



# Charles Hodge: His Life, Importance, and the Church's Spirituality

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*This insert to Mid-America Reformed Seminary's newsletter, the Messenger, is the third in a series of "Reformed Pathways" inserts in which Mid-America faculty members share insights regarding various areas of Reformed thought.*

Who is Charles Hodge and why is he important? Many today know little or nothing of Hodge and mainstream scholars who know him often scorn him for being a champion of Calvinism and the Bible long after such was fashionable. According to this way of thinking, it's acceptable for Calvin to treat the Bible's every declaration as true because he was at the very beginning of the modern era, or perhaps better, at the end of the middle ages. More recent churchmen, however, have no such excuse, because such a high biblical view was rendered passé by the Enlightenment. Although Calvin and Owen may be excused for their views, someone like Jonathan Edwards—living as he did in the full blaze of Enlightenment rationalism—had little excuse for a defense of Calvinism. If Edwards was out of step with the theological currents of his time, how much more Hodge appeared as a dinosaur in an era of Jacksonian democracy, which was quite at odds with Calvinist sensibilities. Many scholars have viewed—and continue to view—Charles Hodge as little more than a parody of himself: a rationalist, Biblicist, confessional Calvinist in an age that had long before abandoned such quaint sympathies. To those who are confessional and share Hodge's Calvinistic faith, however, Hodge should be recognized as a tireless defender of the truth for whom we ought to be profoundly thankful.

The opening question, therefore, may be answered in this manner: Charles Hodge was a nineteenth-century Old School Presbyterian theologian who trained thousands of men in America to preach the gospel during a time in which Calvinism was losing its prominence and

giving way to Arminianism, Socinianism, Unitarianism, and worse. Hodge's son, Archibald Alexander Hodge, chronicled his life. His account (as well as Robert W. Anderson's) furnishes much of the information that follows.

## *The Life of Charles Hodge*

Charles Hodge was born December 28, 1797 in Philadelphia as the last of five children. His father died six months later, leaving his mother to raise him and his brother, Hugh (his other siblings having died in infancy).

Hodge always cited his mother, Mary, with faithfully nurturing him in the ways of the Lord. She taught him the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which he recited to his prominent pastor, Ashbel Green, of Second Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia; Green was also later president of Princeton, during the time of Hodge's student years. Hodge's brother, Hugh, though only a few years his senior, was more like a father to the fatherless Hodge, not only during his childhood, but all of his life. He looked to Hugh, who became a prominent and successful surgeon in Philadelphia, for advice, used him as a sounding board, and on numerous occasions requested and received generous pecuniary aid from Hugh. His letters to Hugh are an important part of the Hodge manuscript collection both at Princeton Seminary and in the University Special Collections. They reveal a side of Hodge seldom seen by the public. Knowing how much others looked to him as an example, Hodge was careful in giving expression to his political views, but was more unguarded in his private correspondence with Hugh. In one letter to Hugh, he divulged his view of fellow-Presbyterian President Andrew Jackson, describing the President in heated, pejorative terms.

Hodge matriculated at Princeton at the age of 14, entering the sophomore class of what was still called the College of New Jersey.



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Princeton had started in 1746 to replace "Log Colleges" that had arisen among New Side Presbyterians as regional training schools for the men needed to pastor the burgeoning Presbyterian Church in the Middle Colonies. Many national leaders like James Madison studied there, and the sixth President of Princeton, John Witherspoon, signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Princeton had quickly become a leading institution and so focused, in fact, on public affairs, that a number of churchmen were concerned that its role as theological training ground was in jeopardy.

There was the perception of the need for a place dedicated to preparing gospel ministers. So in 1812, Princeton Theological Seminary was founded. Hodge entered it in 1816 after graduating from the College. Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller were the first professors at the Seminary. Hodge was asked by Alexander upon graduation if he would be a professor there. Hodge (then 22) began more intensive Hebrew study and began teaching in 1820. He was ordained to the ministry in 1821 and in 1822 was appointed as Professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature.

Hodge married Sarah Bache, great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, in 1822. In 1826, as then was customary for American scholars, he left her and their two children with his mother and sailed to study in Europe for two years. He studied in Paris and then in Halle, Germany, where he met the great Hebraist Wilhelm Gesenius (about whom

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These articles derive from Rev. Strange's current work on his Ph.D. dissertation regarding Charles Hodge and the spirituality of the church. The "Four Favorites" was previously published in *New Horizons* (Aug/Sept 2009) and parts of "The Significance of Hodge" in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2003).

## The Spirituality of the Church in Hodge's Ecclesiology

Some scholars have argued that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, as developed in the 19th century American Old School Presbyterianism of which Hodge was a part, was a profoundly conservative doctrine, developed to remove the church as a player in civil society's strike over American slavery. Others have seen it—in the hands of certain Southerners especially—as a radical rather than reactionary doctrine arising out of a *jure divino* Presbyterianism and a strict constitutionalism. As an Old School Presbyterian, Hodge did not share the particular brand of high Presbyterianism of his fellow Old Schooler, James Henley Thornwell, regarding it as sectarian and viewing its doctrine of the spirituality of the church as a “novelty” calculated to silence the prophetic voice of the church. Hodge did have a doctrine of the spirituality of the church, but it functioned differently than Thornwell's, which is not surprising since it arose out of a different vision of the church.

Hodge's particular vision of the church shaped his view of the church's spirituality, which had the dual effect of insuring that the church would remain the church—not confusing itself or its operations with those of the state—while not rendering the church mute in carrying out the Great Commission, including the task of comprehensive discipleship. Hodge's balanced vision well informs the Presbyterian Church—both in its disestablished forms (the Presbyterian churches in America and the various free Presbyterians in the UK) and in its established forms (the Church of Scotland)—in being properly distinguished from and not dominated by the state, while not being marginalized and rendered irrelevant. For Hodge, the spirituality of the church meant that the primary calling of the church was spiritual in focus; that its concerns were not, first of all, temporal, but spiritual.

Hodge also believed, however, that when the church properly tended its spiritual concerns one would live temporally in a godly manner; that the holiness of life flowing from proper spirituality impacted the whole of one's life: family, education, state, and every sphere into which the Christian's duties thrust him. A renewed interest in some quarters on the spirituality of the church, including Hodge's view of the spirituality of the church, tends to make Hodge sound as if his view renders him

irrelevant—as it does some of his fellow Old School Presbyterians—to any concerns beyond the institutional church. Hodge did see the primary concern of the church as the communion of the saints, as spiritual, but he also believed that when the church carried out its primary task, the faithful preaching of the gospel, such proclamation could not fail to have wider societal impact. Hodge did not see his view at odds with the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, but in line with how the Reformed have always conceived of such a doctrine whether or not it went by that name.

Given the contention that Hodge's spirituality doctrine develops out of his



Charles Hodge

broader ecclesiology, his doctrine of the church warrants examination. Hodge's failure to produce a section on ecclesiology as part of his *Systematic Theology* has occasioned much notice, leading some to conclude that Hodge has an undeveloped doctrine of the church. One can gather, however, from the plethora of articles he published throughout his career at Princeton, that he was quite interested in and thought deeply about both the principles and practices of ecclesiology. A number of his most incisive articles were gathered in a volume by his son, A.A. Hodge, and published posthumously. Hodge's *Church Polity* is divided into two primary sections, the first addressing what he terms preliminary principals, and the second focusing on application of those principles. It is in the preliminary principle section that we can discover Hodge's doctrine of the church.

In short, Hodge's doctrine is that the church is not primarily an organization, but an organism. The church in its essence is the communion of saints, composed of all those who are in saving union with Christ and

communion with each other. The church is, first of all, invisible, and the true church cannot be identified with any particular outward organization that identifies itself as a church; rather the true church exists throughout the world in many bodies that go by the name church and consists of all those within such visible organizations who are true believers. This definition of the church has received much criticism and some, doubtless, is due. Hodge taught, however, that the communion of saints always manifests itself in visible organizations, although no one church or denomination—even his own Presbyterian church—may be identified as the true church to the exclusion of others. Hodge was adamant in defining the church this way, which he believed to be evangelical and catholic.

The invisible church manifests itself in various visible organizations, of which Hodge finds the Presbyterian to be truest to biblical principles of church government. Hodge contends that Presbyterianism, which he sees as involving three primary principles, pertains not to the essence of the church, but to its perfection and maturation. Hodge believes that to make Presbyterianism pertain to the being, rather than the well-being of the church, is to un-church all who are not Presbyterian; even as Rome had un-churched all but those in submission to bishops who themselves were in communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. Hodge thought that such a high churchism could tend to “churchianity” and reduce the whole of theology to ecclesiology.

Hodge's ecclesiology was very much a function of his soteriology. While the church furnishes the context for the administration of the means of grace, it is the Holy Spirit's efficacious application of those means in the saving of souls that constitutes the church. As Warfield said about Calvin, Hodge is a theologian of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit applies the salvation accomplished by Christ and brings us into the church, it is the Holy Spirit who gathers and perfects the saints in the communion of the saints, the church. By the work of the Holy Spirit, believers are properly called “spiritual,” and it is for this reason that the church—over against the temporal concerns of the state—is particularly a spiritual institution. Hodge's spirituality of the church must be understood in the context of his deeper conviction that the church is essentially those in whom the Spirit has worked, and is working unto salvation.

## Life of Hodge, *cont'd from p. 1*

Hodge wrote to his mother, "He has a silly laugh for every thing he says...the last man I should have selected from ten thousand as a distinguished philologist"). While in Germany, Hodge met important figures like Friedrich Augustus Tholuck, Augustine Neander, Ernst Hengstenberg, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, and with some formed a lasting friendship. He also encountered cultural milestones, like Mendelssohn's revival of Bach, writing, "They sang, also, one piece from an old German composer, Bach, whose works have long been neglected, but which they say are equal to almost any of the best German compositions."

Hodge resumed teaching and, in 1840, reluctantly went from the chair of Oriental and Biblical Literature to the chair of Exegetical and Didactic Theology at the request of his aging mentor, Alexander. Though Hodge did not desire to move from biblical studies to systematic theology, he made his lasting reputation in that discipline and the church is profoundly grateful for that shift.

In 1846, Hodge was elected moderator when the Presbyterian Church met at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He was a vital churchman all his life, active in the Board of Home and Foreign Missions and Education/Publications as well as special committees (e.g., revising the Book of Discipline). While he did not always attend General Assembly, he generally wrote a lengthy review of its actions, relying on trusted persons in attendance. These reports were published in the *Princeton Review* and serve as an excellent index of Hodge's views on important ecclesiastical issues of the day. Hodge's views were widely sought and deeply respected in his time.



*Hodge Hall-Princeton Theological Seminary*

Charles and Sarah had eight children before her death on Christmas Day, 1849. Hodge wrote to his brother, "No human being can tell, prior to the experience, what it is to lose out of a family its head and heart, the source at once of its light and love."

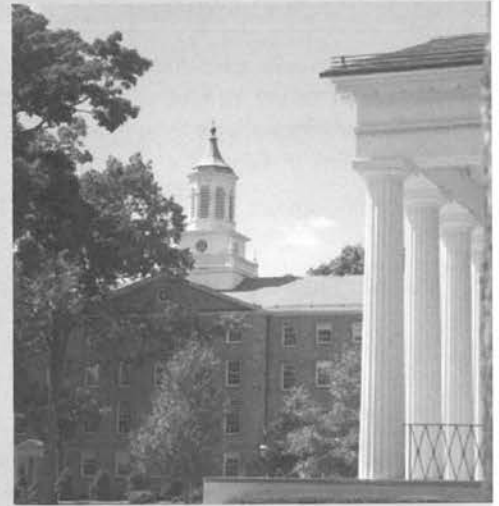
In 1852 he married a widow, Mary Hunter Stockton, which also was a happy marriage. Hodge generally seemed cheerful in spite of frequent economic difficulties (with which Hugh helped) and chronic health problems (particularly a leg that impeded movement).

A semi-centennial celebration was observed at the First Presbyterian Church in Princeton on April 24, 1872 for the fiftieth year of his professorship at the Seminary. The following greeting was sent from the principals and professors of the Theological Faculties of the Free Church of Scotland: "We only express



to yourself what, on occasions without number, we have expressed to others, when we say that we regard your services in the cause of revealed truth, extending over a half a century, as of inestimable value, and that we look on you as one of the chief instruments raised up by the Head of the church, in these times of doubt and contention, for maintaining in its purity the faith once delivered unto the saints.... We congratulate you further on the honorable and distinguished place which you hold in the esteem of the whole Presbyterian Church, and of all churches that prize Evangelical truth—on the affectionate regard so warmly cherished for you by your students, both past and present—and on the happy domestic influence, which through God's blessing, has given to the church sons like-minded with yourself, following in your footsteps, and aiding in your work."

The distinguished churchman, Henry Boardman, addressed Hodge on behalf of



those gathered to honor him, including four hundred of his former students: "In reviewing this half century of your labors, we reverently glorify God in you." Speaking of the type of theology taught in the Seminary, Boardman said, "A censorious critic said the other day, derisively in reviewing the volumes of Theology, lately published, 'It is enough for Dr. Hodge to believe a thing to be true that he finds it in the Bible.' We accept the token. Dr. Hodge has never gotten beyond the Bible. It contains every jot and tittle of his theology." Like Spurgeon, Hodge thought that Calvinism was but a nickname for the gospel. He gloried that he and his Princeton colleagues sought to be faithful to it and gladly defended what critics derided as "unoriginal Calvinism."

In response to the reverence, affection, and gratitude expressed on that occasion, Hodge said, "A man is to be commiserated who is called upon to attempt the impossible. The certainty of failure does not free him from the necessity of the effort. It is impossible that I should make you understand the feelings which swell my heart almost to bursting." The much-loved and deeply-loving Hodge died on June 19, 1878.



*The tomb of Charles Hodge*

## Charles Hodge: Four Favorites

For more information on Charles Hodge, I recommend the following, which are my favorites of the many works available by and about Charles Hodge. For your convenience, I've included a brief summary of each.

1. **David B. Calhoun. *Princeton Seminary (1812-1929, 2 vv)*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994-1996.**

These incomparable volumes provide an informative and sympathetic treatment of Hodge and his academic/ecclesiastical ancestors and progeny in the "glory years" of old Princeton Seminary. Since Hodge taught more than three thousand students at Princeton for more than fifty years, it is quite helpful to have this treatment that sets him, his colleagues, and his students in context.

2. **Charles Hodge. *Systematic Theology. Commentaries. Church Polity. Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* (I'll let you pick publishers).**

Given Hodge's enormous influence in the nineteenth century as one of the prime players in American Calvinism, it is surprising that so little is readily accessible about him. To know Hodge properly, one should dip into his Systematic Theology to see how, following Turretin, he defends and develops the Reformed faith. His commentaries (on Romans, I and II Corinthians, and Ephesians) show that he was no mean exegete. And his polity and history helpfully illumine how Hodge helped shape the Old School Presbyterian Church in America, engaging in many of the controversies of his day.

3. **W. Andrew Hoffercker. *Piety and the Princeton Theologians*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1981.**

This book treats not only Hodge, but also his mentor, Archibald Alexander, and his successor, Benjamin Warfield. Hoffercker shows that Princeton Seminary, and Hodge as a key player there, had not only a head for the Reformed faith, but also a heart that was warmly devotional. Hodge's love of and commitment to Christ and his fellows believers comes through clearly in this short volume.

4. **John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, editors. *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.**

Though many of these essays are critical of Hodge, they are nonetheless more appreciative of him than much of scholarship of the last century. Hodge, as a partisan of Scottish Common Sense Realism, has been dismissed by many scholars as a rationalist/evidentialist who naively approached the Bible to mine its data as a scientist would nature. While there is some merit in this criticism of Hodge, it appears that a long overdue Hodge renaissance might be in the offing, in which Hodge will be better appreciated for his orthodoxy and godliness and less caricatured merely as a theological troglodyte.

### *The Significance of Hodge*

If Hodge had done nothing else, he possessed great ecclesiastical importance in his service as professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary for more than fifty years. Upon his retirement in 1877, he left an enormous legacy. Moreover, Hodge published a vast number writings. And a large number of books and articles have been written about Hodge.

Hodge's literary legacy is a rich treasure trove for scholars and churchmen today. For those who wish to follow his way of orthodoxy, his three-volume *Systematic Theology* (based on his classroom lectures) continues to furnish valuable insight into the truth of God's Word.

He wrote several commentaries that continue to prove useful. Particularly helpful for historical/ecclesiastical purposes are his recently reprinted *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church and Discussions in Church Polity*. His prescience is evident in his diatribe against naturalism, *What is Darwinism?* It might be argued that the Scottish Common Sense Realism of the Princetonians was epistemologically naive, but a careful reading of Hodge may reveal greater philosophical sophistication and understanding than previously recognized by both liberal and Reformed critics.

Not only did Hodge leave a literary legacy, he left an incalculable human legacy. During his five decades in the classroom, he has helped

train more than 3,000 pastors, missionaries, and teachers. Two of his eight children became professors at the Seminary: theologian Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886) and Caspar Wistar Hodge (1830-1881), professor of New Testament. What Charles Hodge meant to the Presbyterian church in America, particularly to the Old School (1837-1869), can scarcely be overestimated.

Hodge was not always on the winning side of some of the great debates that divided the church during his life. He was not on the victor's side of the Gardiner Spring Resolution in 1861 (which led to the split of the church into North/South and the formation of the PCCSA, becoming ultimately the PCUS); and he was not on the victor's side of the movement to reunite the Old and New School in 1869. He also took some positions (e.g., on the question of two/three office, Roman Catholic baptism, and the legitimacy of church boards) that subsequently fell into disfavor, though his views on those topics have been revived in more recent years. Hodge was not always followed by a majority in the church. Nonetheless, he was a great leader for the Presbyterian church, one from whom Presbyterian churches still have much to learn and whose works warrant careful study.

Even when his positions did not gain ascendancy, however, his godly character and counsel frequently helped insure that the church came to positions more closely in conformity to Scripture and the confessions than would have been the case without his leadership. His warnings against the consequences of the reunion between Old and New School, for instance, appear to have been vindicated by subsequent history, borne out in the heresy trials of men like David Swing and Charles Briggs, the doctrinal downgrade of the 1903 confessional revisions, and the 1906 reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterians with the whole Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy that followed. It is a testimony to Hodge's influence that Princeton remained theologically sound as long as it did—far longer than any other seminary in the PCUSA. Princeton retained its positive influence in the Presbyterian Church long after other seminaries had capitulated to liberalism/modernism, not beginning its decline until years after Hodge's 1878 death, with the election of J. Ross Stevenson as President in 1914 and the subsequent reorganization of 1927-28. Hodge's legacy, however, continues in all those seminaries and churches that are dedicated to neither taking from nor adding to the Word of God. May their tribe increase!