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The Making and Ministry of a Theologian

IN JANUARY 1913, students and alumni of Rochester Theological Seminary gathered for the unveiling of a bronze bust of Augustus Hopkins Strong that alumni presented in honor of Strong's forty years of service to the institution.¹ After the presentation, Strong addressed those who had gathered for the event. In his talk, titled "Theology and Experience,"² Strong engaged in a fair bit of autobiographical musing, for a purpose: he believed that one cannot understand his theological journey and development without knowing something of his life. As Strong confessed to his audience, "My views of evangelical doctrine have been necessarily determined by the circumstances of my individual history. . . . My religious history is so interwoven with my secular history, that it will be impossible to relate the one without also relating the other."³ Taking Strong at his word, this chapter relates something of Strong's personal history to help explain some historical factors that may have affected his theological development.

Sources of information about Strong's life and ministry are plentiful, if somewhat hard to come by. When Strong sat down on his sixtieth birthday to write his life story, he followed in his father's footsteps: both men wrote autobiographies ostensibly for their children and grandchildren.⁴ Much of the biographical material that follows is drawn from these two autobiographies and informed by numerous works related to the history of Rochester.⁵

Strong's Heritage

Emerson once asked, "How shall a man escape from his ancestors?" and Strong playfully replied, "Men of genius should select their ancestors with care."⁶ Augustus Strong enjoyed a rich heritage, with roots that intertwined with Rochester's early days. Like many people bearing the name Strong in nineteenth-century America, Augustus could trace this family line back to Elder John Strong (c. 1605–99), who along with numerous Puritans sailed from England to the New

World in the 1630s.⁷ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the descendants of John Strong were remarkably prolific. As Augustus put it,

[John Strong] had no fewer than eighteen children, and it is scarcely a hyperbole to say that all of these eighteen had eighteen apiece. As a matter of sober fact, I find that the next in line of descent from Elder John Strong to me had fifteen children; the third in line had eight; but, as his excuse for having so few, it is said that he was killed by the Indians at the early age of forty-two, or he would doubtless have had many more. The fourth in the line had twelve children and the fifth, fifteen.⁸

The prolific Strongs soon spread throughout the northeast region of what would become the United States.

Augustus Strong's grandfather, Ezra Strong (1777–1846), was a physician who was born and raised in Warren, Connecticut.⁹ Of the fifteen children who grew up on the family farm in Warren, only Ezra pursued a professional career. After completing a course of medical studies, Ezra settled in Scipio, New York, where he became the town's first physician. After a few years of medical practice, Ezra ventured into the mercantile trade and opened the town's first store in 1808. His business endeavors were prosperous during the War of 1812. He invested heavily in cattle and other supplies needed by the American army and managed to turn a significant profit for several years. However, during the deflationary period that followed, his business investments lost much of their value, and Ezra lost both his store and his house and was for a time subject to debtor's imprisonment in the village of Auburn, the county seat at the time.¹⁰

In 1821 Ezra moved to Rochester, New York, just a few years before the opening of the Erie Canal brought a flood of new residents to the town and the greater Genesee Valley area.¹¹ In this new environment, he revived his medical practice and lived out his remaining years, as his son put it, "without material incident."¹² Ezra Strong died in his rented home on Exchange Street in Rochester in September 1846. Some fifty years later, Augustus noted that he had but "slight recollection" of his paternal grandfather, but he deemed that his grandfather's ordeal with debtor's prison cast a pall on all his children and caused them to be "less sanguine and more cautious in business." This tendency extended to Augustus as well, for as he noted, "I am sure that my own eagerness to discharge all my pecuniary obligations and my success in preventing even my extravagance from going beyond the limit of my means in hand has been partly due to the story of my grandfather's misfortunes."¹³ Despite his earlier financial troubles, Ezra developed a solid reputation as a hardworking physician in the early days

of Rochester's history. As an early and respected citizen of the budding town of Rochester, Ezra left his descendants with a good name to uphold, but his earlier troubles with debt caused many of them to approach life and especially financial matters with a sober mindset and a conservative bent.

Augustus's father, Alvah Strong, was born in Scipio, New York, in 1809. He attended a small country school but had little other formal education, yet he had a strong desire to acquire knowledge in less formal settings. Many years later Augustus recalled, "Father was open-minded, courteous, inquiring, conciliatory, and he drank in information continually. . . . He liked to have interesting people at his house that he might hear them talk. If he had had his own way and my mother had permitted, he would have had a constant succession of guests." After working as a runner boy for various newspapers, Alvah secured a job as a journeyman printer in the summer of 1830. Augustus wrote, "He loved knowledge, and the printing office, in which he went through all the grades from roller boy to proprietor, served for his university."¹⁴ In the early years, Alvah worked for Erastus Shepard, a printer in Palmyra, not far from Rochester. Alvah credited Shepard and his wife as important influences on his developing religious ideas.¹⁵

During the fall and winter of 1830 and 1831, the famed evangelist Charles G. Finney held revival meetings in Rochester. Alvah's friend and future brother-in-law, Augustus Hopkins, was converted under the preaching of Finney, and he soon wrote to Alvah encouraging him to come to Rochester to hear Finney and to get "the dirty water of your mind stirred up from the very depths."¹⁶ Alvah initially resisted this pleading, but his own sense of conviction and the tugging of his conscience finally led him to return to Rochester, where he was converted in late 1830.

Augustus, no doubt having heard the story of his father's conversion many times, recounted what took place when his father sought out Finney in his room at the Eagle Hotel. Upon opening the hotel room door, the evangelist motioned for Alvah to sit by the stove while he finished a letter. A few minutes later, Finney approached the young man and asked why he had come. Alvah explained that he had been thinking about the subject of religion and thought he should become a Christian but that he had no feeling. Finney grabbed an iron poker that lay near the stove and waved it menacingly in Alvah's face. The young man stood up and moved to avoid the makeshift weapon. Finney retorted, "Ah, you feel *now*, don't you?" and then, laying aside the iron poker, he immediately returned to his correspondence. Alvah went away initially disappointed and somewhat offended, but on further reflection, he realized Finney had employed an object lesson: if he

was afraid of an iron poker, he ought to fear hell much more. Alvah's mind was soon settled regarding his conversion.¹⁷

In September 1831, Alvah Strong was baptized and received into membership at the First Baptist Church of Rochester, where he would remain in fellowship for the next fifty-five years, serving for much of that time as a deacon.¹⁸ In the early 1830s, Erastus Shepard moved to Rochester and invited Alvah to become his partner in publishing the *Anti-Masonic Inquirer*, a paper Shepard had recently acquired.¹⁹ Alvah accepted the job. He would remain both a Baptist and a newspaperman for the rest of his life.

In December 1834, Alvah married Catherine Hopkins. Catherine was quiet and retiring. Unlike her husband, she had no desire to see an endless stream of guests through their home. In fact, Augustus once described her as "almost morbidly seclusive," a trait she shared with her brother, for whom Augustus was named.²⁰ A hard-working woman, she placed a high value on education. Orphaned as a youth, Catherine came to Rochester to work in the millinery business. From her meager earnings, she purchased a few choice books, and she passed her love of books and reading on to her children, not least to Augustus.

Strong's Early Life

The oldest son of Alvah and Catherine Strong, Augustus Hopkins Strong, was born in Rochester on August 3, 1836, in a little frame house on Troup Street.²¹ Upon marrying, Alvah and Catherine had prayed that God would enable them to raise children who would be both useful in the world and "living instruments to His praise."²² They also followed up this prayer with intentional action: the Stronges were faithful in attending the First Baptist Church in Rochester, and they worked hard to inculcate this habit in their children from an early age. Augustus recounted a day when he was only three or four years old when the front gate of their yard on Troup Street was left open and he wandered into town on his own. When his distraught parents finally found him half a mile from home and asked him where he was going, he replied that he was going to hear Mr. Church preach.²³

Augustus also told of a time when he was about ten and woke to find the ground outside covered with a deep blanket of snow. It was a Sunday morning, and he assumed this meant the family would be staying home from church. He ran downstairs happily announcing, "Father, we can't go to church today!" His father asked, "Why so, my son?" The youth replied, "There won't be anybody there!" His father queried, "Won't be anybody there? Well, if there isn't anybody

else there, it will be very important that *we* should be there!" So father and son plodded through the drifts to church that morning. As young Augustus had predicted, only about half a dozen people had made the snowy trek, but as he later noted, "*We* were there, and I had learned a lesson never to be forgotten."²⁴ Many years later, Augustus wrote, "Never since that time have I been able to be quite comfortable away from church on a Sunday morning."²⁵

Although both parents were committed to teaching their children such lessons about the importance of church, Alvah Strong was a busy man who had relatively little time to spend with his children. By Augustus's account, with the exception of mealtimes and Sundays, his father worked at the printing office from sunrise until late at night.²⁶ Occasionally, Augustus would spend time at the offices of the *Rochester Daily Democrat*,²⁷ which could prove a schoolroom of sorts. One day when his father had left the key in a counting room drawer, Augustus stole five dollars and proceeded to hire a two-horse coach to give himself and a few schoolmates a ride home. Upon arriving home, Augustus was soon filled with fear. He hid the remaining money and waited to see what would happen. News soon reached his father that young Augustus had been seen sailing through town in a coach, and his father put two and two together. As Augustus summarized, "There was an investigation, a trial, a confession, a bringing forth of the stolen money from its hiding-place, and a most memorable application of the rod by way of punishment." More important, as the young Strong recalled, "My own remorse and shame before discovery, my positive gladness when at last my sin had found me out, my father's combined affection and severity, the justice and solemnity with which he pleaded with me and then chastised me gave me a permanent and valuable understanding of the folly and misery of sin, and of the mercy as well as the righteousness of God."²⁸ Through such events and the ill-advised witnessing of a hanging, Augustus was beginning to realize the awfulness of sin and guilt and the unchanging holiness of God, two themes that would later figure prominently in his theology.

After studying at several different schools that Augustus later described as "inferior," he transferred to the Collegiate Institute in Rochester. Here, at the age of fourteen, he studied Latin and Greek under the tutelage of principal N. W. Benedict. Augustus later praised Benedict as a "genuine pedagogue . . . a lover of classics, a man of learning, and entirely devoted to his calling."²⁹ Benedict had a significant influence on Augustus during his high school days.

It was not Benedict, however, who prompted Augustus to read beyond his peers in the Latin classics, thus setting him on a trajectory for academic excellence, but Chester Heywood, an older student and part-time janitor who

encouraged Augustus to push himself and to study while others were taking time off.³⁰ Heywood challenged Augustus to spend the spring break studying Latin so he could move to a more advanced class. Augustus, taking Heywood's advice, for three weeks rose every morning at five o'clock and, with few intervals, studied Latin until late at night. When the new term began, Benedict found that Augustus had improved his Latin significantly and promoted him to an older class, where the boys were translating Cicero. These events had a lasting impact on Augustus's academic efforts: "I learned that, where there was a will, there was also a way. I became ambitious, and perhaps a trifle conceited. . . . Those three weeks of vacation work changed the whole current of my life and encouraged me to act independently of my teachers."³¹

Augustus's high school experience both aroused and confirmed the academic inclinations his parents had recognized early on. His father once noted, "Augustus' early taste ran for books, intellectual work and highest education."³² Augustus's parents encouraged him to read widely and to acquire a solid education through a variety of means. His father, especially, thought travel was important for a good education, so Augustus visited places such as Albany, Buffalo, Niagara Falls, New York City, and various locales in Canada. Often his father accompanied him, but by the time he was twelve he was occasionally making such trips alone or with a friend. Augustus recalled that as a young teenager he went to see the wonders of the Astor House in New York City accompanied by a young companion. The experience was no doubt an education, and looking back he wrote, "I know of no harm that came from the trip."³³ It was all part of getting a broad and thorough education in the Strong household.

By age fifteen, Strong had completed his formal preparation for college, but his father thought he was still too young to begin college, so in 1852–53 Strong spent a year and a half in his father's newspaper office learning the business.³⁴ Strong became familiar with the telegraph, bookkeeping, writing, typesetting, and proofreading. The work also included a number of perquisites, including ready access to an abundance of good literature. Various booksellers would send their latest volumes to the paper hoping for a favorable review. Strong's father allowed him to take home any review copies he liked, and he devoured not only many dime novels but also a number of substantial works, including essays by Francis Bacon and Thomas Macaulay and poems by John Milton and Longfellow.³⁵ Strong later noted that this period greatly increased his stock of general information, which served him well in college essay writing and debate. Strong also believed that his administrative experiences in the newspaper counting room

prepared him to interact skillfully with trustees at the seminary.³⁶ Interestingly, during this time Strong's father was treasurer of the newly founded Rochester Theological Seminary, so all the seminary funds passed through the paper's office and were recorded by Augustus in ledger books.³⁷ No one knew that the young man keeping track of the seminary finances would become the seminary president two decades later.

Strong's College Days

Having completed his eighteen-month stint in the newspaper office, Strong headed off to New Haven, Connecticut, where he soon passed his entrance exams and matriculated at Yale College in 1853. Although his father had helped found the University of Rochester just a few years earlier,³⁸ Strong chose to attend Yale rather than the nearby school, for at least two reasons. First, Theodore Whittlesey, one of his friends at the preparatory school in Rochester, praised the glories of Yale so frequently that Strong decided he could attend nowhere else. Second, in keeping with Alvah's understanding of the role of travel and new acquaintances in a well-rounded education, both Strong and his father thought the experience in a larger school and a new environment would be good for him.³⁹

Strong went to Yale convinced that he would outpace his peers in every area of study, but he quickly discovered this was not the case. As he put it, "I was full of pride and full of ambition, but my pride and my ambition collapsed like a bubble at the first recitation in Homer's *Iliad*."⁴⁰ During this eye-opening session under Professor James Hadley, another student was called upon to demonstrate his mastery of the assigned text. Over the next several minutes the professor asked the young man scores of questions about the first four lines of Homer's *Iliad*. The student, an Andover man, was well prepared for the interrogation. Strong, on the other hand, found that he did not even understand the meaning of many of the questions. In that brief session, Strong realized that his preparation, while generally solid, was far from superior to that of his fellow students, so unwisely, he later confessed, he chose to pursue extracurricular activities with a fervor while letting his regular studies slide.⁴¹ Throughout his college years, Strong devoted much of his time and energy to writing and speaking. He engaged in various competitions and debates, winning many of them and developing something of a reputation as a public speaker along the way.⁴² However, Strong would later counsel his own sons to master the regular curriculum before devoting themselves to literature and debate.⁴³

In the 1850s, Yale employed a recitation method of learning in the classroom. Professors generally did not lecture, and students did not ask questions. Instead, students were expected to read their lessons from a textbook and be able to recite them to their instructors in class. As Strong explained it,

No discussion was permitted at any time. I do not recall that a single question was asked by any student of an instructor during the whole four years of my college course. It was a dead-alive system, which of itself did much to make scholarly work a drudgery and almost nothing to make it attractive. . . . A narrow accuracy was cultivated—breadth was ignored.⁴⁴

The recitation method did little to kindle Strong's academic interests, so for better or for worse, much of Strong's undergraduate educational development took place outside the classrooms of Yale.

Strong developed a number of keen and lasting friendships with faculty members and students alike. As he later wrote, "The good which I got from my college course consisted very largely in the acquaintance which I formed with men, both among the faculty and among the students."⁴⁵ Chief among Strong's valued acquaintances was Theodore Dwight Woolsey. A descendant of the famous theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), Woolsey served as president of Yale from 1846 until 1871 and taught Greek at the college for many years. According to Strong, Woolsey influenced him not so much with his teaching as with his character. Disciplined, courageous, and at times wholly inflexible, Woolsey impressed students with his simple Christian manhood. Although by nature very quick-tempered, Woolsey worked hard to control this aspect of his personality, often remaining silent for a moment while he regained his composure.⁴⁶ He maintained the highest standards of character, and he expected such in his students. Mainly for this reason Strong concluded, "No man whom I have ever met has so ruled me by his mere character. . . . It was worth going to Yale College to sit for four years under the influence of President Woolsey."⁴⁷

Noah Porter, Woolsey's eventual successor as president of Yale in 1871, was in Strong's day professor of intellectual and moral philosophy. Strong confessed that as a teacher Porter was abysmal. His lack of discipline and easygoing nature made him the exact opposite of Woolsey in many respects. As a general practice, Porter added little if anything to the information in the textbook. He also, unwittingly, often managed to convince his students that the subject at hand was dull and uninteresting. Strong was generally disappointed in Porter as a pedagogue. However, he recalled that on one occasion Porter departed from his usual course and gave a brief lecture on the subject of ethics. This lecture so intrigued

Strong that, for the first time in his college career, he approached the professor after class to discuss the subject. To his surprise, he discovered that the views expressed by Porter were original to him. As a result, Strong began to develop a new measure of respect for his teacher.⁴⁸

Many years later Strong visited Porter after the older man had retired from Yale. During this visit, Strong asked Porter if he had apostatized from the Christian faith, that is, if he had become an idealist. Despite his advanced age, Porter replied with vigor, "Never! If idealism be true, what is the world but a dream?" Although Strong's own ethical monism seemed to some observers to flirt with idealism, he apparently agreed with the implication of Porter's question. In later life, Strong regarded Porter as one of the three individuals who did the most for his intellectual development. In particular, Porter's book *The Human Intellect* (1868) had a more significant influence on Strong than the teacher ever did in the classroom.⁴⁹

Fresh from Andover in Strong's day, George Fisher served as pastor of the Yale college church from 1854 until 1861 and as professor at Yale from 1854 until his retirement in 1901. In Strong's opinion, Fisher was not the most entertaining speaker, and he told of students sleeping by the score while Fisher read his sermons with tears running down his cheeks. Nonetheless, Strong regarded Fisher as a capable preacher and writer and considered his primary strengths his ability to arrange difficult material and craft a lucid argument. Strong considered Fisher the primary instructor who helped him learn to write clearly. Strong also benefited from the personal interest Fisher showed him. He regarded Fisher a lifelong friend and readily acknowledged that Fisher had put him on "a higher order of philosophical and theological reading than [he] had known before."⁵⁰ Interestingly, Strong also credited Fisher's lectures on pantheism with giving him an early taste for theology. Years later, after Strong announced his ethical monism in the 1890s, he was accused by many of having embraced pantheism, an accusation he consistently denied.

Despite this interaction with numerous professors of religion, Strong's own religious awakening, as he called it, did not occur until after his junior year in college. Throughout much of his childhood, on Saturday afternoons Strong's mother took him to a dimly lit closet, where she would pray and would attempt to teach him to pray by having him repeat phrases. In later life, he recalled that on the day when he first prayed some stammering words of his own he felt drops upon his cheek and was surprised to discover they were his own mother's tears. Strong's mother also taught him the words to many hymns and in other ways impressed on him the importance of spiritual things. Because his father was a

deacon in the local Baptist church and made sure that the family was faithful in church attendance, when Strong headed off to college he thought he might become a minister someday. But by his own testimony, he was still “at heart very far from the kingdom of God.”⁵¹ Despite his religious upbringing, Strong considered himself unconverted.

Throughout his first three years at college, Strong gave very little thought to his spiritual condition. Around the time he entered Yale, he received letters from two of his female cousins urging him to become a Christian.⁵² Although he was grateful for his cousins’ concern, he for the most part ignored their appeals. Having decided that the pursuit of scholarship was not his path and giving little thought to spiritual things, Strong spent his early college years pursuing pleasure and frivolity. He fell into “irregular habits and associations” and in his opinion teetered on the brink of evil.⁵³ As he later wrote, “My selfish, ambitious, reckless life for three years in college was permitted by God in order to convince me that I was a great sinner and helpless in my sins unless God should have mercy upon me.”⁵⁴ No one at the college spoke to him about his relationship to God during those early years,⁵⁵ but everywhere Strong looked he saw among the faculty and student body men whom he deemed to be his moral superiors. By his junior year, his sense of guilt was palpable and increasing.

One evening near the end of his junior year, Strong was standing outside the old college chapel listening to the bells as they called students to evening prayers. Suddenly Strong felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned to see Wilder Smith, one of his classmates, looking somewhat agitated. With trembling voice, Smith said to him, “Strong, I wish you were a Christian!”⁵⁶ Strong was taken back at this statement, but he thanked Smith for his concern, agreed that he did need to become a Christian, and promised to think about it. The brief exchange was an unremarkable event for Smith, but it had a lasting impact on Strong.⁵⁷ As Strong recalled, “It was the only word he ever spoke to me, and yet it haunted me until I closed with God’s offer of pardon and began an earnest Christian life.”⁵⁸

Not long after this encounter with Smith, Strong headed home to Rochester for spring break. It was early April 1856, and evangelist Charles Finney was in town for another series of revival meetings, his third in as many decades.⁵⁹ Arriving home in the late afternoon, Strong discovered that his entire family planned to attend one of Finney’s meetings that evening. Jenny Farr, one of the cousins who had earlier written to Strong about his spiritual condition, was temporarily staying with the family. Although he had not intended to spend his first evening home at church, at the request of his cousin Strong agreed to attend.

The meeting that night was being held at a Presbyterian church on nearby South Washington Street.⁶⁰ After walking to church with his cousin, Strong found that the building was packed and the extra chairs in the aisles were largely filled. Having somehow become separated from the rest of his family, Strong and his cousin managed to find a seat at the end of a pew near the middle of the auditorium. Strong had previously heard Finney preach in Oberlin, Ohio, and he could still remember the evangelist asking him why he was not a Christian. This evening, as the service came to a close, Finney pressed his case once again. Strong later said that he could not recall the topic or much else about the service that night, but as Finney gave the invitation, he felt as if he was struck by a bolt of lightning. With many others, Strong went forward and was led to the church basement where counselors were waiting to talk to those concerned about their souls. When Frank Ellinwood, the pastor of the church, asked Strong if he was a Christian, he replied that he was very far from it. The pastor then asked if he had some feeling on the subject of religion, and Strong said he had none at all. Ellinwood pointed out that by coming forward Strong had indicated that he knew he ought to submit to God. Strong agreed that he ought to do so, but he still remained noncommittal. Ellinwood said that he would go speak to a few other people and then return to see what Strong had decided. As Strong recalled,

The moments that followed were moments of struggle. I reviewed the past. I saw that I was a miserable sinner, that I had been living a wicked life, that I was in danger of being given over to my wickedness, that if I was ever saved there must be a change, that the chance to change was now given me, [and] that the chance might never come again. . . . Gradually the determination was formed within me that I would put myself into God's hands to do with me what he would.⁶¹

When the pastor returned, Strong told him that he was ready to submit to God. That night Strong went home and before retiring resolved to begin reading his Bible and praying on a regular basis. As far as he was concerned, the most important day of his life was over—he was converted (though he later acknowledged it was a purely New School conversion).⁶²

The next morning Strong told his parents and his cousin Jenny about his decision. Although he began reading his Bible and attending morning prayer meetings, Strong still lacked confidence that he was right with God. He struggled with doubts about his salvation and with continual temptations to sin. He asked Christians to pray for him, but he still felt no closer to God. In his autobiography, Strong described twelve theological lessons that he learned throughout

his life. During these three weeks, he learned the first of these, “the depth and enormity of sin.”⁶³ He learned that, despite his attempts to live as a Christian, he was in fact very much a sinner.

When vacation was over, as Strong sat in the train to New Haven, he thought to himself, “This train is taking me to hell!”⁶⁴ He knew he would face renewed temptations at Yale, and he feared that his good intentions to live as a Christian might disappear like the morning dew. On the train Strong ran through various scenarios in his mind and determined he would live as a Christian regardless of the consequences or the difficulties it might entail.

Back at Yale, Strong continued to struggle. Although he told other Christian students that he was a Christian, he still often felt that this was not the case, so he determined to search the Scriptures for a reason to believe he was truly converted. One day, while reading 2 Corinthians 6, he came upon a text that said, “I will dwell with them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . Saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” Strong took this as an indication from God that he was truly and vitally connected to God. Afterward Strong said that his perspective on nature was changed by this realization. He began to look at the world around him as a revelation of God and of his love: “The world outside seemed somehow elevated to the planetary spaces above and to be part of a mighty universe in which dwelt and reigned a present God. . . . I was joined to God forever, and as I looked up to the stars that shone through the trees, I said to myself, ‘When those shall grow old and die, I shall dwell with God and shall partake of the life of God!’”⁶⁵ Strong’s later reflection on this time in his life suggests that even at this early stage he was beginning to develop what would later mature into his ideas of union with Christ and divine immanence in the universe.⁶⁶

At the end of the term, Strong returned to Rochester. He was baptized on August 3, 1856, his twentieth birthday, by J. R. Scott in the First Baptist Church of Rochester. At the time he was not yet fully convinced that Baptist doctrine was correct, but he figured that if he were immersed by Baptists, he would never have reason to doubt the validity of his baptism. Strong was disappointed that his baptism did not bring him any conscious benefit. Apparently he was hoping for some type of subjective feeling to accompany the physical act of baptism.⁶⁷

During his final year at Yale, Strong discovered that he was still very much a sinner. He lost what he called “the joy of [God’s] salvation” and fell away from some of his earlier commitments.⁶⁸ Strong later concluded that God allowed him

to face this trial of his faith to teach him a second theological lesson, that only God can regenerate:

My willful transgression, after such experience of his forgiving mercy, wrought in me a profound conviction that I was not sufficient to myself. Only God could keep me true to him. My complete dependence upon him for *preserving* grace threw light upon my earlier experience and taught me that I then must have been the subject of *regenerating* grace. If without the help of God I could not *keep* myself in the Christian way, how without the help of God could I ever have *gotten into* that way?⁶⁹

The bonds of Arminian theology were beginning to slacken, and he was starting to move in the direction of moderate Calvinism. From the time of his conversion, Strong felt he was called to preach the gospel. He soon determined to continue his preparation for ministry back in Rochester.

Strong's Seminary Days

From their earliest days the University of Rochester and the Rochester Theological Seminary had a symbiotic relationship. They were, as Strong put it, "twins," though not "organically and inseparably united."⁷⁰ Both schools opened their doors to begin instruction on the same day in November 1850, and in the early years the seminary rented space in the university building.⁷¹ According to popular lore, none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson used the university as "an illustration of Yankee enterprise, saying that a landlord in Rochester had a hotel which he thought would rent for more as a university; so he put in a few books, sent for a coach-load of professors, bought some philosophical apparatus, and, by the time green peas were ripe, had graduated a large class of students."⁷² Although the university outpaced the seminary in terms of growth, both schools were generally healthy in the 1850s. In fact, among Baptist schools the University of Rochester was second only to Brown University in terms of enrollment.⁷³

Although Strong had chosen to go elsewhere for his collegiate instruction, he now decided to return to Rochester for his seminary training. Strong's father had been closely identified with the early history of both the University of Rochester and the Rochester Theological Seminary,⁷⁴ but that was not the primary impetus behind his decision. Rochester was his hometown, and he thought it would be good to spend more time with his parents while studying for the ministry. They

had, after all, funded his four years of study at Yale. Although Strong was not yet, as he called it, “a firm Baptist,” he could think of no other denomination he could safely join, so by default he concluded it would be best to study at a Baptist institution. Most important, Ezekiel Gilman Robinson was then professor of theology at Rochester. Strong viewed Robinson as “the very ideal of a pulpit orator,” and he “felt that [he] could have no instructor in theology or homiletics half as competent as Dr. Robinson.”⁷⁵ Robinson was a big drawing point for Strong to attend the seminary in Rochester.

In stark contrast to the recitation method practiced at Yale, Robinson encouraged his students to think critically and to ask questions in class. As Strong noted, “[Robinson] never was so happy as when he stirred up a hot debate.” This change caught Strong completely off guard. Emboldened, however, by the example of older students he gradually, if somewhat timidly, began to participate in classroom discussion. Strong later considered his experience under Robinson “the real beginning of [his] intellectual history.”⁷⁶

Robinson not only challenged Strong by his teaching methods, but he also forced Strong to rethink much of what he had learned at Yale. For example, whereas Noah Porter had given his students the impression that metaphysics was an uninteresting topic, Robinson showed Strong the practical value of such subjects. As Strong later acknowledged, “Under Dr. Robinson all my ideas with regard to metaphysics were changed. I began to see that it alone dealt with realities, that, in fact, one could have no firm footing in any other department of knowledge unless he had reached a good metaphysical foundation.” Robinson held to a Kantian doctrine of relativity, which Strong adopted and held for more than twenty-five years.⁷⁷ Strong later considered some of the actual philosophical ideas he acquired from Robinson to be fetters of a sort, but he credited Robinson with introducing him to the importance of studying philosophy.⁷⁸

Although in Strong’s opinion Robinson towered above the other faculty members, he also studied under a number of other capable men. Velona Hotchkiss taught both Hebrew and Greek at the seminary during the 1850s and 1860s. Whereas Robinson was somewhat of a radical, always questioning older views, Hotchkiss was a very conservative thinker. He held that the world was created in six literal days and believed in a worldwide flood in Noah’s time. For these reasons, among others, Strong thought him “somewhat narrow.”⁷⁹ At his funeral in 1882, Strong said of Hotchkiss,

He was an ardent lover of the Bible, and a profound believer that its every line and syllable were written by holy men of old as they were moved by the

Holy Ghost. In those days, we who were students wondered whether he did not press too strongly and exclusively the divine aspect of the doctrine of inspiration, and whether he made sufficient allowance for the human moulds into which the molten gold of truth has been poured. . . . He loved the old doctrines, and he held them in their old forms.⁸⁰

Strong recognized the professor's scholarly work was driven by his belief in the infallibility and authority of the Scriptures, and for this he deeply respected Hotchkiss. Still, Strong preferred the questioning Robinson to the more staid and stable professor.

George Northrup was, in Strong's day, professor of ecclesiastical history at the seminary. Like Robinson, he encouraged discussion in the classroom. Conscientious and more mystical than the other professors, Northrup had just completed his undergraduate education when he began teaching, and he was still working through a number of theological issues himself. For this reason, he tended to place himself on level ground with his students. As Strong put it, "His very inexperience compelled him to put himself by our sides as a fellow student, and that stimulated us to think for ourselves as we never would have been stimulated by more advanced and dogmatic instruction."⁸¹ Strong appreciated Northrup's demeanor in the classroom, but Robinson remained the gold standard against which he measured the others.

In addition to his academic work, during his first year at seminary Strong began ministering to a small group of people who met at the Rapids, a small village on the Genesee River three miles south of Rochester. It was a rough area populated largely by canal workers, who spent much of their spare time fighting, drinking, and gambling. The town had three bars, no church, and one run-down schoolhouse. However, the town also had Charlotte Stillson, a woman committed to the spiritual betterment of the community. Throughout the week Stillson would visit folks in the village and encourage them to send their children to Sunday school and to attend services themselves. On Sunday afternoons the neighborhood children were gathered together in the old schoolhouse, where Strong would lead them in singing and speak to them about their souls. Then on Sunday evenings Strong would preach to any adults who came out to hear the young seminary student. Strong described his Sunday schedule during the year and a half he ministered in the Rapids:

On Sundays after I had attended morning service at the First Baptist Church in town and had taught my young women's Bible class in the

church Sunday School, I walked my three miles, often through rain and mud, to Mrs. Stillson's house at the Rapids. There I had a cold lunch and soon after went a little farther out on the Chili Road to the tumbledown schoolhouse, where I led singing and superintended the school. We came back to Mrs. Stillson's for supper. After supper, and often with a lantern to light us along the miry road, we repaired again to the schoolhouse, which was dimly lighted with tallow candles and was crowded to its utmost capacity with an audience of seventy-five. There were fellows outside to throw stones through the windows and fellows inside to create every possible disorder. Somehow I managed to secure their goodwill, and they made me no positive trouble, though it was hard for the young women, without a guard, to get back unmolested to their homes. But all the while there was one quiet little woman whose influence was gradually subduing the community, and that was Mrs. Stillson.⁸²

During this time in the Rapids, Strong preached simple gospel messages, and he credited this experience with preventing him from becoming caught up with rhetorical display.

One evening, Stillson invited a number of young women to her home for Bible study and prayer. Strong read to them from Isaiah 53 and told them about the atoning work of Christ. That night he believed several of them were genuinely converted, and from this experience Strong learned his third lesson in theology: "The atonement of Christ is the effective and the only persuasive to faith. . . . No man had a right to believe in God as a Savior except upon the ground of the sacrificial death of Jesus."⁸³ Strong found that it was not enough to tell people that God would forgive them. He needed to explain how God could justly save them from their sins.

Strong later reflected that he may have learned more about theology in the Rapids than he ever learned at the seminary. Ministering to people in a difficult area forced him to ask many questions that he never would have encountered in the classroom. Stillson herself also had a significant impact on his thinking. She planted a theological emphasis that may have laid some of the groundwork for his later ethical monism. Strong wrote of Stillson: "I learned from her example the doctrine of a present Christ. And though I had still much to learn about this present Christ . . . now I began to pray to Jesus my elder brother, my human companion, my present friend."⁸⁴ By her example, Stillson taught Strong to emphasize the presence of Christ, that is, the immanence of deity.

During the spring of his second year at the seminary, Strong developed a bad cold that settled in his lungs.⁸⁵ After he coughed up blood several times, the family doctor was called, who recommended that Strong end his studies at once and spend an entire year in the open air, else he “might enter the kingdom of heaven” sooner than any of them wished.⁸⁶ Heeding the doctor’s instructions Strong finished his seminary studies two or three months early and headed to Europe for an extended holiday.⁸⁷

On May 6, 1859, Strong and a companion named Theodore Bacon set sail from New York bound for Liverpool on the steamer *City of Washington*. During his more than fourteen months abroad, Strong engaged in a walking tour, visiting England, Scotland, France, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and Palestine.⁸⁸ Strong heard many of Europe’s great preachers, including Robert Candlish, Horatius Bonar, and Charles Spurgeon, and he saw many of Europe’s architectural landmarks, such as Westminster Abbey, the British House of Commons, the University of Wittenburg, the Acropolis, and St. Peter’s Basilica. After spending three weeks in Rome, Strong later reflected that he “almost longed for a good settled bronchitis which would compel [him] to spend a whole winter in this most instructive and fascinating of all the cities of the world.”⁸⁹

The travel and change of pace were certainly good for his health, but Strong also benefited from his interaction with a variety of companions. In addition to his original travel mate, Strong spent quite a bit of his time with Americans he met overseas. Chief among them was Elisha Mulford, who was staying in the city of Berlin, where he spent his days learning German, reading G. W. F. Hegel, and smoking his pipe. A graduate of both Yale and Union, Mulford was a disciple of Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice (1805–72) and was quickly becoming a follower of Hegel as well. Later he attempted to popularize the thought of Maurice and Hegel in his two books, *The Nation* and *The Republic of God*, but at this early stage he was content to spend two or three evenings a week talking with Strong until late into the night. Although these conversations were not Strong’s first introduction to Hegel, they likely included some of the most evangelistic appeals he had ever heard for Hegelian philosophy. Strong spent most of October through December of 1859 in Berlin.⁹⁰

During the first half of 1860, Mulford traveled with Strong to Paris, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and The Hague, and at the end of June they sailed from Liverpool back to Boston aboard the steamship *Arabia*. By the time they arrived in Boston Harbor, Strong had been away from the United States for one year, two months, and four days, and he calculated the trip to have cost about \$2,400. The trip

had been costly and time consuming, but his health had been restored. He had also learned much about foreign language and foreign life, and perhaps most important, he had “found [his] tongue, had acquired ease in conversation, and had learned to mingle with men.” He now had quite a store of memories to draw on for conversation and illustrative purposes, but he also noted that his spiritual condition had somewhat worsened during his time abroad. Ministry no longer seemed an inviting prospect but rather a threatening one.⁹¹ He later admitted, “In my European experience the edge of my Christian feeling became dull. I lost the desire and the love for Christian service, although I learned a great deal of German, and got together a library of German books, which was very useful to me afterward.”⁹² Though spiritually detrimental, the trip had opened his eyes and broadened his perspective on many issues.

Pastoral Ministry in Haverhill, Massachusetts

Shortly after returning from Europe, Ezekiel Robinson asked Strong to candidate at the First Baptist Church of New York City. Having been born and raised in a city, Strong thought New York would provide an excellent setting for ministerial success. He liked the city, and if he were to pastor, he wanted a city church. Strong preached what he considered an excellent sermon, but the church thought otherwise. Strong was surprised when they did not extend a call for him to become their next pastor. In retrospect, he realized that his sermons at that time were overly refined, highly rhetorical, and generally deficient in terms communicating the simple gospel.⁹³

Robinson next sent Strong to a smaller church in Haverhill, in the northeast corner of Massachusetts. At the time, the village of Haverhill had only about ten thousand residents, and the church, about three hundred members.⁹⁴ Strong’s initial impression of the place was unfavorable. He longed for the city and thought this out-of-the-way town would provide little opportunity for advancement, but the people liked his preaching and after the Sunday evening service asked him to accept the pastorate. However, there was one difficulty the church did not anticipate: while in Germany, Strong had decided that immersion was the only valid mode of baptism, but he had not yet determined whether or not baptism must precede church membership and admission to communion. He confessed to the church that he did not yet hold to restricted communion. Believing him a Baptist, the people were shocked by his admission. They replied that, unless he could change his mind about this issue, they would have to withdraw their invitation.⁹⁵

Strong returned to Rochester determined to settle his denominational views. He realized that his view of communion would likely prevent him from being called to any significant Baptist church, so he knew he needed to resolve the question in his own mind. Other issues were also troubling him during this time. Shortly after his return from Europe, Strong had visited an aunt in Oberlin, Ohio, where he met and was smitten by Julia Finney, daughter of evangelist Charles Finney. The two were hastily engaged, but that fall she suddenly broke off their engagement. Strong was devastated by this chain of events:

Darkness seemed to be closing round me. I had wanted a city church, but the city church did not want me. A country church had wanted me, but I had not wanted the country church. A certain young lady of intelligence and refinement, of musical and social gifts, had seemed to suit me, but now I learned of insuperable obstacles which prevented all hope of securing her. I was at my father's house, pecuniarily dependent when I ought to be earning my own living. . . . I began to be despondent, but I began anew to think and pray.⁹⁶

During December 1860, while walking under a clear night sky, Strong renewed his commitment to follow God and to pursue the truth with regard to both doctrine and ministerial duty.

Soon after this, Strong was invited to fill the pulpit of the North Baptist Church in Chicago. The church was small, with fewer than fifty members and almost no financial resources, but it was a place for Strong to regain his bearings both personally and ministerially. In Chicago he spent much of his time either studying or visiting people in the community. For several months he preached simple, plain gospel messages. Life and ministry, if not ideal, at least seemed stable. Then suddenly everything changed. In April 1861, shots rang out at Fort Sumter, a harbinger of dreadful events to come. As newly elected President Lincoln began calling for troops and the Civil War commenced, the atmosphere in Northern cities was transformed. Strong's preaching, too, was impacted by these national events. He was a Unionist through and through, and his sermons reflected as much. He longed to see a stronger national government that could respond decisively to the threat of rebellion: "I was patriotic, and I did my part in strengthening the hands of the president and in nerving the people to give their money and their sons for the defense of the Union. I declared that 'the powers that be are ordained by God' and that rebellion against just civil government is rebellion against God."⁹⁷

In light of his interim ministry, he also began wishing for a stronger church government. Strong started putting together a more developed understanding of church government and gradually came to see that “as birth must come before food, so . . . baptism, the ordinance that symbolizes birth, must come before the Lord’s Supper, the ordinance that symbolizes nourishment.” He had finally adopted a Baptist view of communion: “I saw my way to be a thoroughgoing Baptist—I could no longer be anything else.”⁹⁸ Strong considered his arrival at a Baptist view of the church to be his fourth lesson in doctrine.

About this time, the church in Haverhill contacted Strong again asking if perhaps he had changed his mind regarding communion. He replied that he had come to a Baptist understanding of the ordinance but that he was not sure that it was his duty to pastor that particular church. The Haverhill church responded by inviting Strong to fill the pulpit for an indefinite trial period. This time he accepted, though not without some reservations. He still had no great love for the little town:

I went only because God sent me. When I set foot there for the second time, I wanted to flee like Jonah. I wanted a larger place, and I wanted a city church. But obeying God’s call, I began work there. And I found after a little that the wisdom and plan of God were better than any wisdom and plan of mine. To all eternity I shall never cease to praise him that he did not permit me to have my own way but directed me instead to that little shoe-town in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts.⁹⁹

Although not prone to displays of affection, his New England congregation clearly loved their young pastor from the start, and the trial period was soon made permanent.

Strong was ordained by the church on August 1, 1861. Although the nation was in the midst of great turmoil, Strong found his conservative New England congregation to be the epitome of stability and faithfulness. While not nearly as flattering as the church in Chicago, the sturdy folk in Haverhill were present when the church doors were open, and unlike the big city church, they paid him a generous salary on time every month.¹⁰⁰ When Strong was drafted to serve in the Union army he was ready and willing to head off to war. The congregation, however, believed Strong could do more to help the Union cause by preaching at home, so they raised \$350 to secure a substitute for their new pastor.¹⁰¹

Shortly after his ordination, Strong took a month’s vacation back in Rochester, where he called on Charlotte Stillson in the Rapids. She told him that she wanted him to meet Hattie Savage, a young lady she thought would be a

perfect match for him. Stillson invited the two for afternoon tea, and as Strong put it, "I came, I saw, and I was conquered." They began courting immediately, were engaged within the week, and were married on November 6, 1861, less than three months after meeting. Although he later counseled his own children and grandchildren not to proceed so quickly, he included the caveat, "unless they are sure they have found a treasure as great as mine."¹⁰²

Hattie's father, Eleazer Savage, had been the first pastor of the First Baptist Church in Rochester and was involved in reviving about a dozen dying churches over several decades. Raised in a pastor's home, Strong's new bride quickly adapted to her life as a pastor's wife at the church in Haverhill. Strong's ministry appeared to go well: the church loved their young pastor and his wife, and the young couple had come to love their congregation. Then, after two years of preaching two sermons a week, he began to feel as if his "cask seemed to run dry." He found it difficult to prepare sermons and often lay awake at night thinking that his ministry was a waste. Struggling with ill health and depression, Strong and his wife headed back to Rochester for four weeks of vacation in the summer of 1863. Strong determined to read nothing but the Bible during his time in Rochester. As he read the book of Acts, he noticed that the apostles were marked not by despondency but by courage and hope. He contrasted this with his own ministry and concluded that they were full of optimism and power because of "the presence of Christ *in them*." He went back to John's gospel and reread Christ's promises to his disciples. It eventually dawned on him that Christ's promise to be with his disciples and his teaching about the vine and the branches were not merely pictures of Christ's sympathy and friendship but, rather, descriptions of a powerful and vital union between Christ and his followers. For the first time, Strong saw this relationship as "a union in which the Spirit of Christ interpenetrates and energizes ours, a union in which he joins himself so indissolubly to us that neither life nor death, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from him." Previously he had viewed Christ as an external Savior. He now saw Christ as his "very mind and heart" and as a Savior who had "made himself to be a part of me forever." This new understanding of Christ's relationship to the believer had major implications for other areas of his theology and for his ability to correlate and communicate his developing doctrinal system. Strong later wrote, "Regeneration, conversion, justification, sanctification, perseverance, ecclesiology, and eschatology revealed themselves to me successively as mere correlates of this union of Christ with the believer. If I had never had this experience, I never could have taught theology."¹⁰³ This fifth doctrinal lesson, which Strong

called “union with Christ,” was an important step toward what he would later call ethical monism.

Strong returned from his vacation with a new outlook on Christian life and ministry. Whereas he would previously spend days looking at a text of Scripture trying to come up with a simple sermon outline, he now found that in minutes much of the sermon would come to him with little effort. Several notable conversions soon took place in the town, and the church grew even as the nation convulsed and young men, including several from Haverhill, fell silent in the battlefields.¹⁰⁴

Strong’s family, too, was growing. On November 28, 1862, their first child was born, a son they named Charles after Hattie’s brother, Charles Savage, who had recently lost his life in the war. Then, on August 29, 1864, they had their first daughter, Mary. If Strong had found it difficult to keep a rein on expenses as a newly married man, he found it even harder as his household expanded. Strong claimed that he would never have left Haverhill for purely financial reasons, but finances surely played a part. He also still wanted a larger field in which to labor in the gospel, and he always felt the Haverhill congregation was a bit too conservative for his liking.¹⁰⁵

In July 1865, Strong was invited to candidate at the First Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He initially turned down the offer—he had no desire to move that far west—but agreed to stop in Cleveland and fill the pulpit on his way to vacation on Lake Superior. During their brief time in Cleveland, Strong and his wife were both immediately attracted to the church, and the church seemed to appreciate his preaching—in fact, they compelled Strong to fill the pulpit again on his way back from vacation. That second Sunday in Cleveland, the pulpit committee extended a call to the church, and Strong accepted. He dropped Hattie and the children off in Rochester and returned to Haverhill to resign and pack up their earthly belongings for the move to Cleveland. He announced his resignation on Thursday and by Sunday night had preached his farewell sermon. The church in Haverhill was shocked by his sudden departure, but they did not bear hard feelings against their young pastor, and in subsequent years Strong enjoyed many pleasant visits to the town. He always considered it a place where God had worked mightily in his life by revealing to him the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ: “Haverhill was the place where a change was wrought in my experience more striking than that at my conversion—the place where it pleased God to reveal his Son in me—and therefore Haverhill will always seem to me a veritable house of God and gate of heaven.”¹⁰⁶ However, at the time he

was more than willing to leave this “gate of heaven” for a larger and potentially more progressive church in Cleveland.

Pastoral Ministry in Cleveland, Ohio

When Strong arrived in Cleveland in the fall of 1865, the city boasted a population of about sixty-five thousand. The city was beautiful and was in the midst of a period of rapid growth.¹⁰⁷ It was just the kind of place Strong was hoping to minister. The auditorium of the First Baptist Church could seat around a thousand, and church membership stood at about six hundred. The church was healthy, but the facilities still included plenty of room for additional growth.

The church initially offered him a salary of \$3,000 a year, more than double what he had been making in Haverhill. Several wealthy members also helped him acquire a substantial home with plenty of room for his growing family and his growing library. The increased income and improved domestic conditions gave Strong greater flexibility to perform his duties, and he felt that the larger and better-educated congregation called for some adjustments to his preaching: “I cut myself loose from the fetters of tradition and branched out into new lines of thought and study.” Whereas in Haverhill Strong had studied the Bible almost exclusively, in Cleveland he began to examine other subjects he thought might help him become a better interpreter of the Scriptures: geology, mineralogy, microscopy, botany, chemistry, meteorology, astronomy, political economy, and metaphysics. As he studied these subjects his appreciation of natural revelation gradually increased: “The book of nature began to seem a part of God’s revelation quite as much as the book of Scripture.” His study of these subjects also opened up doors for him to lecture on these topics in a variety of contexts.¹⁰⁸ His growing reputation as a well-informed speaker led to him being offered professorships at Brown University and Crozer Theological Seminary. However, Strong was not yet ready to return to the classroom, so he turned these offers down, feeling he could not leave the pastorate for “any ordinary chair.”¹⁰⁹ Still, he was moving in a direction that would eventually draw him away from the church and into the academy.

For a number of years, Strong was content to devote the bulk of his energy to his congregation in Cleveland. Things seemed to be going well in the church. Within his first few months in the city, more than one hundred people had been converted and added to the rolls.¹¹⁰ Although that level of growth did not continue, the church was actively involved in foreign missions and planting

domestic churches and was well regarded in the community. Before Strong came to Cleveland, the various Baptist churches in the city had little to do with each other, but soon he began hosting an informal Baptist ministers' meeting in his office every Monday morning for fellowship and mutual encouragement. This led to the establishment of a City Mission Union whereby the Baptist churches in Cleveland worked together to promote evangelical outreach and denominational expansion.

Strong enjoyed his ministry in Cleveland, but he also began looking beyond the city limits. In 1831, the Ohio Baptist Education Society had founded a college in Granville, Ohio, about 120 miles south of Cleveland. Strong soon became interested in this work, and in 1867 he was elected a trustee of the school, which by this time had been renamed Denison University.¹¹¹ Strong especially enjoyed the annual ministers' institutes in Granville in connection with the university. He did some teaching in the institutes and "first began to think that [he] might have gifts for teaching and might enjoy that sort of life."¹¹²

Strong's time in Cleveland was eye opening in many ways. Through his scientific study he gained a new appreciation for Christ's role as creator, which he later considered his sixth doctrinal lesson. He had not yet developed the idea of ethical monism, but he was slowly moving in that direction. He recalled, "God gave me in Cleveland a wider view of the universe and prepared me to see the larger relations of Christ to the world he had made. . . . The immanence of Christ did not then impress itself upon me as it did afterwards in Rochester. But I was gathering material for broader conceptions." Cleveland also provided Strong with what he called a "healthy objective element that was previously lacking."¹¹³ This increased understanding of the world through scientific study and interaction with broad-minded people seems to have caused him to view religious authority as less centered in a book such as the Bible.

While in Cleveland, Strong met several people with whom his life would be forever entwined. The most significant of these was John D. Rockefeller Sr. (1839–1937). Contrary to statements found in many sources, Rockefeller was not a member at the First Baptist Church in Cleveland.¹¹⁴ Rather, he was a lifelong member of a Cleveland church that changed names several times and is today best known as the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church.¹¹⁵ Exactly when Strong first met Rockefeller is unclear. However, after the Rockefellers' second child died in August 1870, Strong was asked to conduct the funeral because the Rockefellers' own pastor was out of town: "In the absence of his pastor, I was called to conduct the funeral service."¹¹⁶ This statement by Strong makes it clear that he did not consider himself Rockefeller's pastor.¹¹⁷ By conducting the

funeral, Strong established a definite and memorable connection with the rising businessman—a relationship that would become much stronger, if sometimes tested, in years to come.

During his years in Cleveland, Strong's own family continued to grow. On December 7, 1866, his son John Henry was born, and then on February 10, 1870, twin girls, Cora and Kate. The church continued to provide financially for their pastor and his growing family, but other offers did come in. One of the most attractive came in 1869 when a committee from the Madison Avenue Church in New York City appeared in the congregation one Sunday and afterward asked if he would consider a call from that church.¹¹⁸ Strong had always loved the city, and he viewed New York as the pinnacle of city life and ministry. Plus, the church was offering a salary of \$6,000 a year, significantly more than he was then making. Strong went to New York and preached, and the church promptly extended a unanimous call, but Strong was not yet ready to accept: he had big plans for the church and wanted the church to agree to them before accepting the call. After several months of correspondence and few assurances from the church, Strong finally decided to decline. The church was unwilling to embrace his plans for a mission chapel and, more important, would not agree to follow his leadership on this issue among others.

In 1869, Strong also preached for the Judson Missionary Society at Brown University. He thought he had preached well, but did not expect anything particular to come of the occasion, so he was surprised the next year when he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree from the university.¹¹⁹ Although honorary, this degree recognized his ministerial accomplishments and growing reputation and further set him on course for an academic career.¹²⁰

Returning to Rochester

A few years later, in 1872 Ezekiel Robinson resigned from the presidency of Rochester Theological Seminary. For years tensions had been building around some of his theological tendencies and his corresponding influence on students.¹²¹ A graduate of Brown University, Robinson had first been approached by his alma mater about assuming the presidency in 1867 while on a yearlong sabbatical in Europe, but shortly after returning from Europe he had decided to remain in Rochester. The seminary had graciously allowed him a year off, had struggled in his absence, and now very much needed his administrative leadership. He spent the next several years rebuilding the school and expanding its financial base, but he struggled with ill health and thought the Rochester climate and the official

seminary president's house in particular contributed to his difficulties. In the spring of 1871, Brown University renewed its offer, and this time after much coaxing and deliberation, Robinson finally accepted. At the time he considered this transition a "descent to a lower and less useful sphere of labor," but the decision was made, and after almost twenty years of service at Rochester, Robinson returned to his alma mater.¹²² Although others would later say similar things about Strong, Strong himself wrote of his former professor, "To Dr. Robinson the institution at Rochester owes more of its character and success than to any single other man."¹²³

With Robinson's departure, Rochester lost both its president and its professor of theology. The trustees began to look around for someone to fill the professor's chair and quickly focused their attention on Strong. In addition to being a graduate of the school, he was a successful pastor and had earned a reputation for being well read and for being at home in a variety of academic contexts. An extended series of doctrinal sermons at the church in Cleveland had also bolstered his reputation as a theologically astute pastor. In the spring of 1872, the seminary trustees asked Strong to accept the professorship of theology. Although just thirty-five years old at the time, Strong replied that he could not accept the position unless he was also made president of the seminary, for he said, "I could not work easily unless I had affairs in my own hands."¹²⁴ Remarkably, the trustees then offered him both the presidency and the professorship, which he accepted.

In June 1872, Strong preached his final sermon in Cleveland. He then embarked on a three-month tour of Europe before assuming his duties in Rochester. In September, he moved to Rochester and took up the reins as president and professor of theology at the seminary shortly before the new term began. His first year Strong was pleased to find that the seniors had finished their theology during the previous year, so he needed only to teach the middle class, which consisted of just seventeen students. Strong wrote out the content of his first lecture on the morning of the day he delivered it, and he continued this practice for his first two years, until he had worked through the entire system of theology.¹²⁵ His predecessor and former professor, Ezekiel Robinson, had written extensive notes for the class, but Strong put these notes aside so he would not be tempted to repeat Robinson's material without giving it sufficient thought.¹²⁶ In fact, Strong did not examine Robinson's material at all until about twenty years later, when he was asked to write an evaluation of Robinson's theology as part of a memorial for the older man.¹²⁷

As he prepared his lectures week by week and was forced to work through numerous theological issues, Strong found that he turned more often to German

writers than to English-speaking ones: “English and American theologians often evade or ignore difficulties and leave the reader unconscious of their existence. . . . But German writers aim to cover the whole subject. When they come to a question they cannot answer, they at least recognize it, suggest a tentative answer, or declare it to be for the present unanswerable.” Thus, he found himself devouring the writings of such authors as Isaak August Dorner (1809–84), Friedrich Adolf Philippi (1809–82), and Gottfried Thomasius (1802–75) among others.¹²⁸

Although Strong often turned to German writers, he did not by any means abandon American and English authors. Many American and English writers were stressing the doctrine of divine immanence during the second half of the nineteenth century, and Strong drank deeply from their writings as well, even if he sometimes found their draft less satisfying. Although the connections are not always easy to make, Strong’s thinking, and especially his eventual adoption of ethical monism, was doubtless affected by his early life and ministry and by philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Chapter 2 explores the writings of several German thinkers who seem to have provided some of the philosophical building blocks Strong used to construct his ethical monism. It also examines the writings of several English-speaking philosophers who emphasized the doctrine of divine immanence and who appear to have pushed Strong’s thinking toward ethical monism.