

"TRUTH FOR AUTHORITY, NOT AUTHORITY FOR TRUTH"

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF THEODORE PARKER

by

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## PREFACE

It seems fair to say that there is a renewed interest of late in Theodore Parker. And it is not simply that curiosity with which the orthodox church has always viewed its more notable heretics, rather it is an attraction which Parker himself inspires--especially in these days of neo-fundamentalism.

Indeed, Parker's distinction was not that he was a liberal; he was surrounded by some of America's leading liberal intellectuals in his day. What was memorable about the man was that he dared to take into the pulpit those thoughts which even his Unitarian colleagues kept wisely hidden in the private study of their minds. What many of them thought, Parker preached, and he preached it in a brutally honest fashion.

The result was that Parker struck at the nerve of orthodox Christianity--the miracles. His was a theology which not only by-passed them in its obsession with the love of God in the hearts of men, but made them look pale by comparison. Others had questioned the supernatural elements of Christianity, but Parker's conviction that they were the foundation of an easier faith proved to be a greater indictment than his Boston friends could bear.

In addition, and perhaps most unsettling of all, his life was an endorsement of that conviction--while those around him railed against his theology, his own parishioners, the blessed simple folk of West Roxbury, loved him dearly. He hugged their children, sat hours at their sick beds, squatted evenings with the farmers and shelled beans, helped with plowing and planting, and kissed them all with a humane, not a parochial admiration. Throughout his stormy career, these people never forsook him, even while their neighbors north and south gossiped about this strange man who "believed nothing."

Parker resolved that religion was a matter of the heart, but only after the head had taken one as far as it could, and not in the opposite direction. His critics were forever saying that he was negative about Christianity, but to those whose life he touched, he was relentlessly positive--positive about the love of God and this Christ through whom it was mediated. That was a step far beyond Emerson and the Transcendentalists, with whom he was often sarcastically compared.

## NOTE TO THE READER

To properly study the life of Theodore Parker one must examine the blend of everything that went into it-- childhood, home and family, early seminary days, a thousand books, countless friendships, and much, much more. It is next to impossible to separate any particular aspect of that life without losing a great deal. But given the limits of this paper, the author wishes to sketch briefly his theological development, from that process which begins early in childhood, through the disillusionments of seminary and early ministry, and into the mind of a preacher/social reformer, and heretic whom even his Unitarian associates called a non-Christian. The final chapter, "The Invisible Pulpit" will deal briefly with the broader impact of his life upon American culture.

As a Congregationalist, I selected Parker because, although he was Unitarian all his life, his impact on American Protestantism and his relation to the Unification Controversy of the early 19th century bear directly on the history of my own denomination. This is not to mention the fact that for the most productive decade of his life he preached at the 28th Congregational Church in Boston--a pulpit the people provided that he might be heard.

I also firmly believe that while Parker was a Unitarian in 19th century New England, he could easily be accepted in the Congregational churches today.

Beyond this, I was intrigued by my first acquaintance with Parker, which came this past September at a lecture given by Dr. Howard Conn, speaking at the Boston Seminar of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies. It seemed clear to me, in light of Dr. Conn's comments, that a thorough understanding of Theodore Parker would shed invaluable light upon the history of the social gospel in America and the further development of the free Congregational churches.

At a crucial time in the history of the church in America, Theodore Parker drove a wedge permanently between those two great kinds of faith--the one which binds the spirits of men to the authority of the past, and the other which believes in the living and present God, incarnate forever in human conscience and love. Parker became an irrepressible force for the latter kind--even though it often stripped him of honor and companionship.

Ironically, considering all the attempts to drive him from the ministry, Theodore Parker, that "mere Transcendentalist," guided all his days by the gift from God which men call conscience, and found only one thing to surpass it: Jesus who was the Christ.

--Robin R. Meyers  
October 30, 1978

## CHAPTER I

### YOUNG THEODORE: LOVE AND CONSCIENCE

Theodore Parker was born in Lexington Massachusetts, on August 24, 1810--the last, and unplanned, of eleven children. It was not insignificant to young Parker that the town in which his family lived was a household word. Not only were the fateful first shots of the revolution fired there but Parker's grandfather, Captain John Parker, commanded the troops in that first battle. Needless to say, that memory burned in the lad with an exaggerated brilliance reserved for the hearts of little boys, and the very idea of freedom itself was more than books and talk, it was a family affair.

Considering the intellect that was already fast developing and the amazing mental energy that would someday characterize Parker's whole life, biographers are fond of suggesting that it was all very evident in the crib. But he was probably much like a thousand other little boys in Massachusetts, though his parents did much to provide an environment where learning was glorious and natural. He was allowed to run through fields of flowers near the house and take reckless dashes across freshly fallen snow in his nightshirt.<sup>1</sup> The big Parker house, full of books and people who read them, surrounded him with love and the chance to

fall in love with nature. It was obvious in his later attraction to Transcendentalism, that Parker had more than just pleasant memories of the woods.

When he was barely old enough to talk, Theodore was baptized according to the family tradition. According to the story, he cried out "Oh, don't!" just as the water touched his face. Again, the chroniclers are fond of pointing out this prophetic obstinacy--but water is water and boys are boys.

What was unusual in the Parker house was the availability of books on the "popular theology." Apparently Theodore read them early on, "disapproving stoutly of their more brutal elements."<sup>2</sup> Even though his environment was Unitarian from the beginning, Parker was troubled, in a childish way, with some of the more obvious hypocracies of religious men and women. It was only the beginning.

His father was hard-working, simple, and not outwardly pious; he was a good mechanic, in the Parker tradition and loved to read. Parker's mother was the deeply religious one, and it was on her knee, which Parker later called "the greatest temple of learning," that Theodore found the common touch--the foundation of pure, uncomplicated love that would someday support his whole theology. It was from his father that Parker got most of his intellect, but it was from his mother that he learned the depth and possibility of human affection. She was not stained, Theodore said once in his journal, with "the dark theology of the time."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution made by Parker's parents was the atmosphere they created for developing a sense of conscience. In a rather famous tale of Parker's childhood he finds a tortoise and considers killing it, as he had often seen the neighbor boys do. He remembers that suddenly a voice within him said, simply, "It is Wrong." When he asked his mother about this strange voice she said, "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right."<sup>4</sup>

The theology that would someday emerge in the mature Parker echoes this sentiment again and again--conscience, the "voice of God in the soul of man"--follow it, wherever it leads, even against the doctrine of the church.

As he grew older, Parker fell in love with study. In fact, this is the characteristic of his childhood that most people remember: an insatiable appetite for ideas. Whatever it was that other Massachusetts boys were buying with their allowance it surely wasn't a Latin dictionary, which Theodore purchased with money earned picking huckleberries.

And as he grew sharp in mind while remaining innocent and honest in judgement, young Theodore began to be puzzled about his early contact with the church. It was difficult for him, very early, to understand his life as somehow inherently wicked, lost in sin as the Westminster

Catechism seemed to imply. He was a good boy, even if a bit mischievous, and trying to be better all the while, but where could he find anything in his experience that resembled a "genuine conviction of sin" that would underlie the need for conversion? Out of this confusion and naivete' Parker tossed in his bed at night and in a journal years later he wrote:

I can hardly think without a shudder of the terrible effect the doctrine of eternal damnation had on me. How many, many hours, have I wept with terror as I lay on my bed, till, between praying and weeping, sleep gave me repose. But before I was nine years old this fear went away, and I saw clearer light in the goodness of God. But for years, say from seven till ten, I said my prayers with much devotion, I think, and then continued to repeat, 'Lord, forgive my sins,' till sleep came on me. 5

That religion should seem so contrary to nature was a theme which disturbed and dominated much of Parker's thought. Why, he asked, very early on, should it tear down the heart instead of lift it up?

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## CHAPTER II

### SEMINARY AND THE SEEDS OF DOUBT

The effect of seminary on any young minister cannot be underestimated--the same was true of young Parker. The religious impulse which drives many men into ministry is an intensely personal thing, something one clutches to his breast and protects from the world. But it cannot stay hidden before the exegetes, it will not escape the ruthless questions of Old and New Testament professors, and seldom does it remain quite so glibly intact after the barrage of theological problems, many of which rise out of the guts, rather than trip merrily out of the heart.

Doubt is introduced, and its transforming effect varies depending on the capacity of each young minister to live with it--some graduate still clutching, now even harder. Others, especially those with a keen and consuming conscience, are rearranged completely, sometimes destroyed. For Theodore Parker, the process was painful, but liberating.

When he announced to his father one day that he was entering Harvard College the reply was practical and concerned: "Why, Theodore, you know I can't support you there."<sup>6</sup> But Parker had a plan, and it shows clearly that learning itself was the motive for going to school. He worked part-time and attended classes when he could, paying no tuition.

He passed all the courses and exams but got no degree. The reputation he earned at Harvard was sufficient to qualify him for a teaching position in several country schools, paying \$25 a month. He was apparently overly strict, demanding the same appetite from his students that he possessed and determined to raise their standard of disciplined study. Those were lonely, anxious, and indecisive days in Boston. To pass the time and taste the family heritage Parker joined the Lexington militia, quickly acquiring the rank of lieutenant. But there was little enthusiasm about it and he was already anticipating seminary. Occassionally, on Sundays, Parker would stroll over to hear Dr. Lyman Beecher preach. He recalls:

I greatly respected the talents, the zeal, and the enterprise of that able man, who certainly taught me much; but I came away with no confidence in his theology. The better I understood it, the more self-contradictory, unnatural and hateful did it seem. 7

Theodore continued to teach and move from place to place. In one instance, he built a school in an old bakery and began classes with only two students. In a very short time, as parents recognized the opportunity available, his flock grew to 54, one of which was a black boy. He didn't last very long--a few whispers, a few nods, and he was out. It was Theodore's first experience with racial prejudice and he never forgot it. Like so many other social injustices, it lodged in his throat and through a thousand future speeches on antislavery it never budged.

Parker maintained strong ties with the church and the Reverend Convers Francis made him a superintendent of

the Sunday School program. It was here, after Theodore had moved from Boston to Watertown, that Francis introduced him to Transcendentalism. His preaching was deeper, more thoughtful, and more humane than anything Parker had heard.

He took his teaching responsibility in the church very seriously, once pouring an enormous amount of energy into the writing of a short history of the Jews. His reputation spread quickly and naturally he got more work than he could handle. It was during this period that he met Miss Lydia D. Cabot, a fellow Sunday School teacher, and fell hopelessly in love. The situation was intensified by the fact that Miss Cabot shared a room in the same boarding house with Theodore. As is so often the case for young lovers, the whole world was transformed--Theodore's mild depression lifted and there were "books in the running brooks; sermons in stones and good in everything."<sup>8</sup>

The two were engaged and Theodore entered the Divinity School at Cambridge. It would not seem unfair to say that the consummation of this love and the opening of Theodore's heart to new heights of tenderness and joy prompted the move to seminary and laid an unconscious groundwork for the further appeal of Transcendentalism. The author can personally testify that such a moment can solidify plans for the ministry.

And why should this not make perfectly good sense? The degree to which a man has experienced the depth of love is also the degree to which he can explain it as the core of the gospel, without apology. On the other hand, the degree

to which a man has been denied the depth of love is also the degree to which he builds a scaffold of doctrine around what he fears cannot stand alone. No matter what the state of his learning, Theodore Parker had experienced the depth of love.

His reading in Cousin, Jouffroy, and Coleridge strengthened a developing Transcendental philosophy even while he pursued courses in the divinity school. So important for his future theology and ministry was this philosophy that the following chapter must be devoted to it. For now, it must be noted that Theodore Parker was beginning to experience those "seeds of doubt" of which we spoke earlier.

Even though he read a lot, the "spirit of an organized knowledge had not begun to move upon the face of the waters."<sup>9</sup> His early, experimental sermons were bombed--too much of the material was great hunks of what he was reading. Parker had not begun to trust seriously the process of thinking for himself. He was good in debate, even though sometimes disrespectful of dignities--he once made reference to "old Paul." And he was beginning to feel uncomfortable about some of those "more brutal" elements of orthodox theology, enough so that he felt the need of a cleansing credal exercise:

I believe in the Bible. . .I believe there is one God, who has existed from all eternity, with whom the past, present, and future are alike present; that he is almighty, good, and merciful, will reward the good and punish the wicked, both in this life and the next. . .I believe that neither the rewards nor punishments of a future state are corporal. . .I believe the books of

the Old and New Testament to have been written by men inspired by God, for certain purposes, but I do not think of them as inspired at all times. . . I do not think our sins will be forgiven because Christ died. I cannot conceive why they should be, although many good and great men have thought so. I believe God knows all that we shall do, but does not cause us to do anything.<sup>10</sup>

It would seem safe to assume that Parker regarded this as quite liberal, after all, it reorders the concept of heaven and hell, disclaims that scripture is equally inspired, rejects the whole notion of atonement, and discounts the idea that God invades and directly manipulates human affairs.

Parker also had an early falling out with the church fathers:

St. Augustine, we all know, introduced more error into the church than any other man. Many of his doctrines fly in the face both of reason and virtue to extinguish the eyes of the one and stifle and breath of the other.<sup>11</sup>

It was not so much a case of disrespect, for Parker, as it was a conclusion of the times. For many, this was the age of the new Eucharist--Reason. Whatever seemed contrary to the mind, to the soul and the conscience, must also be contrary to God. Interestingly enough, Parker had not yet let go of much supernaturalism:

I do not doubt that Jesus was a man sent from God and endowed with power from on high; that he taught the truth and worked miracles: but that he was the subject of inspired prophecy I very much doubt.<sup>12</sup>

On the eve of his graduation, Theodore Parker's confidence in the miracles was still unshaken. He went to hear Dr. Dewey preach the Dudleian Lecture. It was here that Parker first heard an articulate and widely respected intellectual claim that the miracles were "the least interesting

parts of the Evidences."<sup>13</sup> It was a distinction that Parker would someday make himself, only more brilliantly in his essay "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity."

More importantly, it was here that Parker began to make those crucial distinctions between Christianity as a way of life, a life lived in absolute relation to God, where love was the norm and Christ the mediator of that norm, and Christianity as a set of propositions, creeds, doctrines, and dogma. The process was not sudden, but gradual, and there came with it a real sense of loss and regret; the faith would never be as easy again.

One of the most interesting moments for Parker in seminary, as it is for many young theology students to this day, was the discovery of multiple virgin birth stories in dozens of other religious cults. The fact that this was an obviously "standard" way of attributing divinity in retrospect to a man whose life warranted a following disturbed Parker greatly. But he reasoned that such a fact did not affect the "spiritual grandeur" of Jesus, and that, after all, was most important.

It was during these days that Parker and several of his seminary friends took over the job of publishing a little pamphlet called "The Scriptural Interpreter." It's former editor of many years had died unexpectedly and the job of interim editors was placed in the hands of the divinity school's top two or three students--the theory obviously being that their discipline and standing would guarantee a

reputable publication. Unfortunately, for the magazine's readers, these same two or three students were the liberal Transcendentalists who called themselves Parker's friends.

They had been fascinated by and eager to publish a work which had existed for some years by Dr. George R. Noye on the general theme of prophetic fulfillment in the New Testament. Dr. Noye's hypothesis was that "it is difficult to point out any predictions which have been fulfilled in Jesus."<sup>14</sup> When the article appeared the reaction was tumultuous. Letters poured in from everywhere claiming that the young men at Cambridge were out to tear down the faith of the people. It sounds exactly like the "town and gown" paranoia that exists today.

