

A Friendly Epistle on Intolerance  
[abridged]

*To the Editors of the Trumpet, The Christian Freeman, The New Covenant, and the Rev. I. D. Williamson; the Rev A. D. Mayo of Albany, N.Y., sends greeting:—*

It has not been unknown to me, brethren, how painfully you have been exercised during these past weeks upon the attempts of the Liberal Christians of this city to establish Liberal Christianity on a permanent foundation, and likewise upon my own participation therein. Your zeal for the preservation of the Universalist Faith, as displayed through various articles under your editorial care, has commanded my admiration. But I regret, brethren, that the lack of accurate information, and a too unguarded use of the pen have led you to give currency to suspicions which have no foundation in reality, and insinuations and open attacks upon a body of men who, with their minister, deserve at least, as the reward of their efforts to found a free church, either to be let alone, or spoken of in your columns with the common respect and fairness which all honorable men demand in the intercourse of daily life; to say nothing of that charity of which our beloved teacher St. Paul says:—If a man have it not, *he is as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.*

Now, brethren, before I state these facts, I wish to propound a few questions concerning *editorial morality*. I suppose, of course, you all believe that moral obligation increases in proportion to the extent of the sphere of moral action; and that you as editors of sheets whose circulation covers the whole of the Northern and portions of the Southern States of this Union, are directly responsible to God and man for every word you write or permit to be written in them concerning the character, motives, and conduct of private or public men. I wish for information, to know whether you consider it consistent with such moral obligation to accuse a religious Society, composed of some 75 active men and their families, and comprising as fair an amount of religious life as can usually be found in such a body, of the disposition to *destroy another religious Society*—an act of meanness and wickedness which should only be imputed after undeniable proof; to accuse them of this without asking *them* what they think of the matter; speaking of the Unitarians of Albany as practising a *ruse* on the Universalists; as the *Freeman* has it; and of twenty respectable Universalist men and their families, who have united with them, as *defiling their garments* by their conduct, as Br. Williamson says; reflecting on the character of their Pastor, as the late remarks in the *New Covenant* have done; and entirely misstating the success of his late ministry in Cleveland, as has been done in the *Trumpet*; and generally holding up our attempt to establish a free church in the Capital of the Empire State, to the displeasure and ridicule of thousands who will only know what you tell them concerning it; I ask, brethren, is this consistent with your ideas of *editorial morality*? If the *Religious Press* can thus ignorantly vilify the conduct and motives of private and public men, will you inform me wherein it differs from the "*Satanic Press*?"

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All these things you have done, brethren, doubtless impelled thereto by your love for the Truth; but *can any zeal for Truth in an editor excuse carelessness in obtaining facts?* Please reflect on these questions, and tell me what you think—not as Theological Controversialists, but as *christian men*.

Now, what are these facts concerning the Albany movement and myself, out of which this cloud of misapprehension and misrepresentation has arisen? Simply these:—The Unitarian and Universalist Societies of the city of Albany, N.Y., having each attempted to sustain public worship for ten years, and at the end of this period found themselves both feeble in numbers, involved in debt for their churches, and greatly discouraged by their past experience. It was the opinion of a large number of the best men and women of both these Societies, that a union of the two into one new organization, would save both from destruction, and establish Liberal Christianity on a firm foundation. At legal meetings of both these Societies, unanimous with but one or two individual exceptions, was passed, that this union should be consummated. The basis of this Union was this:—1. Each Society should dissolve its organization. 2. A new Liberal Christian Society, to be christened as might be hereafter determined, should be formed from the members of the former organizations, and such other persons in the city as would unite in the movement. 3. The two churches and their liabilities should be placed in the hands of the new Liberal Society, to be managed to the best advantage. The Universalist church was already in the market for sale. Negotiations were in progress for its purchase, and in the opinion of a large majority, the Unitarian church was the most convenient place for temporary occupation, till the new Society could build a new church. Such was the plan as understood by all the Unitarians, and all the Universalists, except a few, whose misunderstanding has not been enlightened by the repeated explanations of their friends. Here was a fair, honorable plan of union. Had all the Universalists entered into it, they would have been the *majority in numbers*, and equal in pecuniary ability, as a body, to the Unitarian branch. There was no 'swallowing up' (as the phrase has been used by Br. Williamson,)—*both Churches were to die, and a new Church appear in their place*.

In this condition of affairs, I was invited, in the name of both parties, and by the recommendation of good Universalists, to come to Albany and lead the movements. I had already concluded to leave Cleveland; *not* because I failed to unite both parties of the Liberal Christians in that city, as the *Trumpet* affirms; or considered it a disgrace to preach to a large congregation of men and women, who had common sense enough to cherish independent convictions, (elegantly termed in the *New Covenant*, a congregation of various shades of belief and unbelief,) or had injured the Universalist Church, as the *Trumpet* says, (for the good reason that *there was no Universalist Church to injure*, nor had been for several years previous,) but simply because the climate

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of Cleveland disagreed so entirely with my health, that after several months of increasing bodily weakness, I concluded it better to live for the Church in my native air, than sacrifice my health for it in Cleveland. I therefore came to Albany to preach in December. During the first week of my visit, nothing seemed to threaten the prosperity of the new enterprise. but on the Saturday evening previous to the final meeting for the consummation, the *Universalist Society* meet, at the solicitation of a few members who were dissatisfied with the arrangement, and by *their influence*, their previous vote was rescinded by a small majority.

As all, however, professed a willingness to unite under my preaching, a new plan was proposed: that both parties retain their organizations, and form a *new congregation for a year*. This plan failed, owing to the unwillingness of the same portion of the Universalist Society to come into it on what were considered by a large majority of the united congregation equitable terms.

There was then but one thing more to be done. A large majority of the liberal christians in Albany wanted to worship together. A minority would not worship with them unless they accepted their own terms. The members of the Universalist Society now in the Unitarian Church professed a willingness to subscribe for my support as a preacher over the Unitarian Society, having full confidence in my creed, and believing at the end of a year spent in this way, not only they, but their friends and other liberal men and women, would unite to found a free church to consummate the original plan. This they did, and I came to them as an *independent christian minister*, preaching to a congregation composed of the various liberal elements of the city. In this they neither questioned the right of those now holding worship in Greet street church to do so, nor tried to injure them; they acted like thoughtful, christian men and women, *knowing exactly what they were about*. And the success so far has justified the act. Our pews are nearly all rented; our church is filled with hearers, and a general harmony and satisfaction prevails, only faintly disturbed by the attacks of the Universalist newspapers of which you are the editors.

These are the *facts* of the case, as understood by me and a large majority of the Liberal Christians in Albany. We regret that our brethren at Green street do not so understand them; but conscious of our own rectitude, we trust they will in time ascertain that their suspicions are unfounded. *If you will let us alone*, brethren, there *may* be a good understanding all around; if you continue your warfare, some of will think you are assuming a strange omniscience—assuming to know us in Boston, Chicago and Cincinnati, better than we, how to establish Liberal Christianity in Albany.—These facts have been given to the public by three Trustees of the Universalist Society; and on them we stand. Your insinuations and open attacks upon us, are with no foundation out[side] of your own imagination.

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One thing more, brethren, you belong to a religious Denomination calling itself by the grand title of *Universal-ist*. I have always understood that name to signify the faith in God's Universal Love, regard for Universal Humanity, and a charity and freedom from intolerance as great as man can attain. In this sense I am a Universalist, and believe in all the legitimate conclusions of these glorious facts. And in this sense I am also a Unitarian, for this is the ground on which enlightened Christians of both denominations can meet and worship... We think that Unitarianism and Universalism are schoolmasters to bring men into the unity of that comprehensive charity and free thought we are endeavoring to embody.

We find you ready to impeach our motives, and assail our characters. We see you ready to charge a sister denomination with the paltry trick of wishing to destroy the churches of its neighbors. Is this toleration? *Is this the result of your fifty years service in the Liberal Church*, Br. Whittemore, Br. Cobb, Br. Williamson? Have your studies in Universalism landed you in the universe of this narrow bigotry? Do you believe, Br. Mason, that Albany Unitarians are plotting the down-fall of Universalists, on no other testimony than *ex parte* reports? Whence this readiness to circulate bad stories of your neighbors? Is this Universalism?...

Brethren, we respect your opinions; we have no quarrel with your sectarian position, if sustained in a Christian spirit; but we protest against the spirit of intolerance and rash, uncharitable judgment that disfigures your notices of our movement... I am not to be tried at your bar or the bar of any earthly church, but at the tribunal of my own conscience. We announce to you our position. We challenge honest criticism upon it. We believe it is the only Unitarianism that will endure—the only Universalism that can succeed... We shall not call you bigots, because you may differ from us; but *if you call us bad names because we differ from you*, our dictionary offers no other term for your conduct than *Intolerance*.

All of which is respectfully submitted by your friend and brother,

A. D. MAYO

*Christian Ambassador*, Auburn NY, Sat. 23 Feb 1856

Transcribed on 14 Jul 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY