

**LETTERS ON THE ORIGIN
AND PROGRESS OF THE
NEW HAVEN THEOLOGY**

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Letters on the Origin and Progress of the New Haven Theology by Bennet Tyler

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BENNET TYLER

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Dr. Tyler, Bennet^t LETTERS

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ON THE

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NEW YORK
From a New England Minister to one at the South.
NEW YORK
NEW YORK

NEW YORK.

ROBERT CARTER AND EZRA COLLIER.

M DCCC XXXVII.

LETTER I.

February 10, 1837.

MY DEAR BROTHER :

Although I never had the pleasure of seeing your face, I have for some time felt acquainted with you, having heard so much respecting you from our mutual friend, Mr. Nettleton. I was therefore fully prepared to reciprocate every expression of confidence contained in your kind and friendly letter of the first inst. I can assure you that brother N. remembers with deep interest the season which he spent under your hospitable roof; and that he will ever cherish a grateful sense of the tokens of affection which he received from you and your family. And here permit me to say, that, having been intimately acquainted with him for the last five and twenty years, I can cheerfully subscribe to every word which you have said in testimony of his worth.

But I must proceed to answer your inquiries respecting "the origin and progress of Arminian views in New England." I suppose you refer to the New Haven speculations. I have had opportunity to know something of the history of these

speculations; but the story is long, and cannot be told in a single letter. If you will have patience with me, I will attempt to give you a brief history in a series of letters, promising to bring my narrative within as narrow compass as possible.

It is true, as was stated by Dr. Porter in his letter to Dr. Beecher, that "Arminianism received from the hand of Edwards its death blow, of which it lingered more than half a century in New England and died. Our orthodoxy had settled into a solid, tranquil, scriptural state; and perhaps no body of ministers since the world began have been so united, and so manifestly blessed of God, as the ministers of New England." Such was the state of things, when, as Dr. Porter says—"A battery was opened in Connecticut, a standard raised, and a campaign begun."

The first indications that the New Haven divines were beginning to adopt opinions at variance with those which commonly prevailed among the orthodox, appeared while the controversy between Dr. Woods of Andover, and Dr. Ware of Cambridge, was in progress; which was in 1820, '21. Dr. Taylor expressed to some of his brethren great dissatisfaction with the manner in which Dr. Woods had conducted the controversy, and with the views which he had advanced, particularly on the subject of Native Depravity. He was heard to say, that on that subject Dr. Ware had the better of the argument, and that Dr. Woods had put back the controversy with Unitarians fifty years. Under the impulse of these feelings, he prepared an article

for the *Christian Spectator*, which he submitted to the association of gentlemen, by whom, in connexion with the editor, the work was conducted. The Association decided that it was not expedient to publish the article. Of the character of the piece, and the sentiments which it contained, you may perhaps form some conjecture from the following circumstance. While Dr. Taylor was reading it, one of the gentlemen present composed and wrote with his pencil this stanza :

Immortal Edwards, whom religion hails
Her favorite son, a Taylor overthrew ;
A Taylor now the great man's ghost assails,
His doctrine doubts, and error vamps anew.

I am not able to fix the precise date of this event. I am not certain whether it was previous or *subsequent to the fact* which I am about to relate. On Saturday evening, Dec. 15, 1821, Professor Goodrich of Yale College, in his course of lectures to the college students, came to the doctrine of Original Sin. He commenced his lecture by observing that he was about to present a different view of the subject from that which is commonly received; and proceeded to exhibit the views which were afterwards published in the *Christian Spectator*; and which I shall have occasion to notice in a future letter. Some of the pious students, who had read the controversy between Dr. Woods and Dr. Ware, thought that the views exhibited in this lecture bore a striking resemblance to those of Dr. Ware. They were grieved and alarmed. Some of them wrote to their friends, and in this way considerable uneasiness was excited. Mr. Nettleton was at this

time laboring in Litchfield with Dr. Beecher. On hearing what had transpired at New Haven, Dr. Beecher wrote to Dr. Taylor, and some correspondence ensued. Professor Goodrich sent his lecture to Litchfield. About that time Dr. Humphrey, then pastor of the church in Pittsfield, now President of Amherst College, happened to be there on a visit. He and Mr. Nettleton examined it together, and were greatly dissatisfied. Dr. Beecher did not approve of the views expressed by Professor Goodrich and Dr. Taylor; yet in his correspondence at this time, he made some concessions with which Mr. Nettleton was not satisfied; and in a letter which he (Mr. N.) wrote to Dr. Taylor, he said:

"With all my love and respect for brothers Taylor and Goodrich and Beecher, I must say that neither my judgment, nor conscience, nor heart, can acquiesce, and I can go with you no farther. Whatever you may say about infants, for one, I do solemnly believe that God views, and treats them in all respects, just as he would do if they were sinners. To say that animals die, and therefore death can be no proof of sin in infants, is to take infidel ground. The infidel has just as good a right to say, because animals die without being sinners, therefore adults may. If death may reign to such an alarming extent over the human race, and yet be no proof of sin, then you adopt the principle that death may reign to any extent over the universe, and it can never be made a proof of sin in any case. Then what Paul says "Death by sin, and so death passed upon all men for that all have sinned," is not true. Infants die either on account of their

own sin, or the sin of Adam, or neither. Hence the most that Paul can mean is this, death by sin, if they live long enough; if not, they shall die without it. You may speculate better than I can; but I know one thing better than you do. I know better what Christians will, and what they will not receive; and I forewarn you that whenever you come out, our best Christians will revolt. I felt a deep interest in the controversy between the Orthodox and Unitarians, while it was kept out on the open field of *Total Depravity, Regeneration by the Holy Spirit, Divine Sovereignty, and Election*. For this was taking the enemy by the heart, and I knew who would conquer. But you are giving the discussion a bad turn, and I have lost all my interest in the subject, and do not wish my fellow sinners to hear it. I do fear it is a trick of the devil to send brother Taylor on a wild goose chase after what he will never find, and which if found would not be worth one straw." These are only short extracts from a long letter. The whole has not been preserved. This letter Mr. Nettleton read to Dr. Beecher.

This was in December, 1821. After this Mr. Nettleton had repeated private discussions with the brethren at New Haven, in which he expressed his dissatisfaction with their peculiar views, and faithfully expostulated with them on the danger of causing division among the ministers and churches of New England. And yet for several years it was currently reported, and extensively believed, that he agreed with the New Haven divines, and the influence of his name was made use of to give currency to their peculiar views

How unjustly this was done, is evident from the foregoing extracts. The alarm which was occasioned among the pious students, by the lecture of Professor Goodrich, was somewhat allayed by some explanations which he made to them, and for a season the matter was in a great measure hushed. But Mr. Nettleton, and some others who were acquainted with the facts, were not without great solicitude. Meanwhile the Professorship of Didactic Theology was founded in Yale College, Dr. Taylor was appointed Professor, and the Theological School was organized in its present form in 1822. The founders of this Professorship, required the Professor to sign the following declaration: "I hereby declare my free assent to the Confession of Faith and Ecclesiastical Discipline, agreed upon by the churches of the State, in the year 1708." Dr. Taylor signed this declaration and was inducted into office. The Confession of Faith here specified is what has been denominated the Saybrook Platform, and so far as doctrines are concerned, differs scarcely at all from the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church.

In 1826, Professor Fitch preached and published his discourses on the nature of sin, in which he advanced the position that *all sin consists in the voluntary transgression of known law*. This was regarded by many as a virtual denial of original sin and native depravity as maintained by Calvinists. These discourses were reviewed by Dr. Green in the *Christian Advocate*. Professor Fitch replied to the Review. Meanwhile young men began to issue from the New-Haven school, and to proclaim the discov-