

## Address

Delivered on breaking ground preparatory to the erection of a church  
by the Fourth Universalist Society of the City of Brooklyn, July 19th, 1863  
[slightly abridged]

MY CHRISTIAN FRIENDS: Twenty-three years ago, there was no organized society of believers in God's impartial grace in the city of Brooklyn. Previously to that time, and as far back as 1830, an association was organized which sustained public worship for a season, and Dr. [Thomas J.] Sawyer, who is with us to-day, rejoicing in the change which thirty years have wrought, and some other clergymen of our faith, preached occasionally in this city; but in 1841 the first permanent organization was effected. The men who engaged in that work were lovers of gospel truth, and ready to encounter the opposition which professed Universalists in those days were sure to experience. They were not a numerous band—only three at the preliminary meeting, and not more than five or six reliable men, all told, when they hired a hall on the corner of Fulton and Cranberry streets, and established constant [regular] Sabbath worship. These men had counted the cost of the work they had so nobly undertaken, and would not turn back, though met by opposition and disappointment on the very threshold of their enterprise. The gentleman of whom they had hired the hall, on consulting with his neighbors, concluded that the establishment of a society believing in the paternity of God, the brotherhood of man, and the universality of the mission of Jesus, would have a bad effect upon the morals of the city, and therefore declined to carry out his agreement. Nothing daunted by this obstacle, they soon effected an arrangement with the Unitarian society, and hired the small church they had formerly occupied on Adams street. Their usual congregations at that time were scarcely more than from twenty to forty persons.

Such were the first manifestations of Universalism in Brooklyn. But from the lips of faithful seed men the truth was sown, and some of it falling into good soil, sprang up, to be multiplied in the day of an approaching harvest. Dr. Sawyer preached for that society occasionally during the first year of its existence, and different clergymen filled up the balance of the time, until in 1842 Rev. Abel C. Thomas was settled as their first pastor. He came to his new charge in all the vigor of early manhood, with a soul inspired by his great love for our religious faith—with rare pulpit talent, great social powers, and the precedent of a most successful ministry in the city from whence he came. The fruit of his labors was soon apparent. Curiosity to hear the eloquent preacher, and a growing desire to learn more of the doctrine, then almost everywhere spoken against, soon gave him larger congregations, until, within his first year's ministry, the original number of *three*, who started the society, had been increased an hundredfold. During the first year, an effort was made to raise money for a new church, but not many rich men had at that time pressed into this door of the "kingdom of heaven," and the enterprise, in its original form, did not succeed. But the ever-faithful *three men*, with a few others who were induced to join them, decided that a new church was indispensable; and they went forward and erected one at their own expense, and leased it to the society for a term of years, with the privilege of renewal. This house was built in 1843.

Br. Thomas labored as pastor of that society for two and a half years, and was succeeded by Rev. Thomas B. Thayer. Br. Thayer came from the same city in which Br. Thomas had previously labored, and with the precedent of an equally successful ministry. The names of those two men will long be remembered in connection with the palmiest

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days of Universalism in Lowell, Massachusetts. Br. Thayer...brought to his new charge that ability and zeal which have made him so deservedly popular wherever he has labored as a gospel teacher.

During the term of his pastorate the church in which he preached was destroyed by fire. In that neighborhood, at that time, the people who had closely scanned the goings-in and the comings-out of that society, had come to believe that the tendencies of Universalism were not so immoral as they had feared that they might be; and instantly as that calamity was experienced, two societies opened their doors and made a cheerful offer of the use of their several churches for a part of each Sunday, until a new church could be erected.

The Christian courtesies of the Unitarian society were accepted, and immediately—that is, in the year 1849—the beautiful church now occupied by that society was erected and dedicated as “The Church of the Restoration.” Shortly after this church was erected Br. Thayer was induced to return to his former charge in Lowell, and Rev. H. R. Nye became his successor. Br. Nye had not at that time earned the reputation as a preacher which his predecessors enjoyed, for he was much their junior in years and in the ministry; but his people soon learned to hang with a sweet delight upon his gentle and persuasive eloquence, and to love him most devotedly as an efficient pastor and a faithful friend. The changes I have thus far named brought that society forward to a period six years ago, when they secured the services of their present pastor, our much-esteemed brother in the gospel ministry, Rev. Henry Blanchard. Of his qualifications for the position he occupies I need not speak to this assembly. Six years in a city like this, as pastor of such a society, following such predecessors, and this as his first settlement, are facts known to you all, and they are more eloquent of praise than any chosen words that I might offer. Very few societies in the land have been favored with four successive pastorates, covering a period of more than twenty years, so able and so worthy as those which the First Universalist Society in this city has enjoyed. May the present relation of pastor and people long continue, and prosperity still increase as the fruit of united and faithful gospel labor.

But I should say in this place, that all the growth of Universalism in Brooklyn, since 1841, has not been into that society. Early in the spring of 1845, a society was organized in Williamsburgh, and there, as in this part of our city, Dr. Sawyer was among the first to preach the glad tidings of a world’s salvation. Indeed, we may truly and very justly say that for more than thirty years he has, by the help of God, been educating and sending into all the region roundabout, intelligent and consistent believers in our most holy faith. The men who started the first society had frequently listened to his preaching, not only in Brooklyn, but on the other side of the river; and though I do not know the facts in the case, it would be quite safe to presume that the men who started the society in Williamsburgh were from the old Orchard Street Church... In the autumn of that year, about six months from the date of their organization, the society in Williamsburgh settled as their first pastor Rev. Henry Lyon, who is also present on this occasion. This society met with a spirited and determined opposition from other religious sects; and among other means used to annoy, and if possible prevent their success, certain parties tried to prevail upon the owner of the building in which they worshipped to repent of having rented it for such a purpose. This man had built the place in the anticipation of the coming of Christ, and it was called “The Tabernacle.” He was, of course, a Millerite, and his reply was very characteristic of many of that class. Said he, “I built this house for the Lord, but as he did not come to occupy it, I’ll let it to the devil if I choose.” Odd and

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rough as this reply was, it helps to reflect the public feeling at that time, in regard to the doctrine which we profess. Br. Lyon informs me that forty persons constituted what they called in those days a good congregation. But his ministry was successful. By earnest gospel preaching, and faithful labor among the people who could be reached by his efforts, his congregations increased; and the second year of his ministry the society erected the neat and substantial church in which they have ever since worshiped. Br. Lyon was their pastor for four years.

His successor was Rev. D.[Day] K. Lee, and during his ministry of five years the society was continually prosperous. His people loved him for his many excellencies; the community in which he moved respected him for his spotless life; and in the Sunday School he was able to mould and fashion the young mind and heart more effectively than almost any other man I ever knew, so completely were such hearts within his control. After a short ministry by Rev. W. W. King, the Williamsburgh society secured the services of their present worthy and efficient pastor, Rev. B. Peters. Since he came among them eight years ago, his congregations have increased, and his people have been more deeply baptized into the spirit of vital Christianity than ever before. He thought to have removed from the State at the close of his last year, but he soon learned that his people had bound him so that he could not go. The fetters of love are very strong, and they impose so sweet a slavery that my brother has concluded to wear them uncomplainingly for a few years more.

Some ten or twelve years ago, the New York Missionary Society gave assistance to a few friends in Greenpoint, which enabled them to establish public worship there. They hired a vacant store, put in settees, and for a time had preaching quite regularly. There, as elsewhere in this region, Dr. Sawyer preached many of the first Universalist sermons which were heard in that part of the city. Br. Lyon helped that feeble band of believers by his efficient services, and Br. King preached for them, a part of each Sabbath, for several months. But their place of worship was unattractive and uncomfortable, and that, with other causes, prevented a continuation of that success which was at first so full of promise, and the little society languished. But there were noble men in that place, who had listened to Sawyer, Balch, Skinner and others of our ablest doctrinal preachers, and they could not live without that spiritual food which satisfies the soul; and six years ago they made another effort, which has proved eminently successful. They perfected their organization, secured preaching through the brethren in New York and this city, one service per day, until at length they erected a small but very charming chapel, and have now called our young and worthy Br. [Frank] Magwire, recently a graduate from Canton Theological Institution, to preach for them constantly [full time] and become their pastor. Brs. Peters and Flanders have done much to place the society in Greenpoint in its present state of prosperity.

But three Universalist societies in this great city were not enough to accommodate the believers in God's impartial grace, scattered all over its broad territory, nor were they enough to satisfy the desires of many true believers to see the truth marching on to new triumphs. They were not enough to furnish within their own limits the Sunday School instruction which the religious wants of many children were demanding; and it was determined by several members of the First Society to establish in this neighborhood a mission, or branch Sunday School. This was in the year 1858, and the school was organized in the month of March. Two small rooms were hired at the corner of Fulton Avenue and Canton Street, and at the first meeting there were twenty-nine scholars. It

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was soon apparent that those rooms were not sufficiently large to accommodate the growing school, and a new building was erected on Cumberland Street, into which the school was removed on the 5th of October of that year. The school continued to grow and flourish, and the parents of the children desired to have occasional preaching in the new chapel. Arrangements were soon made by which this desire was realized; and I learn that Br. Blanchard preached the first sermon and Br. Nye the second, on the evenings of two Sundays in October, 1858.

In the month of March, 1860, the Fourth Universalist Society was organized, and in November of the same year Rev. N. M. Gaylord was elected and became its pastor. Never had a new society brighter hopes of prosperity and rapidly-growing strength than had this band of believers when they gathered around their new preacher and were thrilled by the earnest words which fell from his lips. They were a band of noble, liberal, active men, and they *deserved* success. They helped their pastor to relieve himself from the pressing demands of old creditors, that no part of his attention should be distracted from the great work of his ministry, and they raised for him a most liberal salary. But the clouds in our national firmament began to gather; the coming spring introduced this scene of civil strife; the pastor failed to meet his current expenses; and in the month of June he resigned and obtained a chaplaincy in the army, leaving the society poorer than he found them by the amount of his salary, which had been promptly paid, and by about seven hundred dollars, which had been raised to cancel his old indebtedness.

This was a hard beginning, and would have discouraged a less devoted band of believers. But they resolved to move steadily on; and in the course of a few weeks thereafter, they invited Rev. C.[Charles] Cravens to become their pastor, and he commenced his labors on the first of August, 1861. The times were unpropitious, political men had their peculiar ideas, and it soon appeared that the almost perfect harmony which had hitherto existed in the society was somewhat impaired. The strength of the society did not increase during his ministry; and when he resigned in September, 1862, the exercise of an honest difference of opinion reduced the strength of the society by the loss of several excellent families. From their organization to that time, this little band had seen no day so dark and full of discouragement. Still they resolved to live, and in that condition I found them, when, in November last, not knowing that Br. Cravens had closed his connection with them, I consented to supply their pulpit for a single Sabbath. I was surprised by the small congregation with which I was greeted; and when I knew the causes which had contributed to that result, the future of the Fourth Universalist Society in Brooklyn seemed most unpromising.

But I soon found that there were still left to it a few noble and determined spirits; and as I knew more of them, and from Sunday to Sunday saw others coming to uphold their burdened hands, I was encouraged, and finally, on the 1st of March last, consented to cast my lot with them and become their pastor. The result thus far has been equal to my most sanguine expectations. Our congregations are now more than twice as large as they were in November, the society is free from debt and perfectly united, and we are here today to break the soil beneath our feet, that on this spot a beautiful Christian temple may be erected, in which our growing and now once more hopeful society may worship the living God, who is the Saviour of all men.

And now, my friends, what is the summary of the progress of our cause in this city during the last twenty-three years? The answer is a cheering one, when all the trials through which this progress has been wrought out are taken into the account. From that

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original three men, going about the city seeking for others who would join them in opening a place of worship where the doctrine of God's impartial grace could be proclaimed, we now have four organized and permanently established societies, devoted to the promulgation of our most precious faith. From those first congregations of from twenty to forty persons, we have four congregations that will average between two and three hundred worshipers—say about one thousand in all. From no Sunday School at all, we have grown to establish a Union of four Sunday Schools, numbering, in all, about four hundred scholars and sixty teachers. From no church edifice in which to worship the Father of all men, we have come to be the possessors of three, and God willing, the fourth will soon arise upon this spot, so near the summit of our beautiful city. Let us than God and take courage.

Brethren, this occasion is full of promise and of joy to those who have for years past manifested their love for the doctrine of universal grace by worshiping in a most humble, uninviting, inconvenient and unpopular chapel. Your meekness has found a demonstration in that respect; and now as you come to begin the work of erecting a place of worship whose outer walls shall invite the passer-by to join you in your devotions, and whose inner courts shall be in harmony with the beautiful truths and spiritual comfort of your religious faith, no one will accuse you of an ignoble pride, or of vain and unworthy motives.

...

To this work we are now to bend our determined efforts; and in the name of truth we call upon those friends of liberal Christianity who have not found a religious home, where the glad tidings of the gospel are preached in all their glorious fullness, to join us in this enterprise... "Let your light shine" is the command of our beloved Saviour. Throw the whole weight of your influence in the direction of what which is in your opinion the truth of God; is the highest dictate of human reason... We have not raised money enough to complete the work which we are here beginning; yet as I take this spade and break this soil,...I have no lack of faith that, with that liberality for which our people are so widely known, good friends will contribute to supply the full amount to make our enterprise successful. Thus, therefore, do I break this ground, that we may find a sure foundation whereon the pillars of our temple shall rest, while for years to come its sacred courts shall ring with the praises of God.

by Rev. L. J. Fletcher  
Pastor of the Society

*The Christian Ambassador*, Auburn NY, Sat. 8 Aug 1863

Transcribed on 20 Apr 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY