

[Canfield, Andrew J.]

Preaches His Last Sermon in the Church of Our Father  
A Review of the Progress of Universalism in the City of Brooklyn—  
The Preacher's Account of His Own Work—Saying Farewell

The Rev. A. J. Canfield, D.D., preached his farewell sermon to a congregation which completely filled the large auditorium of the Church of Our Father, on Grand avenue, yesterday morning. The sermon was chiefly a review of the growth of the Universalist Church in Brooklyn and some very tender and suggestive thoughts which the doctor termed sweet and holy memories awakened by the outlining of the history. These memories seemed to deeply touch the hearts of many in the congregation, and at the conclusion of the sermon Dr. Canfield buried his face in his hands and many eyes were dimmed with tears as the church quartet sang from Mendelssohn's "It is Decreed."

It is decreed by Heaven above  
That we from those best we love must sever;  
But hard the word we have to tell  
Is when to friends we say farewell forever.  
But this is the meaning we explain  
We hope, and be our hope not vain,  
That though we part, we meet again;  
Then say farewell to meet again.

Dr. Canfield took his text from I Samuel vii:12: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

With these familiar words from the ancient Hebrew seer in humble acknowledgment of divine assistance, said the doctor, I conclude the most important chapter of my life history and return to you the closed volume of my pastorate, the contents of which can never be fully known or understood until the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed. The present hour is therefore an appropriate occasion for solemn review and self examination, as well as hopeful and self congratulation. Let us briefly review some matters of mutual interest in regard to the history of our society and our personal and parochial relations, They are not for the general public but for ourselves alone. I question whether the printing of farewell sermons in newspapers is not of doubtful taste. Indeed, it seems to me as much out of place as would be the publishing of the details of the final breaking up of a family or the parting of dear friends. These details are intended for loved ones only and should not be proclaimed from the housetop.

The history of the parish was outlined, the doctor taking up first what he termed the nebulous period, which extended from 1830 to 1842, during which time, he said, Universalist sermons were occasionally preached by Rev. Messrs. Fiske, [Thomas J.] Sawyer and [Shaler J.] Hillyer. In 1842 an obscure building on Adams street, known as Gothic Hall, was secured and a few ardent spirits resolved to attempt the foundation of a society under the leadership of Rev. Abel C. Thomas. The first sermon was preached Sunday, April 3, 1842. There were seventeen persons in the society. The society grew so rapidly that at the end of the first year an effort was made to secure a lot for the erection of a church building. This proved a difficult undertaking owing to the intense sectarian prejudice of the people of Brooklyn at that time. They were largely the wealthy or influential portion, the descendants of Dutch farmers, a class whose sterling character was yet very conservative and thoroughly Calvinistic in theology. The doctrines of election and predestination were as the bread of life to them, so closely interwoven was their religious training with every other idea. More than once was the nearly successful purchase prevented by the interference of the church to which the seller or owner belonged. The new church was denounced from the pulpit as a "nest of heresy," a "synagogue of Satan," and a "nursery of devils." It was well to remember this prejudice, for it shows the progress made

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by liberal Christianity. Persecution at length produced its legitimate effect, and a lady owning land at the corner of Fulton and Cranberry streets was induced to inquire as to the cause of so much denunciation. Becoming satisfied of the harmlessness of the objects thereof, a sale was finally made by her to the Church of Restoration, as the new society was termed. A strong effort was made to induce her to come to the sale, but she refused. Her pastor, the Rev. Mr. Jacobus, threatened her with discipline and excommunication. As she remained firm the first Universalist church was built and the new society took up the work of the liberal church therein, under the pastorate of the Rev. A. C. Thomas, on June 22, 1843. The progress of the church against an opposition, the result of prejudice, was described. The fire of 1848, which swept across the lower part of the city, destroyed the building, and as a specimen of the feeling shown toward Universalists at that time Dr. Canfield told of the Rev. S. H. Cox and two other ministers of the gospel of peace, who openly rejoiced over the destruction of the church, Dr. Cox saying when the remark "This is a sad night" was made, "I do not feel so. It will purge the city of the awful heresy taught there. That society will never be able to rebuild." It was said at that time that "Brooklyn was chastened by Divine wrath for suffering these pestilent doctrines to be taught." The bitterness felt toward the Universalist church, continued Dr. Canfield, did not extend to all churches. Mr. Beecher, after a battle with his church officers, in which he offered his resignation, wrote a noble letter offering the use of his church. Mr. Farley, of the Pierrepont street Unitarian church, had claimed and received the privilege of housing his brethren, and in that beautiful home the Universalists passed a year while building a church at the corner of Monroe place and Clark street. At the dedication of this church on July 2, 1850, clergymen of other denominations for the first time joined in the services, and the members began to feel that they were no longer tolerated, but recognized. In 1857 a branch organization was established at 274 Cumberland street, and so progressed that a church edifice was built for it on Greene avenue, near Adelphi street, in 1863. This society was known as the Church of the Redeemer. In 1868 there was a union of the two societies, the building on Monroe place was sold and the united Universalists worshiped in the Greene avenue building until a new structure was erected on Clermont avenue in 1870, when the body became known as the Church of Our Father. The Rev. Mr. Bolles was pastor for two years and was succeeded by the Rev. H. R. Nye, who remained until 1879, and was the last pastor before Dr. Canfield came to the church. I would speak of the pastorate of Mr. Nye as I desire to be spoken of. If anyone wishes to realize fully human weaknesses, let him succeed a former pastor. There are those in all churches who believe they will be thought more of by their pastor if they denounce and pick to pieces the character of his predecessor. The church had a lawsuit, the worst thing possible for a church except a scandal. The Clermont avenue property was sold and the society was left without a home or a dollar.

This was the situation when in January, 1881, I met Brother Crowell in Pine street, New York and asked him what the situation was in this parish. He said the society had gone to pieces. It owned nothing and owed nothing. He asked me to come over and see what was left of the people, saying you had a small hall where the Sunday school was kept together. I said I might do so and each week thereafter I got a letter from him urging me to come. My first visit here was on February 14, 1881. I found but little to work upon, but I formed a good impression of that little. The plans for work were laid before me and I accepted the call offered me by the remnant of the society. The result was that this church was dedicated June 17, 1883, and in 1887 we celebrated our jubilee, having paid off our debt. All this was done in a few years. We have from the beginning of the enterprise until now, a period of forty-eight years with seven pastors, having an average settlement of a trifle over six years, making forty-three years of pastoral supervision and five years of transient pulpit supplies, which is not a bad showing.

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Sweet and holy memories are awakened as I outline this history, two-thirds of which have come under my personal observation, for I was ordained twenty-nine years ago next month and have spent more than half that time in Brooklyn. In 1865 I was called to the Williamsburgh church, where I succeeded Bernard Peters and preceded Dr. [Almon] Gunnison, and it was, probably, because of my pastorate there that I was called to this charge. On the whole, I am glad that I selected the ministry as a profession, and that my lot has been cast through so many years in this typical city of churches. Such a pastorate undoubtedly taxes one's time and strength, and has its disappointments and sorrows, but so does almost any occupation in which one engages and to which he gives faithful and honest service. It would be difficult to find another vocation which has opportunities equal to that of the ministry. In a large city like this where there are so many Christian workers and different denominations, an observant and thoughtful pastor must have definite and decided opinions regarding the privileges and obligations of associated as compared with individual methods of work. Shall he spend his time in criticizing and fault finding or shall he rejoice at any and every agency that promises to make men and women better? Clearly he should choose the latter. My theory and practice has always been that there is but one Christian church, of which all who love the Lord Jesus Christ are and of right ought to be accounted members. It is open to all and none should be excluded. At the same time I have decided convictions in regard to the necessity of a clearly defined doctrinal basis to the success of any parish. There must be something to build upon. Hence I have taught and never questioned the great historic doctrines of God, Christ, immortality the consequences of sin, and future but not endless punishment. Who knows in this world of change where the center of absolute truth will be found to be at last. The most we know is as Jesus said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." I publicly declare that any man, woman or child may make public on the house tops any occasion when I have shown a want of Christian charity. This pulpit has been one of the most strenuous of the doctrine of future but not endless punishment. Future punishment, as a natural consequence of sin, is one of the fundamental doctrines of the liberal church. In short, I have taken the gospel, esteeming it above all else, and have sought to build upon it, and while some may have felt that I was not in the habit of using those terms common in this denomination, none can deny that gospel is a better term than universalism. How much the success of my efforts will be the future will tell.

Dr. Canfield, in speaking of the assistance he had had, said he wanted to make a few public acknowledgements, and referred to the perfectly free pulpit he had had, to his obligation to the board of trustees, the noble band of women workers, those who without official station and in some instances without ecclesiastical connection with the society, and to his faithful in the Sunday school, especially to the superintendent, he rendered the homage of his profound gratitude. And though it may seem uncommon, if not strange, yet I will not overlook our obligations to the daily press of the city. The press of this city is exceptionally free from sectarian bias on account of members or wealth. We are indebted to the daily press for many personal courtesies. It stands for all and gives quite equal if not superior attention to the new thought of the liberal church. And now, brethren and friends, to you is intrusted [sic] the responsibility of maintaining this society and church. Continue to do all you have done and all will be well. We have seen how the fathers have gone to their reward, but their work remains. I am going away in body, but my spirit remains with you. One question presses: Is the work done in vain? Is the day of great prosperity of this church passed? Is the church in the way of greater prosperity? It is for you to uphold this great work of liberal Christianity of which this church is the chief center of this city. Nothing is so sacred as that which I am committing to your care. It is the child of my love that I am leaving. I pray to never to be false to it or to my hope of it. I may be thought an unnatural father in leaving you and going to another city. We will not

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discuss that now. I am in the current of God's work and I must follow, but I would not be happy in going did I not feel that my ten years with you was but the beginning of greater things—the sowing of seed. I feel that it is better for you that I should go. I am not forced away. [I am called?] to force myself away. God has called me. I know it. I promise you that if he spares my life you shall not hear a false report [of] me. The father of his child will not disgrace his offspring.

In the evening Dr. Canfield talked informally to another large congregation. In closing he said:

“All I shall carry away will be the memory that I have left behind me here such a large circle of friends that are not ecclesiastical. I have had more difficulty, more fault to find because of full pews than of empty pews. I shall never forget one thing that I never experienced elsewhere in the East. It is that the congregation which commenced to come here in pretty large numbers after we entered this church, most of whom were outsiders, remained until the services were entirely over. Time and time again, in other churches, I have seen half the congregation go streaming out of the door the moment the choir began to sing at the close of the sermon. Many have spoken to me and said they were glad I came to Brooklyn and did so great a work. It was not my work. I have now simply to announce that I go to another city where there is even a better opportunity for my work. My work is preaching. Not dogmatic preaching, but my office is to love and help men and women. I hope to return to this city occasionally and will preach again from this pulpit. And I will say that there is no shadow on my going. Notwithstanding newspaper articles which might be misinterpreted, no one has whispered to me that I should retire from this field. I welcome you, I thank you that you have given me an opportunity to do such good work.”

At the conclusion of the pastor's remarks the choir sang a special farewell song. This choir is second in quality to none in the city, and Dr. Canfield said in his closing remarks that much of the success of the church of late years had been more or less due to the excellent musical services, and [he] thanked the organist and members of the choir. A farewell reception will be tendered the retiring pastor and his wife in the church to-morrow evening. He will start for Chicago on Thursday.

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Transcribed on 22 Aug 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY