

AUGUSTUS HOPKINS STRONG AND ETHICAL MONISM AS A MEANS OF
RECONCILING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND MODERN THOUGHT

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Introduction

Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836-1921) was in many ways a puzzling figure.¹ As president and professor of biblical theology at Rochester Theological Seminary over the course of four decades, Strong shaped a generation of seminary students.² As a leader among Northern Baptists, he played a significant role in the denomination during the years leading up to the

¹To date a critical biography of Strong has not been written. The single most helpful source of information about Strong's life is his *Autobiography* which he began to write on his sixtieth birthday for the benefit of his children and grandchildren (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Autobiography of Augustus Hopkins Strong*, ed. Crerar Douglas [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1981]). Two important monographs on Strong's thought are Carl F. H. Henry, *Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1951); and Grant Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). Shorter sketches include John H. Strong, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Publications of the Rochester Historical Society*, vol. 1 (Rochester, NY: Rochester Historical Society, 1922), 235-41; Kurt A. Richardson, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 289-306; Gregory Alan Thornbury, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 139-62; idem, "The Legacy of Natural Theology in the Northern Baptist Theological Tradition, 1827-1918" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 120-74.

²In 1872 the trustees of Rochester Theological Seminary approached Strong about returning to his alma mater to teach theology. Strong recounted, "I was asked to accept the professorship of theology without the presidency. I declined, upon the grounds that I could not work easily unless I had affairs in my own hands. They thereupon elected me both professor and president, and I accepted the election before I returned to Cleveland" (Strong, *Autobiography*, 203). Strong served in this dual role from 1872 until his retirement in 1912.

One of Strong's sons summarized his impact on the seminary: "Dr. Strong returned to Rochester in 1872. He found the Seminary in debt, meagerly equipped, and not even paying the professors' salaries. Its students were ill-prepared. When he retired after forty years it was in many respects the foremost Baptist theological seminary in the world" (John Strong, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," 238). William H. Brackney noted that Strong was "one of the most illustrious and heavily quoted Baptist theologians of his era. His wide scope of influence was due in part to the premier place in which he labored. Rochester Theological Seminary led student enrollment among the North American Baptist seminaries and boasted what was arguably the leading Baptist faculty at the end of the nineteenth century. Students arrived at Rochester from all corners of the United States and the British provinces to study theology, mostly with Strong" (*A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004], 326).

fundamentalist-modernist controversy. And as the author of numerous books including a major systematic theology, Strong influenced the thinking of countless theologians and pastors.³ He was by any measure an important figure in American theology at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. And yet, Strong has persistently baffled historians.⁴ As Grant Wacker has noted, Strong has been variously labeled as (1) an early fundamentalist, (2) a conservative struggling to make sense of modern philosophy, (3) a mediator between liberalism and orthodox theology, and (4) a closet liberal.⁵

Part of the reason for the difficulty involved in interpreting Strong can be found in some of his own enigmatic statements and actions. Near the end of his life Strong once wrote, “I am an evolutionist, but evolutionist of a peculiar sort. . . . I am a higher critic, but of a certain sort. . . . I am both a premillennialist and a postmillennialist, strange as this may seem to some.”⁶ If these self-appellations struck some as puzzling, so did a number of decisions which Strong made during his presidency at Rochester Theological Seminary. For example, Strong hired a number of theological liberals, including Walter Rauschenbusch and Cornelius Woelfkin, to

³Strong first published his theology notes for the sake of his students in 1876 (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Lectures on Theology* [Rochester, NY: E. R. Andrews, 1876]). These notes were later expanded into his *Systematic Theology* which went through eight editions between its first appearance in 1886 and its final three-volume edition which appeared 1907-1909 (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907]). This work became a standard textbook in many North American seminaries throughout much of the twentieth century. And although widespread use of Strong’s *Systematic Theology* tapered off toward the end of the century, it is still required reading in a number of Baptist colleges and seminaries. Some indication of Strong’s influence on Baptist theology can be seen in the fact that Strong is the most frequently cited author in Henry Clarence Thiessen’s *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1949), in the lesser-known *Systematic Theology* by R. V. Sarrels (1978), and in the initial volume of Rolland McCune’s *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (2008).

⁴In the preface to Strong’s *Autobiography*, Douglas noted that “Strong’s influence was as diverse as the interpretations of his controversial theology” (Strong, *Autobiography*, 15).

⁵Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, 8. See *ibid.*, 7-8 for representatives of each of these views.

⁶Augustus Hopkins Strong, “My Views of the Universe in General,” *The Baptist*, 29 May 1920, 625.

teach at Rochester but then later lamented the fact that the school was trending steadily leftward.

Another factor contributing to the dilemma of interpreting Strong stems from the fact that his theology evolved considerably during his career at Rochester.⁷ The most significant change in his theology occurred in the early- to mid-1890s when he developed an idea which he called “ethical monism.”⁸ Strong defined ethical monism as a “method of thought which holds to a single substance, ground, or principle of being, namely, God, but which also holds to the ethical facts of God’s transcendence as well as his immanence, and of God’s personality as distinct from, and as guaranteeing, the personality of man.”⁹ In other words, Strong held to an ontological monism coupled with a personal pluralism. Strong eventually came to regard this ethical monism and its far-reaching implications as “the key to theology.”¹⁰ And a key to understanding his theology, at least, it was. Ethical monism was both a product of tensions within Strong’s own life and theology and a catalyst for further changes in his ever-developing theological system. Strong believed that ethical monism would enable theologians to solve some of the most difficult problems of theology.¹¹ And he thought it might provide a means of bringing together people of diverse creeds and parties.¹²

⁷Carl Henry traced Strong’s theological development through three different periods which he believed reflected Strong’s “early, middle, and late convictions” (*Personal Idealism and Strong’s Theology*, 15).

⁸As late as January 1888, Strong argued directly against any type of monism (Augustus Hopkins Strong, “Modern Idealism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 45 [1888]: 84-109). Wacker discusses possible explanations for this change in Strong’s thinking, but he ultimately concludes that the reasons why Strong adopted ethical monism so quickly are unknown (*Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, 60-62).

⁹Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 105.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, vii.

¹¹Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams Press, 1899), 41-43.

¹²*Ibid.*, 22.

Strong did not develop his idea of ethical monism in a cultural or philosophical vacuum for, of course, no one lives in such an environment. Strong read widely, and he was keenly aware of the discussions taking place within contemporary philosophy. He rightly recognized that the philosophical winds were blowing away from dualism and pushing many toward a monistic understanding of reality.¹³ Strong believed that the academy's movement toward philosophical monism needed to be accepted and in fact harnessed for the cause of Christ, so that the monism which prevailed would be an ethical and Christian monism rather than a materialist and non-Christian monism.¹⁴ Strong was quite firm in his belief that the rising tide of monism needed to be turned toward Christian purposes and that this movement might be a great work of God. He exhorted potential critics within the church, "Let us tentatively accept the monistic principle and give to it a Christian interpretation. Let us not be found fighting against God. Let us use the new light that is given us."¹⁵ Strong's ethical monism was his attempt to understand and appropriate the "new light" which he believed God had given to his church at the close of the nineteenth century.

Thesis

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to answer the question: what role did ethical monism play in Strong's theology and ministry? Although this is the main issue this dissertation will seek to address, several related questions will also be explored, including the following: First, what factors in Strong's own life and cultural milieu may have prompted him to

¹³Ibid. See also, George Trumbull Ladd, *Introduction to Philosophy: An Inquiry after a Rational System of Scientific Principles in Their Relation to Ultimate Reality*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 420.

¹⁴Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 22.

¹⁵Ibid.

embrace ethical monism? Second, what theological tendencies in Strong's earlier theology may have led him to develop ethical monism as a distinct theological concept? And third, what impact did ethical monism have on Strong's larger theological system?

This dissertation will argue that ethical monism was a means by which Strong attempted to reconcile Christian theology and modern thought while solving tensions within his own theology. According to the editor of his autobiography, Strong believed that ethical monism was the goal toward which his earlier spiritual life had been moving all along and part of the reason Strong wrote his autobiography was to prove this to both his friends and his critics.¹⁶ In the end, Strong was unable to persuade theological modernists to embrace ethical monism or to convince conservatives that ethical monism was a legitimate Christian option. Although Strong's *Systematic Theology* remained a standard textbook for many decades after his death, almost no one picked up the banner of ethical monism. Still, Strong's ethical monism remains the key to understanding his theology, and it is without question a very significant part of his intellectual biography.

Background

Personal Interest

I first read portions of Strong's *Systematic Theology* while working on my M.Div. at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. At that time I encountered Strong's concept of ethical monism but did not give it much thought. It seemed to be simply a theological quirk of bygone days. Since then I have developed a greater interest in nineteenth-century American history and particularly in postbellum (and post-Darwinian) theological developments. At the same time, I

¹⁶Strong, *Autobiography*, 12.

have also become intrigued by the story of Strong's life and have become convinced that Strong's ethical monism was very much a fruit not only of his own theological reflection but also of his personal experience.

Strong's role as a theological educator over the course of forty years is also of interest to me as a recently initiated assistant professor at a Baptist seminary. Strong's theology (though not specifically his ethical monism) is part of my theological heritage as a Baptist who was raised and largely educated in the North. And in many areas of theology, Strong still has not been surpassed by Garrett, Erickson, Grudem or any other Baptist theologian of more recent vintage. Both Strong's theology and his personal story are worth exploring some hundred years after his retirement from Rochester.

History of Research

Despite Strong's long tenure at Rochester Theological Seminary, his influence within the Northern Baptist denomination, and his relationship to significant and diverse individuals such as John D. Rockefeller, William Rainey Harper, and Walter Rauschenbusch, the literature on Strong himself is relatively thin. Only a handful of dissertations have been written on Strong in the past sixty years, and just two of these have ever been published.¹⁷

¹⁷Published dissertations: Henry, *Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology* (1951) and Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (1985).

Unpublished dissertations and theses: William Beryl West, "Theistic Evolution in the Writings of A. H. Strong and Bernard Ramm" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1962); D. Dennis Hesselgrave, "The Relationship between A. H. Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch at Colgate Rochester Divinity School" (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1970); Myron James Houghton, "An Examination and Evaluation of A. H. Strong's Doctrine of Holy Scripture" (Th.D., diss., Concordia Seminary, 1986); John Hartog III, "Ethical Monism in the Writings of A. H. Strong" (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1990); Peter S. Van Pelt, "An Examination of the Concept of the Atonement in Selected Northern Baptist Theologians: William Newton Clarke, Augustus Hopkins Strong, and Shailer Matthews" (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994); John David Massey, "Solidarity in Sin: An Analysis of the Corporate Conceptions of Sin in the Theologies of Augustus Hopkins Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000); Timothy Keith Christian, "The Theology of Augustus Hopkins Strong: The Role of His Key Concepts and

Interestingly, the two dissertations about Strong that have been published both discussed Strong's ethical monism at some length. However, neither of these approached the idea of ethical monism in the way which this dissertation will approach it, namely, as an attempt to bring together modern thought and Christian theology for the purpose of rapprochement between modernists and conservatives. Carl Henry's work focused on the influence of personal idealism on Strong's theology. Henry's treatment highlighted many significant issues within the development of Strong's thought, but as his four-page bibliography may suggest, numerous sources have surfaced in the past fifty years. Grant Wacker made use of many documents which were unavailable to Henry. And his treatment of Strong is both unusually lucid and well researched. Wacker's book dealt primarily with Strong's relationship to historicism or as he termed it "historical consciousness." But his emphasis on historicism coupled with the fact that he did not explore ethical monism's impact on other elements of Strong's theology make his book a very different type of work than the dissertation being proposed.

In the 1960s, LeRoy Moore wrote a helpful dissertation tracing the rise of theological liberalism at Rochester Theological Seminary.¹⁸ He concluded that the main theological problem at Rochester during Strong's tenure was the issue of religious authority.¹⁹ Moore saw Strong's theology as going through three distinct phases which roughly corresponded to three successive faculties which served at the seminary under Strong's leadership.²⁰ He viewed Strong's theology

the Influence of Modernism as Reflected in the Eighth Edition of His Systematic Theology" (D.Th. diss., University of South Africa, 2007).

¹⁸LeRoy Moore, Jr., "The Rise of American Religious Liberalism at the Rochester Theological Seminary, 1872-1928" (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1966).

¹⁹Ibid., 288.

²⁰Ibid., 284.

as developing primarily in its relationship to authority and Strong's desire to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy while keeping stride with the pace of progressive thought. Moore was onto something. But while he correctly noted the impact of evolution on Strong's thinking, he did not give much attention to the one thing that Strong considered the "key to theology," namely, ethical monism. Other dissertations have addressed Strong's view of Scripture, theistic evolution, atonement, or sin to greater or lesser degrees, but none have dealt with his ethical monism in the way or to the extent which this dissertation will examine it.

These earlier discussions of Strong will inform my work in many ways. But a new study of Strong's ethical monism as a means of bringing together modern philosophy and Christian theology will increase the ability of historians to understand both what Strong was trying to do when he developed ethical monism and what he actually accomplished by embracing it.

Methodology

Today Strong's name is most often remembered in connection with the eighth edition of his *Systematic Theology* (1907). Among his writings, this volume has had the greatest impact within the world of theological studies, and it is the only one of his works that is still in print by a traditional publisher. However, in addition to his *Systematic Theology*, Strong published a number of other volumes which dealt with topics ranging from the American poets and their theology to the state of various mission fields around the world. Strong felt as comfortable citing Shakespeare and Milton as he did Lotze and Bowne. He was a renaissance man who devoted his mental energy to pursuing a broad range of subjects. Of particular interest for this dissertation are his two-volume set of *Miscellanies* (1912) which provides insight into his thought on a wide variety of issues and his *Autobiography* (1981) which reveals much about his own self-

perception. In addition to his published works, a number of Strong's personal letters are extant in libraries scattered throughout the United States. To date, I have been able to gain access to more than sixty of these letters, and I hope to access dozens more in the months to come.

This dissertation will focus on examining both the published and unpublished writings of Strong for the purpose of understanding how his ethical monism related to major trends within late nineteenth-century thought, how it was related to circumstances in his own life and work at Rochester Theological Seminary, and how this pivotal idea impacted his theology. The dissertation will be informed by a host of secondary literature related to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought, but it will rely most heavily on the writings of Strong himself.

Tentative Table of Contents

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION (20 pages)

The Enigma of Augustus Hopkins Strong

The difficulties involved in interpreting Strong

A basic definition of ethical monism

Statement of the question to be answered

What role did ethical monism play in Strong's theology and ministry?

Secondary questions to be addressed

What factors in Strong's life and his intellectual and cultural milieu prompted him to embrace ethical monism?

What theological tendencies in Strong's earlier theology led him to develop ethical monism as a distinct theological concept?

What impact did ethical monism have on Strong's larger theological system?

Statement of the thesis

Ethical monism was a means by which Strong attempted to reconcile Christian theology and modern thought while also trying to solve tensions within his own theology. Strong hoped to bring together modernists and conservatives around the theological common ground of ethical monism. In the end, Strong was unable to persuade modernists to embrace ethical monism or to convince conservatives that ethical monism was a legitimate Christian option. Strong's attempt at a theological synthesis failed due largely to the contradictions which ethical monism produced within both Christian theology and philosophical monism.

Importance of the study

Strong's influence within the Northern Baptist Convention

Strong's leadership at Rochester Theological Seminary

Strong's place within Baptist history

No biography of Strong has been written to date

2. THE MAKING OF A THEOLOGIAN (30 pages)

Strong's heritage

Strong's early life

Strong's preparation for ministry

3. THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES WITHIN THE EARLY MINISTRY OF STRONG (30 pages)

Strong's pastoral ministry in Haverill, MA

Strong's pastoral ministry in Cleveland, OH

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4. ADOPTING ETHICAL MONISM AS BOTH A CONCLUSION AND A STARTING POINT FOR THEOLOGY (35 pages)

Early rejection of all types of monism

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Strong's explanation and defense of ethical monism

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5. ETHICAL MONISM AND STRONG'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE AND EXPERIENCE (30 pages)

Scripture as the revelation of God: moving away from verbal inspiration

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6. ETHICAL MONISM AND STRONG'S VIEW OF EVOLUTION AND MIRACLES (30 pages)

Evolution as the method of God: ethical monism as an explanation of how evolution takes places

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A subtle change of emphasis

7. ETHICAL MONISM AND STRONG'S VIEW OF SIN AND THE ATONEMENT (30 pages)

Early tensions in Strong's theology of the atonement

The atonement as a necessary suffering

8. THEOLOGICAL DENOUEMENT WITHIN THE LATER MINISTRY OF

STRONG (30 pages)

Relationship to Walter Rauschenbusch and other faculty members

Retirement and reflections on changes at Rochester

Tour of mission fields

9. CONCLUSION (15 pages)

A summary of answers to the main research question and the secondary questions

The theological legacy of Strong

The introduction will set forth the main research question to be answered and the thesis to be demonstrated. It will also explain the importance of correctly understanding Strong in light of his influence within the Northern Baptist Convention, his leadership at Rochester Theological Seminary, his place within Baptist history, and his relative neglect among historians.

Chapter two will describe Strong's personal background and early life as well as his training for ministry at Yale and Rochester. His father, Alvah, was a significant figure within the city of Rochester and especially at the seminary. Strong was trained under several individuals who cultivated his interest in modern philosophy.

Chapter three will discuss Strong's pastoral ministry in both Haverhill, MA (1861-1865) and Cleveland, OH (1865-1872).²¹ While in Haverhill, Strong developed his concept of union with Christ. This idea of an experiential union with Christ had a significant bearing on his theological work at Rochester. While pastoring in Cleveland, Strong became acquainted with John D. Rockefeller, and this relationship had a continuing influence on both his personal life

²¹The church in Haverhill still exists. And according to their very helpful church staff, the church possesses records that go back to the late 1700s. Hopefully, I will be able to do some work in their archives in the coming months. The church in Cleveland is also extant, and I hope to be able to examine their records as well.

and his presidency at Rochester. Strong's work at Rochester prior to adopting ethical monism will be discussed in this chapter as well.

Chapter four will explore some of the influences which pushed Strong in the direction of ethical monism. After rejecting all forms of monism in the 1880s, Strong gradually embraced the basic building blocks of ethical monism in the early 1890s and accepted it by at least 1894. Although the concept of ethical monism will be discussed briefly in the introductory chapter, this chapter will allow Strong to explain ethical monism in greater detail and to defend it from potential detractors. This chapter will close by considering how both conservatives and modernists responded to Strong's ethical monism in the early years after he announced it.

Chapter five will examine Strong's views of Scripture and experience. In his earlier theology Strong spoke of Scripture as verbally inspired, but he eventually moved away from such language. His acceptance of ethical monism may well have played a part in this change. Strong's emphasis on the believer's experiential union with Christ had far-reaching implications for his theology and unfortunately placed his theological work on a foundation quite similar to that of many liberals, namely, experience.

Chapter six will discuss Strong's understanding of evolution and miracles. Strong accepted a form of theistic evolution prior to his formulation of ethical monism. That formulation, however, gave him a way of explaining how evolution actually takes place. Strong thought ethical monism helped support and elucidate the concept of theistic evolution. Strong's definition of miracles shifted over time. Although his changes in this area were somewhat subtle, his later understanding of miracles was crafted to fit better with ethical monism.

Chapter seven will address Strong's view of sin and the atonement. Strong stated that tensions within the doctrine of the atonement were a major impetus that pushed him toward

ethical monism. Strong's ethical monism caused him to put forward a number of rather novel ideas about the atonement. This chapter will discuss how ethical monism helped Strong answer difficult questions related to the atonement and how ethical monism forced him into some positions which were quite foreign to traditional Christian theology.

Chapter eight will examine the later ministry of Strong at Rochester. Strong hired numerous liberals to teach at Rochester. His relationship with these men will be briefly explored. Strong eventually lamented the fact that Rochester was becoming a seedbed of liberalism, but he never seemed to accept his own responsibility for the seminary's move in this direction.

Chapter nine, the conclusion, will summarize the answers to the main research question and the related secondary questions. It will also discuss Strong's continuing theological legacy. Many lessons can be learned from the mistakes which Strong made. He appears as a tragic figure who lived on the eve of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy without taking a clear stand. His failure to maintain a distinctively Christian theology, and for that matter, a distinctively Christian faculty at the seminary, place him in the seat of one who failed to raise a clear and univocal voice against the rising tide of modernism at a critical moment. Rather than harnessing modern philosophy's infatuation with monism for Christ as he hoped, Strong let his own theology and the school over which he presided become infiltrated by unorthodox principles and people. This unfortunately is part of the legacy of A. H. Strong.

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