Theodore puzzled over the reaction and thought long and hard about a faith so grounded in supernatural propositions. He was amazed by the defensiveness and fear that could be wrought by attacking a single proposition--how could this be with the privileged people of God? And it was not a phenomenon limited to lay people. Reason was a faculty greatly employed by men of rank, such as Mr. Andrew Norton, until it came to religious matters. He assured young Parker one day that all the German scholars were "raw" and "not accurate" and that they were "naturally unfitted for metaphysics, and their language still more so." Schleiermacher was no better than Spinoza, and "gave up all that renders Christianity valuable."<sup>15</sup>

So it was that Parker found the taste of much ortho-

dox Christianity to be bitter and oddly inconsistent with the spirit of Christ. But it was more than this. His conscience had not only dismissed much orthodox thought as meaningless and irrational but his heart had begun to search after that which truly was meaningful and appropriate to sanctify him in the ministry. Some beliefs were crumbling, yes, but if they could crumble in the light of God's gift to man, reason, then how essential were they to the faith?

If they are not essential, then what is to take their place? It was after his graduation that Parker reflected with greater anxiety on Christianity than he had before, but it was also the dawning of what he called "clearer light." It is the natural order of things that dark nights of the soul are set up to be conquered by the fresh insights of dawn, or else the soul is defeated. So it was with Theodore Parker, writing in his journal following commencement:

God has prospered me in my studies and I am now ready to go forth, but not without dread and fear. What an immense change has taken place in my opinions and feelings upon all the main points of inquiry since I entered this place. <sup>16</sup>

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## CHAPTER III

### PARKER THE TRANSCENDENTALIST

The author feels that in order to understand the theological development of Theodore Parker, one must understand Parker the Transcendentalist. Indeed, so much of his theology is intertwined with his philosophy that they become almost inseparable.

It is important to remember that Transcendentalism was the vogue movement of the time. But for Parker, it was more than fashionable, especially considering the faltering concept of "religion" in his mind. Indeed, it became saving, a philosophy which by its "humanity" looked so fresh and promising against "the dark theology of the time."

Although Emerson is remembered as the father of the movement, Parker wrote an essay explaining Transcendentalism which many scholars feel is unsurpassed in its force and clarity of explanation.<sup>17</sup> In it he explains that

Transcendentalism is distinguished by its chief metaphysical doctrine, that there is in the intellect (or consciousness), something that never was in the senses, to wit, the intellect (or consciousness) itself; that man has faculties which transcend the senses; faculties which give him ideas and intuitions that transcend sensational experience; ideas whose origin is not from sensation, nor their proof from sensation.<sup>18</sup>

It is crucial to understand that in a mind reeling from the disintegration of much orthodox Christian doctrine, Parker thrills to the endorsements of Transcendentalism which imply

that religion is the natural disposition of man. Both Emerson and Parker understood the mind as preeminent not just in knowing but also in acting. It is the source of guidance in human activities.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it not only transcends sense experience but is enlightened by its union with God.

This line of thought is a reaction against that prevalent way of thinking which asserts "there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses."<sup>20</sup> All that can therefore be known must appeal to one or more of the senses, for the "senses are windows which let in all the light I have."<sup>21</sup> This philosophy, because it holds that experience is the source of guidance in human activities, both in the case of knowing and acting, needs no mysterious union with God--in fact it doesn't allow it.

This exception would not have bothered Emerson as much as it bothered Parker. For Emerson, Transcendentalism freed man from the old restrictions and institutions, whether they be political, religious, economic, or philosophic. His theme was "let the soul be erect, and all things will go well."<sup>22</sup> While his concerns covered a broader spectrum, Parker focused on Transcendentalism's transforming effect on the life of faith.

But none-the-less, the philosophy's confirmation of conscience gave wings to Parker's convictions. In Emerson's summary of what a Transcendentalist is, we see the spirit of Parker captured perfectly:

The transcendentalist is lonely, critical, disdains to shape himself to fit society's structure, loves beauty. He has a vision and attempts to live up to it. He refuses to cooperate in work which might give the lie to his vision. . .The transcendentalist has made the experiment and found that from the liberal professions to the coarsest manual labor, and from the courtesies of the academy and college to the conventions of the cotillion-room and the morning call, there is a spirit of cowardly compromise and seeming which intimates a frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without an aim.<sup>23</sup>

One legitimate problem with such a definition, however, is that it might fit anyone who deviated, in any degree, from any established society. It has often been the case that Emerson was criticized for just this lack of specificity. People in his time often felt they understood the concept, but were put off by it's lack of boundary--some of society's most despicable characters could qualify for the noble tag "transcendentalist!"

The criticism has some validity, and it was here that Parker refined the concept, in an understandably religious fashion, to answer the charges that are often brought against liberal philosophies or theologies, namely that they are "wishy-washy." They are the fancy playthings of eggheads who believe everything, or nothing, depending on their needs, and haven't the slightest notion of commitment or common sense.

For Parker, the conscience is the voice of God, and that voice must be followed even should it run counter to holy scripture. But he called for discipline and self-control, warning against what he called the "transcendental-mad," those who take their own personal whims to be oracles of hu-

man nature. He sought a balance, praising the good in "sensationalist philosophy," especially its role in delivering us from the exaggerated spiritualism of the Middle Ages, while at the same time acknowledging what he believed to be the absolute necessity of transcending orders in the universe. He was not guilty of going to one extreme or the other, as is the case with so many of history's great philosophers--putting a period where they should have put a comma.

Taking the transcendental philosophy into the realm of religion was easy for Parker--because it was already there. Just as in nature there is the world of sensory experience, and the transcendent order or idea in which it is grounded, Christianity also has its transient and permanent. True or Absolute Religion, as Parker called it had two basic traits. The first of which is the immediacy of the man-God relationship. Parker believes that true religion is "a method of attaining oneness with God."<sup>24</sup>

True religion is not a matter of complex rites, a network of dogmas, nor an authoritarian institution. A church, the Bible, even Christ are not essential to this immediate relationship and, as a matter of historical fact, often intrude into and even disrupt it. The second trait, which follows directly from the first, is that a man's own heart and conscience are his inspiration and guide.

It is obvious that Parker would favor and be inspired by a philosophy which verified a view of reality on which his whole theological framework rested. Without the trans-

cident, without the permanent, without the eternal, Parker would have collapsed along with his orthodoxy. But the appeal of love and its centrality to religion did indeed transcend everything for Theodore Parker--and from that moment on not only were doctrines inadequate or illogical, they were unnecessary.

It is now fitting to return to young Parker where we left him, a young seminary graduate ready to enter the ministry. This short treatment of Parker the Transcendentalist was essential for understanding all his further theological development. The movement was more to Parker than a fad-- it was a rock to which he clung, invisible, and yet sufficient to sustain the heretic to be.

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## CHAPTER IV

### PARKER THE HERETIC

#### His Reputation

When the young minister began looking for his first parish, rumors circulated about this theology. He had already achieved the distinction of being a "liberal" and once a man is so dubbed everything he says or does is interpreted as radical. All that people knew was that Parker was "one of those transcendentalists." And they really didn't know what that meant except that Emerson was one and he had to resign from his church duties because he was unable to serve the Lord's supper with a clear conscience.

All this made finding his first position a bit more difficult, but Parker finally settled on West Roxbury, a small country parish with some intelligent parishioners and only a "stones throw" from the Cambridge library. Such fringe benefits allowed Parker to take a somewhat smaller salary than others had offered. Mr. Francis preached a sermon at the occasion, warning the young minister not to neglect his studies. "Henry Ware, Jr., offered the ordaining prayer, and remembering Theodore's 'fondness for peculiar studies' in the Divinity School, prayed that no such fondness might divert him from doing God's work."<sup>25</sup>

At first, Parker preached rather conventionally, but very early he experienced the need to "authenticate" what he

preached in his own life before he preached it to the people. It was a return to his favorite maxim: "Truth for Authority, not Authority for Truth: After preaching a few months in various places and feeling my way into the consciousness of man, I determined to preach nothing as religion which I had not experienced inwardly and made my own."<sup>26</sup>

He worked feverishly on his sermons, preaching 362 times before his move to Boston. He took pains to know each member of his congregation, their dispositions and their needs, and so transform his "book learning" into effective and nourishing sermons. It is a trick demanded of any serious thinker who would preach to ordinary people; furthermore it is not brilliance which fires shots over people's heads, but ignorance. Theodore Parker, for all his advanced learning, learned the trick early.

As he went about the ordinary tasks of ministering to ordinary people, his reputation spread like wild-fire. And this was more than partly due to the fact that Parker lived in theologically unsettled times. It was the age of the Unitarian heresy, a movement led primarily by Dr. Channing from 1815-1830 to reform Congregationalism. Unfortunately after the Unitarians separated they could not seem to come to terms with themselves.

When the controversy with the Calvinists began most were Arians, holding that Jesus was a being "sui generis-- but an iota less than God," while the minority were Socinians, holding that Jesus was a human being exalted to the

right hand of God because of his devoted life and bitter cross. What they could agree on was Reason--it was the highest faculty of man, a gift from God to be employed to the fullest possible extent. Parker echoed this sentiment exactly when he said "I am surer that my rational nature is from God than that any book is the expression of his will."<sup>27</sup>

The Unification heresy, like any social/philosophical revolution, was baited by oppressive ways of thinking. In an age when reason and the human intellect were enjoying their finest hour, the Calvinists were declaring that all who didn't wear that name were not Christian. Men like Theodore Parker saw Transcendentalism and the religious system it made possible as the only alternative.

It was during this period that Parker joined a "Transcendentalist Club" (so-called by outsiders) which included nothing less than New England's leading religious and philosophical intellectuals. The lofty roster included Convers Francis, James Freeman Clarke, Orestes A. Brownson, Caleb Stetson, William Henry Channing, Hedge, Ripley, Bartol, Alcott, and Emerson.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most important influence of the club was Parker's inspired contact with men whom he greatly admired sharing thoughts he greatly believed. He was growing ever more weary of sectarianism:

Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest soul ever swathed in flesh; to redeem man, he took his stand on righteousness and religion; on no form, no tradition, no creed. He demanded not a belief, but a life--a life of love to God, and love to man. We must come back to this; the sooner the better.<sup>29</sup>

The South Boston Sermon

Parker went to hear an address by Emerson to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School and it fired him to write the famous South Boston sermon. Suddenly, in that one night, Emerson had outdone himself, and Parker felt the truth in all he said. "My soul is roused, and this week I shall write the long-meditated sermons on the state of the church and the duties of these times."<sup>30</sup>

Parker's voice was suddenly heard as it hadn't been heard before. He struck again, even if indirectly, at the necessity for believing the miracles as a basis for Christian belief. He discovered the sober truth that for most churchmen there are "key" dogmas and nothing is so central as the miracles. Christian theology seemed divided into two great camps, crudely speaking: Those who demanded the miracles as the only suitable basis for Christian belief and those who found them not only unnecessary but often a distraction from the real nature of the gospel.

Mr. Norton, speaking on behalf of the "true faith" responded thus:

The latest form of infidelity is distinguished by assuming the Christian name, while it strikes directly at the root of faith in Christianity, and indirectly at the root of all religion, by denying the miracles attesting the divine mission of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly enough, the main thrust of this address was to charge dishonesty on those who did not reject the Christian name when they could no longer accept the truths of Christianity on account of the New Testament miracles. It is exactly the same position the Calvinists took twenty years

before.

Even Johnathan Edwards had risen above the necessity of attaching supreme importance to miracles as the highest evidence of God's activity in the world. He seems so clear on this at times that many have claimed he was a Transcendentalist before Emerson. But the charge of Mr. Norton in 1839 was clear: the miracles were the only "satisfactory proof" of the divinity of Christ and the validity of Christianity. Parker had struck a raw nerve and no matter how else the arguments ranged in the future, they inevitably returned to this fundamental division.

It was during this period that Parker's own theology rapidly solidified and began to take on urgency and determination. He swears that he will write an Introduction to the New Testament, and a Philosophy of Man which will demonstrate that religion is a natural disposition in human beings.

The South Boston sermon showed signs that Parker was "smarting" from brotherly distrust. He was disturbed at the back-stabbing that went on even in the Unitarian circles. "Already men of the same sect eye one another with suspicion and lowering brows that indicate a storm, and, like children who have fallen out in their play, call hard names."<sup>32</sup> Again and again Parker was amazed at what seemed to "matter" in the life of faith--why did they argue ad nauseam over the mixture of divine and human blood in the person of Christ, and not get about the business of living the life he called us to?

But something even deeper was troubling Parker:

"Alas for that man who consents to think one thing in his closet and preach another in his pulpit!"<sup>33</sup> Here was the final demonstration of a man's honesty and conscience. Parker had talked with men in private who believed much as he did, but he watched them on Sunday morning wiggle and squirm their way out from under controversial issues, claiming that such was best for children and weak women.

In order to compensate for the dishonesty he felt all around him, Parker often pushed his own honesty too far-- he was sometimes oppressive with it. He believed in progress and the steadily upward pilgrimage of all mankind, so he often spoke of great individuals who would someday be surpassed. In so doing he often robbed his own parishioners of the uniqueness of their faith. Once a troubled man in the pew exclaimed: "When you write about Ralph Cudworth I like ye; but when you talk about future Christs I can't bear ye."<sup>34</sup>

Parker took such criticism to heart and noted it in his journal. But one thing was certain. While the Unitarians in general were highly polished in the art of blasting orthodoxy, few men expressed more confidence in the permanent influence of Jesus than Theodore Parker. Oddly enough, the thrust of most of his critics was that Parker had stripped Jesus of his divinity. But to those who heard him preach, and especially his own congregation at West Roxbury, there was the most sublime adoration for this Galilean Prince. No one in all of New England, perhaps no one since, has

written more moving passages about Jesus Christ. At a time in American church history when Mr. Beecher could say to his Brooklyn congregation, "If it could be proved that Jesus of Nazareth had never lived, still Christianity would stand firm and fear no evil." and no one blinked an eye, Theodore Parker was replying:

But should we lose--oh, irreparable loss!--the example of that character, so beautiful, so divine, that no human genius could have conceived it. . .Measure him by the world's greatest sons--how poor they are! Try him by the best of men--how little and low they appear! Exhalt him as much as we may, we shall yet, perhaps, come short of the mark. But still was he not our brother, the son of man, as we are; the Son of God, like ourselves? 35

In one passage, Parker both negates the traditional incarnation and exhalts the ideal Christ "whom we form in our hearts" as superior to the historic Christ.<sup>36</sup> Not only has he removed the supernatural element but placed the awesome and sometimes unbearable responsibility of being "Christ-like" upon the shoulders of every man who is a "Son of God."

He believed, like so many liberal theologians before and after him, that a half-God, half-Man not only could not demand that his followers be like him, since they never could, but also that his appeal could never match a fully human Jesus, who was the flesh of our flesh and still exhalted himself to the "right hand of God." There was an example that could make us tremble. Ironically, Parker believed with exceeding passion that which his opponents charged could never constitute the Christian faith. And not only did he believe it, but poured himself into pro-

claiming it, for fellow man and for country, in a frenzied and energetic way that cast the judgment of laziness on most other clergy. If indeed the gospel teaches that one's will can be seen most clearly in his actions, then it can never be said that Parker "believed nothing."

### Reaction

So it was that Parker's South Boston Sermon ignited the fires that were smoldering around his reputation. On the day it was delivered, no one got up and walked out, except one man who needed ventilation. The effect was gradual, but gathered momentum--one Unitarian minister demanded Parker's arrest for blasphemy, others began to form a council bent on forcing Parker's resignation from the Unitarian Association. One layman wrote in the Boston Courier:

I would rather see every Unitarian congregation in our land dissolved and every one of our churches occupied by other denominations or razed to the ground than to assist in placing a man entertaining the sentiments of Theodore Parker in one of our pulpits.<sup>37</sup>

Opponents of Unitarianism smiled and said, "We told you so." Meanwhile, the good folk at West Roxbury seemed unaffected. Parker was their pastor and seemed to care about them and the subtleties of theological debate raged above their heads, or more accurately, outside their hearts.

Systematically, the Unitarian Association removed the pulpits in which Parker was allowed to speak, until he could count them on one hand. It was an odd prelude to a time when Parker would be invited to the Old Music Hall in Boston so that overflow crowds could be accommodated. For

now, the Unitarians were slapping his hand, and naturally Parker simply got more ruthless--more impatient and overbearing than he had planned. It is the case that the persecuted create persecution, and Parker could not be silent now.

Ironically, all this time churches across the land were including passages written by Parker in their worship services, and by very orthodox preachers who thrilled at his prose. Countless parishioners went home from Sunday service with those glorious thoughts still ringing in their ears, and they forgot all the rest--or never knew.

Meanwhile Parker wrote, pressing his conclusions to purge himself and assure the world he would not budge. As to miracles, he reached the conclusions of Huxley forty years prior to Huxley:

Antecedently to experience--this was the doctrine--one thing is as possible as another; but the more stable our experience of any kind of thing, the more evidence we must demand for anything affronting this experience: so few persons have risen from the dead at any time that the evidence for any particular resurrection should be immense.<sup>38</sup>

Parker had come to clarity about what he considered "Religion." The distinction between Parker and his critics was exactly this; if dimly recognized, yet profoundly felt: It is true that Parker identified Christianity with his "Absolute Religion," meaning by this Religion in its essential, universal character. The inexpungible fact remained that Absolute Religion was his standard of measurement. He accepted Christianity as justified by that and not that as justified by Christianity. The free soul was his ultimate standard, and

not any traditional authority vested in Bible, Church, or Christ.

His critics said: the miracles and the authority of Christ attested by them must be added to Absolute Religion to make Christianity. Parker replied: Christianity is love to God and man, and miracles cannot make this more or less important. Again, it is the issue of miracles, as the only suitable proof that finally estranges Parker from the great majority of his brethren.

At a meeting of Unitarian ministers bent on Parker's demise, Dr. Frothingham said, "The difference between Trinitarians and Unitarians is a difference in Christianity; the difference between Mr. Parker and the Association is a difference between no Christianity and Christianity."<sup>39</sup> So it was that his own fellow clergymen, many of whom were as radical at heart as Parker, sent Theodore from the table more than once in tears. He wrote:

I have no fellowship from the other clergy; no one that helped in my ordination will now exchange ministerial courtesies with me. . . I must confess that I am disappointed in the ministers--the Unitarian ministers. I once thought them noble; that they would be true to an ideal principle of right. I find that no body of men was ever more completely sold to the sense of expediency. . . I see few persons, especially scholarly folk, but after all, books, nature, and God afford the only society you can always have and on reasonable terms.<sup>40</sup>

Following Dr. Channing's death in 1842, which greived Parker deeply, the Boston Association summoned Parker to resign his post. He was dubbed the teacher of "shallow naturalism," even though he deplored naturalism. He was called "the expounder of "Negative Transcendentalism," whereas Emerson

was an expounder of "positive Transcendentalism." This is doubly odd considering the fact that Parker's Theism and Immortality were more constructive and positive than Emersons.

It was the low-water-mark of Parker's life, and the arguments he offered in defense of his integrity, even at a time when his very profession was in question, were the arguments by which Parker would thereafter be known. In the heat of the fire Parker branded himself, and his future was permanently rearranged.

But not everyone felt anger, indeed, some Bostonians, waiting on the fringes of the church felt "it doth protest too much," and Parker's voice stirred their interest in a new approach to Christianity. As the slavery issue gathered momentum, Parker's refusal to leave the church or let the church leave the world, gave him the pulpit he always wanted. It was a pulpit that Boston accomodated for him, so that his social gospel could be heard.

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The author has attempted, up to this point, to trace briefly Parker's theological development--especially up to that point at which he was an established heretic. Now let us turn to something of Parker's total impact, in summary fashion, and examine in retrospect the effect this preacher, reformer, and social critic had on America and her Protestant religion.

## CHAPTER V

### THE INVISIBLE PULPIT

The simple headstone above Parker's grave in Florence reads "The Great American Preacher." Parker was, first and last, a preacher--a man of faith and of religion, and even of the church. Despite every attempt to drive him from the church he would not leave it. Because religion itself "permeated his life, inspired his thought, commanded his learning, directed his conduct and sustained his spirit throughout his life."

He rebelled against the Unitarianism of his own time, but unlike the other rebels of his day (Emerson, Ripley, Pierpont and Higginson) he refused to leave the church or be put out. He was fascinated with secular learning, but there was never a time when he considered anything other than the ministry, and throughout his far-flung public life he never abandoned his clerical role. "When he left his pulpit in Boston's great Music Hall, he carried an invisible pulpit with him; and from whatever platform he spoke, it was a religious platform."<sup>42</sup>

He came early under the influence of two of the greatest minds of the New England renaissance, William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson. And though he was charged throughout his life with preaching the worst of each, Theodore Parker actually brought the two to their logical, or at least practical conclusion. He took them out of the study, where

both Channing and Emerson were content to keep them, and "put them to work in the home, the market place and the legislative chamber."<sup>43</sup>

Parker's contribution to religion was significant. He refused to be bound by the dominant Unitarianism which was popular--that curious combination of supernaturalism with rationalism given orthodox form by the Reverend Andrews Norton. Parker substituted the supernaturalism of the miracles with the miracle of intuitive truth. He also brought to religion what was soon to be called the Higher Criticism, working to illuminate the problems of theology with the findings of German scholarship. But he hated pure intellectualism, however much he was accused of it, and preferred to make praxis the test of the gospel.

And as much as those who detested his view made claim, Theodore Parker actually revived religion in much of the north by carrying his gospel to hundreds of thousands of men and women throughout the whole country. As Emerson was the philosopher of those who knew no other philosopher, so Parker was the theologian of those who had no other theology, or who instinctively rejected all that traditionally went by the term theology. And finally, Parker applied what he believed were the great truths of Religion to the social issues of the day. For this reason he has been called the forefather of the social gospel.

Parker's generation, like our own, was much concerned about the place of the scholar in society. Many felt that

scholarship was at war with Nature, the head with the heart, and that Nature and the heart were, after all, the most important because they came directly from God. Scholars were too often self-indulgent and removed from the "great heart of humanity." This accounts for much of the anti-intellectualism that runs through American romanticism and Transcendentalism. And added to this, was a new sense on the part of all American scholars that democracy demanded more from its intelligencia than the Old World cultures. There was new and urgent evidence that scholarship and reform should go hand in hand.

Theodore Parker became the leading spokesman for this happy marriage between learning and loving. He was deeply committed to scholarship--a collector of languages, of books of esoteric lore. He had a remarkable memory and could call forth an avalanche of facts whenever necessary. But he was never entirely happy about his learning. He always feared that the hours in his study, the love of books, might be a kind of dissipation.

So it was that Parker sought to "socialize intuitive ideas." He was not the only social reformer of the day, not by any means. The list was impressive in an age when men would remake the world. But while Parker is always remembered as a religious liberal and an abolitionist, he also found time and energy to champion the cause of women, of labor, of the poor and neglected, of peace and temperance, and of education. "He was, in short, what his religion and his philosophy required: the universal reformer."<sup>44</sup>

He was a Transcendentalist, of course, but he took Transcendentalism a step beyond Emerson. He demanded that the insight and communion one received through Transcendentalism be brought into the streets, where the essence of any faith is tested.

As for matters of the Christian faith, he stripped away doctrine and dogma in order that what he called Absolute Religion would emerge. While others spent their time railing against his systematic destruction of the necessary oracles of the faith, Parker chased what he called a "clearer light." The fundamentals of his theology were simple--Jesus taught no religion, creed, or formula; He taught a way of life, an absolute surrender to the will of God, and not only did doctrine get in the way, but it often distorted and destroyed the possibility of faith.

Yet even while Parker's ideal commanded respect, his methods often did not. He was harsh and violent at times, passionately hostile to every form of injustice and superstition--"to religious obscurantism, ignorance, intemperance, greed and selfishness in the rich, arrogance in the powerful, vanity in the learned, and on one matter he was clearly fanatic: slavery.

Difficult as it is in this generation to understand the problems of slavery, it clearly violated the most cherished principle of Parker's religious faith--the divinity of man. When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, Parker decided that the only solution to the evil of slavery was by force. It is true that Theodore Parker, oddly in tension with his

own beliefs, advocated nothing short of violence to end the oppression.

Perhaps it is true, as one writer maintains, that Parker is the "Forgotten American."<sup>45</sup> After all, how many schoolboys know that it was Parker who defined democracy as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," and not Abraham Lincoln? It may be the case that much of what is today called "modern social awareness" was laced throughout some of the same sermons from which Lincoln borrowed that famous phrase. One thing is certain, Parker was a man of conscience, and that often drove him to places others dared not go--against the very soul of the church he loved, and into an abolitionist circuit so grueling it broke down his health. Whatever else may be said of Theodore Parker, it can never be said that he "believed nothing."

In fact he believed more than most men, and with a conviction so strong that he sanctified his own thought by acting. It may well be that the most significant moment of his childhood was the "sparing of the tortoise" and his mother's simple explanation: "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man." Parker believed her, and nothing in his whole life ever took its place.

--Robin Meyers

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John White Chadwick, Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Steele Commager, Theodore Parker: An Anthology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Chadwick, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 25-26.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 47

<sup>17</sup>Robert E. Collins, Theodore Parker: American Transcendentalist (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup>Theodore Parker, "Transcendentalism" quoted in Robert E. Collins, Theodore Parker: American Transcendentalist (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1973), p. 64.

<sup>19</sup>Collins, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Robert E. Spiller, ed., Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup>Collins, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>25</sup>Chadwick, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>33</sup>Commager, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup>Chadwick, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 98-99.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 123-4.

<sup>41</sup>Commager, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>45</sup>Collins, p. 1.

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