

A Sermon of Farewell to the 20th-street Church.

Delivered Sunday afternoon, March 18, 1866

By Rev. E.[Elbridge] G. Brooks

...The hour for which, for several years, we have been hoping, as a Christian people, has arrived—the hour of farewell to these walls and our religious home. Naturally, it is an hour of retrospect and reflection. Yielding to the suggestions of the occasion, we can hardly fail, ere we speak the words which are [?] to us forever from this place, and from the mingled associations, sad and pleasant, which cluster here, to pause and look back; to inquire after the general history, up to the present time, in this city, of the cause with which we have here been identified; and especially to trace the origin and history of the Society which, bidding adieu to this field of its labors, is about to transfer itself to a new location, and so to enter upon another stage of its career. Our great concern, indeed, is with what is around us and before us; but it is well for us, at times, to think also of what is behind us; and I have been unwilling that this occasion should pass without some gathering up of the things that are behind us, to the end that, considering their lessons and encouragements, we may be the better prepared to go forward, doing the work which lies before us.

I propose, therefore, to ask your attention to *the history of Universalism in New York, and especially to the history of this Society*, as the theme most fitting this farewell hour.

Of the general history of our cause in this city, I can, of course, only give you the briefest possible sketch. For this, I am chiefly indebted to our esteemed brother, Dr. [Rev. Thomas J.] Sawyer, who has, himself and by his labors, made so large a part of the history of Universalism here. What I have to say of the period up to the establishment of Father [Edward] Mitchell's Society, I draw from an article of the Doctor's, published about a year ago, in the *Ambassador*; for the rest, I shall mainly give you a sketch which he has been kind enough to furnish for this discourse.

The history of Universalism in New York, as Dr. Sawyer well says, is naturally divided into three periods:

1. The period from its introduction to the formation of Father Mitchell's Society.
2. The period of the organization of Mr. Mitchell's Society to the disorganization of the Prince-street Society, or, as I should rather say, to the removal of Dr. Sawyer here.
3. The period from the commencement of Dr. Sawyer's labors to the present time.

So far as we can learn, "the doctrine of Universal Salvation was first preached in this city by Rev. John Murray, in September, 1770." You are doubtless all familiar with the remarkable and very interesting story of his arrival and preaching at Good Luck [New Jersey]. The tidings of his sermons there, in the little church built by the venerated [Thomas] Potter, followed him here, and immediately he was besieged to preach in New York, which had then a population, probably, of fifteen or eighteen thousand. At first, he declined; but yielding finally to the importunity, he preached in the Baptist meeting-house which stood on what was then called "Golden Hill"—somewhere on what is now Gold-street. He remained here more than a week, preaching frequently, to large congregations. In the following spring, 1771, he was solicited to return, and doing so, was received with great enthusiasm. A subscription-paper was started, to build him a church; and so great was the interest he had awakened, that it was filled in a single day. He remained several weeks, when, declining the entreaties that he would make New York his home, he went back to Good Luck. We can hardly fail to speculate as to what would have been the result would have been the result had he consented at this time to establish himself here. As Dr. Sawyer well says, "It would have no doubt changed materially the history of our

denomination, though it may well be questioned whether the soil of New England was not, after all, best suited for the work Providentially assigned him.”

In the autumn of 1773, he was here for the last time—again spending several weeks. After this, we know nothing of Universalism here, until the close of the Revolution, when we find it appearing in the persons of two eminent physicians, Dr. Joseph Young, and Dr. William Pitt Smith, a pupil of Dr. Young. Both were men eminent in their profession and for their moral worth, and both published books against the doctrine of endless misery, and in defence [sic] of the ultimate redemption of all souls. In 1793, the first Universalist periodical ever published in America was issued here, called “*The Free Universal Magazine*.” It was a quarterly, of 50 pages, published probably by an Association, and edited by Rev. Abel Sargent, of New Jersey. It was short-lived, however, only two numbers having been issued here—though two others, completing the volume, were afterwards issued in Baltimore.

This brings us to the second period in our history here; and in respect to this, I can not do better than to give you the account of Dr. Sawyer, as he has prepared it for me:

“The Rev. Edward Mitchell, with several others, withdrew from the Methodist Church between 1795 and 1800, and established a new congregation, called ‘The Society of United Christian Friends.’ The distinctive faith of this Society was the final salvation of all mankind, on the theory of Rev. John Murray. The Society commenced with several gentlemen engaged to officiate by turns as lay preachers, as no one of them was by profession a clergyman. For a time, this course of worship continued; but gradually, those best qualified for the work were naturally forced to take more than their share, while others gladly withdrew more and more, till finally their labors were almost entirely superseded. Edward Mitchell and William Palmer for a time stood side by side, but owing to causes with which I am unacquainted, Mr. Mitchell finally became the acknowledged minister of the Society. At first, they worshipped in Vandewater-street. Subsequently, a church was erected for the use of the congregation in Magazine (now Pearl) street, between Broadway and Chatham-street. This was the first church ever built in the State of New York dedicated to the service of God as the Saviour of all men. How long they continued to occupy this house I do not remember; but after some time, owing to the increase of the congregation, this was sold, and a new house of worship erected at the corner of Duane-street and City-Hall-place. This house was large, and, for that day, highly respectable. Here Mr. Mitchell continued to officiate, with the exception of a year or two (during which he was associated with Rev. John Murray, in Boston), till the time of his death, which occurred in the summer of 1835.

“Mr. Mitchell was, in many respects, a remarkable man. He was one of the readiest and most elegant and eloquent extempore or off-hand speakers I ever heard. Without seeing him, one might well have supposed that he was reading a discourse from an English classic. His language was elevated and choice, and his address in every way impressive. Yet I never heard him in his best days. Before 1830, he had suffered from paralysis, or some other violent attack, and from that moment always sat when he spoke. Still, he held an audience with great power.

“The Society of United Christian Friends was never in fellowship with the Universalist denomination. Mr. Mitchell was a kind of Trinitarian, and held all Unitarian views in utter detestation. He was a man of” (intense bigotry and) “violent prejudices.”

To the Doctor’s account of Mr. Mitchell and his Society, I may add that the Society, after Mr. Mitchell’s death, called Rev. Mr. Pickering as its Pastor; but it steadily declined, and finally became extinct. The church edifice is now owned and occupied by the Catholics.

In December, 1821, Father [Hosea] Ballou paid what is believed to have been his first visit to New York, preaching one evening, as he said in his account of the journey published at the

time, “in Rev. Mr. Mitchell’s meeting,” on his way to Philadelphia, and one evening on his return. It is worthy of attention, also, as an indication of the feeling of the time, that on Fast Day in October, 1822, observed in consequence of the yellow fever, one of the ministers of the city—the since famous Dr. S. H. Cox, I judge from the initials and other circumstances—preached a sermon in which he gave, as one reason for the prevalence of the fever, that “Universalism was in its meridian in New York,” and said that “there were thousands who believed, but would not avow it; that the preachers were the murderers of men’s souls, making men the most profligate while living, and the most desperate sinners when they die,” or words to this effect. Thereupon, one of Mr. Mitchell’s printed sermons was sent to Mr. Cox, with the request that he would examine it, and point out anything he might find in it, “calculated to bring down the wrath of God upon the city.” But the sermon was returned, with the leaves uncut, in the same envelope in which it was sent, with these words upon it: “*Procul, O procul, este profani!*...” a piece of arrogant self-righteousness which well illustrated the attitude of orthodoxy toward us then and since, and concerning which [a commentary] letter in the *Evening Post*, giving an account of the matter at the time, well said that it [the Latin] might fittingly be rendered—“...*Come not near me; for I am holier than thou.*”

In June of this same year—1822—the city was a good deal excited by the public excommunication of an estimable lady, Mrs. Maria Townsend, from the Brick (Presbyterian) Church, on account of her faith in Universalism. A pamphlet was published concerning the matter, which made no small stir in the papers of the city and elsewhere. She asked a dismissal without a public trial... giving a reason for her faith—“If these sentiments be erroneous, my *understanding* must be convinced before I can renounce them.” A committee waited upon her, but failed to convince her; and instead of granting her request, excommunication followed... Dr. Spring pronounced the excommunication from the pulpit, on the following Sabbath, in these words: “It has become my painful duty to announce that Mrs. Maria Townsend, a member of this church, has for two years past persevered in denying the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked, and has presented her children for dedication at a pretended place of worship, where the doctrine is taught that the wicked will be saved as well as the righteous.”

In the summer of 1823, the 2d Society of United Christian Friends was formed, and arrangements were made for the erection of another church—the Prince-street church, corner of Orange. The *Gospel Herald*, then published here, announcing the fact, said:—The site for the building is excellent, being the highest ground in the city, and will admit of ‘windows on all sides of the building.’ “For two years,” returning now to Dr. Sawyer’s sketch, “Rev. Nehemiah Dodge, a convert from the Baptists, had charge of this congregation. Then Rev. Abner Kneeland, of Philadelphia, was called to its pastorate. He was a man of most impressive address; cool, self-possessed, confident, with a world of assurance and self-esteem. For a time, he was exceedingly popular, though many of his friends were led to doubt the depth of his Christian convictions. His tendencies were strongly Infidel,” (and some of his brethren in the ministry lost all confidence in him). “When, finally, Robert Owen visited New York, and with his son Robert Dale Owen, and Miss Frances Wright—better known as Fanny—turned the heads of so many, it was not surprising that Mr. Kneeland yielded to the excitement, and went over bodily to a desperate Infidelity. As might have been expected, the consequences to us, denominationally, morally even more than numerically, if possible, was disastrous in the extreme. Defection and chaos ensued. The Society retained the church edifice for two or three years, struggling with difficulties, but finally sold it.

“During the last years of this Prince-street Society, a few friends of our cause, disgusted by Mr. Kneeland’s perversity, and unable to endure Mr. Mitchell’s dogmatism and abuse of

Unitarians, came together and organized a small society in the eastern part of the city, purchasing a little chapel in Grand-street, opposite the head of Division. This was in 1829. Rev. T.[Theophilus] Fisk and Rev. A.[Abel] C. Thomas, then a mere stripling, a printer here, preached for the Society." At length, on the 3d Sunday in April, 1830, Rev. T. J. Sawyer, then a young man, but a little while out of college—now our venerated and beloved Dr. Sawyer—began his ministry in this little Grand-street chapel, and thus the third period in our history here was opened.

A most uninviting field New York was, as Rev. Sawyer thus entered it. Universalism had been almost fatally dishonored by Mr. Kneeland's defection and lapse into Atheism. Father Mitchell still held his position, it is true, honored and confided in, and his society was one of large numbers and great respectability. But neither he nor his society has any welcome for the new-comer. Mr. Mitchell was in no way connected with, and had no sympathy for, our denomination, and was, therefore, in no sense a representative of the organized Universalism of the country. Mr. Kneeland and the Prince-street Society had represented this. Hence, when Mr. Kneeland fell, the banner of Universalism was not only down, but dragged in the dust. Its friends were discouraged. Its moral force was broken, and any prestige it had begun to acquire was destroyed. The Society in Grand-street, as the new minister assumed its charge, numbered but eleven members, all told, and the congregations were very small. But in the face of all these discouragements, the young man went to work—at first, to little seeming effect, but at length, you know with what gratifying results.

In the autumn of 1831, Philo Price removed from Norwalk and started the *Christian Messenger*, which, after several changes, has now become the *Christian Ambassador*. "This proved," says Dr. Sawyer, "an immense advantage to our cause, though it ruined its publisher. I became editor, though Mr. Price wrote a great deal, and was indefatigable in his labors, not only for the success of the paper, but of the cause in general. Never was there a more devoted and faithful friend or man. He never faltered in his loyalty to the cause of Universalism, though he has suffered the loss of all things for it."

At the end of two years, i.e. in the spring of 1832, Bro. Sawyer hired the Orchard-street church, on his own responsibility—four of his friends becoming his backers. Here, leaving Grand-street, the Society prospered; and at the end of Bro. Sawyer's two-years' lease, in 1834, the church was purchased, to become, in due time, so honorably famous as "Old Orchard-street," "the mother of us all."

In the spring of 1834 the 3d Society, now Bleecker-street, originated, holding its meetings in a little church on Sixth-avenue, opposite Amity-street; and in 1835 its present church edifice was built. By and by, the 4th Society, now Dr. Chapin's, was formed, and after several moves, the Elizabeth-street Church was purchased. Then still later the 5th Society was organized, in the neighborhood of the Dry Dock. It prospered for some years, and built or bought a good house in Fourth-street, near Avenue C. but it is now deceased. Finally, the 6th Society appeared. And thus, through this glance at the general history of our cause in this city, we are brought, at length, to the particular history of this—the Society with which we are here and now specially concerned.

The Sixth Universalist Society in New York is the fruit of the earnestness, persistence, and liberality of a very few untiring and devoted men. I have been unable to learn the precise date at which the movement was initiated. Gathering such information as I could, four or five years since, as to the origin of the Sunday School, I assigned the third Sunday in February, 1851, as the day of its birth. In preparing the materials for this discourse, however, I have found several of the friends thinking this is too early, since they are sure that it was in warm weather. In the absence of exact dates, it is enough to say that some time in the spring of 1851—fifteen years

ago the coming spring—Br. G.R. Crary, then as now of Bleecker-street Church, engaged the Hall corner of Eighth-avenue and 25th-street for a Sabbath-afternoon service, secured the Rev. H.R. Nye, then of Brooklyn, to preach, and then inquired through the neighborhood for any Universalists whose attendance and co-operation he might expect. The result was a fair congregation; a continuance of the meetings, the preaching being furnished by the Missionary Society; and after two or three Sundays, the organization of the Sunday School; and further, on the 21st of July, a meeting for the organization of the Society. On the 28th of July, six Trustees were elected, one of whom, Br. P.P. Demarest, has continuously served, and is now serving, in the office; and another of whom, Br. A.J. Post, has been uninterruptedly a member of the Board until a few months since.

Some time in the autumn of 1851, Rev. Nelson Snell was employed to supply the desk, and on the 2d of February, 1852, he was unanimously called to be Pastor. The Hall in which the movement began continued to be occupied until the commencement of 1853. Like all new societies, however, the little band seem to have been much occupied with the subject of a church; talked about lots near the corner of Eighth-avenue and 29th-street for the purpose of building; and at length, on the 24th of September, 1852, the Society voted “that it is expedient to remove to the church in 24th-street, near Ninth-avenue,” and a committee was appointed to ascertain on what terms it could be purchased. A week later, October 1, the committee reported “that they had purchased the church and the adjoining dwelling-house” for \$6,500. The records show the zeal and generosity with which the few who constituted the working force of the Society met the outlay required for this purchase, and the further expense of fitting the little church for occupancy; and as I have gone over the pages in which the story is told, I have found it easy to think myself in the midst of the counsellings and struggles through which the means were realized, and easier still to see the glad faces and happy hearts of the faithful band and their devoted Pastor as, on the 23d of January, 1853, they found their plans fulfilled, and themselves gathered in their new home for worship.

On the 23d of June, the church was organized, consisting of twenty members. A few months after, on the last of January, 1854, Bro. Snell resigned, to remove to Lockport, N.Y., closing his labors on the 1st of May, after a faithful pastorate of something more than two years, and leaving beloved by all. To him, immediately succeeded Rev. Asher Moore, who continued Pastor three years, until July, 1857. Then came an interregnum of a year, during which the Society was without a pastor, though having regular services every Sabbath. In May, 1858, Rev. James Shrigley was invited to become pastor, but declined on account of feeble health; and thereupon, in July, Rev. J.H. Shepard was invited, and at once entered upon his labors. During the ensuing winter, the subject of another church excited a good deal of attention, the result of which was that, in February, this church was bought, and after being refitted at considerable expense, was opened for worship on Sunday May 22, 1859. In June, Mr. Shepard resigned, after a pastorate of one year, and in August Rev. Dr. Sawyer was invited to become pastor. He declined, and on the 17th of October, the present Pastor was called, entering upon his work and receiving installation on the first Sunday of November, 1859.

Since that time, our history has been, during the first year, [one] of a very encouraging success, but subsequent to the [Civil] war, as in the case of so many other societies, [one] of struggle and numerous hindrances and discouragements. But it has been the history, also, of persistence, of an unconquerable purpose, and of comparative victory. At times, on account of removals—from which we have very severely suffered—and secessions, it would almost seem as if the pressure was to prove too much for us. But still the position has been held, and in spite of all that has conspired to dishearten us, the old flag has been kept flying. Though some have deserted, and many, very many, have removed, and a few have died, and others have

fallen away, brave hearts and generous hands have still remained to carry on the work, assured that a society for which so much has been done and sacrificed could not be left of God to prove a failure, and resolved, if perseverance and generous giving could deserve success, that success should be deserved and won. As the result, by the blessing of God, we still live—united, without the jar, as far as I know, of a single discordant element; animated by a common purpose; full of courage, and as these past few weeks past have especially shown, full of the spirit of earnest work; in one sense, not strong, in another, very strong. We are not all that we would be glad to be; but we are able to go out from this to enter upon a new field of labor, with numbers as large, perhaps, as ever before, and with more of pecuniary means than at any former period. As we thus go, our days of trial and hindrance, we trust, are all behind us. Before us, we hope, are days—not without clouds, indeed, but pleasant and prosperous days and years, the harvest of the seed of endurance and persistence we have sowed; and ere long, we trust, a new and more beautiful temple will be ours, in which we may realize, at length, the fruition of the toils and prayers and sacrifices that have been given us to make this church a thriving branch of the great Christian vine, and an established and efficient power for truth and holiness in this city and in the world.

[considerably abridged at this point]

But I must not tarry longer. The field of our history has been traversed, and some of its lessons gathered; and now, at last, comes the word of Farewell. How we have wished for this hour! and yet, with our joy, how much sadness mingles, now that it has come! Glad to go, we cannot help lingering and turning back, as we say our adieu. We look around these walls, and over these seats, and back through the years that we have assembled here for worship, recalling the sweet seasons we have enjoyed, and the struggles and labors and hopes deferred we have known; above all, as we think of the loved departed who have been here with us, whose hands we have clasped, but shall never in the flesh clasp again, whose memory sanctifies the place, and whose eyes look out upon us from the light of the immortal world to-day, it is hard to turn away feeling that we are to come here no more, and thus to sever all the dear and sad associations which cluster here. Ah, were all that we are leaving cold brick and stone and lifeless wood, could we take with us the memories and associations by which brick and wood and pulpit and seat and wall are hallowed, what a different thing this hour of adieu would be! Alas!

...But we can carry with us the memory of what we have here enjoyed, and of them who have enjoyed and labored and worshipped with us; and we *can* resolve that we will try to be the better, the braver, the more Christian, because of the privileges we have here shared; because of the instructions we have here received; because of the experiences through which we have passed; because of the loved we have here missed, and who, in Heaven now, are...magnets, drawing us thither. *This* let us resolve that we *will* do—that so, leaving this old Home, we may take with us all that has here ministered...to our highest and deepest life, and thus be helped, where we may go, to honor our Christian profession in lives and labors which shall attest that we have not worshipped here in vain.

And so, old house, thoughtful of the Past, hopeful for the Future, we say, Farewell!

The Ambassador, New York NY, Sat. 7 Apr 1866