

HISTORY OF UNIVERSALISM IN NEW YORK CITY

Rev. G.L. Demarest communicates to the *Star in the West* valuable statistics in regard to the planting of Universalism in this city. We copy:

When, in 1828 or 1829, Mr. [Abner] Kneeland swung off into the darkness of atheism, the faithful Universalists of his congregation desponded concerning the progress of their better views of God's providence and government. The thinning of their ranks discouraged them, and destroyed their ability to maintain their worship. The Prince Street church was sold, and they were left spiritually homeless. A few, perhaps, found a congenial home with Mr. [Edward] Mitchell's congregation; but that worthy man was so soured by the disaster of the Prince Street congregation, that he became intolerant of Unitarian views of Christ and made more intense his advocacy of Trinitarian opinions. The mass of the old congregations were "as sheep without a shepherd;" some, perhaps, hoping that circumstances would show the way out of adversity, while others, it may be, became indifferent, and ceased to care for the prosperity of a faith which the world seemed not to be worthy.

But soon after, residents in the eastern part of the city, poor in this world's goods, but rich in faith, secured a small edifice which had been a Methodist mission station, and there attempted to maintain themselves. Rev. Theophilus Fisk and Rev. Abel C. Thomas, the latter a young man of twenty-one or twenty-two, who had just begun the enthusiastic ministry of the Word, the former being the editor of the *Gospel Herald*, with perhaps others, used to unfold the doctrines of universal grace, against the scorn and sneer of the world.

OLD TIME OPPOSITION

In these days it can hardly be conceived what it was then to be a Universalist in the city of New York. It often meant the ban of the professor from society, and perhaps his exclusion from opportunities of labor and social advancement. The hard-hearted abused, the loving pitied, those were "deluded" by the "seductive influences" of the so-called heresy. It was in those days that many of the cunning phrases which seem to the simple so wise and conclusive were stereotyped. Then a Universalist was pointed at as a rarity and a wonder. But in spite of all, a handful of poor men, rich in faith, as I will again characterize them, banded together had sacrificed and endured for the enjoyment of spiritual privileges and the furtherance of the Gospel. The two ministers named, in the flush and enthusiasm of youth, flamed with zeal, and valiantly led the enemy. But it was not long theirs to do the needful work in the great metropolis. They kindled a fire which warmed the curiosity and interest in many; but soon Mr. Fisk was drawn to other labors, and Mr. Thomas was invited to Philadelphia, where he exercised so long and so useful a ministry.

HISTORY OF UNIVERSALISM IN NEW YORK CITY

Rev. Thomas J. Sawyer

In 1830, I think, Rev. Thomas J. Sawyer, a Vermonter by birth and a graduate of Middlebury College, was invited to the pastorate of the congregation, which had been incorporated as the Second Universalist Society. I have heard him say, jocosely, that he was invited because that feeble Society could induce no other minister to settle with it, and he accepted because no other Society would have him. For two years or less he labored in the little church where the Society had planted itself, when it became apparent that further prosperity could not there be realized. The edifice was too remote from the social centre of the city, and too small for the gathering of a prosperous congregation. Yet there are many who speak to me of those humble days with great satisfaction.

"The Old Hive"

In the spring of 1832 there offered an opportunity of removal. A Reformed Dutch church, by the inability of its members to fulfill its contract, had been thrown upon the hands of its contractors, and was then exposed for rent. Mr. Sawyer, on his own responsibility, backed by two or three bold men, hired the edifice for a year. Mr. S. had received but a small pittance for his services in the Grand Street church—which, we may here say, immediately became a warehouse, and has since passed from human vision; he had recently married, and now he proposed to receive, in lieu of salary, such balance of pew-rents and collections as remained after the expenses had been paid. The services were begun in the Orchard Street church, affectionately styled "The Old Hive," a name which, curiously, was never applied to Mr. Mitchell's church, though antedating it by several years. Rev. Stephen R. Smith preached a dedicatory sermon in March, 1832. That is the date of a new era of Universalism in New York. But the advent of that fearful pestilence, the cholera, which set its deadly foot upon the city in June of the same year, well nigh darkened the light of hope once more. In those days the railroad facilities, by which so large a business population is helped out of the city at night, had not been acquired. Long summer vacations were not enjoyed, except by the rich. The summer was relied on, as much as the winter, for congregational success; and the unusual scattering of the citizens in 1832, through the alarm engendered by the cholera, proved seriously injurious to the new enterprise. Notwithstanding a new interest in the following season, I am inclined to believe that Mr. Sawyer received a smaller compensation that year than before; but the problem had been solved. Universalism was once more a fixed fact, and the Society itself henceforth assumed its proper responsibilities.

Dr. Sawyer's Early Controversies

In the winter of 1832-3, the ministers of the Reformed Dutch Church, perhaps sensitive because one of their churches had become a stronghold of "heresy," commenced a vigorous attack upon Universalism, through one of their ablest warriors, Rev. W.C. Brownlee, D.D., already noted in the Romanist controversy. Their organ, the *Christian Intelligencer*, joined in the assault. Mr. Sawyer accepted the opportunity of a searching review of the principles of orthodoxy, and

HISTORY OF UNIVERSALISM IN NEW YORK CITY

a vigorous defence [sic] of God's universal and unchanging love. This he did both in the pulpit and through the press. The last instrumentality ought not to be forgotten in a record of the history of Universalism in New York. And it may be proper for me here to digress from the historical order, to allude to the early Universalist press.

Early Universalist Press

Mr. Mitchell published a periodical, for a brief space, called *The Christian Disciple*. How large a circulation this had, or how wide an influence, I am not able to say. *The Gospel Herald* was afterward established, as a weekly paper. I think it was founded by Mr. Henry Fitz, a layman of some zeal and ability. Mr. Fisk and Mr. Thomas, already named, were afterwards connected with it, but it ceased in or before the fall of 1830, when *The Christian Messenger* was founded by Philo Price. Mr. Price was a layman of Norwalk, Conn., who sacrificed a prosperous business to run the risks of a periodical publication in behalf of an aspersed faith. Mr. Sawyer and Mr. Price became the editors. The Universalists of the day responded enthusiastically to appeals in its support, and it attained, even at that day, to a respectable position. That was the time when every city almost demanded its Universalist paper. None of them could attain a living circulation. There was *The Gospel Anchor* in Albany and Troy, which I am inclined to think heavily burdened its editor and proprietor, Rev. I.[Isaac] D. Williamson, for many years; *The Religious Inquirer*, edited by Rev. Menzies Raynor, or perhaps at that time by Rev. R. O. Williams, published at Hartford; *The Southern Pilot*, or something else, edited by Rev. L.[Linus] S. Everett, at Baltimore. These, I believe, in 1835, Mr. Price bought out and consolidated with his own, entitling it *The Universalist Union*. Its editors were Mr. Sawyer, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Williamson, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Price. But the consolidation proved disastrous, instead of beneficial to Mr. Price. The financial revulsion [Panic] of 1837 rendered valueless much of the property he had purchased. He afterwards was constrained to sell to Mr. Charles L. Stickney, who was enabled, by an adequate capital to make it profitable; but being engaged in other business, he availed himself of an opportunity to dispose of the paper, which, in one form, had retained its original title of *The Christian Messenger*, to Rev. Messrs. O.A. Skinner, W.S. Balch and S.C. Bulkley. These again sold to the stock company which held as proprietors precedent to the New York State Convention, at the end of 1850. In all these years it has been a power for good, and has aided in maintaining and enforcing Gospel principles.

The Ambassador, New York NY, Saturday February 23, 1867

Transcribed on 19 Oct 2006 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY