, conscience and Scripture compelled me to be a Baptist."⁵⁵ As a result, six months after his initial visit, the First Baptist Church of Haverhill reissued their call. Strong felt compelled to accept.⁵⁶ He had been engaged to Charles Finney's daughter, but the engagement was broken. His home church ordained him in August 1861. Mrs. Stillson introduced him to Miss Hattie Savage shortly thereafter. By Christmas, he and Hattie were married and settled in their new home and ministry.⁵⁷ 1861 was an eventful year, to say the least.

⁵¹Ibid., 143–44.

⁵²Ibid., 144.

⁵³Ibid. 144–45.

⁵⁴Ibid., 146.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., 150.

⁵⁷Steven R. Pointer, "Augustus H. Strong," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed.

Strong's faithful ministry endeared him to his new congregation, though their New England reserve often kept them from verbally expressing it.⁵⁸ Strong was drafted into the Union army and was willing to serve. The church, however, urged him to stay with them. They paid \$350 for someone to serve in his place,⁵⁹ a common practice in the north.⁶⁰

4. Union With Christ

Another of Strong's theological lessons was union with Christ. Toward the end of his second year at Haverhill, Strong's pastoral ministry became an overwhelming drudgery. He was physically exhausted, emotionally despondent, and spiritually drained. Strong said, "I felt that I was far from God, that I somehow lacked the essence of a Christian experience, that my preaching was destitute of life and power. And yet at this very time I was exhausting myself with my efforts to do my duty."⁶¹

The Strongs spent August of 1863 in Rochester. One month earlier, from the first through the third of July, the Battle of Gettysburg had raged just 300 miles south of Rochester. In Strong's heart, another conflict raged. Privately he pledged to leave the ministry if he could not find peace during that summer vacation. He determined to rest, pray, and read nothing but the Bible. While reading the books of Acts and John, Strong was deeply impressed with the personal reality that Jesus Christ indwells all believers. Strong wrote:

Now I saw that it was a *union of life* which Christ was describing, a union in which the Spirit of Christ interpenetrates and energizes ours, a union in which he joins himself so indissolubly to us that neither life nor death, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from him. . . .

I can describe the effect of all this upon my ministry only by saying it was life from the dead. . . . My fear and my despondency were gone; my physical health began to mend . . . I preached with a joy and self-forgetfulness that I had never known before. Preparation of sermons became a delight. . . . All this was connected with a new experience with regard to prayer. . . . I not only prayed with a faith that I had never known before, but also

Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 2.

⁵⁸Strong, *Autobiography*, 151.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁰Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Random House, 1963), 151.

⁶¹Strong, *Autobiography*, 162.

I came to feel that the Lord desired me to ask great things and desired to accomplish great things by me.⁶²

Following this experience, Strong was convinced theology's "central truth" is union with Christ.⁶³ He understood the union to be a soteriological reality. He noted, "Christ had come to me at the time of my conversion, little as I then understood it, and had formed an indissoluble union with my poor weak soul. I had been ignorant of his presence within me."⁶⁴

In the four lessons discussed so far, excluding his later adoption of soteriological inclusivism, Strong was faithful to his biblical and Baptist heritage. The theological lessons were formed during his preparation and pastoral ministry years (1856–72). In contrast, three additional lessons, developed during his days as a seminary president and professor (1872–1912), reveal modernism's growing influence, which progressively undermined his Baptist heritage.

5. Race Guilt

A fifth theological lesson was his "first new and original contribution to theological science."⁶⁵ Herein, he offered a new explanation of "the imputation of the sin of the race to Christ."⁶⁶ Strong felt the sin of the race being placed on Jesus Christ had been explained insufficiently. He believed the relationship between Christ's deity and atonement and between Christ's two natures demanded a more comprehensive presentation.⁶⁷ He had already formulated this innovation by the time he published the first edition of his *Systematic Theology*.⁶⁸

Strong believed, subsequent to Adam's original sin, all people are born in the state into which Adam "fell—a state of depravity, guilt, and condemnation."⁶⁹ It is not simply that Adam was the federal (representative) head of the race and all his descendants have the responsibility for his sin imputed to them. Strong called federal headship "a legal fiction."⁷⁰ Instead, he held the natural (seminal) headship view. Since all people are Adam's descendants, all are organically united to Adam. All sinned in him. All, being in Adam's loins, actually participated in Adam's sin. Depravity,

⁶²Ibid., 163, 165.

⁶³Ibid., 164.

⁶⁴Ibid., 163–64.

⁶⁵Ibid., 252.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., 251–52.

⁶⁸Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1st ed., 409–21.

⁶⁹Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 596.

⁷⁰Ibid., 614.

guilt, and condemnation are justly bestowed on all people, for Adam's sin is actually that of every person.⁷¹ Further, Strong believed Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, born in Bethlehem, and is, therefore, the God-man.⁷² He faithfully taught God's triune nature.

Considering the fallen nature of humanity and the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ, Strong asked, "How now was to be explained the imputation of the sin of the race to Christ?"⁷³ Strong sought to answer a philosophical objection to Jesus Christ's atonement.

Our treatment is intended to meet the chief modern objection to the atonement. Greg, Creed of Christendom, 243, speaks of "the strangely inconsistent doctrine that God is so *just* the he could not let sin go unpunished, yet so *unjust* that he could punish it in the person of the innocent. . . . It is for orthodox dialects to explain how the divine justice can be *impugned* by pardoning the guilty, and yet *vindicated* by punishing the innocent."⁷⁴

Strong attempted to show that God was not unjust to place the guilt and punishment of the human race upon His innocent Son. Instead of simply acknowledging that God's love compelled Him to give His Son as the substitutionary sacrifice for sinful humanity (John 3:16), Strong attempted to produce a rationalistic explanation. His innovative answer was that God was not unjust to impute sin to, and punish sin in, Jesus Christ because He bore the race guilt of sin.

If Christ took our nature, he must have taken it with all its exposures and liabilities. Though the immaculate conception freed him from depravity, it still left him under the burden of guilt. For the nature which he had in common with us all he was bound to suffer and die. Hence it must needs be that Christ should suffer; hence he pressed forward to the cross as the reparation due from humanity to the violated holiness of God.⁷⁵

Strong rightly differentiated between guilt and depravity. Race guilt, however, is something other than Christ bearing the race's guilt. Strong

⁷¹Ibid., 644.

⁷²Ibid., 673, 684.

⁷³Strong, *Autobiography*, 252.

⁷⁴Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1st ed., 413.

⁷⁵Strong, *Autobiography*, 252.

believed Jesus Christ was freed from depravity by virtue of His Divine conception in the virgin's womb, yet He inherited human guilt at the incarnation by virtue of His human nature. "As the Christian has depravity but not guilt," Strong stated, "so Christ had guilt but not depravity. And thus he could through the eternal Spirit offer himself without spot to God."⁷⁶

Traditionally, Baptists taught that Jesus Christ received the guilt of, and the punishment for, the sin of the human race on the cross.⁷⁷ Strong, however, moved the imputation of humanity's guilt to Jesus Christ from the cross back to the incarnation.

6. Race Responsibility

Strong's next theological lesson, race responsibility, was his second "new and original contribution" to theology. He decided race guilt did not go far enough. It focused on the imputation of original sin to Christ, but did not consider Adam and his posterity's subsequent sins. Christ atoned for personal sins as well as for original sin.

Founded in Creation—Necessary Atonement

Strong stated, "Christ's union with the race in his incarnation is only the outward and visible expression of a prior union with the race which began when he created the race."⁷⁸ Strong now extended union with Christ beyond salvation or even the incarnation. He moved it back to creation. In so doing, Strong moved from a soteriological union with Christ to an organic union with Christ. He stated, "As in him [Jesus Christ] all things were created and as in him all things consist or hold together, it follows that he who is the life of humanity must, though personally pure, be involved in responsibility for all human sin, and so it was necessary that the Christ should suffer."⁷⁹ Strong declared that the Creator's union with His creation caused the Creator to share the responsibility for His creatures' subsequent actions. Christ's suffering was therefore necessary, and in effect, the fulfillment of a just sentence of judgment.⁸⁰ His substitutionary death was both possible (because of His incarnation) and necessary (because of creation). He had to suffer for the sins of humanity, and for His own race

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷*A Faith to Confess, The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689: Rewritten in Modern English* (Leeds, England: Carey Publications, 1975), 28-29; *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1197.

⁷⁸Strong, *Autobiography*, 253.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

guilt and race responsibility for sin.

Just as Strong differentiated between depravity and guilt, he also differentiated between race sin and personal sin. "Race sin was committed by the first father of the race."⁸¹ Every human who grows beyond the infant years commits personal sin.⁸² Strong affirmed Christ's freedom from personal sin, but not from race sin. The necessity of the atonement for Strong is derived from Christ's union with the human race. Jesus Christ would have been under a sentence of death even if God had chosen not to save any human beings. It would have been necessary for Him to die for His guilt and responsibility for sin. Strong stated, "Although Christ's nature was purified, his obligation to suffer yet remained."⁸³ Even though Strong conceded, "He might have declined to join himself to humanity, and then he need not have suffered,"⁸⁴ Strong's concept of race responsibility, founded in creation, seems to obligate Jesus Christ to the incarnation, and, therefore, to suffering and death. Carl F.H. Henry similarly observed:

Strong had thus . . . replaced the Biblical view of a gracious atonement with that of a necessitated atonement—necessitated indeed not alone because of a more intimate creative union of Christ and humanity which seemed to verge toward pantheism, but because of a supposed guilt on Christ's part which . . . could not escape compromising the personal purity of the pre-incarnate Logos.⁸⁵

The Bible declares that Jesus Christ voluntarily laid down His life when He died on the cross (John 10:14–18). Jesus Christ willingly received the punishment for human sin when He "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24a). Strong acknowledged the cross was "the voluntary execution of a plan that antedated creation,"⁸⁶ yet he also declared it a necessity to atone for Christ's race guilt and race responsibility. In Strong's view, God the Father was not unjust to impute the sin, guilt, and punishment of humanity to Christ only because Jesus deserved to suffer for sin; in fact, it was necessary for Him to suffer. Union with the race

⁸¹Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 596.

⁸²Ibid. "In recognizing the guilt of race-sin, we are to bear in mind . . . that no human being is finally condemned solely on account of original sin; but that all who, like *infants*, do not commit personal transgressions, are saved through the application of Christ's atonement" [emphasis added].

⁸³Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 757.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Carl F.H. Henry, *Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1951), 224.

⁸⁶Strong, *Autobiography*, 253.

through creation and incarnation not only *imputed*, but also *imparted* race responsibility for sin and race guilt to Jesus Christ.⁸⁷

One questions, in spite of Strong's verbal gymnastics to the contrary, how Jesus Christ could be personally pure if He had *imparted* as well as *imputed* race sin and race guilt. Strong repeatedly emphasized that Jesus Christ's virgin conception and birth protected Him from depravity but not guilt.⁸⁸ One may simply ask, "Why?" If His Deity did not protect His humanity from guilt, how can one be certain it protected Him from depravity? Henry believed Strong was trapped by his own logic. Henry asked, "If before Christ can properly bear all race sin he must be personally involved in race sin, then must it not be maintained that before he can personally bear all personal sin he must likewise be personally involved?"⁸⁹

If union through creation and incarnation caused Christ to inherit both race sin and race guilt, how could He be a substitutionary sacrifice for humanity's sins? Strong's evangelical contemporaries asked the same question. Henry stated, "Evangelical thinkers . . . insisted that if Christ were genuinely guilty in any sense, he could not atone; and if he provided atonement, he could not have been under guilt."⁹⁰ Was not the value of the atoning sacrifice dependent on the absolute purity of the sacrifice? Was not Christ's sacrifice on the cross the innocent suffering for the guilty? Peter declared, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet 3:18).

Continuing Atonement—Teaching Moment

Insistence on Christ's race sin and race guilt led Strong to declare a continuing atonement instead of a completed atonement.⁹¹ Since he had declared that Christ's race responsibility for sin began at creation, Strong stated, "So through all the course of history, Christ, the natural life of the race, has been afflicted in the affliction of humanity and has suffered for human sin. This suffering has been an atoning suffering, since it has been due to righteousness."⁹² Consequently, Jesus Christ's death on the cross became a teaching moment. It was merely the public declaration of a continuing history of atoning activities. Strong stated, "Christ therefore, as incarnate, *rather revealed* the atonement *than made* it. The historical work of atonement was finished upon the Cross, but that historical work only

⁸⁷Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 761.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 762.

⁸⁹Henry, 224n.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 225.

⁹¹Neither the *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* nor *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession* made any allowance for a continuing atonement.

⁹²Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 763.

revealed to men the atonement made both *before and since* by the extra-mundane Logos."⁹³

Strong's continuing atonement was not well received by some of his contemporaries. Henry stated:

Evangelical thinkers saw in Strong's affirmation . . . of a supra-historical suffering, a sacrifice of the doctrine of a once-for-all atonement. They insisted that . . . the divine compassion . . . must not be confused with a vicarious suffering on account of sin. . . . Strong's readiness to speak of the present suffering of Christ for sin, so that while the historical suffering is ended the supra-historical suffering will continue until sin no longer exists, seemed to evangelical theologians to evacuate the historical passion of all final significance.⁹⁴

The concerns of Strong's contemporaries were valid. The writer of Hebrews contradicts a continuing atonement and declares a completed atonement. The once for all death of Jesus Christ on the cross replaced the repeated symbolic Levitical sacrifices; Jesus Christ's sin sacrifice was superior and final (Heb 9:24–26). On the cross Jesus did not say, "And so it continues." He said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Carson observed, "Jesus' work was done. . . . The verb . . . denotes the carrying out of a task . . . to the full extent mandated by his mission. And so, on the brink of death, Jesus cries out, *It is accomplished!*"⁹⁵ Hendriksen added, "As Jesus saw it, the entire work of redemption (both active and passive obedience, fulfilling the law and bearing its curse) had been brought to completion."⁹⁶

Strong's race guilt and race responsibility added new content to his Christology. The theological lessons seemed to question Christ's sinlessness. Further, Christ's cross was no longer the historical, once for all, climactic, redemptive event. Rather, Strong presented it as a teaching moment; it was the public declaration of Christ's continuing atoning suffering.

7. Ethical Monism

Another of Strong's theological lessons, his third "new and original contribution to the science of theology," was the philosophical system he called "Ethical Monism." Race guilt and race responsibility seemed to

⁹³Ibid., 762 [emphasis added].

⁹⁴Henry, 225–26.

⁹⁵D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 621.

⁹⁶William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–1954), 2:435.

open the door to an adapted version of monism. Strong's emphasis on Jesus Christ's union with humanity and with the universe through His incarnation and creation was compatible with a monistic worldview.

Geisler notes that monism is a philosophical worldview; it sees all existence as "one." "God and the universe are one thing." In contrast, "Christianity is committed to the 'many' of pluralism, holding that God differs from creation,"⁹⁷ and the things created differ from one another. C.S. Lewis described monism as "Everythingism."⁹⁸ He explained:

I mean by this the belief that "everything", or "the whole show", must be self-existent, must be more important than every particular thing, and must contain all particular things in such a way that they cannot be really very different from one another—that they must be not merely "at one", but one. . . . Thus the Everythingist, if he starts from God, becomes a Pantheist; there must be nothing that is not God. If he starts from Nature he becomes a Naturalist; there must be nothing that is not Nature. He thinks that everything is in the long run "merely" a precursor or a development or a relic or an instance or a disguise, of everything else.⁹⁹

Monism, pantheism, and naturalism seem to share a core worldview.

Strong believed the drift of modern thought, whether in physics, philosophy, literature, or theology, was all in the direction of monism. He believed monism was the ruling philosophy of his time, and would be the philosophy of the future.¹⁰⁰ Around the turn of the twentieth century, religious modernism increasingly focused on divine immanence, almost to the exclusion of divine transcendence. An overreaching divine immanence and monism were compatible.

Evangelizing an Intellectual

Most of Strong's fellow Baptists thought the drift toward monism was a drift away from truth, and destructive to biblical faith. Strong's perspective was different. He saw monism as a "movement of the Spirit of God, giving to thoughtful men, all unconsciously to themselves, a deeper understanding of truth and preparing the way for the reconciliation of

⁹⁷Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), s.v., "Monism."

⁹⁸Clive Staples Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 269.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Augustus Hopkins Strong, "Ethical Monism," in *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1899), 16, 22.

diverse creeds and parties by disclosing their hidden ground of unity.”¹⁰¹

For Strong, monism was new light from the Holy Spirit. “Theology must make use of the new light,” he warned, “or lose her hold upon thinking minds.”¹⁰² Strong believed a part of the theologian’s assignment is to show how modern ideas and Christianity are compatible; it is key to evangelizing intellectuals. Strong’s passion for evangelizing intellectuals was personal. Did he make major theological shifts in a desperate attempt to evangelize one particular intellectual? The reader must judge.

Strong had two sons, Charles and John. He longed for them to be faithful followers of Christ. He hoped they would be ministers of the gospel and ultimately join him on the seminary faculty. Both boys professed faith in Christ; both professed a call into the ministry; and both attended Rochester Theological Seminary. John graduated, became a pastor, and served on the faculty. Charles, however, broke his father’s heart when he, as a seminary student, denied his Christian faith and became an agnostic. He studied at Harvard and in Germany and was briefly a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, and then at Columbia College in New York City. Strong and John D. Rockefeller had been friends since Strong’s pastorate in Cleveland. The families periodically visited and traveled together. In 1889 Charles married Bessie Rockefeller (John’s daughter), and they subsequently moved to Europe where they lived most of the rest of their lives.¹⁰³ Strong seemed willing to make nearly any theological accommodation to convince Charles the Christian faith was compatible with his beliefs. As far as Strong knew, Charles never returned to his faith.

At Strong’s urging, the First Baptist Church of Rochester disciplined Charles. In 1891, the church excluded him from its membership when he denied the faith. Twenty-five years later, Strong urged the church to restore Charles to membership. It did so, even though Strong confessed, “I do not see that he has changed his views of Christ and of Christianity or that he now accepts Christ as his divine Lord and Redeemer.”¹⁰⁴ Perhaps, in part, a father’s broken heart led him to conclude that Charles’ “filial loyalty and his persistent search for truth . . . are signs of Christ’s working in him, though he is as unconscious of their Author as was Saul on his way to Damascus. . . . I now see more clearly that the Light that lighteth every man is Christ.”¹⁰⁵ This statement was certainly consistent with a monistic worldview; it equated love with faith, and a search for truth with knowing the Savior.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 22.

¹⁰²Strong, *Autobiography*, 254–55.

¹⁰³Ibid., 257–64.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 351.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

Ontological Union

Ethical monism was Strong's adapted version of monism. Neither his spiritual experience nor theology allowed him to accept the monism taught in the Universities in his day; they were largely either naturalistic or pantheistic. Naturalistic monism tends toward atheism. Pantheistic monism "concludes that God must be equally present in what we call evil and what we call good and therefore indifferent to both."¹⁰⁶ Recognizing this fact,¹⁰⁷ Strong devised a monism he believed was "entirely consistent with the facts of ethics — man's freedom, responsibility, sin, and guilt;"¹⁰⁸ thus the name, ethical monism. Strong's monism was a metaphysical interpretation of his central truth of theology: union with Christ.

If pantheism, as Lewis stated, is the inevitable religion of monism, one can readily see why some suspected Strong had become a pantheist. A metaphysical view of union with Christ tends toward pantheism. Erickson states:

The underlying idea here is the pantheistic concept that we are one in essence with God. We have no existence apart from his. We are part of the divine essence. Christ is one with us and is in us by virtue of creation rather than redemption. This means that he is one with all members of the human race, not merely with believers. This explanation, however, goes beyond the teaching of Scripture; all of the biblical statements about union with Christ pertain exclusively to believers. Various passages make it clear that not everyone is included among those in whom Christ dwells and who are in Christ (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:17).¹⁰⁹

Erickson accurately notes that union with Christ is exclusively a soteriological reality. When Strong pushed union with Christ back to creation, he interpreted a *soteriological* reality as an *ontological* reality. Strong stated, "There is but one substance—God," and everything else is but a "finite and temporal manifestation of God."¹¹⁰ To many of Strong's

¹⁰⁶Lewis, 135.

¹⁰⁷Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., 108: "It has been charged that the doctrine of monism necessarily involves moral indifference; that the divine presence in all things breaks down all distinctions of rank and makes each thing equal to every other; that the evil as well as the good is legitimated and consecrated. Of pantheistic monism all this is true,—it is not true of ethical monism."

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 963.

¹¹⁰Strong, "Ethical Monism," 45.

contemporaries, this sounded like an affirmation of the general definition of pantheism: "God is all and all is God."¹¹¹ Yet, Strong was deeply wounded by the accusation that he had become "a pantheist and a Buddhist."¹¹²

By definition, monism denies God's personality. If God is all and all is God, then how can God be a distinct person? By definition, monism also denies God's transcendence. If everything is one, how can one transcend itself? God is not distinct from and transcendent over all if all is God.

In the minds of most who understood Strong's philosophical arguments, he had denied both God's personality and transcendence. Strong refused to acknowledge this, and argued for a personalistic monism. He invested his considerable intellectual and literary skills attempting to convince his friends that his adapted beliefs were actually a clarified orthodoxy. In doing so, he redefined philosophical and theological terms. He declared that when he used certain words, they now meant what they had never meant. It is little wonder many did not understand ethical monism, and most who did, did not approve.

Conclusion

In light of these facts, one question remains unanswered. Why did an internationally respected, conservative, Baptist theologian radically change parts of his theology when he was seventy years old? As one would expect, no single answer will suffice. For summary purposes, consider five possible reasons.

First, Strong sometimes made the mistake of interpreting the Bible through the lens of his culture. Every theologian and pastor must guard against this subtle temptation. Strong's environment was progressive. His entire life was lived in an environment of almost perpetual technological, economic, sociological, intellectual, and spiritual advancement. His progressive environment seemed to influence his mind-set; it encouraged openness to modernism; it guided his approach to theology and his understanding of a theologian's task. Strong stated, "Theology is a progressive science, not because the truth itself changes, but because human apprehension and statement of the truth improve from age to age."¹¹³ He believed his age had "the advantage of a point of view which include[d] all the

¹¹¹Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), s.v. "Pantheism": "A term coined by John Toland (1670-1722), literally meaning 'everything God.' The view is that God is all and all is God. It differs from 'panentheism,' which views God as in all."

¹¹²Strong, *Autobiography*, 255.

¹¹³Augustus Hopkins Strong, "Christ in Creation," in *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 1.

good” of past generations, but “exclude[d] their errors.”¹¹⁴ Strong believed the ruling idea in any era was God’s revelation for the day. The theologian’s assignment, therefore, was to help the Christian community understand Christianity’s compatibility with contemporary science and philosophy. Modernism, Strong believed, could be used, with discernment, to discover the good and true. He believed modern philosophical and theological ideas were gifts from God that could be used to advance the gospel and ultimately bring in the millennial kingdom.¹¹⁵ Therefore, Strong welcomed new ideas; he was compelled to adapt them into his theology.

A Christian should continually learn. If one discovers he is wrong, he should be willing to correct his beliefs. Such change is commendable. However, when Strong revised his theology, he did not admit his previous beliefs were wrong. Instead, he affirmed his faithfulness “to the old doctrines,” and noted, “I interpret them differently and expound them more clearly.”¹¹⁶ The evidence, however, does not justify the claim. This writer does not agree, for example, that Strong’s denial of the Bible’s infallibility and inerrancy, his affirmation of Christ’s race guilt and race responsibility, his explanation of a continuing atonement, nor his ethical monism were merely different, clarified explanations of old doctrines.¹¹⁷

Second, Strong’s idea that new scientific and philosophical declarations are one form of God’s revelation for their day¹¹⁸ undermined the Bible’s final authority. The concept led Strong to significant theological shifts. Those shifts were always in the direction of liberalism, away from his Baptist heritage, and never toward conservatism.

Third, Strong tended to interpret the Bible by his experience rather than interpreting his experience by the Bible. Above, we noted how Strong’s personal religious experience led him to embrace soteriological inclusivism. We noted that his concern for evangelizing his son Charles may have encouraged him to adapt many elements of modernism into his theology.

Again, experiential Bible interpretation is a subtle and appealing temptation, especially in a postmodern era. Faith should be experiential; faith should be real and personal. Experience, however, must not become the final authority for truth. The Bible is the Christian’s ultimate authority for faith and practice. It is the unchanging foundation.

Fourth, in his later years, Strong seems to have become so confident in his theological prowess, that he considered himself a valid authority.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Strong, “Ethical Monism,” 22.

¹¹⁶Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 8th ed., vii.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 196–242; cf., Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1st ed., 95–114.

¹¹⁸Strong, “Ethical Monism,” 22.

His defense against critics who questioned his redefinition of theological and philosophical terms¹¹⁹ was, “This term now means something different when I use it.” “Because I said so” may be an exasperated parent’s answer to an argumentative child, but it is not a valid explanation from a theologian.

A fifth reason Strong was willing to make major theological shifts may have been his faculty. Faculty members interact. They drink coffee and discuss theology. They influence one another. Strong was committed to what we now identify as “unlimited academic freedom.” He brought a theologically diverse group of scholars onto the Rochester Theological Seminary faculty. Walter Rauschenbusch, the “Father of the Social Gospel,” was among them. A biographer of Rauschenbusch noted:

When Rauschenbusch joined the English faculty in 1902, he was one of only two liberals on the faculty, along with Walter Betteridge, professor of Old Testament. Yet Rauschenbusch was part of the first generation of liberal faculty that the increasingly theologically irenic Strong brought to the seminary from 1902 until his retirement in 1912.¹²⁰

Note the time frame. Strong’s eighth edition was prepared between 1902 and 1909. Did he hire liberal faculty because of his changing views, or did his views change because of friendships with those men? At the least, Strong’s theological sifts were likely emboldened by interactions with his faculty.

Augustus H. Strong’s *Systematic Theology* continues to have an influence among Baptists one hundred years after its publication. W.A. Criswell praised it as “a good illustration of how a pastor ought to read and study.” He noted that most of it was “incomparable,” but warned, “So let the pastor read as he would eat a fish—when he comes to an unpalatable bone, just eat around it; do not swallow it!”¹²¹ This is good advice, not only with regard to his theology, but with regard to his life as a disciple.

Although he was not the perfect disciple of Jesus Christ, we can learn from Strong’s efforts. For instance, we may learn that, while seeking cultural relevance in ministry and theology, we must be careful to build only upon the certain foundation of God’s Word. An appeal to any other final authority for theology, life, and ministry is inadequate and likely will lead to theological error, as it did with Augustus Hopkins Strong.

¹¹⁹A.J.F. Behrends, “Ethical Monism,” *The Methodist Review* 77 (1895): 361.

¹²⁰Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 159.

¹²¹W.A. Criswell, *Criswell’s Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 69.