

[Second Universalist Society, New York City]

Orchard-St. Universalist Church, N.Y.
by Rev. T.[Thomas] J. Sawyer

This Church, represented in the frontispiece of this month's magazine, came into the possession of the Universalist denomination in April, 1832. It was built three or four years previously, by a small society of the Reformed Dutch Church, which being unable to pay for it, the property fell into the hands of Messrs. Westerfield, Woodruff, and Barnes, enterprising builders in New York in those days, who had been the Contractors for the house when it was erected. After remaining several months unoccupied, it was rented, on the first of April, 1832, to the present writer, for the term of two years, at the annual rent of \$1,050.

At this time I was a young minister of scarcely two years' standing in New York, and had entered the ministry only two years and a half before. I had a wife, married six months previous, and in a pecuniary point of view, was not worth a dollar. To remedy this last circumstance, four members of my congregation became my security for the payment of the rent, and I in turn pledged for their security the whole income of the church, pew-rents, collections and all.

The Grand street Society, with which I had been connected during my residence in New York, was formed, I think, in 1828, and had hitherto occupied a small chapel in Grand street, nearly opposite the head of Division street. It had been built, and was for several years occupied by All-Saints (Episcopal) Church, from which our society bought it at the time of its formation. The income of this society for the two years of which I speak had not exceeded \$600 or \$700, according to my present recollection, which circumstance will account for the otherwise unaccountable fact of my assuming the great responsibility in hiring the Orchard street church. This course, however, involved a piece of good policy. It was now but a little time since the defection of Abner Kneeland, and all the consequences of his most astonishing and lamentable course in that city were still fresh in the memory of all, and in many respects still felt in the divisions and heart-burnings which existed among the professors of our faith, and the shame and reproach which attached to its profession. Hence it was plainly seen that if any effort were to be made with the slightest prospect of success, it must stand quite independent of all old difficulties, and be emphatically new.

It needs no argument to show that the responsibility which I assumed in this emergency was a tremendous one, and I have a thousand times wondered in myself how I could ever have engaged in an undertaking which involved in so high a degree not only my present interests, but all that I then possessed, my

future prospects and reputation. It was emphatically a "sink or swim" affair, and yet I embarked in it as cheerfully and as courageously as ever a young recruit mounted his cockade or buckled on his knapsack. I need not suggest that my experience in some other and less amusing aspects resembled but too strikingly that of the young recruit. I had enlisted in good earnest "during the war," and a war too that implied a great deal of hard fighting, and was to last for many years.

I well remember the joy we all experienced, when on the third Sunday of April, 1832, just two years after I preached my first sermon in New York, we entered the Orchard street church. The transition from the little Grand street chapel, which we had previously occupied, was striking enough. The Church seemed large—very large to my unpracticed eyes. True, it had no side galleries as now, and was in many respects much inferior to what it is at present; but I doubt if Solomon, when he first entered his magnificent temple, felt more deeply impressed with its greatness or its awful sanctity, than did I on the day when we first occupied Orchard street church. It seemed to me a goodly place, and there was Universalism I hoped to be revived and restored in that great city. On the occasion of opening the Church for public worship, we had engaged the services of Br. S.[Stephen] R. Smith, then residing at Clinton. He came "in the fullness of the blessing of the Gospel of Christ," and remained two Sabbaths with us. I can see and hear him still, as he stood and poured forth, in the most animated style, thoughts that breathed and words that burned, on the subject of the great salvation. Those were great days, and they told powerfully on the future of Universalism in New York. It will not be supposed that such an undertaking was entered upon without many misgivings among some of our friends, and many prophecies of failure and ruin. That doubts and apprehensions had but too much ground will be apparent to all, but their expression in such a juncture was not judicious. Still they produced no serious consequences.

It was during the summer of 1832 that New York received its first and, all things considered, by far its most fearful visitation of the cholera. Soon after its breaking out, it was suggested by some that the Church should be closed during the epidemic, and the members of that congregation were one day desired to remain after service to express their opinions on the subject. Many were about to leave the city, and thought the Church might be closed for two or three months, and the pastor dismissed to the country. At last Captain Packard, a somewhat eccentric, but warm-hearted and most worthy man, rose and said that he should [e.g. would] remain in the city; and if ever he needed the supports and consolations of religion, it was during such seasons as we had already entered. If the pastor felt alarmed, and desired to leave, he of course would not complain, yet he should [would] greatly desire to come up to the

house of his heavenly Father, to listen to his word and worship at his altar. This settled the question: and the Orchard street Church was open regularly, morning and afternoon, through the whole of that gloomy and trying season. And in this case as always, the path of duty proved in the end the path of the greatest advantage. Many, perhaps a large part, of the churches in the city were closed, and the pastors gone. The minds of the people were seriously impressed, and the gospel of infinite grace proved itself well fitted for such an emergency. Our Church was uniformly well attended, and I much doubt if more good were ever accomplished by my ministry during the same length of time.

The Society continued gradually to increase. Old friends, whom circumstances had alienated, or caused to stand aloof from our good cause, returned one after another, and forgot their former difficulties and discontent. The best of feelings existed among the members, and greatly encouraged all hearts. Very often I was gratified by remarks to the effect that "they once more felt as if they had found a home."

Though the Reformed Dutch Church would not save their new house in Orchard-street, yet no sooner had it come into the possession of Universalists, than the members of that communion began to express a most lively concern for the interests of religion. The *Christian Intelligencer*, their religious journal, soon began to pay some attention to Universalism; and in the autumn Dr. Brownlee, one of their boldest if not their ablest men and ministers, commenced a course of lectures against the doctrine. These lectures were repeated in all the Dutch Churches in the city, and enjoyed therefore a very fair hearing. They were also briefly reported and published in the *Intelligencer*. An attempt was made to get them repeated in the Orchard street Church, but failed. The Doctor was quite too busy to permit it. His lectures were regarded by his friends as exceedingly able and altogether irrefutable. He possessed a [great] deal of assurance, and made assertions with vast boldness and emphasis. As a reasoner he was but a third or fourth rate man. The *ad captandum* was his forte; and among those who knew nothing of Universalism, and undoubtedly believed in endless misery, his reasonings were satisfactory if not convincing.

These lectures were subjected to an examination in the Orchard street Church, which was largely attended; and the substance of that examination was subsequently thrown into the form of letters, and published. The Doctor meant his attack upon Universalism for evil upon the doctrine, but "God overruled" it for good. It proved the means of bringing many to the knowledge of the truth. He called attention to the subject, and provoked discussion.

In the course of the spring of 1832, the Grand street Society was remodeled, and took the name of "The Second Universalist Society in the City of New

York." It should have taken the title of *first* society, but did not, out of courtesy to the old "Society of United Christian Friends," under the care of Rev. Edward Mitchell, which, though never in fellowship with the denomination, and in many respects quite antagonistic to it, still sturdily maintained the doctrine of universal salvation; and it was hoped that under more favorable auspices, it might some day assume a better position, and take the place of First Universalist Society of New York. But this hope was never realized. That society continued during Mr. Mitchell's life-time, and struggled on for a year or two afterwards—but finally passed away.

The first years' operations in Orchard street proved very satisfactory to all interested. A small but united and zealous society was established. It was composed of the best of men, and though not rich, was still liberal and firm as a rock. Never was there a more reliable society. He who knew them, knew exactly what they could, and what they would do; and during a ministry of more than a dozen years with them, I was seldom or never disappointed in my expectations. The amount of money raised by the society during this first year considerably exceeded \$2000. Yet, after the payment of the rent, and the various incidental expenses, together with bills for one and another article of furniture, it left but a very meagre income for the young pastor. I never knew precisely to what it amounted, but suppose it might be \$250 or \$300. I well remember the inward joy I felt when told, in the spring of 1833, by one of the trustees, that the society intended to assume the responsibility in future, and give me a salary of \$800. It was perhaps the richest hour of my life.

At the close of the second year, or indeed a little before the expiration of our lease, the church was sold under the fore-closure of a mortgage, and our society became the purchaser. The price at which it was knocked down was \$14,550, and it required no small degree of energy to raise, in such a society, the means for so considerable a purchase. It was done, however, for we deemed what duty seemed so obviously to require, to be possible.

I need not pursue the subject farther. As is well known, the society increased till it became respectable for numbers, character, and wealth. During the space of thirteen and a half years I ministered constantly [e.g. full-time] in that sanctuary, and enjoyed several special opportunities to contend for the truth. My reply to Dr. Brownlee I have already mentioned. With Rev. Slocum, a Presbyterian clergyman, I held a discussion that occupied fourteen evenings, and added twenty families to my congregation. I answered Rev. Mr. Remington, a Methodist clergyman, and reviewed Rev. Dr. Parker's lectures on Universalism. These lectures had been preached and published in Rochester many years before, and were now, scarcely revamped, repeated in several churches in New York. I happened to possess the Rochester copy of the production; and very much to the astonishment of many pious people, replied

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to the learned Doctor's lecture on the very evening after he had delivered it in the immediate neighborhood, in the morning. With Rev. Hatfield I also had frequent encounters, and finally replied to his work, entitled "Universalism as it is." It was a rule, indeed, never to allow any antagonist of Universalism, whose position and character deserved attention, to pass unnoticed or unanswered. Truth has nothing to fear from discussion.

Since I left New York in 1845, the Orchard street Church has been singularly fortunate in those selected to occupy its pulpit. Of Rev. O.[Otis] A. Skinner, who became its pastor in the spring of 1846, and continued his successful labors till Feb. 18, 1849, it is superfluous for me to speak. He is too well known to need any commendation from me. It was a misfortune to the Orchard street society when what he deemed his imperious duty recalled him to Boston, to the bosom of his old society. His place was filled last spring by the election of Rev. C.[Cyrus] H. Fay, whose private character and public reputation give every assurance of a successful ministry. Long may he, one of the worthiest of men, continue to break the bread of life to a congregation more endeared to my heart by mutual sorrows and joy than any other ever can be.

After an absence of more than four years I can say, I trust, without egotism, that Orchard street Church has enjoyed much good preaching. Long before I left, I knew it had possessed charity enough to tolerate much more that was very indifferent. When I settled in New York in 1830 I had not a dozen sermons in the world. Yet, for years I was required to preach three times every Sabbath, and for the first four years had few opportunities for exchanges. Add to this an ever increasing parochial duty, and no small portion of editorial labor, as the files of the *Christian Messenger* will show, and reasonable men will not feel surprised when they are told that the labors of the pulpit were very often nerveless and poor; and I have often wondered how they were so patiently endured on the part of the people, or so highly blessed by the Great Master of Assemblies. For, with all its defects in this respect, it can not be denied that Orchard street Church has been honored, by standing at the head of the denomination in the city of New York and its vicinity—and has probably done more for the diffusion of Universalism than any other single society in the State. All the societies in its immediate neighborhood—Bleecker street [Third Universalist], Murray street, Fourth street [Fifth Universalist], Brooklyn and Williamsburgh, were first formed by members of Orchard street, and may be regarded as off-shoots of that parent stock. Its policy was always liberal and expansive. It labored not merely for itself, its own ease or aggrandizement, but for the good of the cause. During a single year it dismissed nearly forty families, for the purpose of encouraging some of its sister societies, and promoting Universalism in the city. It was willing to make sacrifices for the truth, and wished to see truth prosper. Would to God all of our societies could

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act on the same principle. Our holy faith would go forth like the light of the morning.

In reading what is written above, I am sensible that it may appear egotistical; but in reviewing the history of Orchard street church, I could not but feel myself identified with it; and the position which Divine Providence there assigned me, and the work it enabled me to perform, are such as I could not alter, even if I would. Devoutly do I thank my heavenly Father for having placed me in such a field of labor, and for having accompanied my poor but honest endeavors there with so signal a blessing of success.

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