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Connecticut.

Local history. Vol. II

REV. GEORGE H. WOODWARD'S

HISTORICAL DISCOURSE.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED THE LAST SABBATH OF

1 8 4 3 ;

At Stafford, Conn., Dec. 31st.

BY GEORGE H. WOODWARD,
PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH.

H A R T F O R D .
PRESS OF ELIHU GEER, 26 STATE STREET.
1846.

STAFFORD, CT., Feb. 23d, 1846.

DEAR SIR:

Many of your people have often expressed a desire to see in print, a historical sermon which you preached on the last sabbath of 1843; and the undersigned, as a committee, distinctly request of you a copy of that discourse for publication.

In allowing it to be put in a readable form, we believe you will not only gratify your people generally, but encourage the hearts of many who are toiling for the truth's sake, and preserve many interesting facts in the history of this church and society, which should be recorded for the good of those who come after us.

DANIEL SMITH,
MINER GRANT,
NELSON KINGSBURY,
ALDEN BLODGET,
SAM'L. C. LYON.

To Rev. GEORGE H. WOODWARD, Pastor of }
the 1st Congregational Church, Stafford, Ct. }

GENTLEMEN:

If the discourse referred to in your note of the 23d inst. can be made instrumental in "vindicating the ways of God to man," or in any way subserve the cause of truth, I should not allow any personal feelings or inconveniences to interfere with your wishes concerning it. It would afford me pleasure, to do any thing in my power to honor the loved names and excellent deeds of those who have stood by the truth in times of "rebuke and blasphemy," and to gratify my people, whose happiness I love to promote and whose welfare I earnestly seek.

I present this discourse to them with the prayer, that, when the sacred relations, which we sustain to one another and to the cause of the Redeemer on earth shall be dissolved by death, we may be prepared for perfection of friendship and holy service in the kingdom of our Lord on high.

G. H. WOODWARD.

To the Committee of the 1st Ecclesiastical Society, Stafford, Ct.

DANIEL SMITH, NELSON KINGSBURY, SAM'L. C. LYON.
MINER GRANT, ALDEN BLODGET,

S E R M O N .

Because thou hast been my help, therefore under the shadow of thy wing will I rejoice.

PSALM lxxiii: 7.

WE have not the gift of foreknowledge to penetrate the intricacies of the future, and, for a certainty, ascertain what is in reserve for us. But we have what is better, memories to retain that which is past, from which we may draw *conclusions* and derive *hopes* in reference to the things yet to be.

Hence, though we cannot intuitively read the future, God has not wholly shut us up to the past and present. His word has lifted the curtain of the future, as to some general scenes, so that we may understand what will be some of the great developments, which are to come out of the present operation of the system of which we form a part.

He has revealed glorious scenes, which will take place in the latter days of the church, and given his people positive assurance of the final triumph of the truth. He has laid down principles, the result of whose operation we know; and has shown us the effects of certain causes, so that we need not be ignorant, in the general, of the event of certain courses of conduct.

But precisely what is to take place from year to year, he has not informed us; and, as to ourselves, we know not what a day will bring forth. All these particular events are wisely concealed in the mind of God, with whom we are permitted to confide our interests. If we do this, our experience will, doubtless, enable us each to say, in the language of David, as we from time to time consider the past and look towards the future, "Because thou *hast been* my help, therefore under the shadow of thy wing will I rejoice." Like the eaglets which resort to the powerful wing of the parent for protection; or the little brood that

hovers under the extended wings of the ever watchful mother, would this pious servant confidently take shelter under the protection of the Almighty. And, in the text, he informs us that one source of his confidence was *experience*. In reasoning from the past to the future, he derived encouraging conclusions, that sustained him in seasons of apparent adversity. It is true that the filial heart will, in the first instance, in view of the divine character and promises, confide in God as a spontaneous act. Having the spirit of adoption, it will voluntarily cry unto God, "My Father, thou art the guide of my youth."

But our sins often disturb this filial repose through consciousness of deep guilt. We feel we have so entirely forfeited the favor of God, he may justly hide himself from us and refuse us succor.

Then we need to be able to appeal to experience ; and, remembering the kindness he has shown us under similar circumstances, strengthen our hope in him. His adopted children may thus derive great comfort concerning the coming scenes of life ; though the ungodly, with how much forbearance soever they may have been treated, ought always to remember the declaration, "Woe unto the wicked, it shall be ill with him."

God calls upon his own people to "prove" him. He wishes them to study his providence, that they may *see cause* for encouraging themselves in him. When we have made thorough trial of a friend, we always think we know what to depend upon. He that has failed us, even though he be a parent, excites our distrust. But he, who has pursued us with unremitting interest, giving needed aid in the most difficult and trying circumstances, makes a sure purchase of our trust. Thus David, in the fourth Psalm, appeals to God for help, encouraged to ask, by a remembrance of what had already been done for him.—"Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness ; thou *hast* enlarged me when I was in distress. Thou hast in former days made bare thine arm for my rescue from the sorest trials and the greatest perils. When hemmed in and shut up on every side, thou didst graciously and strangely open a door of deliverance, and let the captive go free. Staying my spirit, therefore, with this cheering remembrance, I cannot but assure myself of thy continued protection."

It is well for God's people frequently thus to review the past. *We*, to-day, stand in a favorable position for doing this, being about to take our leave of one year, and anticipate in a few hours, standing on the threshold of a new one. It is natural to fall into serious thought concerning the possible events of the year to come. What will be its developments concerning us? What changes will there be in our circumstances? Where shall we be at the end of the year? in time or in eternity? What of our families? will they abide with us? or some of their dear members depart hence. If we live, shall we be in prosperity, or adversity? If we die, shall we depart to be forever with the Lord, or be irremediably lost? And what of the cause of truth and and the moral interests of the world? What of Zion among us?—shall she arise and shine, or in depression mourn?

In regard to our personal interests, we are admonished by the past, not to be distrustful. Although God may have tried us, has he not shown himself ready to help?

I have called your attention to this subject principally for the *purpose of deriving lessons from the past CONCERNING OUR OWN ZION.*

Let us, therefore, aided by such facts as we have, *review the history of this Church and Ecclesiastical Society.*

Stafford township was granted October, 1718; it was settled May, 1719; the first town meeting was held Jan. 31st, 1720.*

The principal settlers were the twelve following, Robert White, Matthew Thompson, Samuel and John Warner, Daniel and Josiah Blodget, Cornelius Davis, Daniel Colburn, John Pasco, Josiah Standish, Joseph Orcutt, and Benjamin Rockwell,† the most of whom have descendants still resident here.

It was early favored with the stated preaching of the Gospel. Early, too, a portion of its inhabitants engaged in employments‡

* The town was inhabited *ten years* before any person died of any kind of disease.

† Trumbull's History of Conn. Vol. ii. p. 86.

‡ Coaling and Blast Furnaces—these, especially as formerly conducted, made the Sabbath very much a day of idleness and dissipation, and upheld a servile system of rum-drinking. The first Blast Furnace was put in operation in 1779, by John Phelps & Co. The "New Furnace" was built in 1796, by Nathaniel Hyde & Co.

calculated totally to defeat the design of the ministry and of the Sabbath, as they prevented so many from hearing the one or sanctifying the other, and extensively cherished principles subversive of the law of God; and, causing expediency and self-gratification to become governing principles, conducted directly to the error that has manifestly proved ruinous to such numbers. For, if the moral law might be set aside, the institutions of the Sabbath and sanctuary practically annulled for the designed promotion of man's secular interests and gratifications, why may not God's plan of salvation be disregarded, and men think to live in sin, and go to heaven unsanctified, if that would better suit them?

In men, not of settled religious principles, employments and indulgences have a direct tendency to shape avowed belief. They will seek out a system of religion that will not continually rebuke their practice.

What more natural, then, than for those, who are practically Antinomians, directly to become Anti-christians? When they involve themselves in employments and immoralities that encourage the adoption of the principle, that God will leniently dispense with his moral law for their gratification; will they not, as a consequence, sooner or later conclude, that he will not finally cast them away, if they should never find it convenient to submit to the claims of his gospel? It is not supposed that this principle was at once formed. It did not develop itself till years had passed away. Nevertheless, these *causes* were in operation and gradually gaining strength. Increased Sabbath breaking and intemperance, (fostered through necessity, as it was claimed, on account of peculiar employments,) were fast paving the way for the eager reception of the doctrine, when it should be distinctly proposed, that God is too good to allow "the wages of sin" to be "death," and will never suffer that "the wicked shall be turned into hell with all the nations that forget God." The formal announcement, at length, of such anti-scriptural sentiments, offered a salvo to guilty conscience, and encouraged men on in seeking their own pleasure, even at the expense of morality and vital godliness. Although, therefore, the gospel was preached from the settlement of the town, this error, in such soil, was steadily growing by its side.

This church was organized May 22, 1723. The number of communicants was *twenty-three*, ten males and thirteen females. There were then about thirty-five families in town.* The Rev. John Graham was the first settled minister in Stafford, ordained May 25th, 1723, having commenced preaching here the January preceding. For want of adequate support he was dismissed by a council called at his request, in 1731.

His successor, Rev. Seth Payne was ordained June 6, 1734, and dismissed July, 1740.

About four years after, September 14, 1744, Rev. Eli Colton was settled, and died of the small pox, June 8, 1756, after a ministry of about 12 years.

The year following, Rev. John Willard was ordained, March 23, 1757; he died February 16, 1807, having preached to this Society more than half a century, and been their settled minister nearly the same length of time.†

There was no meeting-house in this (the east) parish during his life, except that in which the Congregational Society worshipped, and no stated preaching but to that denomination.

Previous to this, however, Universalism, whose beginning and incipient growth we have already traced, became rife in the west parish, where it continued to be preached for some years.‡

The meeting-house in the east parish, at this time, stood in the street, about half a mile south of this, near the old graveyard. In that the Rev. Dr. Willard preached about *eighteen* years. In the meeting-house that stood on the corner north of this, now laying in ashes by the hand of an incendiary, and in which most of us have often worshipped, he preached about *thirty-two* years, or till his death.

The history of that sanctuary is fraught with interest to the elders of this congregation. Their fathers nobly undertook that enterprise in troublous times, having entered upon it just in the beginning of the nation's conflict with Great Britain, in 1775,

* Collections in the hands of Rev. Wm. Ely, East Hampton, Mass.

† Mr. Payne and Mr. Colton were graduates of Yale College; Mr. Willard of Harvard.

‡ In 1761, a second society was set off, by the name of West Stafford.

the year before the Declaration of Independence. They, might, therefore, say with David, "In trouble have we prepared for the house of the Lord." Their numbers were drafted for soldiers, and their light incomes taxed to aid in sustaining the expense of war. Yet they perseveringly went forward, all at the work, and each man building "over against his own house."* It was a matter of *principle* with them to erect a sanctuary, that they and their children might be unembarrassed worshippers of Jehovah of hosts. That meeting-house was the second which had been built in this parish.

By recurring to the records of the Society, we find that it was at once voted, on a proposition being made at a meeting called to consider the expediency of the plan, that they ought immediately to proceed to carry it into effect.

The following is a record: "At a meeting of the first Society in Stafford held September 23d, 1772, Daniel Alden, Esq., was chosen moderator. *Voted*, That it is necessary to build a new meeting-house for divine service in this Society. Lieut. Josiah Converse is appointed an agent from this Society to appear before the County Court to be held at Hartford, in the County of Hartford, (this then being a part of that county,) to get them to appoint and affix the place where the meeting-house shall be erected and built. *Voted*, to raise a rate of one penny on the pound, on the August list, to defray the necessary charges of this Parish."

The Society met November 16th, to hear the report of their agent, and stood forty-eight to forty-two in favor of receiving the report. Negotiation was had repeatedly in regard to the location. Finally Daniel Alden, Esq. was appointed an agent to invite the General Assembly to "stick the stake;" and, at a meeting of the Society, November 15, 1773,—more than a year after the vote to build—Isaac Pinney, Daniel Alden, Esq., Capt. Samuel Rockwell, Lieut. Josiah Converse, Capt. John Phelps, and Joshua Blodget, were chosen to receive the General Assembly's committee. Two years after the first action on the subject, at

* After the building was inclosed, the wall pew-ground was sold to individuals who assumed the responsibility of finishing the walls pertaining to the pews, from the floor upwards.

a meeting September 6th, 1774—Daniel Alden, Esq., being moderator—a building committee was appointed consisting of Lieut. Josiah Converse, Isaac Pinney, Lieut. Ephraim Hyde, Joshua Blodget, and Capt. John Blodget.—“ *Voted*, To raise one shilling on the pound to enable said committee to go on with said building.” At a meeting October, 1775, the Society voted to take down part of the then old meeting-house, which stood south of this, to be used in erecting the new one. The frame was completed and enclosed, by means of money already raised ; then a portion of the pew-ground was sold to furnish funds for completing the house. The wall pews were first to be made, and those who bought the ground were to complete the walls adjoining.

At a meeting of the Society, March 13th, 1780, Mr. David McClure moderator—it was voted to sell the pew-ground and to choose a committee to plan the ground and report. Daniel Alden, Eleazer Walbridge and Dr. McClure were the committee. The report of this committee not being accepted, Ensign John Townsen, Abijah Bixby, and Moses Newton, were chosen in their place. Their plan was accepted May 31, 1781 ; and the Society “voted that each man, who accepts of the pew ground, pay the sum fixed by the committee into the treasury of the Society ; said money to be laid out in purchasing glass to finish the windows besides what the persons are to do that have said pews, and the rest of said money to be laid out toward finishing the meeting house.” The last vote on record, in relation to that sanctuary, bears date, December 27th, 1802, thirty years after the vote to build. The Society then ordered *four hundred dollars* to be raised, for the purpose of paying arrearages for work done on the building.

Thus they toiled on from year to year, never forgetting the work nor fainting under it.

At first they met in it for worship without the benefit of the light of heaven, save what might beam in through the openings, through which also the cold urged its way. For a long time it was simply covered for a shelter ; and, for more than a year there was preaching without a pane of glass in the house ; when, out of compassion to the minister, they contrived to raise means to glaze

one half of the pulpit window ; which shows out of what poverty they abounded even to liberality, to do so much as make an attempt to erect a sanctuary ; and how God carried them through the enterprise, even “in times that tried men’s souls ;” and, how ready they were, if they might but assemble with their families for divine worship, to sit in cold, and dampness, and darkness, upon the rough board, and with no comfort but such as they felt in their souls. And here too, we discover what was the kind of training, by which God fitted them and their children to stand the fiery trials through which they have been called to pass.*

Rev. Dr. Willard, after having been the pastor of this church *fifty years*, wanting about forty days, died “an old man and full of years ;” having sowed much seed, whose fruit will, doubtless, be re-produced till the latest generations.

It seems that during his ministry, something more than *one hundred and fifty* were added to the church on profession of their faith, and about *forty* by letter, making about *two hundred*, which would be an average of four per year.

Many having died and removed, we can only conjecture, in view of the succeeding history of the church and other circumstances, what was the number of communicants at his death.

The Church voted during his ministry, January, 1758, “to debar from communion, those members that shall come from other churches to live in this town, after residing here six months, unless they bring letters of recommendation.” This was found to be a necessary measure, duly to maintain the order of God’s house.

It seems to have been during the ministry of Dr. Willard, also, that the first *Church Committee* was appointed. It was at a meeting of the church held June, 1794 ; at which date we have the following record—“Said committee is appointed to use their endeavors to promote religion in the christian Society in this place ; to use their endeavors in conjunction with their Pastor, agreeably to the plan proposed by the General Association, which sat at New Haven, September 15th, 1774, that the discipline Christ has appointed in the churches, should be more constantly

* It will not be forgotten that there was an extreme scarcity of money at this time.

and regularly carried on ; and that no baptized persons, under the particular watch and care of the church, be permitted to live in scandalous sins without being dealt with in such manner as the christian rule requires. The committee is appointed in part, as a council to the Pastor, by his express desire. It is also expected, that they will use their influence by way of argument and advice, to reconcile contending brethren, and to prevent as much as may be, the rise and progress of unreasonable controversies."

There being now such a committee, this record may be of service as an exposition of their duty, as here is expressed its original design.

The committee appointed in 1794 consisted of the following individuals, Lieut. Ephraim Hyde, Dea. Jonathan Whitaker, Major John Phelps, Dr. David McClure, Mr. John Carpenter, and Mr. Lyman Lyon. The same were continued two years after, with the exception of Dr. McClure, and the addition of Mr. Solomon Washburn. These all sleep with their fathers, having done their work on earth. And their descendants, where are they? In the church prosecuting the good work of their progenitors? or living to let in the wild boar to waste the vine of their cherishing?

As we look over the records of this church and society, we see the names of the predecessors of many who are now with us.

The fathers seemed to have possessed a liberal, enduring spirit, and to have planned and toiled for the promotion of truth and righteousness ; "choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, having respect to the recompense of reward." And, O how wise! Suppose that, by withholding their hands, they might have amassed greater treasures here? What would have become of the "durable riches?" and who would have cared for their children?

How, too, could they, in that case, have expected to hear the Master say, at death, "Well done, good and faithful servants ; ye have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things ; enter into the joy of your Lord." We have reason to praise God for raising up, from time to time, men like those whose names stand on our records, in connection with important public duties, in building and repairing the house of

God, and who are true to the church in every emergency. It is in keeping with our present theme to encourage ourselves in view of this fact. In this thing the Lord "has been our help," as we shall continue to see in the progress of our history.

Before the death of Dr. Willard, East Stafford had become much leavened with Universalism, a form of unbelief which has since widely pervaded the community, being exceedingly congenial with the unsanctified nature of man, and finding affinity with almost every other demoralizing and destructive error. The tendencies to infidelity, to which I have referred, growing out of the habits and employments of a portion of the early inhabitants of the town, found occasion to develop themselves, and assume a *form*, in the apostacy, from the faith of the Gospel, of *Rev. Isaac Foster*.*

It often happens that there is an *indefinite* species of unbelief among a people; as unbelief we have seen there will be in any portion of community, who yield themselves, wittingly or not, to a course of life in itself subversive of the truth. If pecuniary interest or other motives cause adherence to that course, those thus involved will sympathize with almost any creed whose principles will justify, or rather will not condemn them. Having turned away from the rebukes, and cast off the restraints of the pure gospel, they will be ready to seize upon the form of latitudinarianism that first comes in their way.

In this case the doctrine of the universal salvation of men was presented, and at once adopted; and this, like every form of flattering error, when once embraced, would, of course, be adhered to, not only from a love of its flattery, but for consistency's sake, even after the prime agent of its introduction had disappeared.

The apostacy of Mr. Foster to Universalism, while officiating as a minister of the gospel to the Congregational church and society in West Stafford, afforded a favorable occasion for numbers above described, embracing his sentiments, whom he assiduously endeavored to indoctrinate, and inspire with a zeal worthy of a better cause.

Mr. Foster came on to the stage in those times in which many

* Mr. Foster was settled in West Stafford, October 31, 1764.

confessedly entered the ministry, who gave no evidence of piety. Having no root in themselves they very naturally fell away; and when they abandon the true faith, if they continue their profession, they will of course appear "zealous for the law," and quote scripture perhaps as readily as did the "father of lies" to sustain his anti-scriptural positions. Mr. Foster apostatized about the year 1780, and died March, 1807.

Many from this parish attended on his preaching, and at length formed the nucleus of a Universalist society in this part of the town.

Thus the roots of the poisonous tree threw up their sprouts at a distance; and these continued to thrive awhile after the old stalk had disappeared from the earth.

Up to this time, all individuals in the parish were taxable for the support of the Congregational order, unless they had declared themselves under another name. Hitherto those shoots; just referred to, were mere saplings, and had not attracted much notice; though it was evident that there was a growing disrelish for the truth, which would soon become sufficiently mature to induce many to seek a plausible pretext to sever themselves therefrom.

An occasion was found, at the death of Dr. Willard, in the demand of *one thousand dollars*, which his estate had upon the Society for arrearage salary. This debt, however, was soon liquidated; but its existence, viewed in connection with a previous tax, levied on the whole society, to defray meeting-house expenses, alarmed many, who seceded.*

All seceders being under the necessity of assuming a denominational title, that they might be recognized in law, as something, a few joined themselves to the Methodist meeting, of which there had sometime been a germ, the most called themselves Baptists.

Thus the Congregational Society became broken, confused, and well nigh destroyed.

We have now, perhaps, come upon the darkest period of our history. The Congregational meeting-house was still the rally-

* There was a series of litigations in connection with this tax which threw heavy cost upon the society, besides disaffecting many individuals.

ing point of the whole parish, in all its now diversified names. Three denominations centered there, Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists, the two latter having been considerably increased by seceding members from the first : but having probably gained more apparent than real strength. For, as it appeared, they had been deceived in the character of their new associates.* It was now, that this church and society, perplexed and weighed down with debt, were about to sell themselves ; or perhaps, more truly, though unwittingly, to commit suicide. They listened to a proposal to join the Baptists, in hiring or settling a minister of that denomination ; and the proposition was rejected by a majority of only one. The plan, with those who heard to it, was a mere expediency ; but its result, if adopted, they had not sufficiently weighed. It must have proved disastrous to the church, and to the peace and spiritual prosperity of their families.

An agreement had been entered into by the two denominations, to hear each other's candidate, and then, if possible, to unite in giving a call to one of them.

The Baptist candidate had been heard as long as their funds, raised for the purpose, lasted.

It was at the expiration of his term, that the above-named vote was taken and decided against him by the one majority. When, however, a movement was made to procure a Congregational candidate, that all might listen to him, according to a previous understanding, if the first should not be concurred in, the Baptists withdrew ; and, together with the above named seceders from the "standing order," set up meetings in a neighboring tavern hall. They soon after, in conjunction, erected the present Universalist meeting-house on the hill. When this was done, the true Baptists found themselves in the minority by about one third.

For the majority, most of whom had gone out from the Congregational Society, probably more from a disrelish of sound doctrine than any other cause, and had adopted a Baptist name as a sort of passport, now changed their colors and appeared as *Universalists*.

* It would be more agreeable to the author's feelings to have less necessity for speaking of other denominations ; but so involved is our history with their's, that reverence to them is unavoidable. And history demands the truth.

The minority now saw no alternative but to choose the least of two evils. Accordingly, they very wisely abandoned their new associates, so dearly bought, and left their meeting-house property to desecration—the almost infallible issue of such a game.

About this time a proposal was made, and a committee appointed on both sides, to effect a re-union between the now Universalist party and the old society. But, as nothing would effect it, but a compromise of principle on the part of the latter, the project was abandoned.

To this, things had come, in the embarrassing interval after the decease of Rev. Dr. Willard, and before the settlement of another minister.

This interval was about *ten years and a half*.

But, although these occurrences were very threatening and discouraging, and apparently weakening, they were, in fact, the merciful siftings and prunings of divine Providence.

The previous state of things had mingled all in one mass. Yet, though a separation was necessary for the purity and peace of the church, that separation was painful to the flesh, and disheartening to the eye of sense. Still, in these very days of darkness and rebuke, the church had cause to sing of mercy and deliverance.

They had been preserved, in the providence of God, by a single voice, from a suicidal act; and, (though by an almost killing process,) God had sifted from their bosom, the enemies of sound doctrine and suffered them to assume a visible form without the camp. These, however, were days of sadness to the church; torn, and peeled, and prostrate, it was in the dust. During this interval, it had gradually declined and become so feeble, that there was scarcely an active male member to be found within its pale.

They sometimes were favored with preaching for a short time, then again were destitute.

Rev. Calvin Ingols was hired three years, to preach alternately here and in the West parish, they having contributed in part to support him.

But the church had no stated pastor to study, and watch, and pray for its interests, and regularly feed the flock. Its friends

diminished, its enemies increased. Yet the Lord did not forget his heritage and the vine of his own planting, but appeared in a signal manner for its salvation: and his people had reason to sing of mercy, in the language of the church of old, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side when men rose up against us; then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us; then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul; then the proud waters had gone over our soul. Blessed be the Lord who *hath not given us a prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we are escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*"

Yes, now came one of the "years of the right hand of the Most High." 1815 was a year of God's merciful visitation to this depressed and afflicted church. He revived his work and brought sinners into his kingdom. As the fruit of that revival, more than sixty individuals united with this church, "of whom part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep." It was then that prostrate Zion began to arise and strengthen herself in the Lord.

God had heard prayer and attended to the supplication of his chosen few; and they could seem to see the approaching fulfilment of the promise on which they had relied, "Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Strengthened and encouraged, they began to think of consecrating one to go in and out before them, as a guide and teacher; and, by the good hand of the Lord, they found one meeting their wishes, the Rev. Cyrus W. Gray, who was installed over them July 16th, 1817.* He was an efficient pastor; and he did much, in the four remaining years of his life, to establish the wavering, strengthen the feeble, and instruct the ignorant. He called the church to a thorough course of doctrinal training, for want of which they had long suffered, and which resulted in truly bringing them up in the holy faith and order of the gospel.

* Mr. Gray graduated at Williams College, and was first settled in Washington, Conn.

The society was assisted in his support by annual donations from the Connecticut Domestic Missionary Society, which was organized a little previous to this time. This assistance was continued several years, until, by the increased ability of the society, and the very praiseworthy liberality of a few, they found means to sustain the preached Gospel without foreign aid.

About this time it was put into the hearts of some members of the society, to endeavor to place their means on a permanent footing, by creating a fund, that should eventually pay nearly *two hundred* dollars annually, and thus raise them, in ordinary circumstances, above pecuniary exigences. While this pays but a little more than one-third of their yearly expenses, it is substantial aid, and better than twice the amount, because it leaves room for healthful action ; and much of it is derived from property that otherwise would have been lost to religious purposes. Thus, to some extent, that is brought into the service of the Lord, by voluntary subscription of the fathers, which would have been squandered by the sons, or bestowed upon error. Here, too, is the hand of the Lord to be seen, providing for his heritage. This little fund, in connection with a late liberal donation in meeting-house property,* the rent of which shall be available to the society, it would seem, should now place them beyond any necessity of pecuniary embarrassment.

Compare, now, present circumstances, in this respect, with those which we were a few moments since contemplating, and say, are we not compelled to exclaim, “Verily, what hath God wrought !” “When we were brought low, how hath he helped us !”

But returning to the period of Mr. Gray’s ministry—we find it brief—cut short in four years by the arrest of death. He died August 20th, 1821, peaceful in the faith of the Gospel he had so understandingly preached. There seems to have been no church records kept during his ministry or the ten years previous.†

* By Mr. Miner Grant, something more than *two thousand dollars*, including conference-house.

† Here I may add, the records are very meagre of almost the whole time under review. Dr. Willard kept very accurate note of all admissions, baptisms, &c. There is, however, only now and then a hint of the acts or state of the church. A

Rev. Hervey Smith was successor of Mr. Gray, as pastor of this church, installed October 1822, little more than one year after the death of the latter.* According to the best information, the church, at this time, consisted of between *seventy* and *eighty* members. Of these, some had removed from the place, others had become infirm, so that those who attended on the ordinances, did not probably exceed *fifty*.

Mr. Smith was a good man, and an affectionate pastor. But it does not appear that, during the eight years of his ministry here, more than about *ten* were added to the church on profession of their faith; fourteen or fifteen were received by letter. A protracted and painful dearth is sometimes experienced, even under a faithful ministry. This seems to have been the case after the revival of 1815. Of course, the congregation was just in the condition, at the time Mr. Moses B. Church became their minister, August 25th, 1831, to be most injuriously affected by the preaching of such a man. This was eminently a favorable season, "while men slept," for an "enemy to sow tares."

During the whole period from 1816 to 1831, though the faithful few had become consolidated and established in their doctrinal views, and remained unwavering, we look in vain for any special enlargement of Zion. Disaffection in regard to a secondary kind of fund, which an attempt had been made to raise, gave occasion for many to secede from the society, and the other denominations became more fully established.† Universalism, during this period, had reached its height in numbers and influence; and that influence was exerted for a number of years, very

great part of what I have here communicated, was treasured in the memories of those who will soon be in their graves.

It has required diligence, in culling from the scanty records, and conversing with those acquainted with facts, to produce any thing like a history. Yet so interesting has been the experience of this church and society, so worthy of memory the deeds of the fathers, and so illustrative of the care of God for his people is their history, it ought to be rescued from oblivion and recorded at least in the memories of the children, that they may appreciate the value of their inheritance and bless the name of the Lord.

* Mr. Smith graduated at Williams College.

† This was a temporary arrangement. An obligation was given by individuals to pay a certain sum for a number of years; and to rid themselves of it, some left the society.

destructively to the young, with whom flattery is usually successful, and to whom the promise of indulgence here, with no inconvenience hereafter, is peculiarly acceptable.

The unwearied endeavors that were made to cast odium upon a profession of religion and fellowship with the orthodox, deterred many of this class from the house of God, leading those, who from time to time became residents in the place, to feel that there could be no adherence to sound doctrine, without a sacrifice of popularity and a surrender of social and civil preferments. Thus this error sat like an incubus upon the cause of truth, and was corroding the piety of many. And Mr. Church was not the man to arrest the downward course of things. He possessed a strong mind, and a considerable sermonizing talent, so far as stating and defending what he considered to be truth was concerned; yet, he was so peculiarly watchful against every kind of religious awakening, he would probably have extinguished any kindling flame, and the beginning of a revival under him would have been quashed. Whether he was a regenerated man or not, and is a stray sheep from the fold of Christ to be restored and saved, is not for us to determine. Whether he is a monomaniac, or is only possessed of "madness in the heart," is uncertain. But he was constitutionally eccentric; hence it was conceded to him, as his prerogative, to do and say things, that, in other men, would have been irregular and very soon subjected their religious integrity to suspicion. It was for this reason that he retained the confidence of most of his people, for a time, after he became contaminated with German neology and rank infidelity. He at length avowed himself an enemy of the sacred ministry and the Bible, and did what he could, in the space of a few months, openly to disseminate his unhallowed principles.*

He succeeded in hastening some abettors of Universalism, to

*Mr. C.'s preaching, for several months, had seemed to be of a doubtful character, often containing sentiments novel, and evidently pernicious. He exchanged with a neighboring minister on the very day in which he publicly renounced his former faith. Long before this he had much intercourse with infidels, and read their productions extensively. After his dismissal from his people, he lectured in the neighborhood, and considerably to an infidel club in the city of New York, to whom he offered his future services. But, as, according to his own confession, he had received salary from his former charge after his change of sentiments, they rejected him as not sufficiently honest for their purpose.

the legitimate end of their belief, infidelity⁴; and in leading other secret infidels to avow their error; and in sowing seeds of skepticism, and, it is to be feared, of damnation, in some of the youth of the congregation. No member of the church, and no prominent member of the congregation, however, was found to sympathize with his sentiments, when in February 1837, he was deposed from the gospel ministry. But they gave him up with pity in their hearts for his erring, fallen state.

This was to the church "a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of blasphemy." The enemies of the truth were emboldened and elated, and its friends turned pale and began to falter. But God who had always appeared for them in times of darkness and peril, stood by to strengthen and encourage them.

And, although they could join with Israel of old, in saying, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept when we remembered Zion;" they could also say, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." There were some praying spirits, and they sought unto the God of Israel. There was consecrated property, and it was cheerfully pledged to the support of order and sound doctrine. The society resolved to struggle against the pressure of circumstances. Their late pastor had become a reproach to them, their sanctuary dilapidated, and those who had contributed to the support of the gospel, few. They succeeded, however, in getting their pulpit supplied by students of the Theological Institute of Connecticut, till one from that seminary, whom they had regularly chosen as their minister, came to reside with them in the following autumn, October 1837.

We might indulge ourselves here in looking at the abyss from which the church had just escaped. It is rare that a people escape such a vortex unharmed. But He, of whom it is said, "He shall deliver thee in six troubles, yea, in seven, no evil shall touch thee; in famine he shall redeem thee from death, and in war from the power of the sword; thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue, neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh," kept his flock from being scattered and devoured.

In the providence of God, a little previous to this, several individuals came to the place and engaged in business as permanent residents, whose hearts the Lord had opened to receive and love the truth; they now came forward and united their sympathies with those who had so long borne the burden and heat of the day, and encouraged them with their prayers and their alms.

The church, at this time, consisted of about *seventy* members, some of whom were absent, and others infirm, by reason of age and sickness.

The preaching, furnished from the Theological Institute during the summer, had operated favorably upon the spiritual interests of the congregation; and during the winter there was an increasing attention to preaching; some cases of awakening appeared among the impenitent; the church became more spiritual and active; and, through the whole year following, cases of conviction and conversion were occurring. As a result of this special visitation of mercy, the people of God were elevated and comforted; and, including a few who came recommended from abroad, about *thirty* were added to the church.

It was now felt that the interests of religion and the prosperity of the congregation demanded a more comfortable and inviting place of worship. Still the society delayed a year or two longer, as they had done before, being reluctant to enter upon the undertaking, both on account of difficulties always attendant on that enterprise, and the pecuniary circumstances of the society generally. It was exultingly proclaimed by opposers of the truth, that it could not be accomplished, and the society must dwindle and die through want of it.

But the Lord can call forth willing servants in every crisis; hence the work at length went forward.

Thus was erected, during the summer and autumn of 1839, a neat and commodious place of worship, and an excellent choir was organized, all contributing to the attractiveness and power of the sanctuary service.*

But let their survivors speak principally of the merit of the deeds of those who are now on the stage.

*The cost of the meeting-house and vestry was about \$4,500; and about \$300 was expended in the erection of sheds.

The new meeting-house was dedicated January 29, 1840 ; and, at the same time, the present pastor of this church was installed, having preached here, as stated supply, two years and a quarter. He commenced his labors, after his contract with the society, on the last Sabbath of October, 1837. His text A. M. was, "*Preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee ;*" and P. M., "*Take heed, therefore, how ye hear.*" May both he and they prayerfully meditate much on these texts, "not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth the word of God," and thus be prepared mutually to profit in this earthly temple, that we may together rejoice "before his throne, and serve him day and night in his temple," where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." From time to time, during the two years succeeding the building of the new sanctuary, individuals gave evidence of conversion and united with the church. On the whole, however, we were sinking into a state of apathy ; and the interesting class of youth among us were becoming thoughtless and trifling, and in some instances, skeptical ; then the Lord graciously interposed to arrest many of them in their career of folly and sin, by bringing them to repentance.

This revival commenced September 1842, and continued through the winter. Between *forty* and *fifty*, in the judgment of charity, became savingly acquainted with the Lord Jesus Christ, principally of the young ; and numbers of them have entered the church to occupy the places of the fathers and mothers in Israel, which we began to be painfully apprehensive were soon to be left without any to occupy them. One year after this revival the church numbered about *one hundred and forty members*, having doubled in six years.

There are facts connected with this revival, and occurring simultaneously with it, which, if they could be fully rehearsed, would greatly magnify the grace of God in our eyes—such as His ruling the spirit of disorder, so abundantly cherished in some revivals of the present day, threatening violently to "put asunder what God hath joined together," because "all his people," of both sexes, may not be "prophets" at will, and requiring the experienced in years, and in wisdom, and piety, to bow in silence to the teachings and revelations of babes in knowledge and experience ;

and also his thwarting devices of the enemy of righteousness to uproot the truth.

We cannot soon forget his interposition, at this time, to defeat an attempt to give preponderance, and even exclusiveness to avowed infidelity, and its foster error among us, in a growing section of the town, by an increase in property and in numbers; the establishment being headed by a bold infidel and sustained by men of capital.

We are not ignorant of the revolution caused in a few months, by an overruling Providence; how he confused their counsels, suffering the house to be divided against itself to its overthrow; casting that property and other valuable privileges directly into the hands of those, who, we trust, will not be the abettors of immorality and infidelity; nay, who are substantial helpers to the truth—thus “taking the wise in their own craftiness, and carrying the counsels of the wicked headlong.” Who but God can interfere thus to break up fountains of corruption and put them in a condition to send forth healing streams? Surely “it is the Lord’s doing;” and we would note it as a signal proof that in critical emergencies he will vindicate his cause, even if it be by arising “to shake terribly the earth.” If he thus work, by sending forth his command “to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy,” “who shall let it?” What, before Him, shall be all the fortresses of error, and the mighty engines of heresy! How easily he can convert the funds of infidelity, and the costly edifices of the Man of Sin, in our land, into means of extending and perpetuating the cause of truth. The church of Christ will soon find use for these funds and edifices, as, through the prayers and labors of his friends, it shall extend its irresistible influence abroad. Let, then, the abettors of error remember, while they are contributing for the purpose of establishing falsehood, that, by the word of the Lord, they shall be made the unwilling supporters of the cause they hate.

There is, by no means, a want of facts, standing out prominently in the history of this church, to show that “The Lord is known by the judgments which he executeth, while the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands;” and to lead us to realize how safe it is to “abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

Let me here, however, throw out a caution against ever being lifted up with success, or becoming insolent towards the abettors of a bad cause ; for then the Lord would cast us down, and cover us with reproach. He does not so signally interpose for *our sake*, but for his own *name's sake*, and for the sake of Jerusalem which he hath chosen. Let tenderness and pity fill our hearts for the deluded, while we endeavor to win them to the truth.

By humbly, and prayerfully, and faithfully demeaning ourselves, we may be permitted to see greater things than these. True, the immediate future may be fraught with apparent reverses. The enemies of Zion may rally for a time, and strengthen themselves against her ; but remember who has said, "*the triumphing of the wicked is short.*" There may be deep waters for us yet to pass through ; but remember who has said, "*they shall not overflow thee.*" Let us encourage ourselves *in the Lord*, and not in our fancied merit or might. Let us ponder wisely the proofs we have, in our experience, of the care of the great Head of the Church for his cause ; weigh well the evidence which appears in our history, that the Lord "*has been our help,*" and resolve that *under the shadow of his wing we WILL REJOICE.*

