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# THE SUPERNATURAL

BY

LYMAN ABBOTT

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE ALUMNI  
OF BANGOR THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, MAY 18,  
1898, ON "THE RELATION OF NATURE AND  
THE SUPERNATURAL TO THE CHRISTIAN  
THOUGHT OF TODAY"

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# The Supernatural Lyman Abbott

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TruthUnity Ministries  
PO Box 15  
Timonium, Maryland 21094

<https://www.truthunity.net>

And so I dare to try to go where he leads; and when he climbs those mountain heights, stands so far above me, and still beckons and calls down to me, and says, “Lyman Abbott, follow me,” I believe I can, or he would not call me; he would not tell me to go if he would not give me the power to go.

And so I dare to pray, though as with bated breath, the prayer which Paul has taught us : “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”

## Summary of Part 2

It seems to me, then, that the relation of nature and the supernatural to Christian thought has undergone a great change in the last half-century; and that it is a change which promotes Christian life, because it brings God nearer to us in our Christian thought, and makes religion seem more natural and more real.

In the thought of today God is not apart from nature and life, but in nature and life: creation is continuous; all events are providential; revelation is progressive; forgiveness is through law, not in violation of it; sacrifice is the divine method of life-giving; incarnation is not consummated until God dwells in all humanity and Jesus Christ is seen to be the first-born among many brethren.

Then, when God’s work is done, and he is everywhere — as he is now everywhere but in the hearts of those who will not have him — when he is in all human hearts and lives, as he has been in all nature and in all history, then will come the end, and God will be all and in all.

## Eight ideas in *The Supernatural* that you won’t find in mainstream Christianity

Hi Friends —

I’m sharing this on Christmas Eve because the 7th idea in Lyman Abbott’s *The Supernatural* is

✍️ “Incarnation is not consummated until God dwells in all humanity.”



My bet is that line will resonate with many people in Unity. So I share it with you today, Christmas Eve. And I wish you all a joyous and blessed Christmas.

*The Supernatural* by Lyman Abbott is important for all Christians because it clearly states eight metaphysical understandings that we won’t find in mainstream Christianity. If you are a Christian and you are looking for a new way to understand how God works in the world and in our life then this lecture is for you.

*The Supernatural* is also important for people in Unity and New Thought because the ideas contained in this lecture shaped the worldview of those who struggled with the evangelical teachings of the day, and, almost certainly shaped the worldview of our founders, Emma Curtis Hopkins, Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, Emilie Cady and their students. If you are a metaphysical Christian then these ideas will help you understand the distinctive understandings of nature of God taught by our branch of the Christian faith.

At the time of this lecture, these understandings were known as “the New Theology”. Essentially, the New Theology was about how the church should address the challenge that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution placed on orthodox, mainstream Christian teachings.

Evangelicals and Fundamentalists rejected evolution. Lyman Abbott and other proponents of the New Theology embraced evolution; and they found that it enhanced their understanding of God.

The reason I have created this web page and downloadable booklet is because I believe the ideas contained in the New Theology can help us understand not only evolution, but also many forms of change we are confronted with today — changes in climate, changes in world order, changes in race relations, changes in sex relations, changes in our understanding of gender. Is God relevant in changes in our world today? If so, how? I hope these ideas will help us find answers to these challenges.

Lyman Abbott gave this lecture in 1898 to the graduating class of ministerial students at Bangor Theological Seminary, exactly sixty years after Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his Divinity School Address in 1838 to the graduating class at Harvard.

Emerson, like Abbott, left the ministry and did his greatest work as a writer and public speaker. Both Emerson and Abbott were immensely influential men and both shaped what we know today as New Thought. I put them together here because these two men, and the lectures they gave to divinity school students reflect two intellectual streams that flowed together in the late 19th century to form what we know as New Thought.

Emerson influenced New Thought through his writings about the metaphysical traditions in Christianity that had come to him through Thomas Taylor. To some extent Emerson's writings predate the challenge of evolution, but his writings on Nature are in a way prescient of what Darwin would have to say.

Abbott influenced New Thought through his writings about the effect of science and progressivism on the Christian faith. So it may be said that New Thought is a confluence of metaphysics expounded by Emerson and liberal theology expounded by Abbott.

Abbott's lecture is about "the relation of nature and the supernatural to the Christian thought of today." He opens the lecture with distinguishing a hypothesis from what is believed to be certain. He acknowledges that hypotheses are important but he warns the students that those in ministry must distinguish what they

humanity; God in man.

1. The question of the tri-personality of God — the Trinity of Person as distinguished from the Trinity of manifestation — including the question of the conscious pre-existence of the Logos, it did not come within the province of this address to discuss. Personally I accept the Trinitarian view of tri-personality; that is, that the Trinity of manifestation apparent to us has a basis in a Trinity of Person necessarily hidden from us.

## Jesus Christ is seen to be the first-born of many brethren

The question is sometimes asked — it was asked, I remember, a few years ago of a young theological student in this very State of Maine — "Do you think the divinity of Jesus Christ differs in kind or differs in degree from the divinity in man?" He replied, "In degree." For that he was sharply called to an account by the "Advance," and we asked in *The Outlook*, "Will the 'Advance' tell us how the divinity in man differs in kind from the divinity in God?" and never got an answer.

There are not two kinds of divinity. If there are, then there are two kinds of God. That is polytheism. There is only one divine patience, one divine righteousness, one divine justice, one divine love, one divine mercy. The divinity in man is the same in kind as the divinity in Christ, because it is the same in kind as the divinity in God. We are made in God's image. That means that we are in kind like God. It is sin, and only sin, which makes us unlike him. We are children of God. That means that our natures are themselves begotten of him, flow forth from him.

A sinless man would be the image of the Eternal Father, because the child of the Eternal Father, begotten of God. God has come into Christ and filled that one life full of himself, so that when you look at it you look through the glass and see the Father; and this he has done in order that he may come into your life and my life; in order that he may dwell in us and fill us full of himself.

If one objects to the statement that God is incarnating himself in the human race, I will not use the phraseology, because I will not shock people's minds needlessly; but I believe that God came into Christ and filled Christ full of himself in order that he might come into us and fill us full of himself.

himself, "I am the door." A door is not to be simply looked at; you push it open and go in. Why was God in Christ? Why was Christ a door? In order that through Christ God might enter into the human race and the human race might enter into Christ.


In my friend's house on the Hudson River is a window framed in as though it were a picture; one opening the door and coming into that room and looking, sees, as though hanging on the wall, a picture, including the mountains, the valley, the river, the distant city. I imagine two persons coming in and looking at that picture; one saying, "This is an image of the landscape hand-painted;" the other, "No, that is the real mountain, the real valley, the real river, seen through a glass." The one no less than the other thinks the real is represented. That seems to me fairly to represent the difference between the *liberal* Congregationalist and the *orthodox* Unitarian. The orthodox Unitarian looks at the picture on the wall, and says, "That is not the image of God, but it looks exactly like him."


Now, I am orthodox; I believe that through the window I see God himself in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the image of God, the reflection of God, God manifest in the flesh; that is, such a manifestation of God as is possible in a human life. I never say, I never should say, Jesus Christ is God, because what I said a few moments ago, and you then agreed with me, I repeat now, when some of you will not agree with me: God is more THAN THE SUM OF ALL HIS MANIFESTATIONS. Jesus Christ is one of the manifestations of God, but God is more than the sum of all his manifestations.<sup>1</sup>


You hear a great preacher like Phillips Brooks, and you say, "I have heard Phillips Brooks." I beg your pardon — you have heard one little bit of Phillips Brooks. He is a great deal more than any sermon he ever preached; and if you gather all his sermons together and read them all, still there are in him resources that you have not seen. When I look at the one transcendent historical manifestation of God in Jesus Christ tabernacling in the flesh, there is no praise I would give to the Father that I will not give to him, no prayer I will direct to the Father that I will not direct to him, no reverence I will show to the Father that I will not show to him; and yet, when I am asked of my philosophy, Is Jesus Christ God? I reply, God is more than the sum of all his manifestations, and, therefore, God is more than Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh, and God entering into that flesh in order that he may enter into the whole of


hypothesize from what they are certain is true. He stresses that ministry is about bringing life to their congregants by expounding Truth and should never insist on expounding their own hypotheses. I'll get back to that further on.


After describing what he formerly believed to be true he then describes his new hypothesis. In what I have labeled Part Two of this lecture he lists eight changes that have come from his new hypothesis. Here is *my interpretation* of those eight changes:

 1. *God is not apart from nature and life, but in nature and life.* Metaphysically understood, nature and life are not created, but rather they are expressed, by God, through divine ideals. This punctures the duality of heaven and earth, the supernatural from the natural. There is one presence.

 2. *Creation is continuous.* As Eric Butterworth says, the Eternal is forever begetting the only begotten and our only obligation to God is to allow God to be God in us.

 3. *All events are providential.* Many people do not know that providential means the protective care of God or nature as a spiritual power. Abbott declares that God's providence is in all things, all events, all people. There is one power.

 4. *Revelation is progressive.* God reveals divine nature to humanity as humanity has the capacity to accept it. In earlier times this was through revelation, in modern times has been through discovery, and in more recent times it is through our ability to not only understand but to understand in compassionate ways. But in all times, revelation comes as consciousness is expanded.

 5. *Forgiveness is through the law, not in violation of it.* Forgiveness does not erase the penalty of sin (shame), nor the effect of sin (disease) but rather releases the desire to hold on to sinful conditions, thereby releasing the cause of shame and disease. Forgiveness is obtained through a transformation of human desire, not confession.

✍ 6. *Sacrifice is the divine method of life-giving.* Sacrifice, for Abbott, is continuing to love regardless of the state of that which is loved. Sacrifice does not give life by vicarious suffering but rather by the transformation of the subject of our love.

✍ 7. *Incarnation is not consummated until God dwells in all humanity.* We are more than creatures made in the nature and image of God. We are, as Abbott says, manifestations of God, known to metaphysical Christians as begotten. As begotten children, God's presence dwells.

✍ 8. *Jesus Christ is seen to be the first-born of many brethren.* Abbott reminds us that there may be differing degrees of divinity, but only one kind. That kind of divinity that dwelt in Jesus also dwells in each of us. Our task is to raise it up.

You might sense that what Abbott calls a hypothesis is what we would call in Unity metaphysics and what mainstream Christian theologians would call a theology. Abbott's point is that our hypotheses change. The point I wish to make here is since hypotheses change, so does our metaphysics and theology change.

What does not change is Truth. Truth, as he says, appears to change only because Truth is revealed progressively. Yes, we do understand things differently today than did earlier people. Further, we understand things differently from others right now who have different life experiences, culture and language.

But, as Abbott warns, we should never equate our metaphysics with Truth since our metaphysics no more than a hypothesis. Lyman writes that "the object of the minister is not to expound philosophy, but to promote life. He is not a teacher of theology, but a preacher of religion."

So not only does this lecture by Lyman Abbott give us a deeper understanding of God and a fuller understanding of the worldview of the founders of New Thought, it also provides a sober warning about the role of philosophy in the spiritual development of people.

Mark Hicks  
Christmas Eve 2021

it as the law of spiritual life, and of Christ as the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world. For the phrase "suffering love" appears to me to be tautology. Love must suffer so long as the loved one sins or suffers. So long as God is love and his children sin and suffer, God suffers with and for them. The sacrifice of Christ is the revelation of a sacrifice which will not end till sin and suffering shall be no more.

From the hour when Eve looked with puzzled anguish into the unresponsive face of Abel, marble-like in the mystery of death, and then went out in the unutterable longings of a mother's heart after the fugitive brother, down to this hour, love has suffered for the stricken and for the sinful, and through anguished and broken hearts has poured itself out in sacrifice to save. Vicarious sacrifice is the law of life; that is, it is the law of God's own nature. The divinest thing man ever does is to suffer for another; and the divinest form of sacrifice is that suffered for the unworthy; and its greatest triumph is won when, through sacrifice, the unworthy becomes worthy.

The long history of love's sacrifices seems to me the history of God's love dwelling in human hearts and inspiring human lives to their highest and divinest service; and the sacrifice of Christ seems to me the climacteric expression of that love, the supreme revelation of God's life, the supreme gift of God's life. The sacrifice is offered not by nor on behalf of man to God, but by God for the life of man; it is not the condition on which God grants forgiveness, but the method by which he forgives — that is, delivers his children from the death of sin by imparting to them the life of holiness.

As the truth of God is revealed in all the teachings of prophets, as the benevolence of God is revealed in all the philanthropies of the humane, so the deeper love of God is revealed in all the sacrificial love of earth's vicarious sufferers. And as Christ is the consummation of the revelation of the truth of God by his teaching, and of the benevolence of God by his service, so is he the consummation of the deeper love of God by his suffering and sacrifice.

## Incarnation is not consummated until God dwells in all humanity

Incarnation: what is that? God was in Christ. Why? Christ said of

Forgiveness of sin is not remission of penalty. It may include that, or it may not; but it is not that. Redemption is not letting a man out of one place and putting him into another; it is not barring the doors of hell and throwing open the doors of heaven. The phrase used in the Greek Testament for the forgiveness of sins is two Greek words meaning sending away of sin; and I believe I am right, though I make the statement with some hesitation, that that Greek phrase, the sending away of sin, is never used in classical Greek to signify forgiveness, and is always used in the New Testament Greek to signify forgiveness.

Two men are arrested and are brought before a New York court; one is sent to Elmira Reformatory, where he must stay until he is cured; one is sent to Sing Sing for ten years. The one who is sent to Sing Sing has political influence and gets a pardon after he has been there three months, and comes out to plunge into thievery again; the other man stays ten years in Elmira Reformatory, and comes out an honest man, to live an honest life. Which of these men is redeemed? — the man who escapes the penalty and continues in the sin, or the man who is delivered from the sin and bears the penalty?

Forgiveness is not remission of penalty, though it may include that. Forgiveness is remission of the sin itself; and God is always lifting off the sins of the world. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they" — the sins themselves — "shall be as white as snow." "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of" — penalty? No! — "the remission of sin." I no longer believe that Christ died that he might bear the penalty which a just God must inflict because law required it; I believe he died that he might give life by his death — the remission, not of penalty, but of the sin itself. "Behold," says John, "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Oh, how we belittle Scripture! I used to think that text meant, Behold, the Lamb of God which takes away some sins from some men, in some parts of the world. No! He is the Lamb of God, who is taking away the sin from the world, and when his work is done the end will be a sinless world.

## Sacrifice is the divine method of life-giving

I no longer think of sacrifice as one act done on man's behalf by the Son of God to propitiate divine wrath or satisfy divine law. I believe not less but more profoundly in sacrifice since I have come to think of

# Title Page

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preaching upon this Bible. If there were not revelations in the Bible that the Bible writers themselves did not fully comprehend; if there were not revelations in the Bible that all the past has not discovered; if we were not continually finding new meanings in old texts; if God was not continually rewriting his Bible in our experience, and giving us a new message to new generations, we might well close our church doors and stop our preaching.

We preachers are not to stop at the revelation which God has made of himself to others; we are to take that revelation that he may be revealed to us and by us. The Bible is a guide to revelation, not a substitute for it. Only as we so use the Bible that we stop not at the book, but go through the book to the God who gave it forth, are we worthy to be prophets and preachers in this nineteenth century.

1. Job xxxii; 2 Timothy iii. 16

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## Forgiveness is through the law, not in violation of it

The forgiveness of sins is, in my thinking of it, no longer an exceptional, episodic manifestation of a supernatural grace; it is the revelation and effect of the habit of mind of the Eternal Father toward all his children. The laws of forgiveness are a part of the laws of the Almighty and the All-gracious. It is said that the violation of natural law is never forgiven. It is said that if you put your finger in the candle, it will burn, pray as you will, and if you fall from your horse, you will break a bone, however pious you may be; whether the bone breaks or not depends, not upon your piety, but upon your age.

