

[Third Universalist Society, New York City]

GROWTH OF UNIVERSALISM

Dr. Crowe Gives the Reasons for Abandoning the Old Creed

BEHIND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Doctrines Once Considered Radical Now Extremely Conservative

—New Statement of Principles

At the Church of the Eternal Hope [Third Universalist], in West Eighty-first Street, yesterday morning, the Rev Dr. W. S. Crowe preached on the subject, "Why We Abandoned Our Creed," his sermon being a defense of the Universalist Church in abolishing its historic creed, adopted at Winchester, N.H., in 1803, and substituting for it a platform containing a declaration of five Universalist principles. Printed cards containing the abandoned creed and the platform of principles adopted at Boston last October were handed to the members of the congregation as they entered the church.

"The Universalist creed adopted ninety-six years ago," said Dr. Crowe, "was a remarkably broad and liberal profession of faith for that age. Other churches regarded it as extremely radical—so radical as to be quite outside the limits of Christian belief. The Universalist Church, with many of the leading scholars and thinkers in the other churches, traveled on and on until the old creed became extremely conservative—so conservative as to be quite behind the rear guard of religious thought."

Dr. Crowe then quoted the first article of the old creed, which reads, "We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the character of God and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind."

"It was to the word 'destination' in the first article," he continued, "that the Universalist Church by and by objected. A destination is a place. Our fathers had before their eyes the old, materialistic, childlike pictures of heaven—pictures of an ancient walled city with gold-paved streets. The Bible reveals the principles of a religious life; it does not reveal a destination. The Universalist Church came to regard those descriptions as entirely poetic, purely imaginative. Then our church entered the struggle for a change of creed."

Continuing, Dr. Crowe quoted the second article of the old creed, as follows: "We believe that there is one God whose nature is love, revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and purity."

"If men [sic] were not familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity," he said, "this article would not suggest it; but because that is the popular thought about God, people have always seen a kind of half-and-half Unitarian-Trinitarianism in it. As a simple fact of history, that is what was intended. At the beginning of the century there were both Unitarians and Trinitarians in the church, and their common creed had to be a compromise. In the course of time our church became solidly Unitarian. Then the look of the article misrepresented us.

"There was also difficulty over the word 'restore' in the last clause. You can only restore a thing to a former condition. 'Restore' very emphatically teaches that mankind was once in the condition of holiness and happiness. Our church has

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always kept close to the advancing thought of the world, and when the science of evolution came along, we could no longer say that mankind would be 'restored' to holiness. People must be educated, disciplined, developed, refined into holiness."

The last article of the creed was then discussed. It reads: "We believe that holiness and true happiness and inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men."

"The third article," said Dr. Crowe, "is a curious, almost bewildering compromise. To the different parties in the church a hundred years ago 'holiness and happiness' meant one thing and 'holiness and true happiness' a very different thing. There were certain men in that early day who believed in the 'death and glory' doctrine, while other men were struggling toward what we call 'salvation by character.' According to the former, sin belonged absolutely to the physical appetites and passions, while the soul was forever pure. The other party believed that good and evil belonged to the soul, to the man himself. True happiness, according to them, was of a moral and spiritual character, inseparably connected with holiness. By holiness they meant that purity of life which men struggled for and attained.

"But even in the philosophy of these more rational and common sense men, the great idea of salvation by character was only half developed, as you will readily see in the remainder of the third article, which is a strange lapse into orthodoxy. Before the comma men were saved by morality, after the comma by belief. Before the comma we looked into the future world and saw that the good, by a necessity of the moral law, were happy. After the comma, we looked into the future world and saw that Emerson, Darwin, Lincoln and Jefferson never could be happy until they became believers. This back-sliding article gently cautioned but did not command 'believers' not to be vain and careless in this world, because they had mortgaged the glory of the next.

"Are you surprised that we buried such a creed? Are you not astonished that we delayed buried it until the year 1899? Are you not amazed that any man voted to retain the self-contradictory puerilities of this third article? How preposterous if we had gone into the twentieth century with such a misstatement of our great, strong, vitalizing, rational faith.

"The platform which we have adopted is not a creed. Its declarations are the broad statements of religious principles. You can feel proud of your church, and your heart can lay hold anew on the vital things of Christianity as you repeat them and teach them."

New York Times, New York NY, 11 Dec 1899

Transcribed on 28 Aug 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY