

**“A House on the Sand”:**  
*American Theological Liberalism*  
*From the 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**Part I – 1740s – 1860s**

**Introduction:**

The title of this seminar is “A House on the Sand”: *American Theological Liberalism From the 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. As I was casting about for a title, a number of ideas suggested themselves. One that perfectly summarizes my aim with this two day gathering might be “Dorrien For Dummies”. Dorrien For Dummies. Gary Dorrien is currently the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Dorrien is the author a magnum opus entitled: *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. It released in three volumes between 2001 and 2005. It’s over 1500 pages all together, and weighs in at just over 500 pounds. Though I’m obviously being facetious with the weight of the trilogy, I’m only a little bit tongue in cheek with the title: “Dorrien For Dummies”. Beyond a little bit of supplementary reading, Dorrien has provided my entire fund of historical help on this topic. To offer a bad pun, I will be quoting Gary Dorrien quite *liberally* throughout this seminar. I chose Dorrien because first, he *is* a liberal. He’s not a *critic* of the movement but a *coach* and an elder statesman within it. The institution where he serves (Union Seminary in New York) has been a stronghold of liberal theology for nearly a hundred years. The second reason I like Dorrien as a guide is because he is on a short list for me of the most faithful and careful historical scholars I’ve ever read.<sup>1</sup> In other words, he doesn’t just tell the story of

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the evidence of Dorrien’s care as a scholar is the work he’s done on evangelicalism. Well worth reading is his *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 1998. His work is outstanding.

liberalism as an admirer, or an adoring fan. Though he's appreciative and sympathetic of the history he's writing, his objectivity is remarkable, and his *critical* advocacy of his subject is terribly refreshing. I trust you will hear abundant evidence of that over the next two days.

Let's begin with Dorrien's definition of liberalism and I'll follow his definition with my own (which really is not my own at all – but more on that in a minute). Dorrien says:

“...liberal theology...In essence...is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority...that all claims to truth, in theology...must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority. [In other words] Christian scripture...does not settle or establish truth claims about matters of fact.”<sup>2</sup>

Dorrien's categories of external authority, reason, and experience have their home originally in the thinking of John Wesley but they came to be most clearly systematized by 20<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan scholar Albert C. Outler. Outler studied Wesley and he saw him appealing to four categories as domains within which we do theology: written revelation, human reason, human experience, and human tradition. He called it “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral”. Outler said that these four sources are *all* sources of authority in the Christian's life (which *Wesley* taught as well). What Wesley believed is that while human reason, experience, and tradition were *legitimate* sources of authority, Scripture alone provides the *primary* authority. Of the four sides or points of the quadrilateral, the Bible carried the greatest weight, held the most clout, and it goes on top.<sup>3</sup> Scripture bears the chief influence. Give reason, experience and tradition their due, but the buck stops with the Bible. Scripture is authoritative, and it has the first and final Word

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2001. p.xiii. and Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2003. p.1

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Don Thorson, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Model of Evangelical Theology*. Emeth Press: Lexington, KY. (1990) 2005.

(so to speak). That backdrop is absolutely crucial to making sense of Dorrien's definition of liberalism. I think it's a dynamite definition of liberal theology but you need to know that that's what Dorrien means. His quadrilateral looks different than Wesley's. The categories are the same, but the primary authority is not the same. And that makes all the difference (in Dorrien's thinking, in Wesley's thinking, and in my own). Dorrien says truth claims must be made on the basis of reason and experience (without appealing to external authority)...Christian Scripture does not settle or establish claims about matters of fact. Wesley was not a liberal in the sense that Dorrien is defining "liberal" here. Wesley was quite conservative on this score.<sup>4</sup>

Now one final note and we'll begin our survey. I have my own definition of liberalism and here it is: liberalism is the desire to be free from the Word of God in our mood, methods, morals, and message. Liberalism is the desire to be free from the Word of God in our mood, methods, morals, and message. The four "m's" are drawn from the work of Charles Woodbridge in his 1969 work entitled: *The New Evangelicalism*.<sup>5</sup> Woodbridge, himself a Presbyterian fundamentalist, used the four "m's" to assess what was being called "the new evangelicalism" at the time (what we simply refer to as "evangelicalism" today). He said the New Evangelicalism differed from Fundamentalism in its mood, its methods, its message, and its morals. He didn't like it. For Woodbridge, the New Evangelicalism had built within it, tendencies toward liberalism. Though I am not a fundamentalist, I do completely agree with Woodbridge's concerns about evangelicalism. But I believe that the desire to be free from the

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<sup>4</sup> Clear evidence of John Wesley's doctrine of inerrancy is demonstrated in John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers / McKim Proposal*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI. 1982. pp.213-214 n. 39.

