



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

# Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I have just completed reading a fascinating new book which illuminates the seismic theological and ecclesiastical changes taking place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book is entitled [The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher](#). Written by Debby Applegate and published by Doubleday.

Henry Ward Beecher was an amazingly charismatic and controversial pastor, beginning as a Puritan, then becoming Presbyterian, and finally Congregational. Beecher was on the forefront of transforming mainline Christianity from old-style Calvinist to a much more moderate and even liberal theology. He also was front and center in some of the most tumultuous and divisive social and political changes in our history.

Looking back we might almost say that Beecher was a composite of Robert Schuller, Norman Vincent Peale, William Sloan Coffin and Elmer Gantry. In 1858 he was named the most celebrated preacher and most popular orator in the land. But like many before and after him, he became cursed with hubris, believing his own press notices, and soon betrayed his office. Henry Ward Beecher is both an American hero and an American tragedy.

He was born in 1813 as the son of "the last great Puritan minister in America, Lyman Beecher." His father had two parallel missions in life, to save people from sin, death and the devil, and to save America from moral depravity. He was one of the greatest fire and brimstone preachers, in the mold of Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God." He was so powerful that Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French interpreter of American culture, called him the "political priest."

Lyman Beecher, the "great gun of Calvinism," would incarnate the American paradox of the "activist conservative," in defense of traditional values. (All twelve of his children would eventually reject the Puritan theology). Lyman Beecher created his own evangelical army, distributing cheap, mass produced newspapers and tracts, laying the groundwork for the modern mass media. He believed that sin and corruption lurked around every corner, and he led the crusade to turn all of America into God's kingdom, in preparation for the return of Christ.

Henry was born the eighth child of twelve, a jovial and enterprising student. Attending Amherst College, he excelled in locution and debate. Since being a first-rate orator was one of the surest paths to success in that period of history, Beecher was quickly in his element. When his father, Lyman, accepted the presidency of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, all seven sons would eventually join him.

But a crisis soon confronted the seminary, which eventually

would bring the seminary to the brink of closing. It had to do with the increasing battle over slavery. Slavery was now legal in the southern states and illegal in northern states, and the fight was accelerating over what would happen in new states. The real battle was over power, which way the new states went would determine ascendancy in the nation. While Cincinnati was located in a northern state, it actually faced south and many of its leaders were pro-slavery. Henry Beecher had no choice, he was thrust into the midst of this national debate, and would become a leading abolitionist.

Following ordination, Beecher served two congregations in Indiana. However life in the "west" was still highly risky, with malaria and cholera commonplace, especially among children. Henry and his wife Eunice lost a couple of children due to disease. Thus in 1847 at the age of 34, he accepted a call to move back east, becoming the pastor of the new Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York.

Suddenly the career and reputation of Henry Ward Beecher soared. He was now among the forefront of those who wanted to grow a progressive and modern church. His personality and passions matched the ambitious, hard-driving, upwardly mobile members of his church and community. Brooklyn would soon grow from just a few hundred residents to the seventh largest city in the U.S, and the church grew with it.

Within a decade of his arrival, Plymouth became one of the largest congregations in America, with a worship center that now housed 3,000 people. His preaching was so popular that tourists by the hundreds took Sunday ferries, nicknamed "Beecher Boats" from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Instead of a pulpit the church had a wide stage which extended out into the middle of the audience, so that the preacher and congregation could have a true face-to-face experience.

No less famous of a commentator, Mark Twain described his own experience at Plymouth Church. "Beecher went marching up and down on the stage, sawing his arms into the air, howling sarcasms this way and that, discharging rockets of poetry, and exposing mines of eloquence, halting now and then to stamp his foot three times in succession to emphasize a point."

Beecher also had an amazing gift of humor, sadly lacking in most churches. By temperament he was naturally funny, putting human foibles in such an ironic light that people could not help but giggle. Of course such behavior created apoplexy in the strict Puritanism of the day, but Henry continued to launch an assault on almost everything his father's religion had held dear. He raised up congregational singing and created a huge controversy when he instituted "open communion," inviting Christians of all denominations to participate in the Lord's

Supper.

Plymouth Church became under Beecher's leadership the epicenter of abolitionist activity in the country. At a time when most churches were silent on the subject, and when many prominent pastors quoted Scripture to claim that God even approved of slave owning, Beecher thundered often against slavery as being ungodly and unchristian. "The nation's soul," he proclaimed, "would be destroyed if it did not purge itself of this monstrous sin."

The congregation became the stopping point for many runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, even though it was against the law to harbor such slaves. Some Sundays he would even host these ex-slaves in the audience, challenging members to help them find freedom. At the same time the fame of the Beechers grew by leaps and bounds when his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, published her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, which became the single best selling book in the world, translated into 58 languages.

Beecher also became a champion of women's rights, working together with such female leaders as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Henry became a part of what became the entertainment industry, matching wits with other famous speakers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Frederick Douglas. In fact, Emerson issued this compliment: "Our four most powerful men in the virtuous class in this country are Horace Greeley, Theodore Parker, Henry Ward Beecher and Horace Mann."

Tracing the career of Henry Beecher, it is clear that he was continually shifting his theological principles. Contrary to his father's emphasis on the wrath of God, Henry focused almost exclusively on the love and mercy of God. Instead of a "rule of law" he centered on a "rule of love." His famous declaration was often cited, "higher than morality, higher than philanthropy, higher than worship, comes the love of God." He no longer saw God as an exacting parent but as a loving parent.

Eventually he would reject the entire teaching of hell and original sin, focusing instead on God's gifts of love and happiness. He struck a responsive chord especially among those who had been scarred by hellfire and damnation preaching. He became in many ways the pioneer of "liberal mainline Christianity," which has come to dominate so many of the mainline denominations today.

But all of this fame and notoriety led Beecher to succumb to unbridled hubris. Herein lies the tragedy of Henry Beecher. Three specific areas stand out. First he became addicted to material things, and he tried to amass as much money as possible. This led him to live beyond his means, borrowing large sums of money to fund his luxurious tastes. In order to support his increasing wants, he was forced to accept more and more speaking and writing invitations, all for healthy fees. He lost his sense of balance.

Secondly, he was drawn into the political realm as well, where grace so often becomes ungrace. He was an early champion of

the Republican Party which emerged in 1856 as the abolitionist party. But he quickly became a political power broker, exploiting the extensive patronage system to benefit family and friends. When the Republican Party splintered some years later, he was in a no-win situation, as well as Plymouth Church. Whenever the church becomes too closely identified with a political party, disaster is just around the corner.

And thirdly, he reacted to an unhappy marriage by spending enormous amounts of time in the presence of adoring females who flocked to the church. Soon rumors began circulating about his alleged infidelities. One newspaper even printed this incendiary quote: "Every Sunday Henry Ward Beecher stands in his Brooklyn pulpit and preaches to a dozen of his mistresses." The "dozen" may well have been an exaggeration, but it seems clear that he was violating his marriage vows quite regularly.

The controversy exploded in 1874, and even before Cable TV and talk radio the entire country was riveted on Beecher's fate. One New York paper wrote, "we can recall no event since the murder of Abraham Lincoln that has so moved the people as the question whether Beecher is the 'basest of men.'" During that summer alone, the New York Times printed 37 editorials and 105 news stories about Beecher's plight. A civil suit by the husband of one alleged mistress led to a trial that lasted six months, followed by eight days of jury deliberation, fifty-two ballots and a jury divided 9 to 3 in favor of Beecher.

Henry Ward Beecher managed to keep his ministry position at Plymouth Church but never recovered his previous buoyancy and joy. By 1883 he had rejected all forms of the Calvinism of his father and had even withdrawn from the roster of the Congregational Church. When he died in 1886, all of the flags around New York City were at half-mast and some fifty thousand mourners filed past his casket. Mark Twain, who was not enamored with conventional morality, eulogized his friend with the quote:

"What a pity, that so insignificant a matter as to the chastity or unchastity of (the woman named in the suit) could clip the locks of this Samson and make him as other men, in the estimation of a nation of Lilliputians creeping and climbing around his shoe-soles." Other more traditional critics would rightly claim that Beecher's sins were not insignificant at all, but rather a tragedy outcome for a person with such gifts and intellect. Like so many other Christian leaders of his day and our own, he did not end well.

Biographer Applegate summarizes Beecher's import, "At his best, Beecher represented what remains the most lovable and popular strain of American culture, incurable optimism, can-do enthusiasm, and open minded, open hearted pragmatism. He brought such unconditional love that the entire country could feel his warmth. For fifty years he tried to persuade the nation that love was what God wanted for all of us."

Anyone who is interested in history, especially American history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would enjoy this intersection of religion and culture.