

A HUNDRED YEARS OF UNIVERALISM

By The Reverend L. O. Williams

The story of Universalism in the State of New York begins with John Murray, who preached in New York City as early as 1770. This led to nothing, however, of organization or continued effort. About 1805 in the neighborhood of what is now Utica, the Rev. Nathaniel Stacy began a movement which led to more important results. More congregations and societies were rapidly formed, and in 1815 at New Hartford the first Universalist church building in the State was erected.

From this center of influence, the following year, the Rev. Stephen K. Smith carried the glad tidings to Western New York. First at Williamsville, then at Buffalo, then at Chautauqua, and later in twenty towns and hamlets at the Niagara frontier the new preacher proclaimed the doctrine of universal salvation as opportunity occurred. The date of the first sermon in Buffalo June 24. 1814 at 8 o'clock of the afternoon. The place is described as a new barn connected with Ransoms [?] which stood on the northwest corner of what is now Huron and Main streets. The text was the sixth verse of Psalms cxxvi: "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, doubtless, comes again with rejoicing, bearing his sheaves with him." Then Universalism, or Restorationism, as it was more commonly called, was introduced into Buffalo.

The situation is not easy to imagine. It was but two years before that the British had burned the village to the ground. The excitement of Perry's victory had not yet died away. The entire population could not have been more than 300 souls. Williamsville, Hamburg, Black Rock were still of as much importance as the hamlet at the mouth of Buffalo creek. Chippewa street was the northern limit of the town, and Ellicott street and Delaware avenue on the east and west respectively were literally out in the woods. The barn secured for the first service, then, was probably the best the community afforded, and we may assume that the congregation which assembled at that occasion was respectable in size as well as in character.

From the theological point of view, Buffalo was nearly as diversified as it is today. Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics were here then as now and a few Universalists from older societies to the east had drifted in this direction, among them Benjamin Caryl of Williamsville, who was largely responsible for the work along the frontier. Of course, there was controversy, often vindictive and bitter, but the people as a whole, whatever their faith, rarely refused to hear what a Universalist might say. Men were especially interested in the new faith and it was many years before women constituted any considerable part of Universalist congregations. It may also be admitted that in the struggle with those of other creeds the advocates of Restoration[ism] were often needlessly severe.

Mr. Smith remained in Western New York until the close of 1817. A year later he returned to his western circuit, but only for a few weeks, and so ended the first attempt to sow the seed of Universalism in the counties west of the Genesee river. No societies were organized, no preachers settled, little of a visible character established, yet a beginning was made which in following years made better things possible. In his Historical Sketches written in 1843 Mr. Smith gives a modest but sufficiently detailed account of those early experiences as well as a candid criticism of Universalist shortcomings and mistakes.

From 1820 to 1830 little of importance occurred. In 1833 the Rev. Thomas Gross, a convert from the Congregational church of New England and a man of ripe scholarship, preached in this neighborhood and published a paper in defense of Universalist principles.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF UNIVERSALISM

Other preachers of the faith made sporadic visits and no doubt stimulated public interest in the great consummation, while the trend of popular thought as a whole was in the direction of a less severe theology, but as regards organized parishes in Western New York, little progress was made until after 1830, when the story of organic Universalism in Buffalo begins.

In 1831 the Rev. G. W. Montgomery and the Rev. L. C. Marvin preached alternately in Buffalo and as a result on December 8th a society and church was regularly organized. The next year a church building was erected on Washington street, a little above Swan, with Mr. Montgomery still the pastor. In 1833 the Rev. William I. Reese was called, but he died of cholera the next year, a martyr in the cause of humanity. The Rev. Russell Tomlinson then served for three years, and for the next five years matters were at a low ebb, so low that the church was rented for a time to Trinity Episcopalian church and no regular service was held. For this period the names of two pastors appear, it is true, but these were for brief pastorates and little of the men is known.

With 1843 the parish entered upon a life of activity and varied prosperity, which has gone on without interruption to the present day. The Rev. Stephen R. Smith, who had preached the first sermon in the city, was settled on May 1st of that year and at his death in 1849 the parish had recovered from its discouragements and greatly increased in numbers and in influence. Debts were paid, a church organization developed, friends made among all classes of people, and a regular administration of religion established. Wise, broad-minded, sweet-spirited, able and tolerant, Mr. Smith won respect everywhere for himself and general goodwill for his church and congregation. Mr. Smith easily holds first rank among the leaders of Universalism in New York.

The Rev. Alexander O. Laurie, a quaint and brilliant Scotchman, the Rev. Richard Eddy, the historian of Universalism in America, and the Rev. E. Winchester Reynolds continue the pastorate until the settlement of the Rev. J. Hazard Hartzell in 1858. It was a trying time for ministers in general and for none more trying than for those occupying liberal pulpits. The slave question was uppermost in the public mind and in the passion of the hour the conscientious pastor was often between two fires. To speak or not to speak that was the question and in either case he was sure of the condemnation of a part of his congregation. It is remarkable, however, that the only results of the strife were short pastorates and that lack of continuity of service which such conditions bring.

With the Rev. J. Hazard Hartzell the parish emerged into modern life. The old church in Washington street was abandoned and in 1866 a new edifice built where Flint & Kent's dry-goods store now stands. The congregation grew rapidly, activities multiplied, and influence increased. Mr. Hartzell was the impassioned orator that appeals to the multitude and at the same time commands the respect of the more thoughtful. For twelve years he remained, successfully carrying the church through the period of the Civil War and reconstruction and keeping it abreast of the best theological thinking of that stormy time, and making a name for himself which still remains in the hearts of our older citizens.

The Rev. L. J. Fletcher, D. D., was Dr. Harwell's successor. For eight years longer the congregation continued to grow and to increase in influence. A fire which destroyed the church in [1876?] served only to stimulate the people to new vigor and zeal. Under Dr. Fletcher's leadership new visions of service and responsibility were opened; and when he resigned in 1878 the society had reached the highest point in its efficiency and success as an organization. Indeed, since then it has been the ideal of every one of its pastors to maintain the high degree of success reached by Dr. Fletcher's pastorate.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF UNIVERALISM

With 1878 Dr. Hartzell began a second term of service which was continued for two years, when the Rev. William E. Gibbs became pastor for five years. Dr. J. K. Mason was the incumbent from 1886 to 1898 when he was followed by the Rev. Levi M. Powers for seven years. The Rev. James D. Corby served one year and in 1897 he was succeeded by the present pastor, the Rev. L. O. Williams. The church has been fortunate in the character and in the ability of its leaders. Seven of its ministers served less than two years each, a term too short for constructive work or definite influence; but of these no one was dismissed for questionable conduct or failure as a minister. The average pastorate for the remaining ten is seven years, two of the number serving more than ten years each.

The history of the society may be divided into four periods. The first was from the preaching of the first sermon until the dedication of the first church, a term approximately of fifteen years. It was a time of seed-sowing, a time of debate and discussion and sometimes of bitter opposition and even persecution. It was the day of an itinerating ministry and spasmodic effort, but often of intense interest and large congregations.

The second period covers about 35 years. It is the story of the society as it existed in the church on Washington street. Something of the character of the earlier period was preserved, but evangelism gradually gave way to regularity of worship and action. Instruction in the principles of Universalism continued to be a large feature of the preaching while many of the social aspects of Universalism were developed. It was a day of great preaching, of impassioned appeals and emotional fervor, and of great hopes of the conquering power of the faith.

The third period represents the 25 years passed on Main street. Here the early fires had somewhat cooled. Preaching had become less emotional and more scholarly and restrained. There was a more or less marked transition from an inspirational to an educational basis. Social life became richer and more diversified. More wealth appeared in the congregation and organizations took on more of a cultural character. Schools and colleges received greater attention while missionary aspirations were tempered by a cooler wisdom and a more careful adaptation of means to ends. Here was the beginning of the Messiah Literary club, and the Women's Union, and the Fresh Air Mission, all of which have meant so much to the life of Buffalo.

The last period, also, representing 25 years is the story of the North street experience which has been in a sense the result of changes which took place in the society in the preceding years. It has been marked by an attempt to keep definitely abreast of the changes which are taking place in all the different departments of life. It is modern in the technical sense of the word. It has aimed to keep in touch with the social aspects of our modern life, to make room in its thinking for the results of science and philosophy, to place itself alongside of the great psychological movements of our time without losing sight of the essential principles of the New Testament. We are not less religious than in the olden time, but we see Christianity in larger aspects and in more adequate terms. It must also be noted that we have found more numerous contents with other branches of religion and are trying to include more aspects of religion than in earlier days.

And during the hundred years of our existence we have done much to clarify our thinking. In the five principles of our faith, the Universal Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, the spiritual authority and leadership of Jesus Christ, the trustworthiness of the Bible as a revelation from God, the certainty of just retribution for sin, and the final harmony of all souls with God, we have evolved a statement of faith which is at once simple, comprehensive and we believe adequate for the religious needs of Christian

A HUNDRED YEARS OF UNIVERALISM

people everywhere. We have reached an attitude of mind that looks in many directions and recognizes affinities with most of our denominational neighbors and we have not forgotten the world's need of the essentials of the Christian life. We have never liked to think of ourselves as a sect. We prefer to stand rather as the embodiment of all that is true in Christianity. If we have failed in this it is because of our human weakness more than because we have not cherished the ideal.

In the practice of good works the Church of the Messiah has borne an honorable part. Not all of our missions have succeeded in the establishment of permanent parishes, but Grace Universalist church at the corner of Lafayette avenue and Hoyt street may be counted as one of our successes. Especially under the leadership of the Rev. H. P. Morrell great progress was made and under the new past[or], the Rev. Christian [Clinton] Scott the parish is in a victorious mood. In our city charities we have generally had an influence if not a leading place. In the later years we have done much to arouse the interest of the community in the improvement of social conditions. Our Sunday class has been specially active in this direction. And we have always been interested in the cause of education as the long history of our Literary club at first under the guidance of Mrs. George W. Townsend and later under Mrs. F. M. Griggs and others testifies and in the cause of suffering humanity the Social and Benevolent Society has always been both ready and active.

And it may be said that the Church of the Messiah faces the new century of its existence with confidence, in these days of rapid transition when no man can say what the future is to bring forth. New methods may be necessary and new instruments employed. Yet the resources of the doctrine of the Fatherland of God and the Brotherhood of Man have not even been explored, to say nothing of having been applied. Indeed the time is ripe for a profounder interpretation of our fundamental faith than the church has thus far made and there is a demand that our social order shall be reconstructed on Christian principles. No doubt other denominations will do their part. But to no church does the call come for leadership in the new interpretations and in the new applications of the principles of the New Testament with more persistence or persuasion than to the churches of the Universalist faith. The success of our first century but leads to the greater opportunity and so long as we have work to do there can be no such word as fail. And to see the opportunity and to pursue it is our task for the years which open before us.

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