

## Reminiscences of Universalism in Western New-York No. VI

In 1828 for the first time I attended a Universalist meeting in the city (then village) of Rochester, N.Y. Rev. A. [Alfred] Peck preached in the old Court House. There was a small congregation, comparatively. Only four women were present, including my aunt, (a Methodist), my mother, and myself. At the intermission, I took occasion to enter into a conversation with the only woman who attended, aside from our company. She said, "I am not a Universalist, but I *do* like to hear them preach," adding, "I shall receive a severe reproof, if my friends learn that I have been to this meeting." If the reader will go into the Universalist Church in Rochester now, at the hour of divine service, he will discover the difference between the early state of our cause and its present condition, in that city. On returning (at that time) from meeting, I said to my cousin, a young man, "Why did you not go to our meeting to-day?" "O," said he, "people in this place think there are none who attend the Universalist meetings, but the very *refuse* of society."

As late as 1833, Rev. Mr. Wisner, who was at that time pastor of the Second Presbyterian church in Rochester, delivered a series of lectures designed, as he said, to disprove or prove Universalism. He professed a great sincerity on the subject. Said he, "If Universalism be true, let it be proved so in this house. I am very anxious to have it done, if it can be done, that the people here assembling may know the truth." He very cordially invited any Universalist to send in written questions for examination and investigation, and he would answer them, providing they were written in respectful language. On an evening that I attended, he commenced by reading an article represented to have been sent in by a Universalist, stating reasons for so believing and giving also questions for examination. I then thought and still think, the article came no farther than from Mr. Wisner's pen and brain. It was anything but Universalism. Yet he held it up to the view of his congregation as being the genuine faith of that sect. He then gave his "man of straw" a severe flagellation, most of his hearers, probably imagining he had demolished Universalism.

Our cause in that city was then so weak, there seemed to be no one to administer a just rebuke to Mr. W. for the unfair course he was pursuing. (Rev. H. [Henry] Roberts, then a resident of R., was at that time, I think, absent from the city.) A feeble woman did address a letter to him on the subject, giving him a goodly number of texts of Scripture for his examination, requesting him to send a written answer, as it was very inconvenient for her to attend his lectures. But he deigned no reply. She addressed a second, but it met with a like fate. Neither could she learn that he ever noticed them in any manner. Think you a preacher of respectable standing in the community could now in that city, thus continue to misrepresent [illegible] evening for some eight or ten weeks in succession and not meet with the rebuke so unjust a course merited? At the present time, I think they who are willing to enter the list of controversy against Universalism are the more ignorant class of preachers, not knowing with what they must contend.

In the early part of 1835, Rev. Wm. Andrews preached every Sabbath, for several months, in the Court House in Rochester. A gentleman (resident of that city) of superior information on other subjects, finding I attended the Universalist meetings, inquired of me "if the Universalists attended to the ceremony of prayer in their

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meetings?" He said he always supposed that Universalists never prayed. Indeed, I have been asked that question - "what can Universalists pray for, if there is no endless hell to be saved from!" These persons said they could see no use in prayer; no reason why a person should not go on in the most sinful course; could see no incentive to live a virtuous, Christian life, but the fear of endless pain. A very respectable Presbyterian lady of Rochester, for some cause, supposed I was a Methodist. On my telling her that I was a Universalist in belief, she gave me a very singular look, and said she never had known but one Universalist woman, and she did not believe in any God, or the truth of the Bible. I assured her that "a person who disbelieved the truth of the Bible could not be a Universalist," and commenced to give her some reasons for thus believing; but she manifested an unwillingness to hear. This was, I think I may say, the usual course which people of opposite sentiments to ours would pursue, in the times of which I am writing: very unwilling to hear our belief explained, but ever ready to condemn our sentiments without knowing why.

But the glorious light of divine truth has been constantly dispelling the dark clouds of superstition, until our denomination has obtained a respectable standing in the community. That monster, bigotry, dare not stand up with so bold a front as formerly. The march of truth is onward; its glorious light shining into the hearts of the people. We feel that nought can stay its course, until every soul is warmed and cheered by its divine and solacing influence.

What I have said of the darkness which reigned in Rochester is but a fair sample of many another city or village; may I not say of nearly all cities or villages in New York State at that time. And the Empire State was not far behind any other in that respect. It may have been somewhat behind some of the New England States, but far in advance of most States in the Union ...

With my best wishes that the light of divine truth, which I believe to be Universalism in its true sense, may shine into your soul, and cheer you on in life's pilgrimage. I must now very respectfully take my leave of the subject.

Mrs. L. I. T. [Lasira I. Torrey]

Grand Marsh, Wis.

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Transcribed on 3 Oct 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester NY