

A Visit to Albany

[slightly abridged]

New-York, March 24, 1856

BR. AUSTIN:—

You ask, “Would it not be well, in case you have been to Albany, to write an article stating the condition in which you found things, and advising what had better be done.”

I confess my great reluctance, almost repugnance, at this business of pushing private and local matters before the public through the medium of newspapers. There are many better ways to settle personal difficulties, to reconcile social differences, and boast one’s self a little, if desired; and much better food can be served to the readers of public journals... And besides, very little good is one to the parties interested. The public exposure of what *seems* to be an error in others, does not often help to correct it, and to magnify differences and discuss their causes, does not generally serve to reconcile and edify brethren... We boast that we have no censorship of the press. The Press, in turn, should assume no cen-*sure*—ship of private conduct.

Of course you will expect me to say little of the condition of things in Albany. In fact, there is little need to be said, for the simple reason that there is little to say; and had nothing been said in the papers, East or West, there would have been much less to comment upon.

The sum and substance of the whole affair, as near as I could learn, is this:—For several years the Universalist and Unitarian Societies in the good old Knickerbocker city of Albany have been “living at a poor dying rate,” hardly able to keep their heads above water. Several months ago some *liberal* minded men in both Societies, satisfied of what has often been said in private and public, and what is true in fact, that there is no great difference in the religious opinions of Unitarians and Universalists, bethought themselves that the two might unite and make one strong, useful and prosperous Society. The matter was talked over and very generally approved, and steps were taken accordingly. Among the first objects, a preacher was to be sought who was qualified for such a position, but who was not bigoted in his attachment to *either* sect. Br. Mayo was selected, and all seemed to promise fair. A few there might have been who doubted the wisdom of such a union, not because of any real unsuitableness in the parties, but like Jews, Catholics and Quakers, who do not allow their people to marry outside their communions, because it is against their *established order*...

Waiving all figure, there seems to be no disposition for contention among the good people of Albany. A difference of opinion exists as to the course of action; but I heard not a word of unkindness uttered by anyone, except in respect to outside doings. Portions of both Societies are united under Br. Mayo, and those who are left of the Universalists express no dislike to[ward] him. But they would prefer he should [would] preach in their house a part of the time... And there may be some Unitarians who are *socially* too undemocratic to approve so liberal a work. But were both churches sold, and a new one built in a better location, I have no doubt the cause of truth and salvation would be better promoted, and more love and unity abound than in times past. Both churches are encumbered with debt, and neither is conveniently situated. Apart they may struggle on and die. United they may live and prosper.

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I am as fond of our denominational name as anybody, but I had rather have the great truth we embrace preached under any other, than to have ours disgraced with a narrow and bigoted reserve, which precludes all light and all improvement, and binds us to the precise notions of those who have gone before us. We are too young to talk of "our Fathers" as exclusive teachers of God's truth, and expounders of his word. Such superstitious respect has been the bane of religious growth in all ages. I feel a strong attachment to the Universalists and to the cause in Albany. It was the place of my first settlement as a preacher, and I was their first pastor, and helped to organize their Society. I do not know whether that precise organization remains, and do not care... I do long and pray for the time to come when *Principles*, not names, Character and not pretensions, shall be sought and sustained as Christianity; when men shall be willing to see and fellowship truth, and goodness, outside the treadmill of sectarian organizations... Shall the two sects, claiming to be Liberal Christians *par excellence*, stand aloof from unity, and put up their backs at the first call for a little self-sacrifice? What will the world think to see men who profess *love* and *liberality* so narrow, bigoted, selfish, ambitious of party, and most hostile to those who approach nearest to them? Especially if they profess universal love, believe that alone can conquer and *will* overcome all hatred, all animosity, all evil, and reconcile the world to God, how sadly, how darkly does the contrast appear, when harsh words, unkind looks, and cold treatment marks their conduct toward each other, and toward them that are without?

Pardon me, my brother, if this means more than Albany. I would that all should live in love and harmony, and so honor Christ.

W. S. B. [William S. Balch]

☞ Will those of our denominational papers which have published articles in regard to the Albany difficulties, have the kindness to insert the above:—[Ed. Amb.]

Christian Ambassador, Auburn NY, Sat. 5 Apr 1856

Transcribed on 14 Jul 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY