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Echoes of Old Heresies Still Among Us — A Visit to Divinity Hall

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Just a few hours ago I stood at the very spot where one of the most significant addresses in American history was delivered — and where the settled understandings of the Christian ministry and the church's theology were thrown into revolution.

The date was July 15, 1838, the place was the chapel of Divinity Hall at Harvard, and the speaker was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson had been asked to deliver an address to the Senior Class of the Divinity College, and he accepted the challenge. Emerson was then a part-time Unitarian preacher, but his intellectual stature in the movement known as Transcendentalism attracted the attention of the students training for ministry.



More to the point, Emerson had ignited an intellectual explosion the year before, when he was asked to deliver the annual lecture to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. That address, “The American Scholar,” was widely understood to represent a declaration of independence for American intellectuals. No longer should American thinkers be slavishly dependent upon European patterns, Emerson declared. This was the time for the emergence of the American Scholar, a new and advanced form of the human thinker; a scholar who would “plant himself indomitably on his instincts” and refuse to be “timid, imitative, tame.”

A year later, Emerson rose to deliver his address to the Divinity School. Speaking to young men studying for the ministry, Emerson repudiated Christianity and called the young ministers to trust their own spiritual instincts and to free themselves from the Bible, from belief in a divine Christ, and from any remnant of orthodox Christianity.

“Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion,” he declared. “As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus.” This singular focus on Christ has turned Christianity into an uninspiring religion, he argued. All the “official titles” ascribed to Jesus just serve to make him into a “demigod,” Emerson insisted.

Preaching that centers on Jesus Christ as the divine Savior is “vulgar,” Emerson asserted. Miracles were eliminated as a possibility. Men and women do not come to be “converted,” he insisted, by a “profanation of the soul” that centers on necessary beliefs. Instead, they should be converted “by the reception of beautiful sentiments.”

Emerson also attacked the ministers of his day by accusing them of preaching the Bible. So far as Emerson was concerned, the Bible was a dead and lifeless book in itself. Preaching from the Bible will not produce greatness, Emerson explained. To limit the voice of God to the Bible is to shut the voice of God up into a dead book.

“Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead. The injury to faith throttles the preacher; and the goodliest of institutions becomes an uncertain and inarticulate voice,” he argued.

In other words, the young ministers were challenged to give up preaching the Bible and instead to preach their own religious sentiments:

“To this holy office you propose to devote yourselves. I wish you may feel your call in throbs of desire and hope. The office is the first in the world. It is of that reality that it cannot suffer the deduction of any falsehood. And it is my duty to say to you that the need was never greater of new revelation than now.”

Emerson’s bold and confrontational call for “new” revelation was translated into his most memorable lines from this historic address – “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.”

In other words, he commanded the young ministers to abandon the Scriptures and to trust their own instincts, religious sentiments, and intuitions as all the divine revelation they will need. “Preaching,” he explained, is nothing more than “the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life.”

With his address, Emerson ignited a firestorm. He had boldly and thoroughly repudiated biblical Christianity. His proposal was to replace the Christian faith with a religion of individualistic sentimentality, iced with a coating of moralism.

Nevertheless, even as Emerson ignited a firestorm, the Harvard faculty were themselves mostly Unitarian in outlook. Theological liberalism had already become a fixture by the 1830s. The professors scandalized by Emerson’s address might protest his candor, but they had little theological ammunition with which to refute him.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1838 “Divinity School Address” was a call to radical theological revisionism, and thousands of ministers have answered his call. It is no accident that evangelical Christianity was so soon set on its heels in Emerson’s New England.

Standing in the chapel in Divinity Hall last evening, I was struck by how contemporary Emerson’s argument sounds. The call he issued 170 years ago is the very message we now hear from others — Christianity must change or die. We cannot simply preach a book that is two thousand years old. God still speaks, and a slavish dependence on the Bible is both offensive and ineffectual. Doctrines must go — intuition and sentiment will be enough.

The issues and arguments are the same. Nevertheless, we have all the evidence we need to show us where Emerson’s argument leads. It leads to the death of churches, denominations, institutions, and ministries. It leaves sinners dead in their sins and robs them of hearing the Gospel.

The church has never needed “newborn bards of the Holy Ghost.” Instead, the need of the church is for preachers who are skilled in the art of preaching the Word of God — rightly dividing the Word of Truth, while holding without apology to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

I am glad I visited that historic room in Divinity Hall last night. It served to remind me of what is at stake in our generation — and for eternity. There are no new heresies, only echoes of the old ones. And yet, the old ones come back again and again.

Photo taken at Harvard University, November 20, 2008- by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

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