Is it indeed true that there is no forgiveness in natural law? What a strange-looking audience this would be if there were none! The boy cuts his finger and nature begins to heal it; he breaks his arm — nature begins to knit the bone; he burns his finger — nature provides a new skin. Nature, that is, God, implants in man himself the helping powers that remove disease; and, in addition, stores the world full of remedies also, so that specifics may be found for almost every disease to which flesh is heir. The laws of healing are wrought into the physical realm; they are a part of the divine economy; and shall we think that He who helps the man to a new skin and to a new bone cares nothing for his moral nature, and will not help him when he has fallen into sin?

to find it in the words of Christ in the New); and of the drama of the Bible — the epic drama of Job, the love drama of the Song of Songs.

In these is seen a manifestation, a revelation of goodness and truth and righteousness, and, above all, of a personal God dealing with men. This is the characteristic of the Hebrew poetry. We find more beautiful phrasing in Wordsworth, or in Tennyson, or in Longfellow, or in Whittier, but nowhere do you find in literature, ancient or modern, such discoveries of God as in the Hebrew Psalter. The “Eternal Goodness” may seem to you more beautiful than the One Hundred and Third Psalm; but would Whittier have written “Eternal Goodness” if he had not read the One Hundred and Third Psalm?

But if this be so, and the Bible be a revelation and disclosure of God, why not new revelations? why not new disclosures? why not a new Bible? If the American continent was discovered by Columbus, why does not some one discover a new continent? Because we have discovered all the continents there are. What is it that this Bible tells us about God, the Infinite and the Eternal Energy from which all things proceed, the Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness? Sum it all up, put it in the briefest statement, what does it tell us respecting God?

God is love. Love is service. The highest manifestation of service is self-sacrifice. The highest self-sacrifice is the laying down of one’s life for the sake of the wholly undeserving.

Is there anything to be added to that message? Can you conceive of any statement respecting the Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed, the Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness, beyond these four declarations — first, this Infinite and Eternal Energy is love; second, this love shows itself in unpaid service; third, this service runs beyond all self-glorification into self-sacrifice; and, last of all, this self-sacrifice shows itself in laying down life that the undeserving may walk along the prostrate form up to the eternal heights of glory? If any one has another revelation, let him bring it.

But there is opportunity, infinite opportunity, for added disclosure of God, added revelation of God, in the unfolding and application of this truth to the experiences of the nation, the church, and the individual. If it were not so, you and I could not go on

## Part 1: Truth in Ministry

### Hypotheses and Certainties

We are to discriminate clearly between theology and religion, between life and the philosophy of life. My object this morning is not to expound a complete system of philosophy, but to consider the effect of the change which is taking place in philosophy upon the religious life.

The object of the minister is not to expound philosophy, but to promote life. He is not a teacher of theology, but a preacher of religion. He must be a theologian; he must have a philosophy of the life which he is imparting; nevertheless, his object is not to impart the philosophy, but to use the philosophy that he may impart the life. “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly,” says Christ. And then he breathes upon his disciples and says, “Receive ye the Holy Spirit. As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” We who are ministers of his grace are to be administrators of his life. We are to impart life. We are to do this through truth; nevertheless, for his ministers truth is not an end, but a means to an end. Truth is instrumental.

The teacher in the medical school teaches physiology and anatomy and hygiene; but when we get sick and send for a doctor, we do not send in order that we may receive a lecture on physiology or anatomy or hygiene. We send for the doctor that he may use his knowledge of physiology or anatomy or hygiene to make us well. You break a bone: you do not want the doctor to tell you about bones, you want him to set the bone.

So the object of ministers is not to lecture us on the philosophy of religion; neither is it to ignore the philosophy of religion; it is to use the philosophy of religion to help men and women to live better, nobler, diviner lives. “The truth,” says Christ, “shall make you free.” “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.” Truth is, then, an instrument. The object of truth is to set men free; it is to sanctify men, to make them holy.

The minister who simply expounds the truth does not understand his mission. His mission is so to use truth that men shall be made free; that men shall be made holy. His ministry is, therefore, to be determined by fruits in the life. That is the best sermon, not which is a great pulpit effort, but which is helpful. If, young men, you have preached a sermon and some one comes up to you and says that was a great pulpit effort, hide your head in shame and go home and never write another like it. But if some one comes to you, with a little quaver in the voice and a little moisture in the eye, and says, "Thank you; you have helped me this morning," thank God and go home and try to write another like it. That is the end of preaching — to use theology to help life. The test of the sermon is its fruitfulness in life; and that is the test of theology.

We are not, however, to judge of a truth beforehand by the fruit which we think it will produce. It is the truth which makes free, not any kind of error. It is the truth which sanctifies men, not any kind of falsehood. All truth is safe. All error is dangerous. It is only the truth that the minister is to use. He is never to say, "This is the philosophy that my people are used to and this is the philosophy that I think will do better service, and so, though I do not believe it, I will preach it." Never. It is only the *truth* he is to use, but he is always to *use* the truth. Truth is always an instrument.

He is to distinguish, too, between the things he knows and the things he thinks, between certainties and hypotheses. He must have both, both certainties and hypotheses, but he must distinguish in his own mind between the two. It is absolutely certain that there is sunlight, and it is absolutely certain that that sunlight produces certain vital effects on humanity and vegetation; and it is now the universally accepted hypothesis that the whole universe is filled with an invisible, impalpable ether, and that sunlight is produced by undulations of that ether. The ether is a hypothesis. The sunlight is a certainty. In science we all recognize this distinction between the hypotheses and the certainties. Unfortunately, we have not yet learned in theology to distinguish between the hypotheses and the certainties. We generally quarrel about the hypotheses.

It is, for instance, a certainty, I hope in the experience of all of us — certainly it must be a certainty in the experience of every minister, or he has no right in the pulpit — that God is. God is not a hypothesis which the minister has invented to account for the phenomena of

Hebrew people have added nothing to the architecture, the art, the philosophy of life; but they have been a prophetic race — discoverers of God.

In this race there were preeminently religious men, who saw God more clearly than their fellows, and God's relation to mankind more clearly, and God's relation to human events more clearly, and told their fellows what they saw. And, from all their telling, natural selection says the scientist, providence says the theologian — I say the two are the same — elected those that had in them the most vital truth, the most enduring, the most worthy to endure. Thus we have in the Old Testament something like twoscore of writers, the most spiritually-minded of a spiritually-minded race, telling us what they have discovered concerning God. This is the Bible. It is the gradual discovery of God in the hearts and through the tongues of prophets who were themselves members of a prophetic race.

God is always revealing himself, and has always been revealing himself. He has always been knocking at the door; he has always been standing at the window. He has always been showing his character. They who have seen it best and most clearly, and had power to tell us what they have seen, are the world's prophets. What is distinctive in respect to Hebrew law is not its universal applicability to the human race — there is a great deal in the Hebrew law to which we no longer pay any attention; it is the recognition of the fact that God is the great lawgiver. What is peculiar in the Hebrew history is not its narration of great battles, great statesmen's endeavors and achievements; it is the history of the dealing of God with a particular people.

God is as truly with the American race as he ever was with the Hebrew race; as truly with Abraham Lincoln as he was with Moses. The difference between the Hebrew race and the American race is the difference between the Old Testament Scriptures and the modern newspaper. The modern newspaper is enterprising, and it gathers news, and gathers gossip that is not news, from the four quarters of the globe; but it fails to see God in human history. The Old Testament prophets did not show the same enterprise, did not have the same wideness of view; but they did see God in human history, and have helped us to see him. That vision of God is equally characteristic of the fiction of the Bible — Ruth, Esther, Jonah, the parable of the prodigal son (there are some people who think it is irreverent to suggest that there is any fiction in the Old Testament, but quite right

Revelation, then, appears to me less a sudden disclosure to man of God, as some one external and before hidden, than a gradual awakening in man of that spiritual life which alone can take cognizance of God. Revelation is the unveiling of God.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the nature of inspiration. Dr. McConnell, of Brooklyn, called attention, a year ago last winter, to the fact that the word inspiration occurs but twice in the Bible,<sup>1</sup> and only once in such connection that it can be deemed to refer to Scriptural teaching. The claim of the Bible writers for themselves is not that they were inspired by God, but that they have made a revelation of God. What does this mean?

Revelation is unveiling, and discovery is uncovering; two words more nearly synonymous I do not know where to find. The revelation of God is simply the unveiling or the uncovering or the discovery of God. What the Bible writers claim for themselves is this: "We have been studying life, history, nature, our own personal experiences; and we have found some truths about God, and we tell you what they are."

The word discovery is used for science; the word revelation for theology; but they mean substantially the same thing — the unveiling of the secret of life. Science goes a little way in the search and stops; the prophet goes further, and discovers behind all the forces and all the laws which science has discovered the Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed, the Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness — in a word, God.

Discovery is the revelation of the laws and forces operating in nature. Revelation is the discovery of Him who is the Lawgiver and the Force-producer. Discovery is revelation in the physical realm; revelation is discovery in the spiritual realm. The man of oversight, with skill in the observation of the sensuous world, is a discoverer; the man of insight, with skill in the perception of the invisible world, is a revelator.

God has given to different nations different missions. He has given to Rome the mission of teaching the world the meaning of law; to Greece the meaning of art and philosophy; to the Hebrew race the meaning of religion. He has given this race this message: Tell the world what you can learn of God and his relation to men. The

creation. He knows that there is a "power not ourselves that makes for righteousness," because when he has been weak that power has strengthened him, when he has been a coward that power has made him strong, when he has been in sorrow that power has comforted him, when he has been in perplexity that power has counseled him, and he has walked a different path and lived a different life and been a different man because there is that power — impalpable, invisible, unknown, and yet best and most truly known. But when he comes to ask himself for a definition of this power, for an account of its attributes, and its relation to the phenomena about him, he enters at once into the realm of hypothesis. We know God in his personal relation to ourselves. What he is in himself and what he is in his relations to the great universal phenomena, that is matter of hypothesis.

## The Old Hypothesis

It is about the effect of a new hypothesis on our religious life that I am going to talk to you this morning. I am not going to consider which of two hypotheses is true; I am going to try to describe two hypotheses, and consider their respective effects on the religious life. I will describe them as matters of personal experience; because I find that when I attempt to describe the old theology, some of my friends, who still hold to it, think I am describing it unjustly and unfairly; I do not wish to describe another man's opinion, because I find it so difficult for other men to describe mine.

As I look back, I can remember something of the view which it seems to me I held when I was entering into the ministry. It was something like this: There is a great and good God. He is somewhere in the center of the universe — whether in the body or out of the body I knew not, and yet in my conception I embodied him. He is the creator and the ruler of the world. He had made the world.

I conceived of him as making the world as an architect makes a building. I rather think somewhere, in some of my earlier sermons, that figure would be found worked out — he had turned it in a lathe; he had erected the pillars; he had woven the carpet of grass; he had ornamented it with the flowers. You have heard that from other ministers, and no doubt you would have heard it from me when I was a young man.

And as I conceived of God creating the world as an engineer creates an engine, so also I conceived of him regulating this world as an engineer regulates the engine. When men said to me, "Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that God has set aside natural law?" I said, "Oh, no, but he uses natural law. As an engineer uses the steam and the fire, or as an electric engineer uses the electricity, so God uses the forces of nature. He is in his engine, with his hand on the lever; he can add to its speed or he can diminish its speed, or he can halt it, or he can make it go backward, or he can turn it in the one direction or the other direction. He made the engine and he rules the engine." Something like that was my conception of God.

Similarly I conceived of him in his relation to men as a great king. He had issued certain laws, and had attached certain punishments to those laws. In order to law there must be punishment; a law without a penalty attached is only advice, not law. I conceived that God had issued laws, and to them had attached penalties. Those laws had come from His throne like edicts from an imperial Czar. They were righteous and just laws, and I had broken them, and the whole human race had broken them, and punishment was denounced against the whole human race for breaking them, and that punishment must be executed.

And yet God was merciful and wished to spare men. And so his Son had come into the world, and had borne the punishment in order that the law might be carried out and still man might be forgiven. That God might both be just and the justifier of him that believeth, some one had to bear the penalty which had been attached to the law. So I conceived of God as sitting apart from his creation which he had made and ruling it, and apart from men whom he had made and ruling them.

And when I entertained this conception of God, as sitting apart from the universe which he had made and ruling it, and apart from men whom he had made and ruling them, it seemed to me that the most fundamental question in theology was, Do you believe in the supernatural?

If a man did not believe in the supernatural, then all he believed in was the machine; then he believed in the engine, but he did not think there was any engineer to control it; then he believed in humanity, but he did not think there was any king to govern men. And one

thought was dead appears to me as certain as any fact in history can be. Whether that ocular demonstration was afforded by the return of the departed spirit to reanimate the crucified body, or by the disciples' vision of the spiritual and incorporeal body, appears to me a question neither possible nor important to determine. The former hypothesis presents, I think, the fewer difficulties; but the fact of continuous life is the one and only important fact.

Surely this conception of God in all nature, all life, all epochs, is not carrying God away from us. It is bringing him nearer. If every springtime, as I see the buds growing and the leaves putting themselves forth and the flowers beginning to bloom and the birds beginning to sing, I look out and say, "God is creating a new world;" if in every incident and accident, so called, of my life, I look to see what the voice of God is for me, what errand he would send me on, what mission he would give me, what he means; if all events seem to me to have God's voice in them, and I seek to understand them all and follow them all; if every event is a manifestation of his presence and power, and a miracle only an unusual manifestation of a power equally present at all times and in all eras — surely my philosophy is not getting me away from God, but nearer to him.

It is not easy to formulate in a sentence that change which has come over my thought, and, as I believe, the thought of the present generation, respecting God's relation to man. Shall I say we are coming to think of God as dwelling in man rather than as operating on man from without? This might be taken to imply a denial or at least a doubt of God's personality, and of man's personality as distinct and separate from God's, and this implication I vigorously and energetically disavow.

If I speak of God in man, it is as one speaks of one soul working within another, so that the two personalities intermingle, the two lives are intertwined. Perhaps it will be better to attempt no formal statement of the general principle; rather to illustrate it by special applications.

1. In Bartlett and Peters's edition of the Scriptures this story is classed with Literature, not with History.

## Revelation is progressive

Do I, then, believe in miracles? I believe in some, and some events that have been called miracles I do not believe, and some I do not think were intended to be regarded as miracles at all. The story of the sun and the moon standing still I do not think was intended to be taken as history by the man who wrote the narrative. It was poetry, and is quoted from an old poetic legend. The story of the great fish that swallowed a prophet I do not believe was ever intended to be taken as history by the man who wrote it. I think it is a genial yet keen satire of Jewish narrowness, written for the purpose of making clear that there is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.

Some other of the strange events recorded in the Bible seem to me story rather than history; I do not think them well authenticated; nor does their historical truthfulness appear to me a matter of any importance. The story that once upon a time an ax-head dropped into a pool and sunk, and a prophet threw in a branch and then the ax-head swam again, to me carries a better lesson if I think of it as an illustration of the Hebrew folk-lore, the sort of stories that mothers told their children in the olden time, than it does if I try to make myself think it happened – because I do not succeed very well if I do try.<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Ruth is clearly romance, though historical romance; I see no reason for doubting that the Samson story is so also. The mere mechanical fact that one narrative is incorporated in the Book of Judges and the other is separated from it does not seem to me to affect the question either of credibility or interpretation.

On the other hand, the resurrection of Jesus Christ seems to me to be the best-attested fact of ancient history: attested by the witness of disciples whose interest would not have led them to attest it and whose prejudices were all against their faith in it; attested by the change of the day of rest from the seventh day, which the Jewish nation had up to that time kept, to the first day, ever after celebrating the resurrection; attested by the growth and life of Christianity itself, which, if Christ did not rise from the dead, I must think was historically founded on either a great folly or a great fraud, and to believe that would be to believe that there is no moral order in the universe.

That the disciples had ocular evidence which convinced them against all their preconceptions that the Christ was living whom they

who believed simply in the engine without any engineer, and in the community without any king, was either an atheist or a deist; that is, either he believed there was no God, or else he believed in an absentee God, in a God who had nothing to do with the world, a God who had nothing to do with men.

And it did not seem to me then, and it does not seem to me now, that there is much to choose between the belief in no God and the belief in an absentee God. For religion consists, I recall to you again, not in a hypothesis that there is a God, but in a life lived under the inspiration of God; and if God is conceived as so far off that there is no longer any intercommunication between God and the soul, he is an absentee God, and life goes on without him. Under that conception there cannot be any vital religion, for religion is the inflowing of God upon life.

“Religion,” says Max Muller, “consists in the perception of the infinite under such manifestations as are able to influence the moral character of man.” If, then, God is represented as absent from the universe so that he does not produce any influence on the conduct and character of man, there is no religion.

Gradually my whole conception of the relation of God to the universe has changed. I am sure that I have not lost my experience of God. I am far more certain now than I was forty years ago that God is, and that God is not an absentee God. I am not quite so certain as I once was about some of the manifestations which I once thought he had made of himself. I am a great deal more certain than I once was of his personal relation to me. My experience of God has changed only to grow deeper, broader, and stronger. But my conception of God's relation to the universe has changed radically. My hypothesis was — God an engineer who had made an engine and sat apart from it, ruling it; God a king who had made the human race and sat apart from men, ruling them.

## The New Hypothesis

That was my hypothesis; now I have another hypothesis. And I think the change which has come over my mind is coming and has come over the minds of a great many. I think that there is nothing original in what I am going to say to you this morning, for I am only going to interpret to you a change, perhaps not altogether

understood, which is being wrought in the mind of the whole Christian Church. I think my change only reflects your change. But whether that be true or not, I am sure the change has taken place in me.

I now conceive of God as in his universe. I conceive of creation as a growth. I conceive of him as making the universe somewhat as our spirit makes our body, shaping and changing and developing it by processes from within. The figures from the finite to the infinite are imperfect and misleading, but this is the figure which best represents to me my own thought of God's relation to the universe: Not that of an engineer who said one morning, "Go to, I will make a world," and in six days, or six thousand years, or six million thousand years, made one by forming it from without, as a potter forms the clay with skillful hand; but that of a Spirit who has been forever manifesting himself in the works of creation and beneficence in all the universe, one little work of whose wisdom and beneficence we are and we see.

Herbert Spencer says: "Amid all the mysteries by which we are surrounded, nothing is more certain than that we are ever in the presence of an Infinite and an Eternal Energy from which all things proceed." I look out upon the universe and I see that it is a universe, a variety in unity. I see that there is a unity in all the phenomena of nature, and that science has more and more made that unity clear, and I see that there is one Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed.

And I see too, it seems to me very clearly, that this Energy is an intellectual Energy; that is, that the physical phenomena of the universe are intellectually related to one another. The scientist does not create the relations; he finds them. They are; he discovers them. All science is thinking the thoughts of God after him. It is finding thought where thought has done its intellectual work; it is learning what are those intellectual relationships which have been in and are embodied in creation.

Matthew Arnold says: "There is a power not ourselves that makes for righteousness." The unity of physical phenomena is not more certain than the unity of moral phenomena. It makes history possible, moral philosophy possible, sociology possible, the study of literature and human life possible. We are each one of us an individual, and yet the nation has its entity and the human race its entity, and we

## All events are providential

I have, therefore, for myself, practically abandoned the distinction between general providences and special providences. A special providence is, in this new conception of God's relation to the universe, nothing but a general providence specially perceived. It is a clearer perception of the universal presence. God is in all the phenomena; sometimes we wake up and see him; then we say, "Behold, a special providence." It is we who have opened our eyes.

This is what I think Christ means when he says, Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without your Father. This is what he means when he bids us pray day by day for our daily bread. The children at the table do not realize that the bread and milk which they have regularly for supper is the father's gift as well as the box of candy which he brings home on birthdays; but the one is as much the father's providence as the other, only the children specialize the one and recognize it. That is all.

Therefore, a miracle no longer seems to me a manifestation of extraordinary power, but an extraordinary manifestation of ordinary power. God is always showing himself. Perhaps some of you may think this is a new theology; but this particular bit of theology is as old as Augustine, and as orthodox. It is Augustine who said, a birth — I am not quoting his exact words, but I am giving the spirit of them — a birth is more miraculous than a resurrection, because it is more wonderful that something that never was should begin to be, than that something which was and ceased to be should begin again. The senses every day, and the other in the one great event of human history was made palpable to the senses of a few witnesses in years long gone by.

The mere fact that a miracle is an extraordinary event seems to me to constitute no reason for discrediting it. For the credibility of an event does not depend upon the nature of the event, but upon the nature of the testimony which attests it. If the Old Testament told the story of a naval engagement between the Jewish people and a pagan people, in which all the ships of the pagan people were absolutely destroyed, and not a single man killed among the Jews, all the skeptics would have scorned the narrative. Every one now believes it—except those who live in Spain.

## Creation is continuous

Creation, therefore, is no longer the manufacture of a globe by an architect or a builder. It is not something that God did six thousand years ago, and, ending, stopped to rest. Creation is a continuous process. It is always going on. The geologists tell us that the same convulsions that shook the solid world in the time of its birth, that shot the mountains up and dug the channels for the seas and the rivers, are going on even in historic times. God is always creating. Every flower is a new creation. Every day he separates the waters that are under the firmament from the waters that are above the firmament; for he it is who daily and hourly lifts the clouds from their ocean bed and causes them to float in the air above. Every spring is a new creation, and he himself is the secret and the source and the center of all the life.

Between the philosophy that says there is no God or there is only an absentee God, and the philosophy that says that God is in all phenomena and if there were no God there would be no phenomena, there is certainly nothing of kin. These are not extremes that meet. The abolition of the distinction between natural and supernatural for the purpose of getting rid of the supernatural is one thing; the abolition of the distinction for the purpose of affirming that the supernatural is in everything is quite another.

A writer in the "Interior," of Chicago, said in a criticism on one of my lectures perhaps a year ago, that Dr. Abbott held that God created amoebae, and amoebae did the rest. I do not know how it would be possible in a sentence of equal length to state more clearly what I exactly do not believe. I hold that God is the secret and the source and the center of all life.

When your spirit departs from your body, the body crumbles into dust. If I could conceive the Spirit of God departing from nature, I think all nature would crumble to dust. No longer would the planets circle around the sun; no longer would clouds float in the air; no longer would the sunbeams flood the earth; no longer would flowers bloom, or water run, or rain fall, or men walk, or living creatures breathe. God is himself the life of life. All things are his breath; literally, scientifically, absolutely, in him all things live and move and have their being.

are all one. The seventy millions of people in these United States are not seventy million separated grains of sand; we are an organic nation. These many millions upon this globe, that have inhabited it we know not how long, and are to inhabit it we know not how much longer, are not like the grains of sand lying upon the ocean beach; we are a unit, with a beginning, with a progress, with a history, with a development, with a moral law that unites and makes us one.

As there is, therefore, one power that makes for order in the natural universe, so there is one power that makes for righteousness in the moral universe; and if it makes for righteousness it is a righteous power, as the power that makes for order is an intellectual power. In other words, I have come to believe that in the world of nature and back of all its phenomena, and in the world of men and back of all human phenomena, is one great intellectual and righteous Power manifesting himself in and through the world of nature, manifesting himself in and through the world of men.

Perhaps some one will ask me here, "Do you believe in a personal God?" A reporter of one of the daily papers once came to me; he wanted to make a column of copy for his paper, and he had a long row of questions on the subject of theology. I was bowing him out of the room with gentle declination when he stopped me, saying: "Oh, but, Mr. Abbott, just one question: Do you believe in a personal God?" "Well," I said, "what do you mean by a personal God?" He said: "I mean a great big man sitting up in the inner circle of the universe, ruling things." "No," I said, "I do not believe in that kind of a personal God." "Oh, well, then," he said, "you are a pantheist."

I have long since learned that, if fine words butter no parsnips, hard words break no bones. If my new conception of God were pantheism, and I thought it were true, I hope I should dare to say, I am a pantheist. But it is not pantheism. The difference between saying that God is in all nature, and God is nature — the difference between saying that God is in all phenomena, and saying that God is simply the sum of all phenomena, seems to me plain enough — even for such a reporter of a daily newspaper to understand. No. I believe that I am in my body, equally regnant in every part of it; but I am sure that I am something more than my body. I believe that God is in all phenomena, regnant in them all; but I believe that he is something more than the sum of all phenomena. He is more than any manifestation of himself. He is more, therefore, than the sum of all the

manifestations of himself.<sup>1</sup>

1. A man is no less a person because he can speak in New York and be heard in Chicago, or press a button in Washington and set machinery in motion in Omaha. Extension of power does not lessen the personality of him who exercises it.

## Part 2: The New Theology

I am not going this morning to argue for one or the other of these conceptions. I am not going to try to show you that the one is true and the other erroneous. I am going to try to consider with you the difference which this change in conception makes in the religious life. This is the topic which I have been asked to speak on: The relation of nature and the supernatural to the Christian thought of today; not to argue philosophically which is true, but to consider practically what is the effect of our changed conceptions on our spiritual life.

### God is not apart from nature and life, but in nature and life

In the first place, then, I no longer recognize a distinction between the natural and the supernatural. When I thought that God sat apart from nature ruling over it as an engineer rules over his engine, then it seemed to me to be of essential importance that one should believe in the supernatural, that is, in the One who was apart from nature, and did rule over it.

But now that I believe that God is in nature, ruling through it, and in humanity, ruling in the hearts of men, all the natural seems to me most supernatural, and all the supernatural most natural. For not now and then in special episodes and exceptional interferences does the finger of God appear; not now and then, as when the engineer adds the steam or subtracts it, or reverses his engine, does the will of God show itself in life; not now and then does the King appear as King, by the issuance of a new edict.

God is in all of nature; all its forces are the forces of God; all its laws are the methods of God; all its activities are the activities of God. And in human nature the laws of God are the beatific influences which proceed from him, the spiritual forces projected from him as the rays from the sun, and which vivify the hearts of those who receive them.