Other evidence of Wesley's conservatism with reference to Scripture is clear from the types of epithets some contemporaries used to speak of him: "Wesley was...called a 'Bible bigot' in his day." See Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*. The Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, PA. 2003. p.257.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Woodbridge, *The New Evangelicalism*. Bob Jones University Press: Greenville, SC. 1969 (1970). Charles was the father of John Woodbridge from the footnote above.

Word of God (both written and incarnate) is part and parcel not merely of the *evangelical* condition but of the *fallen human* condition. And that means that fundamentalists can be guilty of liberalism, too. So can evangelicals, so can progressives. Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox alike.

So that's what I mean by liberalism. To be liberal is to be "free", that's literally what the word means. A desire to be free. It's a positive word. But as I'm using here, you certainly catch the negative overtones of it. The morality of freedom is contingent upon the subject from whom we desire to be free or to be liberated. So the desire to be free from sin, to be free from injustice, to assist other people in their freedom from suffering. That's a wonderful application of this word. We want to be liberal there, to seek to liberate. But the desire to be free from the word of God, I believe, is not only the essence of liberalism, but it's exactly what Jesus means when he speaks of building our house on the sand. To change the metaphor back to freedom and liberation, it was Charles Bridges who once said: "Even the very chains of Christ are glorious."<sup>6</sup> And in saying so he's merely echoing the biblical witness of Paul in Romans 6:18 who says that Christians: "having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." So taking together Dorrien's definition, Wesley's Quadrilateral, and Woodbridge's four "m's" of mood, methods, morals, and message – we now are prepared to begin to examine the story of American theological liberalism.

As we do, I'd like to note that the majority of the people we will learn about are academic scholars by vocation. Though there certainly will be some pastors sprinkled through this study, it's a profound irony that the majority of the theology in our country's history that's been done by leaders of the church hasn't come from church leaders. Does that make sense? It shouldn't make sense. Pastors should be theologians and theologians should be pastors. Jonathan Edwards was the greatest mind America has *ever* produced and he did it in the context of a small town pastoral

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<sup>6</sup> Bridges quoted in Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey Into the Christian Faith*. Crown & Covenant Publications: Pittsburgh, PA. 2012. p.26.

ministry. When he died, he only had a few hundred books in his library. Pastors used to be made of something different. When we come to examine the mighty rushing river of liberal theology that's been flowing through our nation for the better part of three hundred years, though, we must start at its source – those at the headwaters. Let's begin by looking at one of those pastor-theologians. We begin with Charles Chauncy.

## **1. Charles Chauncy (1705-1787)**

Charles Chauncy was born in Boston on New Year's Day 313 years ago in the year 1705. His family was of rich a Puritan ancestry that stretched back to England a century earlier. His great-grandfather – also named Charles – was a Cambridge graduate who eventually became the second president in the history of Harvard College in the Cambridge on this side of the Atlantic. Though Chauncy's father was not a minister, he was a man who took his Christian faith seriously and sought to create an environment of family worship and discipleship in the home. Chauncy was raised in the Calvinistic and Congregationalist Protestant tradition of early 18<sup>th</sup> century New England. His home and church life were woven together in a seamless fabric of Bible reading, prayer, participation in the local church, careful attention to the Westminster Shorter Catechism. These means of grace were the realities of his childhood and they would impact his entire life until his death at age 82.

Chauncy entered Harvard College in the year 1717 which would make him 12 years old if you're keeping track. While sounds nearly impossible to us today it was quite common in his day. He began his studies at Harvard during an era of incredible change and evolution for the school. We'll say more about Harvard later but suffice it say at this point that Chauncy was trained for the ministry of the gospel in a school that was rapidly moving from a posture of treasuring traditional orthodoxy to a posture of tolerance toward heterodoxy. He eventually earned a Bachelor's degree and by the year 1724 had been awarded the Master's degree though it would be another few years before he took his first church, took his first wife, and began a family. I say

his “first” wife because over the course of his 82 years, he was married three times and a made a widower three times over. This man was acquainted with grief. Chauncy knew his share of sorrow.

In view of these relationships it’s accurate to say that Charles Chauncy’s greatest, most enduring marriage was to the flock at Boston’s First Church. First Church of Boston (or Old Brick as it was called) summoned Chauncy to their charge in the year 1727 and he remained at his post as a pastor of Old Brick until his death in 1787. That’s sixty years of ministry in the same local congregation. In our age of church hopping this ought to give us pause. One of the finest aspects of a ministry like Charles Chauncy’s was its permanence. Its stability. I agree with Eugene Peterson who writes: “Every time a pastor abandons one congregation for another out of boredom or anger or restlessness, the pastoral vocation of all of us is vitiated .”<sup>7</sup> I had to look up “vitiating”. It means rendered faulty , defective, or debased. So Chauncy’s tenure at First Church is one that ought to be appropriately respected and revered by shepherds and sheep alike in our church shopping 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As you read and research the years of the First Great Awakening, it is almost impossible to avoid the presence of Charles Chauncy. Though he longed for revival and awakening in his beloved Boston, what he observed in the ministries of men like Jonathan Edwards and especially George Whitefield caused him grave concern. Chauncy was man of morals. He was a pastor who prized order and reason and felt misgivings not only with the obvious excesses present in the Great Awakening but he also was deeply troubled by statements like this one from Jonathan Edwards who once wrote: “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections...I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. (1992) 1994. p.18.

they are affected with nothing but truth...”.<sup>8</sup> Chauncy didn’t appreciate that emphasis. He saw danger in it. He perceived imbalance. In fact, his most well known work (*Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*) was a direct, point-by-point attempt to refute Jonathan Edwards’ written work on the subject. The key quote from Chauncy is this one: “The plain truth is...an *enlightened mind*, and not *raised affections*, ought always be the guide of those who call themselves men; and this, in the affairs of religion, as well as other things.”<sup>9</sup> Do you hear what he’s saying? Your *heart* must be guided by your *head*. *Heat*? Certainly. But no more *heat* than the *light* warrants. The essence of Chauncy’s critique of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Great Awakening as a whole was just that. Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4:24 – “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” In a sense, the clash between these two 18<sup>th</sup> century pastors was over the understanding and practical application of that verse. Edwards (though he saw deficiencies in the Great Awakening) believed it was of the Spirit of God. Chauncy believed it to be of another spirit altogether.

Now Chauncy didn’t like Edwards, but he *really* disliked Whitefield. At least Edwards was a settled parish pastor, a native of New England. Critically advocating the Great Awakening. Charles Chauncy simply had no use for George Whitefield. And this displays the difference between Chauncy and Edwards at this point. It’s stunning really. Chauncy was unbelievably threatened by Whitefield’s presence in New England during his preaching tours. On the other hand, Edwards was overwhelmingly thrilled. Edwards wrote a letter to Whitefield, asking him to come preach at his church and stay at his house and minister to his family and he did.<sup>10</sup> Chauncy would never have dreamed of such a thing. There

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*. Edited by John Smith, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 2. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1959 p.95.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Chauncy quoted in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT. 2003. p.281.

<sup>10</sup> That letter can be found in *A Sweet Flame: Piety in the Letters of Jonathan Edwards*. Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. Edited and Introduced by Michael

is an account (it may be apocryphal) but it's entertaining. An account of the one known meeting of Chauncy and Whitefield. It is said to have occurred on a street in Boston in January of 1745. Here's the tale as told by author William Sumner:

“Soon after Whitefield landed in Boston, on his second visit to this country, he and Dr. Chauncy met in the street, and, touching their hats with courteous dignity, bowed each to the other, [Chauncy says] ‘So you have returned, Dr. Whitefield, have you?’ [Whitefield] replied, ‘Yes, Reverend Sir, in the service of the Lord.’ ‘I am sorry to hear it,’ said Chauncy. ‘So is the Devil! [answered Whitefield and they] touched their hats and passed on.”<sup>11</sup>

Chauncy genuinely saw Whitefield as a menace to the health of the churches in New England. He felt his pathway and presence among settled congregations to be unsettling and dangerous to them. Gary Dorrien (quoting Chauncy) observes: “[Chauncy] denounced Whitefield’s presumption in going about ‘from one Province and Parish to another’ *as though New England had never heard the gospel* (emphasis mine).”<sup>12</sup> That phrase by Dorrien is (I believe) telling. He’s acting like we haven’t heard the gospel. Chauncy’s mood toward Edwards, Whitefield and the Great Awakening was cynical and his mind unconvinced that it was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. His mood was one of suspicion.

In time, Chauncy’s mood wasn’t the only change that would take place as a pastor. It demanded the better part of 30 years, but his message altered dramatically as well. Describing the metamorphosis, his biographer called him “a heretic in doctrine...a Puritan in temperament.”<sup>13</sup> What’s fascinating about Charles Chauncy, however, is that he self-consciously lived his entire life in what he believed to be humble submission to the absolute

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A.G. Haykin. Reformation Heritage Books: Grand Rapids, MI. 2007. pp.37-40.

<sup>11</sup> William Sumner quoted in Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston (1705-1787)*. Minnesota Monographs in the Humanities Volume 11. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN. 1980. p.91.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2001. p.4.

<sup>13</sup> Griffin, p.94.

authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture. *If* he was a heretic, he was not so with reference to the way he viewed the Bible. Listen to his own words here: “I have made the Scriptures my sole study...and I think I have attained to a clearer understanding of them than I ever had before...[he believed his writings to be]... written from the scripture account of these matters, and not from any human scheme. [Chauncy confesses that his thoughts] will not, I believe, comport with what is called orthodoxy, but I am very persuaded it contains the real truth.”<sup>14</sup> And for Chauncy, the “real truth” included the denial of the doctrine of original sin, and the eventual affirmation of universal salvation (universalism) – a breath-taking position for an 18<sup>th</sup> century New England pastor to hold in his day.

Charles Chauncy is a fascinating man. He looked to his right and he saw the theology and enthusiasm of Edwards, Whitefield, the Great Awakening and he knew that was not his team. But when he looked to his left, he only saw the materialistic unbelief of philosophers like David Hume and the deism of Benjamin Franklin. And he couldn’t go there with them. What Chauncy did (perhaps entirely without realizing it) was to give birth to categories that simply didn’t *exist* in America before his time. Gary Dorrien asks: “Is there a progressive Christian ‘third way’ between the authority-based orthodoxies of traditional Christianity and the spiritless materialism of modern atheism or deism?”<sup>15</sup> Chauncy, who died in 1787, *wanted* there to be a way. Men like William Ellery Channing (in the generation that followed) *made* a way.

## **2. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842)**

William Ellery Channing was born in Newport, Rhode Island in the year 1780 (seven years before the death of Charles Chauncy). His maternal grandfather was a member of the United States Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Channing’s father was a successful lawyer who actually worked as

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<sup>14</sup> Chauncy quoted in Griffin, p.111.

<sup>15</sup> Dorrien, p.xiii.

the D.A. of the city of Newport as well as State Attorney General for all of Rhode Island. Channing was raised the 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational Church of Newport whose pastor was Samuel Hopkins. Hopkins was mentored by Jonathan Edwards but failed to echo many the hallmarks of his traditional orthodoxy (denying doctrines such as total depravity, original sin, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness).

More important, though, than Samuel Hopkins's influence on Channing was the influence of his own father. In what is probably the most moving biographical account I came across in all my reading over the last year is the story of young William Ellery Channing's experience at his father's side as they attended an evangelistic meeting together. The preacher was intense. He spoke of the coming judgment. He warned his listener's of the terrors of everlasting hell. The account I read that so moved me reads this way:

"Channing was stunned. He felt the terror of his condition as a condemned being... After the meeting his father greeted an acquaintance with the pronouncement: 'Sound doctrine, sir.' The words struck Channing hard, because *they seemed to answer the question whether the preacher spoke the truth*. [Just a parenthetical statement here about the power of fatherhood. When our sons look to us, they are looking to us to help them determine what is true. That's what boys need from their dad's more than anything else. And most fathers fall woefully short of this service to their sons] Neither of them spoke as they began their journey home, but on the way; incongruously, the elder Channing began to whistle. Nothing was said about how the family should attempt to flee the wrath to come. When they reached home, instead of speaking some word to his family about their apparently terrible plight, Channing's father pulled off his boots, propped his feet before the fireplace, and calmly relaxed with his newspaper. The scene was a revelation to Channing: *His father didn't believe it!* As this realization first washed over him, Channing first felt relieved, but then, on further reflection, he began to feel violated. He felt angry at being manipulated and imposed upon. Why did the church preach that God was so vindictive? If people believed it, why did they praise God for his goodness and love? If people like his father didn't believe it, why did they pretend otherwise? (emphasis mine)"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dorrien, p.9.

Okay, now I first read that paragraph in March of this past year. And as I read it my heart was pounding out of my chest. I could barely swallow. This is the moment that brands William Ellery Channing for the rest of his life.

He went on to become a minister but a Unitarian minister. He came to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross, and embraced a version of biblical authority that would have given pastors a generation earlier (like Charles Chauncy) serious pause. His doctrinal views went on to have a devastating impact on his vision of evangelism and proselytism. Listen to Channing in his own words here: "...we are not governed by a proselyting temper...I will venture to assert, that there is not on earth a body of men who possess less of the spirit of proselytism, than the ministers of this town and vicinity."<sup>17</sup> Now many of us would make that same confession but with tears in our eyes – with great humiliation. Channing was proud of the lack of evangelistic zeal that marked his movement. He was bragging on their anti-missiology.

By the end of his life, Channing had successfully paved the way for the fledgling movement known as transcendentalism. Before he died, he came to believe so strongly in the truth of general revelation (the knowledge of God that comes through creation) that he found it wholly needless to appeal to special written revelation at all. And you may ask, how then can we know this God and these truths about him with certainty apart from written revelation? Channing says:

"I answer, we derive them from our own souls...The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God...is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity."<sup>18</sup>

Now that final sentence: "In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity" is all that a young man like Ralph Waldo Emerson needed to hear in order to send shockwaves through the American culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Channing quoted in Dorrien, pp.25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Channing quoted in Dorrien, p.48.

### 3. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Ralph Waldo Emerson became the undisputed leader of the Transcendentalist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote essays and poetry, and he gave lectures the power of which are still today being felt. Emerson was born the son of a Unitarian minister in Boston in the year 1803.<sup>19</sup> He graduated from Harvard in 1821 and in 1838 would give a commencement address before the Divinity School that would go down in infamy. Now you have to know that by the early to mid-nineteenth century, Unitarianism as a movement had been around long enough to become institutionalized at Harvard (that change was finalized as early as 1805). But Unitarianism itself was splintering. Progressive though it was, it still had within it an old school and a new school. The old school (represented by men like Channing) actually believed in things like a personal God, the reality of biblical miracles, and though they did not hold an orthodox Christology, old school Unitarians did believe in the distinctiveness and the importance of the person of Jesus Christ as a revelation of God. The new school (represented by men like Ralph Waldo Emerson) felt the doctrinal positions of the old Unitarianism to be too restrictive and not nearly progressive enough. And the event that forced the issue for the fragmenting Unitarianism was the graduation address given by Emerson on July 15, 1838.

Now, the senior class was permitted to extend an invitation to their own speaker and they chose Emerson. And though his private journals were much more candid about his views on Jesus, his public address at Harvard was plenty controversial. Privately, Emerson wrote things in his journals about Jesus like: “I do not see in him cheerfulness: I do not see in him the love of Natural Science: I see in him no kindness for Art; I see in him nothing of

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s father (William Emerson) is the pastoral grandson of Charles Chauncy. Not related by blood, but by pulpit – Ralph Waldo Emerson’s father was the successor of John Clarke who was Chauncy’s own hand-picked successor. In other words, the time from Chauncy’s death to the beginning of William Emerson’s pastorate was only 12 years.

Socrates...of Shakespeare.”<sup>20</sup> Now, publically, he didn’t say such things – the tones he chose were less abrasive. But in many ways, the language of the Harvard Divinity School address was even more incendiary. Here’s a portion of it. Now he’s speaking to future ministers with theology professors looking on:

“It is my duty to say to you, that the need was never greater of new revelation than now...Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil...Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, - cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.”<sup>21</sup>

Now this scandalized the Unitarian Harvard of 1838. I don’t mean to mean to make light of Emerson’s theology here, but imagine how unorthodox Emerson had to be in order to offend his listening audience. Emerson’s ideas and his rhetoric at the Harvard commencement caused a huge firestorm *among Unitarians*. He made heretics blush. Well Harvard distanced themselves immediately from Emerson. In fact, it was another 30 years before he was issued another invitation to come back. In the wake of his rejection by organized religion, Emerson put his hand to the helm of a burgeoning Transcendentalist movement and steered it late into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. *Harvard College 1636-1805*

Now a brief note on Harvard College before we take a look at one more biography and then move to a time of discussion with a break. You may recall me saying that Harvard officially fell into Unitarian hands by the year 1805. And a generation later, the senior class is urged by the speaker to “love God without [a] mediator”. How does that happen? How does a school that was chartered in 1636 as a bastion, as a training-ground for gospel ministry move to a position Unitarianism in less than 200 years? How’s it happen? Well, the story of Harvard is also the story of

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<sup>20</sup> Emerson quoted in Dorrien, p.72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp.73-74.

many schools (including but not limited to) William and Mary, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Rutgers, Andover and Princeton. The entire Ivy League. What happened at Harvard between the years 1636 and 1805 was repeated time and again at many institutions throughout the United States. And though the story is far more involved and complex than even I know or could possibly summarize here, I think it's fair to say that what happens individually can also happen corporately.

R. Albert Mohler (who knows something of what he speaks on this subject – as he 20 years ago became the President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary during the years of the conservative resurgence) Mohler once said that liberalism at an institutional level is “almost always in the hands of those who would claim to save Christianity rather than to bury it. [Thus] There's a basic apologetic impulse behind [this].”<sup>22</sup> The *mood* when such change is afoot is usually buoyant and optimistic. The *methods* used to induce change are subtle, even imperceptible. Now, let's say you spot what's going on this point in your institution. Just try and blow the whistle. Try it. The backlash will be fierce. After all, how do you critique a mood? What's the best way to correct attitudes? Now, once you get to the next step, the *moral* and ethical battles fought in such institutions are typically waged over issues in the broader culture whose ship has already sailed so there is often enormous social pressure brought to bear. And finally, the change in *message* (once mood, methods, and morals are redefined) the message is not normally a hard sell. Due to the other changes, there may not be anyone left in your institution that will even fight the doctrinal battles. If you're interested in learning more about the decline of Harvard College, I would point you toward the excellent essay on this topic written by David Beale called “The Rise and Fall of Harvard”. Just google “The Rise and Fall of Harvard” and you'll see it. It's available free online. One final biographical sketch before our discussion and break. Let's look for a moment at the life and ministry of Theodore Parker.

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<sup>22</sup> R. Albert Mohler, “How Does It Happen? Trajectories Toward an Adjusted Gospel”. An address given at Together for the Gospel. Louisville, KY. 2010.

## 5. Theodore Parker (1810-1860)

Theodore Parker was born in Lexington, Massachusetts on August 24<sup>th</sup> of 1810. Parker had graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1837 and was pastoring a flock in West Roxbury Massachusetts. He also happened to be present for Emerson's notorious Divinity School address the following year. His response to Emerson was euphoric. He wrote in his journal: "My soul is roused...So beautiful, so just, so true, and terribly sublime was [Emerson's] picture of the faults of the church in its present position."<sup>23</sup> Given Parker's theological commitments as a new school Unitarian, Emerson's address was like pouring lighter fluid on a flame that was just beginning to smolder in Theodore Parker's heart. Unlike Emerson, Parker wanted to be a part of the Unitarian establishment, but he wanted to push its boundaries from without. He was curious to see how far he might press the limits of its conception of orthodoxy. He was thrilled with the ideas of Transcendentalism and gladly attended the meetings of Emerson's Transcendental Club, he just wanted to do so from his perch within Unitarianism. He wrote: "I intend, in the coming year, to let out all the force of Transcendentalism that is in me. Come what will come, I will let off the Truth fast as it comes."<sup>24</sup>

Theodore Parker was quite open and candid about his misgivings with traditional orthodoxy. He discarded the idea of biblical infallibility, the possibility of miracles, and he had very little use for the historical Jesus. He said things that Emerson himself wouldn't go on record as saying publically. And as a result, he experienced an increasingly icy reception among fellow Unitarian ministers. And he didn't understand why. He believed that he was simply voicing publically what other ministers clearly held privately. Eventually, neighboring pulpits were shut off to him. No pastors would exchange with him. He said at one point: "I must confess that I am disappointed in the ministers – the Unitarian ministers. I once thought them noble; that they would be

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<sup>23</sup> Parker quoted in Dorrien, p.77.

<sup>24</sup> Parker quoted in Dorrien, p.81.

true to an ideal principle of right.”<sup>25</sup> For all his shocking heresy, Parker was clearly a man of convictions and of integrity. His theological conclusions were direct and they were shocking. He once said: “Each man must be his own Christ, or his is no Christian.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Now we may wonder if I’ve gone too far afield from our topic in surveying the lives of Channing, Emerson, and Parker. After all, these guys were Unitarians to start with. They began from a position many would argue in simply outside the bounds of the historic Christian faith. And while that may be entirely true, what we’re going to see as the story of mainline liberal theology unfolds over the next two days is that it’s men like these that sow the seeds for departures from orthodoxy that are quickly on the horizon among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and others. The lives of Chauncy, Channing, Emerson, and Parker and departure from orthodoxy modeled at Harvard are going to be refrains that we hear again and again as this story goes on.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.99.