

## PAPER 6

### *What's in a Name? Strong and Spong*

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As a member of the Charles Strong Memorial Trust, I was asked to give a talk about Strong and Spong for the Strong Symposium, sponsored by the said Trust and held in conjunction with the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion, July 7-9, 2006 at the University of South Australia. More specifically to consider whether Charles Strong, a century ago, anticipated the thought of the famous John Shelby (known as Jack) Spong, who has caused such a stir in Christian circles in our own time. I cannot hope, in a short paper such as this, to do justice to either of these great men whose breadth of vision is quite remarkable and who indeed appear to think along similar lines even though the ways in which they substantiate their thinking are not always identical. Before moving on to a consideration of their thought I would like to give a short biographical sketch of each man as this is useful for discerning the influences upon them and allows us to see how each developed in accordance with and beyond his early formative environment.

As should have become clear from the preceding papers, Charles Strong was born at Dailly, Ayrshire, in Scotland in 1844<sup>1</sup>. He was the third son of a Presbyterian minister, David Strong, about whom little is known, although C.R. Badger comments that, "an imposing monument in the Dailly churchyard testifies to the respect and, indeed, the affection of his parishioners"<sup>2</sup>. There is no evidence that David Strong became involved

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<sup>1</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, p.17

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.19

in the events which led to the break away of some ministers from the established Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1843 to form their own association, The Free Church of Scotland<sup>3</sup>. However, the reason for his move from the larger and more central parish of Kilmarnock in 1844 to the smaller, rural church in Dailly in 1844 is unknown and so does give rise to the suspicion that it may have been precipitated by the events of 1843. Charles Strong's humanitarian outlook and, in particular, his concern for the poor, which was to become apparent during his time in Australia, may have its seeds in his childhood for he attended the village school in Dailly.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, all the sons of David Strong appear to have been well educated, with two (including Charles) becoming ministers and two chartered accountants<sup>5</sup>. This came about despite the death of David Strong in 1855 when Charles was only eleven years old, for his mother sought the assistance of the Scottish Clerical Widows' Fund<sup>6</sup>. Charles pursued an M.A. at Glasgow University between 1858 and 1863 and a B.D. at the same institution between 1863 and 1867. The M.A. compulsorily demanded the study of Latin and Greek as well as moral Philosophy and what we, today would call the Sciences and Mathematics<sup>7</sup>. The BD included the learning of Hebrew<sup>8</sup>. Strong's knowledge then was very broad as well as deep and this would be of benefit to him when he began to grapple with how religion should be understood in the modern world. Further, as Badger points out, discussion was a central feature of the Scottish University classroom<sup>9</sup> and this surely enhanced Strong's ability to debate issues. Another legacy from Strong's University days was his witnessing of the

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<sup>3</sup> The impulses which led to the Disruption, as it is often called, were both political and theological.

<sup>4</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, p.21

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.19

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.21

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.23

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.24

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.22

bitter conflict between members of the Established Church and The Free Church<sup>10</sup>. I would hypothesise that Charles Strong's attempts to move away from doctrines and his highlighting of what was truly important within Christianity were intended to overcome those aspects of the faith which had proved so divisive in Scotland and, indeed, which he found present in Australia too. Charles continued his theological and general education beyond his University days by reading. He learnt German and became acquainted with Philosophers, such as Hegel, and with the works of the Biblical Historical Critical School<sup>11</sup>. At age 32, he came to Australia as Minister to the Scots' Church in Melbourne, the most important Presbyterian Church in Victoria<sup>12</sup>. Why did he come? Did it have anything to do with the pay being offered? In a letter that Badger reprints<sup>13</sup>, Strong was offered £200 per annum for a post in Scotland. The Scots Church in Melbourne paid a stipend of £1,000, five times as much. This was a huge sum of money for those days. It would guarantee financial security. Yet other ministers from Scotland had turned the post down. Strong may have been motivated to accept it because of other considerations. He may have hoped for a new life in the Colonies free from the theological disputes that marred the life of a churchman in Scotland. It was not to be. He gained the respect and loyalty of his own congregation at Scots Church, but ran foul of some other Presbyterian clerics, coming close to being accused of heresy. Eventually he resigned and, with the encouragement of members of his former congregation and other influential people he inaugurated his own church - The Australian Church<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.22

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.25

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.18

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pp.158-159

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, pp.29-118

Almost a century was to elapse between the entry of Charles Strong into the world and the birth of Jack Spong in the southern United States of America in 1931. Unlike Strong, Spong came from an uneducated family. His father was dysfunctional in several ways, but his mother was a strong woman who brought up her children alone following the death of her husband when Spong was twelve years old<sup>15</sup>. As a child, Spong's religious affiliation was Episcopalian, as indeed it has continued to be throughout his life. Nevertheless his Mother's religious background, was, in Spong's own words, "a fierce and harsh fundamentalism of the Calvinist Protestant variety"<sup>16</sup>. Aspects of this, such as a strict adherence to the Sabbath and reverence for the Bible, pervaded his upbringing. Indeed, in his youth, Spong admits that he understood the Bible in a literal way. This was consistent with the religious atmosphere of the deep south. Another aspect of the southern United States which impressed itself on Spong as a young priest was the fight for Civil Rights and, indeed, he took an active part in the movement<sup>17</sup>., seeing justice for all people as an integral part of his world view. Spong graduated from the University of North Carolina and that he was able to attend there at all was due partly to his Mother's encouragement and to his own efforts to earn the money to pay for his tuition<sup>18</sup>. He worked as an Episcopalian priest in North Carolina and Virginia prior to becoming Bishop of Newark in New Jersey<sup>19</sup>.

There are similarities then in the respective backgrounds of Strong and Spong. Both lost their fathers at about the same age. Both had mothers who were concerned that

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<sup>15</sup>, John Shelby Spong, *The Bishop's Voice: Selected Essays 1979-1999*, Compiled and Edited by C.M. Spong, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, p.21

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.20

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.22

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.21

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.?

thy complete their education. Both witnessed the effects of poverty in their local community and experienced division amongst people based upon religious affiliation or ethnicity.

I should like to turn now to the thought of Strong and Spong. Both men have persisted in speaking about their views and publishing them, although Spong has done the latter in much greater volume and more explicitly than Strong. This, despite stringent criticism, which has extended, in Spong's case, to the receipt of death threats<sup>20</sup> while Strong's career and livelihood certainly hung in the balance as did those of any fellow ministers who supported him<sup>21</sup>. Why continue on such a hazardous path? Both Strong and Spong think of themselves as Christians but both felt/feel that Christianity must change or die<sup>22</sup>. Their reasoning behind such a view is complex but it is possible to say that just as their thought is a continuum so is the intellectual background against which they speak. The nineteenth century saw not only the introduction of new philosophies and Biblical criticism, but also the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. Science then appeared to oppose the Biblical account of creation. The consequence was declining church attendance, particularly by the more educated layperson<sup>23</sup>. This trend has continued to the present day, as we are all well aware. In the modern Western world, even those without an extensive education are disinclined to believe in events that run counter to scientific knowledge. Another important aspect of the motivation for Strong and Spong to speak out in the way they have is their firm belief in inclusiveness. Above

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p.89

<sup>21</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, pp82-83.

<sup>22</sup> Spong has written a book which incorporates this phrase in its title.

<sup>23</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, p.

all, both advocate a new approach to religion, by appealing to the heart of the Gospel.

Badger<sup>24</sup> encapsulates the thought of Strong as follows:

"Religion ... was primarily a recognition of a new relationship between man and God declared by Jesus-- that of Sonship -- and a recognition, therefore, of a new relationship between man and man, that of brotherhood."

Spong, too, points to the heart of the Gospel. He says<sup>25</sup>,

"Jesus understood that the call of every human being is not just to survive but to journey into both the fullness of one's own humanity, and into the mystery of God""<sup>26</sup>

From such a beginning all else follows and much of what was, and is, considered essential belief for church affiliation is excluded. That is not to say that either Strong or Spong arrived at their starting point without deep study of Philosophy or Biblical criticism. Spong has published two major works on the virgin birth stories and the resurrection narratives, particularly troublesome aspects of the Gospels because they appear to clash with scientific knowledge for the modern person. Using the insights of Raymond Brown and other scholars, Spong demonstrates in great detail that they were not true stories in the literal sense of the word, rather were introduced and built up gradually to serve as theological and apologetic arguments. Strong did not have access to the extensive body of critical Biblical literature that Spong had, as Biblical critical scholarship was in its infancy in his day, nevertheless in sermons he rejected a literal

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.221

<sup>25</sup> J.S. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, p.138

<sup>26</sup> Spong defines God as "the Source of Life", "the Source of Love", "the Ground of Being" *ibid.*, p.145

understanding of the resurrection. His approach was historical. Badger<sup>27</sup> reprints a section from Strong's Easter sermon of 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1915, in which Strong speaks of an evolution within the Old Testament from the belief that Sheol was the destiny of all to the belief that there was a hereafter. Strong also makes clear that in the pagan world, spring was seen as a time of new life. The certainty of some of Jesus' followers that they had seen him after death, he believes, gave rise to the marriage of the Spring Resurrection Festival and Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection. The new hope for people, at the time of Jesus and now, which came from this was a spiritual hope, one which, in Strong's words,

"bursts the narrow limits of...nation and country and church and old traditions, and maybe calls us to crucify them and die to them, and rise again, and compels us to take it as a stage of life behind the veil, but it is always the spiritual hope of a spiritual life, a spiritual Kingdom, of a personal and social life the soul of which is love."

In conjunction with the rejection of a literal resurrection, both Spong and Strong query any doctrine of atonement. Spong categorically states that it is wrong. He demonstrates its origin from the Jewish Day of Atonement and the use of the concept by early Christians to try to explain Jesus' death upon the cross<sup>28</sup>. As he points out, the doctrine of atonement "assumes the accuracy of the primary Christian myth"<sup>29</sup> The myth to which he refers is that of Adam and Eve and the "Fall". He goes on to counter the notion of original sin through reference to the Darwinian notion of evolution<sup>30</sup>,

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<sup>27</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, pp.297-300

<sup>28</sup> J.S. Spong, *Resurrection Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 124-126

<sup>29</sup> J.S. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, p.121

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, pp121-125

showing that if there was no original sin there was no need for atonement or indeed for Baptism to wash away sin. Strong is not quite as forthright as Spong. Nevertheless his article on the Atonement which was published in the *Victorian Review*<sup>31</sup> in 1880, created problems for him with many ministers of the Presbyterian Church. He reviews briefly the different images about the Atonement in the Gospels and Pauline writings and demonstrates that there was nothing approaching a doctrine even in the works of the early Church Fathers. Rather it began to develop only from the late second century onwards. The period of the Reformation saw it becoming more prominent but in forms which reflected the concerns of that historical period. He draws the conclusion that figures of speech in which the Atonement is described are appropriate to the age in which they emerged. Adherence to such figures of speech then is not necessary. What is important is not to lose sight of the important aspects of the Atonement i.e. reconciliation between a person and their true self, other people and God.

What then is the function of the church? Strong countered the usual notion prevalent within the Christianity of his day that the church was separate from the world. In Badger's words, Strong thought,

"Religion ... was bound up with the whole of life and not only and not even most importantly with that aspect of it deemed to be 'spiritual'. The activity of the church, its whole point and mission, was directed to the world. It was a means and not an end. It was not a piece of machinery, miraculously devised to 'save souls'; its business was to forward the kingdom of God on earth, to stand over against the world in judgement and to point always to the enduring values of the

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<sup>31</sup> Vol 2, no. 12 (1880), pp.763-73. Reprinted in C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, pp.239-248



Gospel, to preach freedom, justice, peace, charity, compassion, reconciliation and by its example to point to what these values actually meant in the day -to day - circumstances of life". The church was not to say, 'Believe this', but 'Do this' and its work and purpose was to be seen in the light of a critical appraisal of the main drift and tenor of the New Testament and not in an arbitrarily selected series of texts from a supposedly infallible book."<sup>32</sup>

Spong too emphasises the advancement of the Kingdom of God. He sees Jesus as pointing towards this and says of him,

" I see him portrayed as one who was constantly dismantling the barriers that separate people from one another. I see him inviting his followers to join with him, to walk without fear beyond those security boundaries that always prohibit, block or deny our access to a deeper humanity."<sup>33</sup>

Further, in the introduction to his book, *Into the Whirlwind - The Future of the Church*<sup>34</sup>, Spong says,

"Since Jesus is a time-limited figure of history, there must be a community where the infinite power of this Jesus can be experienced as eternally present and ever-available in time, where one can meet the life-giving power of God. The existence of a church is imperative, but there is no compelling need for any particular ecclesiastical or institutional expression of that church."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.221

<sup>33</sup> J.S. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, p.131

<sup>34</sup> New York, Seabury Press, 1983

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

Spong's view of what the church should be, then, is essentially the same as that put forward by Strong. It should not be an institution ruled by dogma but a gathering of people who embody the qualities that Jesus displayed.

Inclusiveness within the church and or humanity is something which was, and is, vitally important for both Strong and Spong. Strong did not think that sectarian divisions should divide people one from another. In a letter to the *Argus* on 11 August, 1883<sup>36</sup>, he made a public statement in reply to accusations made against him by the Rev.

McEachran. He says,

"Mr. McEachran accuses me of consorting with Secularists, Unitarians, and Roman Catholics...If Mr McEachran's principle of refusing to associate with men of other creeds and of no creed is to be carried out, we would have no Hospital Sunday and other philanthropic committees, of some of which I am a member, and which includes Jews, Spiritualists, Unitarians and Roman Catholics. I have received no taint from being associated with such men, but perhaps by agreeing to act with those from whom I differ widely I have been able to make a little contribution to public charity and brotherly kindness. I cannot forget what was once said of the Great Teacher, ' This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him' or that He was accused of being a 'wine bibber and a friend of publicans and sinners'. Mr. McEachran would, I think, serve the Master better and win a more patient hearing for any message which he has to his fellows, if he would assume a

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<sup>36</sup> Reprinted in C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, pp. 61-65

kindlier attitude towards modern Samaritans and were less afraid of being contaminated by those whom he regards as publicans and sinners."

On issues facing the wider community, Strong was against wars and strikes. Their foundation lay, he thought, in false economics which caused nations and classes to be suspicious of each other. False economics though were, in his opinion, "due to a low religious and ethical ideal"<sup>37</sup>.. He concludes,

"I see no light or hope for mankind save in a great religious ethical movement towards a co-operative commonwealth and a co-operative world."

Spong echoes Strong's sentiments when he says that in the parables

"Jesus is shown as a God-presence that calls those of us who would be his to become more fully human by opening the dark crevices of our souls where our prejudices hide, the place to which we have assigned the Samaritans of our day."<sup>38</sup>

As a person whose work spans the twentieth and twenty first centuries, Spong is particularly concerned to combat racism and sexual prejudice as well as discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. He emphasises that Jesus reached out to women and to those who were marginalised.

Both Strong and Spong are open to the insights of other religions for two reasons. First it is part of their common understanding that Jesus taught that all people are brothers and sisters. Secondly, their intellectual inquiries demonstrate that the core message of Jesus is both radical and simple. Love is at the centre and all else in the New Testament

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p.289

<sup>38</sup> J.S. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, p.135

is theological and/or apologetic commentary. As such, the core of the Christian message resonates with the core of other religions. Strong, in a sermon entitled, "Brotherhood and Health" says that if we are

"united in the faith, the great supreme trust in God as the all embracing Goodwill our Christian denominational distinctions thus melt like ice in sunshine. And in the same sunshine there is reason to believe that religions, other than Christian, will melt also, into the religion of Goodwill..."

The Charles Strong Trust, set up in 1957 as a memorial to Charles Strong, provides funds for "the promotion of liberal Christian religion and of friendship with other faiths"<sup>39</sup>.

This took up a hope expressed by Strong in his sermon, *Christianity in its most Simple and Intelligible Form*, that

"some day we shall see lectureships like the Hibbert and Gifford Lectureships instituted by wealthy citizens in Australia"

Spong has been in dialogue with Hinduism and Buddhism and his

"conviction is that the true God, the divine mystery, the essence of holiness, is within and beyond all of these ancient worship traditions. (my note: this includes Christianity) God is pointed to by all, captured by none."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> C.R Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, Australia, Abacada Press, 1971, p.155

<sup>40</sup> John Shelby Spong, *The Bishop's Voice: Selected Essays 1979-1999*, Compiled and Edited by C.M. Spong, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, p.148

Indeed Spong, as did Strong, envisions a time when people of all religious backgrounds can worship together and be part of the same *ecclesia*<sup>41</sup>. It will be an *ecclesia* that rejects differences in ethnic backgrounds (tribal groupings) and differences in lifestyles<sup>42</sup>.

Both Stong and Spong draw attention to the mystery of God. Previous attempts to define the Deity, they say are merely that - attempts. As such they should not be cause for division. Strong refers to the Deity as "God the spirit of all light and beauty, God the spirit of Jesus, God the spirit of all pure souls"<sup>43</sup> whereas Spong calls God "the Source of Life", "the Source of Love", "the Ground of Being"<sup>44</sup>. Such a "God" is present in all nature and life.

Strong sees history as the basis for understanding the Christian tradition<sup>45</sup>. He thinks it will lead to the knowledge that

"the New Testament is a collection of books, containing no one uniform theology, but each with a history and a certain individuality of its own".

This, he says, will result in an awareness that dogma is not possible, thus the separation of denominations has no basis in Jesus' words. Nevertheless such study will give an understanding that dogma arose because people were trying to express what they saw as a truth from a philosophical point of view. Further, study of the New Testament leads to uncovering its most essential point, what Strong calls "The Inspiration of Jesus of Nazareth". He says,

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<sup>41</sup> J.S. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, p.214

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p.214

<sup>43</sup> *A Church's Common Ground and Bond of Union*, Sermon December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1890

<sup>44</sup> cf. footnote 26

<sup>45</sup> *Christianity in its Simplest and Most Intelligible Form*, op. cit., pp.2-8

"Jesus is the foundation of the Church because it was his breath that gave it life and that breath is still the breath of life"<sup>46</sup>.

Spong echoes such thought in his book, *A New Christianity for a New World*. He demonstrates the differences between each of the Gospels and Paul in their attempts to define Jesus, shows how through study of the texts and integration with modern scientific thought, dogma comes tumbling down and all that is left is the essence.

Education then is the key. The rise of fundamentalisms throughout the world is based in part in ignorance of the ancient literary genres in which religious texts were written. The only way to reach all people is through the school system. Will it ever happen? As Mark Ehrlich, Professor of Hebrew Bible, Talmudic Thought and Jewish Mysticism at Shandong University in Eastern China is quoted as saying in *The Age* (25<sup>th</sup> January, 2006),

"The clerical class has always been the avant garde. They have always broken away from religion, have always led the reformations of religious movements because they know the intricacies of the structures; they're not awestruck by them as the layman is".

To sum up. A century lay between the lives and work of Strong and Spong. Their thought and perceptions of what is important in the New Testament are remarkably similar although each argues his case in slightly different terms in accordance with the knowledge of his own day. Similarly, although both promulgate the view that all people should be treated with humanity and respect, the particular divisions between people that they attempt to combat most passionately are in keeping with the most apparent divisions

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

of their own age. Both are men who were educated and continued study after the taking of formal qualifications. Both witnessed dissension and division in the society of their youth and attempted to reconcile such matters in a practical and intellectual way. Both have great vision and tried in their own ways to encourage the spread of the Kingdom of God. That their message has not been adopted wholeheartedly is undoubtedly due to fear of change amongst religious adherents and ignorance among the secular.