

[Canfield, Andrew J.]

THE PREACHERS OF BROOKLYN¹

[excerpt]

The Rev. A. J. Canfield

There are four Universalist societies in Brooklyn, that on Fourth street, E.D., being at present the only one which has a regular pastor. The society of which the Rev. Henry Blanchard was formerly minister and whose church, now Swedenborgian, was treated of in our last article, is the oldest. The members of it mostly resided up town, and they now worship with the society in Greene avenue, of which, until recently, the Rev. Mr. Bartholomew was minister. There is some talk of the two societies uniting permanently. Second in order is the church of which we now speak, which is the first of Williamsburgh, and of which the Rev. A. J. Canfield is pastor. The Universalist Society at Greenwood is the third, and that in Greene avenue the youngest. The Society in the Eastern District was founded in 1845, by George Ricard, William B. Miles, G. L. Demarest, and J. C. Stanley. These gentlemen hired at the outset a building on Second street called "The Tabernacle," where the first discourse was delivered by the Rev. William S. Balch, then Pastor of the Bleecker street [Third] Universalist church, in New York. The present meeting house which stands on Fourth street, corner of South Third, was built in 1847, and was then considered a very spacious and acceptable edifice, but twenty years have so increased the population that it is now too small for the congregation. A new church is to be built during the present year in South Ninth street. The pastors who have filled the pulpit are the Revs. Henry Lyon, Day K. Lee, W. W. King, B.[Bernard] Peters, and A. J. Canfield, the present occupant. Of the original founders, two, Mr. Ricard and Mr. Stanley, are still members of the parish. Mr. G. L. Demarest has become a minister and is settled in Massachusetts, and W. B. Miles is dead. The Society at present numbers about two hundred families and the church members are eighty-five.

The Rev. A. J. Canfield was born in Broome County, New York, January 12th, 1840. His literary education was obtained at Union College, Schenectady, and his theological training at Canton, St. Lawrence County, New York. He was ordained in 1862; and his first pastoral charge was at Concord, New Hampshire, where he remained three years. Shortly after his settlement at Concord he married the daughter of Colonel B. Cowee, of North Adams, Mass. On January 1st, 1865, Mr. Canfield removed to his present church in Williamsburgh. He writes for the *Christian Leader*, the Universalist organ of this State, and is the Secretary of the New York Universalist Association and of the Executive Committee of the State Convention.

Mr. Canfield is thoroughly radical in his theology and belongs to the progressive branch of the Liberal Christian body. His sympathies are more with the young men of the order than with the patriarchs who are passing away. Thoroughly conversant with the writings of the English Broad Church theologians, he believes profoundly in

¹ This article begins with an extensive review of Universalism in the United States. My excerpt begins with a summary of activity in Brooklyn.

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a great future for liberal Christianity. He works for the union of the Universalist and Unitarian bodies, as a means to this end.

As a preacher he is earnest in spirit, facile in illustration, powerful in argument, fluent in language and rapid in delivery. His zeal and energy are remarkable, as we have reason to remember, when, after attending morning service at his church, he insisted on our going with him to *One hundred and twenty-fifth street*, Harlem (!) to afternoon service, at which he was to preach. Although the heat and dust were great, and our Third avenue car broke down, and we could barely find standing room on the platform, and were so jostled and hooped and elbowed by the Bowery and its wife and family, who were "on pleasure bent," (as we were with pain) that we felt in anything but a heavenly frame of mind, or a "liberal Christian" humor, we could but admire the imperturbable serenity of our clerical companion, who preached an earnest experimental sermon at Harlem, and declared on the road home that he felt quite fresh for the evening service at Williamsburgh. We must remain orthodox, however, for our constitution is inadequate to such progressive movements as those we shared on Sunday week with Mr. Canfield.

His sincerity of heart, freedom from prejudice or little-mindedness, and generous instincts, combined with his intellectual ability and extensive reading, render this clergyman a great favorite not only with his own congregation and denomination, but with the Eastern District public. He is an able lecturer, and the local press has frequently devoted much space to reporting his sermons. He often originates ideas which leave a lasting impression on the minds of his hearers, although like all extempore preachers his oratorical bark is dependent somewhat on wind and tide. We fancy it depends not unfrequently [sic] on the atmosphere whether a clergyman gives us a sermon on heaven or the other place. When we heard Mr. Canfield a sun of unusual brightness for April was shining cheerily on him and his people, and he seemed to baptize them and their theology in the glad promises of the Spring. Life, not death, eternal was the prophecy of the sunbeams and the teaching of the sermon. As the morning was without clouds, so the theology was without gloom. We felt that Universalism was a good religion for pleasant weather, and as it excludes despair, and "hopeth all things," we may perhaps add for cloudy weather too. Mr. Canfield, in his buoyancy and confidence in good and its final triumph, is a sound representation of this system of belief.

Behind the clouds the sun's still shining, behind austerity there is love, behind punishment there is pardon, behind hell there is heaven, behind death there is the radiance of eternal life—this is his faith. And in the end of the days when evil shall have run its course, and this world of immortal spirits shall be restored to more than its original symmetry and grace, Mr. Canfield and his co-religionists believe, in spite of dogmas and decrees, that to all of us "the King" will come "in his beauty," and that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York NY, 30 Apr 1869

Transcribed on 21 Aug 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY