Universalist Church of America. General Convention, New York, 1841.

THE

OCCASIONAL SERMON,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSALIST GENERAL CONVENTION,

At its Session in the City of New-York, Sept. 1841;

TOGETHER WITH

THIRTEEN OTHER SERMONS,

Delivered on the same occasion.

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STEREOTYPED BY J. S. REDFIELD,
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NOTE TO THE READER.

In giving the following Sermons to the public—as "Convention Sermons,"—it may be inferred by the general reader that they were prepared and arranged expressly for the occasion. It is, therefore, due the authors to say, that, with the exception of the Occasional, no previous arrangements are made for the Discourses to be delivered during the session of the Convention. The whole direction is left to a committee, usually designated at the opening of the session; and they make all arrangements, select speakers, &c. Consequently, those called upon to officiate, must go before their audiences with such preparation as they may happen to possess; or at best, with but few hours' additional preparation.

We cannot but express the hope, in this connexion, though it may possibly be deemed out of place, that this evil (for evil, or difficulty, we regard it) will be eventually removed—that the Council of the General Convention will sooner or later take the matter into its own hands, and not only select all the preachers for its succeeding annual session, but allot each one some specific subject to discourse upon. In this way, time may not only be allowed the preachers to prepare themselves, but we shall obtain a series of discourses on important and useful

subjects, and which may be made highly serviceable in advancing the cause which we profess to revere and honor.

As a farther apology, for this volume, it is proper to state, that the plan of collecting the Sermons into a book, was not suggested till several of the preachers had left the city. Most of the discourses, also, were mainly extemporaneous, and have been written out since, from memory, after two or three weeks delay, and in considerable haste. Time has likewise been consumed in communicating with the authors, and the subsequent hurry in crowding the work through the press, has left no opportunity for them to examine proof-sheets. Errors, consequently, may have occurred. If so, let them be regarded, under the circumstances, with a lenient eye.

With every needed allowance, however, it is believed this little volume will be found highly interesting and valuable; and, in the confident hope that it will accomplish much good, it is sent forth on its errand of love.

THE PUBLISHER.

NEW YORK, Nov. 1841.

CONTENTS.

CONVENTION SERMONS.

OCCASIONAL SERMON,

BEFORE THE GENERAL CONVENTION OF UNIVERSALISTS, AT ITS SESSION IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 15, 1841.

BY REV. T. J. SAWYER.

"Say not ye, there are yet four months and then cometh the harvest. Behold I say unto you, Lift up your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white already to the harvest."—JOHN iv. 35.

WHAT is the cause in which we are engaged? What is the position it now occupies? What are the prospects that lie open before it? What is the ministry it is destined to perform? And, finally, What are the duties it requires at our hands?

I know not, my brethren, that I can better fulfil the duty assigned me on the present occasion, than by calling your attention to these several questions, and endeavoring, as well as I may, to answer them. The field which they open before us is obviously one of great extent, and even a brief discussion of the several topics it presents will necessarily occupy considerable time; but as I deem it a subject of no inconsiderable importance to Universalists, I indulge the hope that my auditors may be so far interested in its consideration as to relieve me from the fear of soon wearying their patience, while I attempt to unfold it.

Were we to listen to the representations of our opposers, we should be led to think that the cause in

which we are engaged is one full-fraught with mischief; that it is opening wide the flood-gates of licentiousness, paving a highway for vice and crime, and, if successful, will "convert our world into a hell," and end only by working out the certain and hopeless ruin of millions and millions of our race! But we, my brethren, do not so apprehend it. On the contrary, in the light of Scripture, according to the dictates of sober reason, and under all the lessons of experience, we cannot but regard it as the cause of truth, of humanity, and of God,—a cause whose spirit is that of divine benevolence, breathing universal good-will, and is inwoven with the best and holiest aspirations of many a heart that knows not whence those aspirations come, nor whither they tend.

The cause in which we are engaged is an open and manifest one, that shrinks not from observation or scrutiny, and may therefore be easily defined. It is the cause of universal goodness and grace. It combines two considerations which must ever be of the highest importance to rational and moral beings: I mean *the glory of God*, and *the happiness of mankind*. We name it after no man; we designate it by no appellation drawn from outward or trifling circumstances. We give it a title indicative of its broad and comprehensive character. We call it UNIVERSALISM. It stands opposed to all partial and narrow-minded schemes; it lifts itself up above all low and grovelling systems, and comprehends the whole vast plan of the divine goodness and grace, from the moment of creation, when the morning-stars sang together, to the grand consummation of Heaven's purposes in relation to man, when all moral beings shall be brought into willing subjection to the gentle reign of Jesus Christ, and "God shall be all

in all." We call it Universalism, because it rests upon, and teaches the universal benevolence of God; because it inculcates the great truth that the Mission of the Savior was designed by the Father for a universal purpose, viz., that he might be the Savior of the world; and, finally, because it proclaims, as the result of the divine government and grace, the universal holiness and happiness of the family of man.

We differ,—and we would by no means conceal the fact,—we differ widely from most of the Christian sects by which we are surrounded, and on grounds, too, which we cannot but regard as fundamental in the system of revealed truth. I allude to *our views of the moral character of God.* We hold it to be one of the highest—perhaps it is also one of the most difficult—duties of the Christian, to sanctify the Lord God in his heart; that is, to think worthily of that great and good Being, in whom we live and move, and from whom we receive our every blessing. We should strive to form just and noble conceptions of him; to entertain lofty and comprehensive views of his perfections and character; and to ascribe to him no purpose or mode of working which casts dishonor upon his holy name.

The world seems to fear thinking too well of God. We believe the danger is far greater of thinking meanly of him. We see in all ages how prone men are to bring down the Deity to a level with their own moral character, and not unfrequently to degrade him even below themselves. It is the spirit of Christianity to reverse this unhallowing process, by lifting man up, and conforming him to the moral excellence of the Godhead. It was observed with too much truth, by Dr. Adam Clarke, that "the system of *humanizing* God, and making him, by our unjust conceptions of him, to act as *ourselves* would in certain

circumstances, has been the bane both of religion and piety; and on this ground," says he, "infidels have laughed us to scorn."

Now we regard it as one of the chief excellences, nay, as the ground of all the excellences, of our faith, that it represents God as worthy at once of our highest love, and our profoundest reverence. We believe him to be possessed of all moral perfection. We believe him to be infinitely holy, just, and good; that in the depths and essence of his very being he is *love*, from whose inexhaustible fountains come forth all the divine purposes in reference to his whole intelligent and moral creation. We believe that he regards every human soul with an affection so pure and true, that no transgressions can destroy it, no waywardness or perversity can alienate it, no ingratitude or forgetfulness can cool it. We believe that while his infinite holiness forbids that he should ever look upon sin with the least approbation or allowance, he still loves the sinner: and that while his perfect justice requires him to "bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil," and to "render to every man according to his deeds," it is still the glory of his character to remember mercy; and though he visits man's transgressions with the rod and his iniquities with stripes, nevertheless his loving-kindness he does not utterly take from him, nor suffer his faithfulness to fail.

In short, we believe what our Savior so clearly and frequently taught, that God is a Father, and that his government is parental in its principles, its spirit, and its end. Amid all the multiplied evils of this world, we believe none is so great as to bid defiance to the wonder-working power and love of God; and perhaps we should not go too far to say there is

none which the divine wisdom and grace will not make the occasion for their own manifestation and glory. Where sin abounded grace did much more abound. We believe, therefore, that with God there is no unconditional toleration of evil in the universe, and that in the economy of his grace will be found the most ample and efficient means for its counteraction and ultimate destruction.

We confess that these rational and cheering views of God and his government are to us unspeakably dear. They seem to us essential to an enlightened and cordial piety. They constitute, in our opinion, the only ground of an elevated, pure, and truly Christian morality. We cannot, therefore, but cling to them as to the glory of the gospel; at least as one of its most amiable features, and replete with divine consolation. And we feel bound by every consideration of love, of gratitude, of veneration, to proclaim and defend them. We see traces of the divine goodness everywhere around us. It seems to us to sparkle in the stars of heaven, to bloom in the flowers of earth, to spread beauty like a garment over the whole face of creation, and to scatter the manifold blessings which bestrew the pathway of all life. It shines in the sun that rises alike upon the evil and the good; it falls in the shower that equally descends upon the just and the unjust. But most clearly and fully do we behold it in the face of Jesus Christ. We see its mild and gentle reflections in his pure and benevolent life; we hear its voice in the words of truth and love that came forth from his lips; but most of all does it speak to our hearts in moving accents from Calvary, where it triumphed over all the agonies of the cross and all the malice of men. It is written out in letters of light in the volume of inspiration, and we feel that we cannot, dare not,

doubt that God is indeed good unto all, that he loves his enemies, and is kind even to the unthankful and the evil.

In promulgating these views, it is needless for me to say how much opposition and obloquy we have been and are still doomed to encounter. For although all professed Christians acknowledge in words that the goodness of God is infinite, it requires no great discrimination to perceive that most of them deny it in fact. We need only glance at the popular systems of faith in order to see that they limit this divine attribute, circumscribe its sphere of operation, subject it to the conditions of time and place, and thus narrow it down and suit it to their own prejudices and passions.

Some of these creeds boldly maintain, for instance, that God created a large part of the human race on purpose to make them the subjects of his endless wrath and curse! And they all involve the fearful idea that he brought millions and millions of our fellow-beings, perhaps ourselves, into existence with the infallible foreknowledge that that existence will be one of measureless and unmitigated wo! Need I ask what notions of divine goodness can consist with such representations as these? Clothe malignity itself with the attribute of omnipotence, and what worse could it do?

But this is not all. It is a common doctrine of those who claim the honor of orthodoxy, that all men are born with moral powers so corrupted as to be opposed to all good and inclined to all evil, and that continually, and that they are therefore morally incapable of thinking a good thought, or doing a good action. And yet while man is lying in this deplorably helpless condition, they teach that God requires of him a pure, spiritual, and perfect obedience to

his holy law, under the penalty of endless damnation! According to the same systems, the little innocent babe that looks up in its guileless joy, and throws back upon its mother's face the smile that its quiet beauty first kindled there, is, in the sight of God, a *sinner*, little better than a demon, and deserves, for the heinous crime of being born of mortal parents, to be outcast from the favor of God, and to suffer "all the miseries of this life, death itself, and the pains of hell for ever!" In like manner the whole heathen world is represented as sinking by thousands and millions into the quenchless flames of a lake of fire and brimstone, because they do not believe in a Savior, of whom they never heard!

But enough. If it be true that names do not alter things, then it can avail little to call a being good while we ascribe to him such conduct and dispositions as these. Such a goodness belongs to a Moloch, or a Juggernaut, rather than to the God of Nature and Revelation. We shrink with horror from such a being. We cannot bow in devotion before his altars of blood. We would not attempt to imitate him for the world.

But I must not dwell on this point. My auditors can see at a glance the radical difference existing between our views and those of the popular religionists around us. A God who can deliberately meditate the never-ceasing miseries of any creature of his power, little deserves to be celebrated for his goodness and love. A God who could kindle the flames of hell in which to torment his own offspring for ever, merits not the hallowed name of Father. How truly was it said by Dr. Clarke, that "most religious systems and creeds are incapable of rational explanation because founded on some misconception of the divine nature." And what misconception, let me

ask, can be greater than that which changes the light of God into darkness, denies his paternity, and makes all the exhibitions of his goodness an illusion and solemn mockery.

I need not say that these two views can never coalesce, never be harmonized. If what the Scriptures teach be true, that God is good, universally, infinitely, changelessly good; that he is the Father of the spirits of all flesh; that we are all his offspring; that he is love, and love worketh no ill to its objects; and that of his infinite love Jesus Christ was sent forth from the bosom of the Father, with all power in heaven and earth, to work out man's salvation, if all this be true as the Scriptures plainly teach, then it seems to us to follow, that God can neither purpose nor do much that human creeds ascribe to him. If, on the contrary, he be not all this, if he is such a being as confessions of human origin represent him, then we have read the volume both of his works and his word wrongly; then indeed are we blind, and misguided; then is man miserable beyond expression, and may give himself over to despair. But it is not, my brethren, it cannot be so. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." He is love without hatred, goodness without malice, justice without cruelty or revenge; and the measures of his beneficence already communicated to our race, should be gratefully acknowledged as the pledge and foretaste of the boundless store reserved to show forth his goodness in the future. We can believe anything of God, rather than that he will choose evil and perpetuate it in his empire for ever, or that his plan of goodness shall end in defeat. We cannot ascribe to our Father in heaven the base passions of fallen and sinful man. This would be to dishonor rather than to glorify him. We know that he who

commands us to love our enemies cannot hate his. We know that he who enjoins it upon weak man to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger, with all malice, cannot indulge these dark passions himself. Nor can he who requires us to overcome evil with good, attempt to rectify the evils of time by the torments of an eternity.

I have now pointed out what I conceive to be the prominent feature of our cause, the characteristic that distinguishes it from all other causes around us. It is true our system of faith differs from most others in many other particulars; but they are generally more or less intimately connected with the great doctrine of the divine goodness, and cannot be separated from it. These minor differences I shall not stop to specify, nor is it necessary. The grand excellence, or the grand error, of our faith is believed by us and our opposers to be the doctrine that God is good; or in the language of that excellent man, William Law, that "God from eternity to eternity is mere unchangeable and ever-overflowing love;" and that his whole economy of providence and grace is benevolent, not only to the whole, but to every individual part, and all tending wisely and certainly to the chief end of man, which is "to glorify God, and enjoy him for ever."

Having thus glanced at the cause in which we are engaged, and contemplated its principal and distinctive feature, I shall now pass to consider the position which it is at the present time occupying in the world.

It admits of no doubt, so apparent is the fact, that the cause of universal goodness and grace is now far more prosperous than it has been in any period for centuries past. It is more widely diffused, and more ardently and successfully, if not more ably ad-

vocated; it holds a more conspicuous place in the church, and is commanding a greater degree of attention, than it has in many a bygone age. In some respects its position is new and more favorable for exerting an influence, securing respect and making progress.

That the great truth, which we maintain, in relation to the divine character and the end of the divine government, was taught by our Lord and his apostles, is capable, we think, of conclusive proof. That all the early Christians fully understood and appreciated it, may, I suspect, admit of much doubt. This will at least appear probable when we reflect how slow even the apostles themselves were to comprehend the spirituality and all-embracing design of the gospel. With the crude and grovelling views that, we know, existed in many a mind in the apostolic churches, with the avowed anxiety on the part of the apostles to perfect that which was lacking in their faith, we have much reason to conclude that there were many who had not attained to clear conceptions of God, or to comprehensive notions of his government and purposes. Indeed I cannot think that the intellectual and moral development of that age was generally high enough to justify an expectation on our part, that all the disciples were cordial and intelligent believers in the universality of the divine grace and salvation. It is enough for us that Christ and his apostles clearly taught it.

In the writings of the fathers called apostolic, from the circumstance that they succeeded the apostles, but who were all illiterate and ignorant men, we find their views undeveloped with respect to the ultimate condition of the wicked. But as early as the year of Christ 150 we meet with distinct traces of the doctrine of universal salvation. In several

subsequent ages of the church, we know this doctrine was boldly proclaimed by many of the fathers, and among them a large portion of those who were the brightest ornaments of the Christian profession, and who would not suffer in comparison with any of their age, in learning, talents, or piety. Tertullian, about the year 204, is thought to have been the first to assert the absolute eternity of punishment, in which opinion he was followed by Cyprian. They seem to have had little of the gentle, benevolent, and forgiving spirit of Christianity, and are said to show by their exultation that this horrible dogma found a too congenial soil in their hearts.

It is a fact worthy of particular notice, that notwithstanding the doctrine of universal salvation was widely diffused, especially in the eastern church, and though it was maintained by many of the most distinguished fathers, yet it was never made the subject of either public or private reproach till near the close of the fourth century. It seems to have excited no disaffection, to have provoked no controversies, to have called forth no censures or condemnation. Thus for two and a half centuries, the most enlightened of any period after the apostles, till the Reformation, Universalism existed unchallenged in the orthodox church, and was orthodoxy itself. For a part of this period the dogma of endless misery also existed under similar circumstances. Thus our own more merciful doctrine stood side by side in the church with that of interminable torments. As the author of the Ancient History of Universalism, to whom I am indebted for these facts, well remarks, "the wolf and the lamb lay down together."

The next century opens a new scene, barbarism and "old night" begin to resume their throne. Another race, another spirit—a race and a spirit that

seemed to revel in universal destruction—gathered like a thunder-cloud around the Roman Empire. The hoofs of Attila's war-horse were heard clattering through all the south of Europe, and behind them rushed on the myriads of his barbarous Huns. The sun of civilization, of philosophy, of moral culture, was going down, and the night of the dark ages was about to set in. The church wrapped herself in the folds of her drapery, and amidst imposing forms and ceremonies sat down till the storm was overpast and a brighter morning should dawn on the cross.

It is instructive to observe how Universalism waned after the close of the fourth century, and seems soon to have become extinct throughout nearly all Christendom. The peculiar spirit of Christianity, the spirit of gentleness and love, vanished away, and all that remained of our holy religion was the shell, the form, was what was imbodied in sensible rites, well calculated, and wisely designed I doubt not, by a beneficent Heaven, to preserve its being in the earth. But in the spirit of the dark ages Universalism found no sympathy, no aliment. The ignorance, the cruelty, the superstition of that period of the world's history, proved uncongenial to so high and pure a faith. The dogma of endless torments, on the contrary, then held its carnival. Never before had it enjoyed such an authority, and never will it again unless the dark ages return once more. During the long lapse of eight or ten centuries, I know of but two or three names that can be enrolled among the friends of Universalism, and these seem to have been born before the world was prepared either to receive or appreciate them. The human mind seemed incapable of rising to the conception of a grace broad enough for the salvation

of the world, and the human heart was too narrow, too selfish, I fear, to even desire so great a good.

The elements of an intellectual and moral revolution had for some time been mingling. Notes of preparation were heard on all sides, but the great event which they preintimated was not yet understood. At last the Reformation, like a trumpet-blast, effectually awoke the slumbering intellect, and man stood up to battle, sometimes with the pen and sometimes with the sword, for freedom's dearest right, the right of thinking for himself. It was not Luther that produced the Reformation as men generally speak, but it was the Reformation rather that produced Luther. The spirit of the Reformation had been kindled and was gaining strength day by day long before Luther was born.

But observe, in the selfsame hour that the human mind broke its shackles, and religion from being the exclusive domain of ecclesiastics, went out again the common property of the world to whom God gave it at first, lo! Universalism appeared once more after a sleep of centuries. It came forth again to gladden and bless the human heart, but it came also to meet with a bitter and relentless opposition, and to win its way, amidst toil and sacrifice and tribulation, to its present state. The reformers were indeed "the apostles of liberty," but it was a liberty as narrow and as selfish as their religious faith—*a liberty for themselves*. Great as they were they knew not what they were doing. They "had not looked up to the primary motive nor down to the ultimate consequences of their own work." They seem to have struggled less for *principles*, which are universal, than for *private privileges*. For while demanding the right of human thought and private judgment for themselves, they grossly trampled on the rights and

judgments of others; while denying the authority of the Pope and the Church over them, they persecuted to the death those who differed from themselves. They began the Reformation but they did not know how to finish it; and hence it happens that our cause has been struggling on through good report and evil report from that day to this. It has gone wherever the Reformation has gone, and wherever there has been the most intelligence, the most earnest striving after truth, the most intellectual freedom, there has then been the most Universalism.

For confirmation of this remark, look at Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, where Universalism is generally adopted by the learned of both the Evangelical and Rationalist parties, and where as in the ancient Church it makes no one a heretic. Look at England, in whose establishment it has by a wise policy been tolerated from the time of Elizabeth, and where, it is said, on the authority of the Bishop of Exeter, to be now widely entertained. And not in the established Church alone, but in many of the dissenting communions, it extensively prevails. Look, too, at France, among whose protestant population it finds an asylum and exerts no inconsiderable power.

But turn with me, my brethren, to our own country. It was not the Puritans who brought the principles of religious freedom to our shores. They brought a spirit of intolerance, of persecution. For no sooner were those adventurers, so long and deeply persecuted, come in possession of power, than they began to persecute all who chanced to differ from themselves. They disfranchised all who did not belong to the church; they whipped the Baptists and banished the Quakers. They were the true dis-

ciples of their great teacher Calvin. They loved to rule, but not to be ruled.

It is instructive to observe that while Massachusetts under a Puritan, and Virginia under an Episcopalian, government, were grossly intolerant and persecuting in the early ages of these colonies, Maryland, governed by Catholics, exhibited the most noble example of political wisdom and religious toleration. Pennsylvania, also, under the guidance of the Quakers, manifested a very tender regard for the rights of conscience. It is to the influence of these two colonies, connected with the fact that such a variety of religious faiths were established along the Atlantic shores, that we are to ascribe the religious liberty enjoyed here before the Revolution. Nor was it less a matter of necessity, than of far-reaching policy and sound principle, that freedom of thought and speech were secured in the Constitution of the United States.

I cannot but admire the wisdom of Divine Providence in directing Murray with the lamp of truth, to our shores at the precise juncture it did. The year of 1770 was the eve of a great political revolution. That year the first American blood was shed by the British soldiery. The spirit of freedom was awakening from the north to the south, and the bands of fellowship and brotherhood were being knit more closely between the several colonies. The diversities of religious opinion were forgotten, or less regarded, in the growing necessity for political union, and in a growing love of liberty. It was a time for the spirit of general toleration to be cultivated and prosper.

At the same time the universal prevalence of church, orthodoxy prevented Murray from being lost in the bosom of any existing sect. A new truth, or

rather an old truth restored, was to now take its place in the religious world, and a place so prominent that all eyes could behold it; that it could make itself intelligible to all minds that would consider, and to all hearts that would listen to its voice.

The public mind had been prepared, too, in some degree at least, for this new doctrine. It did not, therefore, come to a barren desert. In this new world, religion had always been an important element of its culture, and in many a soul of that early day, both the intellectual and moral nature were so far developed as to fit it for the reception of a better faith. Nay, in many a soul these better views of God and his government were already slumbering, or half-revealing themselves, "felt, but not expressed," or like the visions of beauty sometimes caught in our dreams, were floating indistinctly, but with a spiritual peace about the sanctuary of the heart. To these mysterious anticipations, so pure and hallowing, the excellent Potter of Good Luck, was no stranger, and with him were sympathizing hundreds, unknowing and unknown, scattered throughout the whole country. They only needed the eloquent voice of that herald of salvation to awake them to the full consciousness of their inward faith and trust.

It is now 71 years since Murray was cast upon the shores of New Jersey. From that day to this, our cause has been constantly progressing, and year after year has added to its growth, till now it stands the FOURTH denomination, probably, in point of numbers and religious and social influence in the United States. But rapid as has been its course, it has still been doomed to battle its way amid difficulties and dangers, and gained its present elevation in spite of the combined resistance, and steady and

not always Christian opposition of most other sects. We owe everything, my brethren, to God and a good cause, and little to the moderation, the sympathy, or even the kindness of our opposers. They have met us at every pass, they have disputed every inch of ground, and yet the tide has rolled on, and discomfiture and defeat have attended them on every well-tried field. I say this not in the spirit of vainglorying, but with humble gratitude to God, and a manly confidence in the truth of our holy cause.

But in estimating the condition of Universalism in our country at the present time, we must not confine our attention and remarks exclusively to our own denomination. It is well known that Universalism is entertained by several sects beside ourselves. The Unitarians, it is said, generally believe in the ultimate salvation of all men. Several German sects, scattered through the middle and western States, also believe it. It is adopted by many, it is supposed, in the Lutheran church, and is believed to be by no means uncommon in the Episcopal church. Prof. Stuart confesses that "not a few persons in the community believe in the final restoration of all men," and of these "not a few are professed preachers of the gospel." Indeed to what point can we turn, where this truth is not insinuating itself? In what sect does it not find at least secret friends and believers? It is like the leaven hid in three measures of meal; nor will its ministry cease till the whole be leavened.

But let us turn from the present to the future, and ask what prospects lie open before our cause in time to come? This is a question of some importance to us all. We need the conviction that we are not laboring in a cause that is destined to speedy ruin. We need it to strengthen us midst the toils and sac