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April 2022

### Samuel Hopkins

Earl Clement Davis

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Samuel Hopkins.

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We are approaching a critical, and a disintegrating period in the history of New England theological thought as it has developed within the Congregational Churches.

We have already seen how the movement has exhibited two tendencies. One marked by Chauncy and the liberals, and the other by Edwards and the reactionists. In Edwards we have seen a tendency towards speculative theology which gave rather undue freedom to the imagination, and left out of consideration the facts of life, and had no place for the ordinary common sense. In Samuel Hopkins of Great Barrington we have a man who carried this speculative, unreal system of theology to its full limit. In his theological system sometimes spoken of as the Berkeleyian



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of man's relation to a sovereign God. Hopkins  
follows in Edwards's path, emphasizing the  
moral fruits of the spirit, in what he calls  
disinterested benevolence.

Hopkins wrote an account of his own life  
and I quote his own words. "I was born  
at Waterbury Connecticut on the Lord's day,  
Sept. 17, 1721. My parents were professors of  
religion; and I was descended from christian  
ancestors, both by my father and my mother  
as far back as I have been able to trace my  
descent.... As soon as I was capable of  
understanding, and attending to it, I was  
told that my father, when he was in-  
formed that he had a son born to him  
said, if the child should live, he would



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give him a public education, that he might  
be a minister or a Sabbathday man, alluding  
to my being born on the sabbath." <sup>p. 23, 24 of</sup>  
At the age of 16 he entered Yale, and <sup>11 of his life,</sup> thus  
speaks of his college life.

While a member of the college, I believe, I had  
the character of a sober, studious youth, and  
of a better scholar than the bigger half of my  
the members of that society; and had the  
approbation of the governour of the college.  
I avoided the intimacy and company of  
the overly revivars; and indeed kept but  
little company, being attentive to my studies.  
In the eighteenth or nineteenth year of my  
age, I cannot now certainly determine which,  
I made a profession of religion, and joined the  
church to which my parents belonged in Waterbury.  
I was serious, and was thought to be a fine  
youth, and I had this thought and hope of myself.  
I was constant in reading the bible, and in  
attending on public and secret religion.



And sometimes at night, in my retirements<sup>4</sup>  
and devotion, when I thought of confessing the  
sins I had been guilty of that day, and asking  
pardon, I could not recollect that I had com-  
mitted one sin that day. Thus ignorant was  
I of my own heart, and of the spirituality,  
strictness, and extent of the divine law."

After his graduation he went to Dr. Houghton  
to live with Edwards, and finish his  
preparation for the ministry.

In July 1743, he began his duties as pastor of the  
church in Housatonic, later known as Barrington.  
It was a most unfavourable community in which  
to begin work. His parish consisted of thirty  
four souls, half of them New Englanders, and the  
remainder New York Dutch, who could not under-  
stand English. They were a poor people, lax in  
their religious and social habits, and the  
fact that the Dutch could not understand  
his preaching, and were still forced to pay  
for the support of the church, was a source



of discord in his church.

Indeed his own characteristics were not such as to have great influence among such a people. Of himself he says: "I have loved retirement, and have taken more pleasure alone than in any company. And have often chosen to ride alone, when on a journey, rather than in the best company. He wore an arctic dress in his diet, living on the worst food fare. He never took any exercise, and worked in his study from 14 to 18 hours each day. Aside from that he was a poor preacher. Channing said of him that he was the very ideal of bad delivery." This limitation Hopkins himself realized, and in his old age said "My preaching has always appeared to me as poor, low and miserable, compared with what it ought to be.... I've felt often as if I must leave off and never attempt any more."



Such was Hopkins from one point of view, yet<sup>6</sup>  
if we look at him from another point of view  
we feel very different about him. His other  
side appears in his devotion to duty, the practiced  
application of his great theme of disinterested  
Benevolence.

The natural disadvantages of his parish  
coupled with the bitter controversies into  
which his theological opinions carried him  
lead to an unsatisfactory relationship  
in the church, and he sought for new fields  
of work. On April 11, 1770 he became  
pastor of the church at Newfort R. I.

It is during this pastorate that the very  
valuable characteristics of his personality appear.  
The Revolutionary war had a very disastrous  
influence on the town at Newfort, and  
he was forced to be absent from the city town  
from 1776-80. When he returned to his  
parish in 1780, he found it entirely



scattered, the favorage bowed, and the  
meeting house unfit for use. In the face  
of all these difficulties, to which was added  
the further consideration that his invalid  
wife and family must be cared for, he  
refused a call to a very comfortable parson  
in Middleborough, and took of his clerical  
at Newfort, relying upon the weekly contributions  
for his support. At times these amounted only to  
about two hundred dollars per year.

Not only was Hopkins church in favor competition  
but he was not afraid of losing his most  
substantial supporters financially in his  
sense and persistent attacks on the slave  
trading interests. Newfort was of course the  
most important slave trading port of New  
England, and the wealth of the city was due  
to this business. But <sup>Hopkins</sup> his disinterested  
benevolence would hardly permit him  
to mix with sycophancy such an in-  
stitution. While other ministers of New England



were tolerating, and even taking part in &  
the slave institution, Hopkins was denouncing it  
from his pulpit, and making every possible effort  
to secure freedom for individual slaves, and  
out of his scanty salary he contributed over \$100  
annually to a missionary society for carrying  
the Gospel to Africa.

From this point of view we can see that Hopkins  
was a great man, and did much to start the  
philanthropic reform of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There is  
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in the man in the following sentences taken  
from Woke's lecture on Hopkins. He is speaking of  
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a bright display of the worthiness and grandeur of the Redeemer, and of divine love and grace to the redeemed; and is the occasion of ~~so~~ so much happiness in heaven; and so necessary, in order to the highest glory, and the greatest increasing felicity of Gods everlasting Kingdom: that should it cease, and this fire could be extinguished, it would, in a great measure, obscure the light of heaven."

But his strong emphasis upon the power of the regenerate for disinterested benevolence is his great contribution, and marks a long step in advance of Edwards. It is at this point that charming touches upon Hof Rius.



Samuel Hopkins

Earl Clement Davis

Harvard University or Pittsfield, MA<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts in this series covering early New England Congregational preachers have no date. They are hand-written, dating them before Earl Davis started typing his manuscripts in 1907. So, they date either from his time at Harvard University, or the first year or two of his ministry in Pittsfield.



attending to it, I was told that my father, when he was informed that he had a son born to him said, if the child should live, he would give him a public education, that he might be a minister or a Sabbath day man, alluding to my being born on the sabbath. (pp 23-4).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D.*, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin. 1805.

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and the remainder New York Dutch, who could not understand English. They were a poor people, lax in their religious and social habits, and the fact that the Dutch could not understand his preaching, and were still forced to pay for the support of the church, was a source of discord in this church.

Indeed his own characteristics were not such as to have great influence among such a people. Of himself he says, "I have loved retirement, and have taken more pleasure alone than in any company. And have often chosen to ride alone, when on a journey, rather than in the best company."<sup>4</sup> He was an ascetic also in his diet, living on the most frugal fare. He never took any exercise, and worked in his study from 14 to 18 hours each day. Aside from that he was a poor preacher. Channing said of him that "he was the very ideal of bad delivery." This limitation, Hopkins himself realized, and in his old age said, "My preaching has always appeared to me as poor, low, and miserable, compared with what it ought to be. ... I have felt often as if I must leave off and never attempt any more."<sup>5</sup>

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The natural disadvantages of his parish coupled with the bitter controversies into which his theological opinions carried him led to an unsatisfactory relationship in the church, and he sought for new fields of work. On April 11, 1770 he became formal pastor of the church at Newport, R.I.

It is during this pastorate that the very noble characteristics of his personality appear. The Revolutionary war had a very disastrous influence on the trade at Newport, and he was forced to be absent from the

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Eternal punishment reflects such light on the Divine Character, government and works, especially the work of redemption; and makes such a bright display of the worthiness and grandeur of the Redeemer, and of divine love and grace to the redeemed; and is the occasion of so much happiness in heaven; and so necessary in order to the highest glory, and the greatest increasing felicity of God's everlasting Kingdom; that should it cease, and this fire could be extinguished, it would, in great measure, obscure the light of heaven.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ten New England Leaders* by Williston Walker. New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1901.