

# Can Any Good Come out of Yale?

## The Life of William Lyon Phelps

Professor at Yale University

(Moody Preaches in Hartford)

In 1951 Wilbur Smith wrote: “About two years ago there passed away in his home in New Haven, CT, at the age of 78, the most famous Professor of English literature of our generation, who probably gave more lectures outside of his classroom on the great themes of English literature than any other one man of this century—William Lyon Phelps, for forty years a teacher in Yale University.”

“I think it is not an exaggeration to say that Professor Phelps said more things about the Bible worth saying, and wrote more in an interesting way about the Word of God, and consistently bore a more definite testimony to his faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and his belief in the Gospel, than any other one famous professor in the United States since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

Phelps was born in New Haven in 1865. He was brought up in a Christian home, in a fundamental atmosphere where his parents believed in heaven and hell, and they believed that every word of the Old and New Testament was true. Phelps said, “We had family prayers every morning and every evening, including the singing of a hymn at night; and naturally my father said grace before every meal....I grew up in an atmosphere of prayer and unaffected intimacy with God.”

In his *Autobiography*, Phelps devoted an entire chapter to meetings held in Hartford, Connecticut by Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey. This is his own tribute to Moody:

“Moody was the greatest professional evangelist I have heard. He had no mannerisms, very few gestures, and seldom raised his voice to a shout; but his deep and unaffected piety, his apposite figures of speech, his humour, his solid common sense, his thrilling earnestness, made him amazingly effective. He did great good and as he hated hysteria and sensationalism, he never did any harm. He was a man of genius. In later years I got to know him intimately, both at his school at Northfield and during his visits to Yale; it was impossible to talk to him without feeling his sincerity and his knowledge of human nature....When I was an undergraduate he preached one Sunday at Yale. Attendance was compulsory and the attention to the average sermon was not very keen; and most sermons were no longer than twenty minutes. Mr. Moody preached for one hour, and held the breathless attention of the students.”

One of the best effects of his prolonged visit to Hartford in 1878 was on the various pastors of the city; they were roused to new zeal and the increase of membership was evident in every church.”

Wilbur Smith continues, “It is in the opening page of his Introduction to his (Phelps’) book, *Human Nature in the Bible*, which he published when he was 57 years old, that there occurs the most remarkable single paragraph on the necessity of knowing the Word of God that has probably been expressed by any distinguished college professor in American literature, at least in our generation. We must remember that the man who wrote these words wrote them after he had been teaching for thirty years, and that this man is one who could say that he lived with Browning every day of his life, who, whether he said it or not, was one who lived the better part of every day among the greatest books of the world. This is Phelps’ famous paragraph.”

Everyone who has a thorough knowledge of the Bible may truly be called educated; and no other learning or culture, no matter how extensive or elegant, can, among Europeans and Americans, form a proper substitute. Western civilization is founded upon the Bible; our ideas, our wisdom, our philosophy, our literature, our art, our ideals, come more from the Bible than from all other books put together. It is a revelation of divinity and of humanity; it contains the loftiest religious aspiration along with a candid representation of all that is earthly, sensual and devilish. I thoroughly believe in a university education for both men and women; **but I believe a knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without the Bible.**

[Material taken from *Chats From A Minister’s Library*, by Wilbur M. Smith, 1951.]

The Middletown Bible Church