

History of Universalism in New York City

Rev. Mr. [G.L.] Demarest continues his sketch of the History of Universalism in this city, in another letter in the *Star in the West*. We copy in part:—

MR. PHILO PRICE

I ought to have emphasized more forcibly, in my last, the reference to the labors of Mr. Philo Price, in the permanent establishment of Universalism in the city of New York. He was not only active and industrious in connection with his paper, which was one of the most correctly imposed and best printed that we have ever had, but was efficient and prudent in managing the affairs of the Second Society, at its outset, as a leading trustee. With characteristic modesty he retired from office when other active friends were secured. That the failure of his paper, as a business enterprise, was not due to any lack of business tact or ability, is evident from the fact that he afterwards built up a prosperous business, with which he is still connected, though he is now, at sixty-nine, enfeebled by a nervous affection, from which he has long suffered. To him is largely due the success of the Second, and, I may say, of other Societies in the metropolis.

Although I omitted so to say, perhaps it was inferred that Mr. Price's paper, the *Christian Messenger*, was one of the direct ancestry of *The Ambassador*, now entering upon an new lease of life.

DR. SAWYER'S LABORS—ORCHARD STREET.

I referred, in my last, to the commencement of Mr. Sawyer's labors in the Orchard Street church. The controversies which ensued, served to awaken a spirit of attention to theological belief, such as was never known in New York before or since. Not only did the Reformed Dutch ministry vigorously assail Universalism, but Presbyterians and Methodists, and others, joined in the cry. The religious press was violent, the *Observer*, the *Evangelist*, and *Christian Advocate* fiercely attacking, not often by argument—most frequently by expressions of contempt and obloquy—the faith which was battling for a foothold on the public regard. To Mr. Sawyer, under God, is due its success. His labors made possible those of other ministers. He was ever ready in criticism of other doctrines, and in explanation and defence [sic] of those of Universalism.

In those days the Orchard Street church used to be thronged by interested worshippers and hearers. Converts were multiplied. Many who went under cover of night, through curiosity, became open adherents of the faith they once despised. And the children of the Orchard Street church may be found in all parts of the land, while many churches have been built up in the region of the metropolis, whose founders received their inspirations [unreadable] the Society, their places seemed to be supplied by new comers. And when Mr. Sawyer, in 1846, deemed it to be his duty to the whole Church—he was always denominational—to accept the charge of the Clinton Liberal Institute, and of a theological class, the Second Society was in a condition of great prosperity. He was succeeded by Rev. Otis A. Skinner, of precious memory, whose labors had great success. Rev. Cyrus H. Fay followed; and his efforts, too, were highly prized, and were successful.

CHANGE OF POPULATION—RESULTS

But causes had already begun to operate, which were destined materially to interfere with the final prosperity of the Second Society, "the mother of us all." The changes of popular residence, to which I referred in my first and second letters had begun. While the material of the surrounding population was favorable to the development of Universalist sentiment, the colonization of other churches did not seem to affect the Second Society permanently. But imperceptibly the character of the population was in process of change. The removals to

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Brooklyn and other suburbs were supplied by a new people. Germany and Ireland began to take possession of wards formerly almost American. The Orchard Street brethren naturally adhered to the beloved home where they had found so much spiritual enjoyment. And "the old hive" was held fast until the way to it and all its surroundings had become unpleasant. And it was not until 1860 that the Society came to feel the necessity of leaving the site of its great prosperity, and of seeking a new home.

DR. CHAPIN'S INFLUENCE

In the meantime the Second Society lost many old friends, who had gone to swell the numbers and revenue of the Society to which ministered the wonderfully gifted Dr. [Edwin H.] Chapin. In enumerating the causes of the adversity of this Society, it would be affectation to omit the great genius for oratory, of that most excellent man. When the Church of his ministry removed to its present central position, it immediately affected the numbers not only of the Second, but [also] of the Third Society. And all our churches here still feel the influence of his overshadowing and just reputation. Dr. Chapin has succeeded Dr. Sawyer in the popular mind as the representative of Universalism; but whereas Dr. Sawyer's position was that of the influential theologian, Dr. Chapin's is that of the thrilling orator. His grand eloquence has thrown into the background the former successful policy of doctrinal discussion. In all these forms of pulpit effort Dr. Sawyer was powerfully influential. From 1833 to 1844, I was an almost constant hearer. He was mighty in controversy; clear and logical and convincing in statement; eloquent in indignation against dogmas dishonorable to God; but a teacher of positive truth, as well as a critic of error, and one of the most practical and spiritual preachers I ever heard.

RECENT HISTORY—PROSPECTS

In 1860 the Second Society left the Orchard Street church, Dr. Sawyer having succeeded Mr. Fay in the pastorate seven or eight years before. The church edifice brought only a small sum beyond the amount of mortgage upon it. The purpose was speedily to obtain a new church; but difficulties as to location, and the lack of an enterprising spirit have prevented the fulfillment of this purpose. The Hall of the New York Historical Society was secured, situated about a mile to the north of the "Old Hive," on the site of which stand two five-story tenement houses. The change is sad to one who has memories of the old temple. Dr. Sawyer resigned the pastorate of the Society in 1861. His final farewell was very touching, and his hold upon the affections of the people continues to be very strong.

The Ambassador, New York NY, Saturday March 2, 1867

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