

An Outline of the History of the Berry Street Ministerial Conference

(Founded by William Ellery Channing in 1820)

By

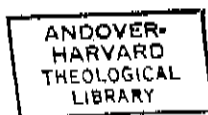
PROFESSOR CHARLES LYTTLE

The Berry Street Ministerial Conference is unique among Unitarian institutions. It is the professional legacy of William Ellery Channing to his successors in the Liberal ministry. It is, moreover, the oldest Unitarian institution; and the only one that has traversed so many decades with name and purpose and spirit practically unchanged. Furthermore, the restriction of its privileges to Liberal ministers was for many years the only exclusive sign of their Order and their only bond of vocational unity. Even today it retains enough of the literary and theological atmosphere of its origin to justify and ensure its continuance. The simple but strictly observed conventions of its procedure; its unquestioned intellectual dignity; its century roster of essayists; its dedication to the acumen, integrity and candor of the human mind in quest of a rational religion have seemed to say to Liberal ministers who have gone up to the May meetings year after year as "spiritual rendezvous": "By your commitment to the principles of liberty, honesty and love in religion you share the spirit, you enter the comradeship of many wise and noble servants and teachers of man; philosophers, poets, reformers, whose renown is the measure of their consecration; whose genius and whose gospel were one."

Some years ago the records of the Conference were lost in transit from an outgoing Scribe to his successor in office. I was asked by the Conference to re-construct its minutes from the beginning. On the basis of reports of the sessions and digests of the essays in various periodicals, both secular and religious, I made such a re-construction, and in June, 1927, placed a copy in the hands of the Scribe, another in the care of the Librarian of the American Unitarian Association. Because of the poverty of material, this reconstruction, year by year, was far from complete. It revealed, however, many things of interest, and occasioned the hope that a sketch of the history of the Conference might some time be written, as well as a survey of the theological evolution of our movement from the evidence offered by the significant addresses of the past century. As soon as the library of our School is recovered from storage and made available, such a survey will be made. Meanwhile the following sketch of the external fortunes of the Conference has been prepared.

Let us hope it was a pleasant May evening, that of Tuesday, the eve of Election Day, 1820, when a large number of the ministers of the Commonwealth denominated 'Liberal' made their way to the door of the newly acquired Vestry of the Federal Street Church of Boston. This Vestry, a plain, commodious building on Berry Street, behind the Church, was customarily used for meetings devoted to beneficence and religious education. The first meeting of what was later to be known as the Ministerial Conference in Berry Street must have taxed its modest capacity. This first meeting had been carefully planned beforehand, not alone by Rev. Mr. Channing but by others of his thinking; for in the address which followed the prayer by Rev. Joseph Flint of Bridgewater, Mr. Channing let it be known that "it was thought by *some of us* that the ministers of this Commonwealth who are known to agree in what are called Liberal and Catholic views of Christianity needed a bond of union, a means of intercourse, an opportunity of conference not yet enjoyed". These words might be taken as the preamble of the unwritten constitution of the body. It is evident that "some of us" wished to enlarge the fraternity of Liberal ministers of Boston and its vicinity to include all congenial spirits coming up to the annual meetings of Anniversary Week. This was one measure of that energetic, almost evangelical, fervor which had obtained a theological foundation in Harvard (1816), promoted and published the Baltimore Ordination Sermon (1819), a Liberal periodical (*The Christian Disciple*, 1813), and now proposed to induce the Liberal ministers of the whole State "to join their prayers and counsels, to report the state and prospects of religion in different parts of the Commonwealth, to communicate successful means of advancing it, to give warning of dangers not generally apprehended, to seek advice in difficulties, to take a broad survey of our ecclesiastical affairs and the wants of our churches, in order that much light, strength, comfort, animation, zeal should be spread through our body". Other objectives were to be "brotherly love . . . joint exertion . . . more earnest co-operation . . . the power of associated numbers, as far as consists with the free, upright, independent spirit of religion". The practical, even aggressive, aims of the meeting are obvious. Indeed, such an intention and such an atmosphere are plainly dominant during the early years of the Conference, before the organization of the American Unitarian Association. In his opening address—from which I have been quoting—Channing stressed the fact that "the Christian religion is, in a particular manner, committed to the care, watchfulness, protection of ministers"; a position that he held with increasing conviction and fervor. He may have hoped the Conference would gradually assume, in a judicial, unsectarian way, the functions later assigned to the American Unitarian Association, whose founding he rather hesitantly approved.

Four



In any case, his opening address was a well-reasoned and nobly worded summons; and it is of the highest significance that the problem it dealt with has remained one of vital interest through the century: "How far is Reason to be used in explaining Revelation?" In this challenge he found the source of division between Orthodox and Liberal. "An irrational form of religion cannot support itself against the advances of intelligence"; "rational views are more suited than the so-called Orthodox, to reconcile men's hearts to God, to purify and exalt human nature, to advance charity and philanthropy. . . .".

The address and its proposals met with favor, and the meeting adjourned to Wednesday evening, "when much interesting and profitable discussion was had on the state and prospects of religion. A similar meeting was appointed for next year, to be holden on the morning of Election Day at eight o'clock".

What may well be regarded as the constitution of the Conference was formulated in the following articles:

- (1) There shall be an annual meeting in Election Week for mutual improvement in pastoral duty and for the promoting of Christian truth and holiness.
- (2) At each meeting a Moderator and a Scribe shall be chosen by nomination.
- (3) One of the brethren shall offer a prayer and another shall deliver an address suited to the objects of the meeting, it being understood that these services shall be short, so as to leave time for the other exercises.
- (4) Each brother shall be requested to report the state and prospects of religion in his vicinity and to suggest any measures for promoting truth and practical piety which the circumstances of the times may seem to require, or which his own experience or observation may have led him to approve.
- (5) Any brother shall be authorized to propose for discussion any plan for advancing ministerial usefulness, for uniting our efforts in the common cause, and in general for spreading the knowledge and spirit of Christianity.
- (6) At each meeting a committee of three shall be appointed to select the persons who shall officiate at the next meeting, to assign the subject of the address, to use such means as they shall deem expedient for ensuring a general attendance, and to report such measures as shall seem to them fitted to increase the usefulness of the meeting. The Moderator and the Scribe shall be, *ex-officio*, members of this committee. (1)

The venture began well. Announced for 1821 (2) for "8½ A. M. precisely", a prayer was to be offered and an address delivered on "The Prevalent Defects of Liberal Ministers". In order that there

(1) *Christian Disciple*, 1820, page 230.

(2) *Christian Disciple*, 1821, page 158.

Five

might be a good attendance at this opening gun of our historic and unique campaign of self-criticism and censure, it was "hoped and requested that the brethren will be general and punctual in their attendance", so as to make the meeting "as interesting and profitable as possible".

What the response was to this genial invitation by the Committee "to come and hear all your faults" is uncertain, for apparently no report was given to the press. The negative tone did not, however, discourage continuance of the plan, for in 1822 an excellent address⁽¹⁾ was delivered by Rev. Joseph Tuckerman on "The Difficulties of the Christian Minister in the Present Period"; it was voted that the style of the meeting should be "The Ministerial Conference in Berry Street"; and in an evening session, inquiry having been made, agreeably to the rule, on the state of religion in the land, remarks were offered by Revs. Mr. Goodwin of Sandwich, Bates of Bristol, R. I., Mr. Walker of Charlestown and Dr. Ripley (then Moderator) of Concord, Massachusetts. A curious sidelight on the inner life of the meeting is cast by the motion adding to the Rules of the Conference the provision that "no question relating to the private concerns of any minister shall be discussed until a vote has been taken without debate whether the meeting will consider it or not".⁽²⁾

The Ministerial Conference in Berry Street is now an established institution, although all the hopes entertained for it by Dr. Channing and "some of us" are not yet fulfilled, and may never be. I shall not linger over the details of the next few years. The meetings from 1822 on contained with considerable regularity the features already indicated; an address on an assigned topic, always pertinent to the minister's calling and duties⁽³⁾; reports on the state of religion in

(1) Published in the *Christian Disciple*, 1822, page 153; meeting reported on page 219.

(2) The practical interest of the Conference, foreshadowing the purposes of the American Unitarian Association, is to be seen in the appointment of "a committee to consider what methods may be adopted by this Conference for a more effectual extension of religious publications".

(3) Cp. the address in 1823 on "The Means to be used by Ministers in giving the young adequate views of the nature and importance of true Christianity". These are to consist of, briefly stated, (1) a series of discourses to his congregation; (2) the cultivation of a spirit of inquiry among young minds . . . but not litigiousness, for this is hostile to rational, practical Christianity; (3) forming a young men's class, using a syllabus of Priestley's Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion and his Corruptions of Christianity "in order to counteract our brethren of the five points who use the Westminster Catechism, and sow, together with the good seeds of life, the tares of human speculation and traditional error"; (4) giving parents manuals and catechisms for home use; (5) putting interesting books and tracts into hands of schoolmasters and mistresses; (6) starting a periodical intended for the use of the young; (7) help support a publishing fund; (8) encouraging a faithful translation of the New Testament, with Griesbach's Commentary,

different parts of New England; occasional resolutions dealing with such matters as a new commentary on the Scriptures⁽¹⁾ or on the publication and distribution of tracts. Twice in four years the Standing (*sic*) Committee saw fit to assign as the theme of the annual address the responsibility of the Liberal minister to bear himself with high moral integrity and consecration. Alternating with Dr. Ezra Ripley of Concord, Dr. Aaron Bancroft of Worcester began his long service as Moderator (annually elected), from 1824 to 1838, saving 1827, when he gave the address. In 1826, after an eloquent presentation by Professor Henry Ware, Sr., of the State of Christianity in India, it was resolved, on motion of Dr. Tuckerman of Chelsea, that every Unitarian minister be earnestly requested to communicate to his people all the information he has relative to the promotion of Christianity in India and to forward funds raised from such appeals to the "Society for Obtaining Information Concerning the State of Religion in India". In 1827 revivalism, promoted in Boston by Dr. Lyman Beecher, and imitated throughout New England, formed the topic of the address and the ensuing discussion, Rev. Mr. Keene of New Hampshire being especially anxious to know how to cope with it, and Dr. Abbott of Beverly responding out of his rich experience. The Conference also discussed the advisability of Juvenile Libraries in the churches, and a committee was appointed to prepare a list of suitable books, which was painstakingly done and presented to the brethren in 1828.⁽³⁾

"to offset the influence of Scott's Family Bible, which is breeding up young Calvinists in every family".—(*Christian Disciple*, 1823, page 161.)

(1) *Christian Register*, 1826, page 86; *Christian Examiner*, page 259.

(3) Perhaps the most weighty episode of these years, although it did not form a part of the recorded action of the Conference, was the announcement made to the brethren in 1825 of the inclination of some of their younger colleagues to "form a new association, to be called the American Unitarian Society. The chief and ultimate object will be the promotion of pure and undefiled religion, by disseminating the knowledge of it where adequate means of religious instruction are not enjoyed. A secondary good which will follow from it is the union of all Unitarian Christians in this country so that they would become mutually acquainted, and the concentration of their efforts would increase their efficiency. The society will embrace all Unitarian Christians in the United States. Its operations would extend themselves through the whole country. These operations would consist chiefly in the publication and distribution of tracts and the support of missionaries".—(*Christian Disciple*, 1825.)

The Scribe of the Conference, Rev. Henry Ware, Jr., elaborated this proposal, and informed the meeting of one to be held in the afternoon in the same place (though with a different chairman) for further consideration of the plan. Since the meeting in the afternoon was marked by practical unanimity (in contrast with previous efforts) it may be assumed that the Conference gave the inception of the American Unitarian Association an unmistakable endorsement, though it proved to be also an abrogation of certain functions of useful service that Dr. Channing had projected for the Conference itself.

In 1832 more than one hundred ministers were present, although from 1829 the meetings had been put back to eight A. M. They listened to an address by Professor Palfrey of Cambridge on "The Duty of Ministers to interest themselves in providing a further supply of Candidates for the Ministry", and accorded it "an animated discussion". This is the first of several discussions on the theme, for the inability of Unitarianism, which has grown more marked, to supply its pulpits with its own sons, had even then manifested itself by seriously checking the rate of growth of the Liberal movement. It was not clearly seen that the critical, cautious, logical frame of mind that prevailed in the average Unitarian household was inimical to the emotionalism which swept the children of Calvinism into the orthodox seminaries and pulpits. This deficiency, if it be such, has never been successfully repaired, and is probably one of the main causes for the slow growth in the number of Liberal churches and members; the virtue of the defect being found in the vast secular evangelization through teaching and the press.

The meeting of 1832 witnessed a signal change in the nature of the discussion following comment on the address. The constitution had provided for reports of the state of religion in various parts of the Commonwealth. This feature had presumably lapsed, for a resolution was now passed that "it be a rule of the Conference that when its business is concluded, the members will resolve themselves into a meeting for conversation on the duties of the clerical profession". Such a conversation was held until half past one o'clock, the Scribe (Rev. Samuel Barrett) reporting "a delightful interchange of thought and feeling on a great variety of topics of deepest concern to the profession".⁽¹⁾ Could Emerson's attitude toward prayer and the Lord's Supper have entered into this conversation? Did the disestablishment of the Town churches (effected in 1833) have a place? At any rate the Scribe was so deeply moved that he inserted in the Register one of the few expressions of emotion to be found in our chronicle, "God grant that every member may be faithful to the trust committed to him by the great Head of the Church!"⁽²⁾

A desire expressed in 1832 "to devote the time to questions of a practical interest rather than to topics of a speculative or dogmatic character" might be regarded as determining the sessions from 1833 to 1837, which were so well attended that it was necessary to forsake the Vestry in Berry Street and gather in the Salon of the Odeon. In 1833 and 1835 we know that these topics proved so

(1) *Christian Register*, 1832, page 86. In 1831 between 80 and 90 ministers were present, "bad as the weather happened to be". The new arrangement for taking tea together in the rooms over the Vestry was attractive.

(2) *Christian Register*, 1835, page 170.

absorbing that the discussion continued all Wednesday and was resumed on Thursday morning. The craving for practicality was singularly gratified in 1836 by Dr. James Walker's address on "Real or Alleged Defects in the Preaching of Unitarian Ministers". How pertinent for later years his two chief criticisms sound: (1) "Unitarian ministers shoot over the heads of their hearers"; (2) "they do not address themselves enough to the feelings of their audience". With respect to the accusation that they display their learning, he observed that "a little more learning might not be amiss", but it is well to "avoid essays on metaphysical or spiritual themes". Cultivate "repressed passion" by appealing to "the sense of Right, to the disinterested affections, to the longing desire for immortality". "Consider that to produce the full effect of their doctrines they shall not deliver them as traditions, but are to feel these truths, to live them, to reproduce them in their own minds!"⁽¹⁾ Is it not appalling to perceive that at least one of our bad habits is over a hundred years old?

It is distressing to learn that the brethren elected, in 1837, to adjourn from the Berry Street Vestry to the Saloon (sic!) of the Odeon, although it should be said that it was for convenience' sake only. When assembled there, they discussed a report given by Dr. Whitman of Portland on the subject of presenting the importance of missionary effort directly to our parishes. Then, as now, the members of the local churches rarely, if ever, had their responsibility for missionary effort in the West and South brought home to them, although much was said and money was solicited at the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association. Nothing appears to have been done about the report. Of much the same purport, however, and possibly a logical sequence, was the "animated discussion held upon the project of a theological school in the West", participated in by the Rev. Drs. Ripley, Walker and Pierce, and Rev. Messrs. Sullivan, Allen of Bolton, Whitman of Billerica, Dr. Kendall of Plymouth, Lothrop of Boston, Bulfinch, Stetson of Medford, Hedge of Bangor, Ripley and Pierpont of Boston.⁽²⁾ This subject was academic, indeed, in comparison with the problem proposed for discussion at the meeting in 1838, "The mode in which we ought to treat Infidelity and Infidels". It should be recalled that the prosecution of Abner Kneeland, beginning in 1834, had culminated in 1839 in a sentence of two months in prison. To obtain the remission of this sentence, as a denial of religious freedom, 167 citizens of Boston, headed by William Ellery Channing, petitioned the Governor who, like another of more recent days, sacrificed the gospel to the law, and Kneeland served the sentence. What could be

(1) *Christian Register*, 1836, page 86.

(2) *Christian Register*, 1837, page 87.

expected but to find that in the Conference, "animated and interesting remarks were made by Drs. Channing, Walker, Parkman, George Ripley, O. A. Brownson, F. A. Farley of Brooklyn" and others. If only we had an explicit account of these remarks! Fortunately, wise old Dr. Bancroft was Moderator at this meeting—his last, for he died in 1839. But even while this "animated discussion" was going on, Emerson in the Concord meadows and woodland paths was meditating "infidelity" that eclipsed Kneeland completely (the Divinity School Address, July, 1838). When we search to read what the brethren of the Conference of 1839 thought of "the latest form of infidelity" we are rewarded with silence! Was the discussion too "animated" for print? (1)

Theodore Parker's *Journal* gives us a glimpse of the meeting of 1840, which had been announced in the *Register* (1840, page 83) but not reported later. Parker says: "The following proposition was discussed: 'Ought differences of opinion on the value and authority of miracles to exclude men from Christian fellowship and from sympathy with one another?' I was not a little horrified to think a doubt could be raised; but men went so far as to ask if it were proper to exchange with one another if they differed on this question! This is the nineteenth century—this is Boston—this among Unitarians! Some good speeches were made by Ripley (2) Stetson and Hedge quite to the advantage of the New School, but the fundamental questions were untouched. I wished to disenchant men of their delusions, but could not. However, they all parted in peace and with this conclusion: that though there were differences of opinion, there was yet no cause for withholding Christian sympathy—a result they might as well have brought with them as gathered from such a discussion. For my own part, I intend, in the coming year, to let out all the force of Transcendentalism that is in me. Come what will come, I will let off the Truth as fast as it comes!" (3) Was not the South Boston Sermon on "The Transient

(1) *Ibid.*, 1838, page 86. Theodore Parker, who heard the address, deemed it "the noblest, most inspiring strain I ever listened to". (*Life of Parker*, by O. B. Frothingham, page 106.) Edward Everett Hale, in the College, thought it "in singularly bad taste. . . I did not like it at all!" (He was then a Junior, aged 16.) (*E. Hale, Life of E. E. Hale*, I, 122.) The Dean of the Divinity School said: "The part which was not folly was downright atheism!"

(2) George R. Ripley of Boston, who soon resigned his pulpit to establish the Brook Farm Community.

(3) J. Weiss, *Life of Theodore Parker*, I, page 155. The Journals of Parker are, like the manuscripts of Channing, among the lost literary treasures of our movement. The only portions of any value of which I have knowledge are in the possession of Rev. John Haynes Holmes of New York City.

and Permanent in Christianity" (May, 1841) the climax of this year of radical ebullition on the part of Parker? May not the Conference session have been the stone that started the geyser of Truth gushing with such dramatic effect?

Possibly the phenomenal attendance of 1841 was due to the sensation aroused by the great Sermon. (1) But the Standing Committee had already devised a program quite remote from such theological thunderbolts. A Committee reported on the two projects of (1) a new translation and commentary of the New Testament; and (2) raising a fund of \$10,000 for the Theological School in Cambridge, which was evidently in financial straits, since the indigence of its students came up for consideration in 1842. There was "animated discussion" (a stock phrase of the Conference Scribes!) on the question proposed by the Committee: "Are we accomplishing the results which, all things considered, we ought to effect; and, if not, what and how can we do more and do better?" But if the attendance was large in 1841, in 1842 (the year of Channing's death!) it was so great as to necessitate resorting to the Salon of the Odeon, where, after "an admirable performance" by Rev. Dr. Lamson of Dedham on "The Value and Uses of Ecclesiastical History to the Minister" the Standing Committee took the bull by the horns and proposed for discussion: "Is there anything in the experience of Liberal Christians which tends to favor the introduction of new and extraordinary means of awakening religious interest?" Since Dr. S. K. Lothrop of Boston was the senior member of the Standing Committee and Parker's most persistent, even acrimonious opponent as well, it seems more than likely that the question was meant as a tilt against the famous Sermon. Whether or not this was the case, many of the brethren were heard on the subject, among them being Huntoon of Holland, Cole, Whitman, Clarke of Boston, Muzzey, May of Scituate, Osgood of Providence, Brownson, Bigelow, Thurston, Stetson, Hedge, Palfrey of Grafton, Miles of Lowell; and the session was resumed on Wednesday afternoon! (2)

Specific evidence is lacking; so that only conjecture can be offered to explain the change of location in 1843 to the Supreme Court Room of the new Court House: was the latter a more central location in southward moving Boston or was the attendance upon the meetings, due to the persecution of Parker, too large for the old Vestry or the Odeon Salon? Another change of location came in 1844, when the "Berry Street Conference of Congregational Clergymen" was appointed for May 29 in the Room of the Mechanics Apprentices' Library, under the Swedenborgian Chapel in Phillips

(1) *Christian Register*, 1841, page 86. Preached May 19.

(2) *Ibid.*, 1842, page 86.

Place, Tremont St., nearly opposite King's Chapel. (1) Perfection had not yet crowned Unitarian homiletics in spite of the several addresses devoted to its faults in the twenty years and more of Conference history; so the brethren listened to another on "The Alleged Defects of Unitarian Preaching". They then turned to a matter of minor significance, no less than the Letter which a large number of Unitarian Clergymen of England had seen fit to address to their clerical co-religionists across the seas, reproaching them for their dilatory, even tolerant, attitude toward Slavery. "Some conversation, but no action". At an adjourned meeting of the Conference held on Thursday morning another matter of large portent was brought up: "The course which Unitarians should pursue toward other denominations that might be supposed to entertain similar opinions with their own". Events will show that the much mooted rapprochement with the "Christian Connection" which had materialized in the joint undertaking of Meadville Theological School was the potential target of this debate; for in 1845 Dr. Orville Dewey of New York City brought to the notice of the Conference, meeting in the New Jerusalem Chapel, a letter from Elder J. J. Harvey of the Christian Connection in Pennsylvania and spoke in favor of a cordial reply. This was granted in the resolution "that this Conference receives with pleasure the hand of fellowship thus stretched out to the religious society which it represents, and expresses in return its friendly and hearty sympathy with the Pennsylvania Christian Connection and with that Connection in general which denominates itself "Christian". The resolution was passed "with a most cordial and grateful unanimity", and the Scribe added in his report of the meeting: "We trust that the union and fellowship now formed between us and the great denomination of Christians will be confirmed and perpetuated and will be the harbinger of a general good-will among all the followers of Christ who call no man master". (2) Dr. Dewey having delivered "one of his greatest productions" on "The Rights, Claims and Duties of Opinion" (published in the *Christian Examiner*, 1845, page 82), a relevant subject was chosen for discussion: "In what manner should we deal with the prevailing views which doubt or deny the supernatural element in Christianity?"

Our records fail to say whether or not "an animated discussion" followed, but it is certain that in 1846 Theodore Parker did provoke

(1) *The Christian Examiner*, page 133: "Ministerial Conference". It is pertinent to emphasize the fact that, from the beginning the Conference never bore a name distinctively denominational, perhaps by design. "Liberal" is its own proper description.

(2) *Christian Register*, 1845, page 87. See *Monthly Religious Magazine*, 1845, page 214, for another report of the Conference, shedding additional light on the letter from the Christian Connection.

the same by introducing a ringing commitment of the Unitarian clergy against slavery. After the mild, urbane Rev. E. B. Hall of Providence had delivered an address on "The Relation of Christianity and Christian Ministers to Reforms", which was described as "a seasonable, fair, candid, truly Christian discourse, calling on Liberals to engage in a yet more faithful philanthropic and reformatory action than had hitherto distinguished them", the Conference received, and in the afternoon session, passed the following:

"WHEREAS, The sin of slavery has long existed and continually increased in the midst of us, and at this time has brought upon our land the evil and terrible sin also of war; therefore,

Resolved, That we, the members of this *Christian Conference*, (1) abhor the institution of slavery as it is now established in this land and supported by the government of the United States with the treasure and persons of the North no less than the South; that we count it alike un-Christian and at war with the noble nature of Man and the commandments of God; and that we mourn over the silence of our legislators and the deadness of our churches with respect to this alarming sin.

Resolved, That we lament the chastisement of a disgraceful and infamous war which our coldness, deadness and sin have brought upon us; that we of this Conference, as Christian ministers and in the presence of Almighty God, do solemnly pledge ourselves to use what ability we possess to rebuke and abolish the un-Christian spirit which has so long continued, deepened and extended that national sin; and that we will labor manfully to promote and spread abroad among the people the spirit of true, practical Christianity which is the spirit of freedom as opposed to all bondage; the spirit of peace and brotherhood as hostile to all war".

The passage of these unequivocal resolutions, moved by "Parker of Boston", is itself sufficient comment on the question thereafter chosen for discussion by the Conference: "What are the peculiar dangers at present to the character and standing of our body in relation to the exercise of liberty and freedom?" which was discussed with "candor and spirit" throughout the morning by several of the brethren (2) in speeches limited to ten minutes. It is to be hoped

(1) It is interesting to note that Parker here associates himself with the other Unitarian ministers as "Christian", although even Dr. Channing had doubts as to his right to be called such!

(2) Those participating were: The Rev. Messrs. Stetson, Simmons, Hedge, Parker, Frost of Concord, Osgood, Pierce, Clarke, G. B. Hall, Dr. Gannett, Conant, Livermore, Whitman, Folsom, etc. The chapel of the Church of the Savior in Bedford St. was used this year, and it was proposed to change the name "Ministerial Conference in Berry Street" since Berry Street had been renamed Channing Street, and the Conference no

that some one made an observation to the effect that the Resolution quoted, which constituted undoubtedly the nearest approach, so far as we have knowledge, that the Berry Street Conference ever made to the passionate humanitarianism of Jesus Christ was the inspiration of the very man to whom the epithet "Christian" had been vehemently denied by members of the Conference. (1)

The "Ministerial Conference" (2) did not allow such an approach to become an alliance! Following Mr. Parker's precedent, "several resolutions on the subjects of moral reform, peace, slavery, etc., were offered; after some time spent in debating whether it was agreeable to the character and objects of the Conference to pass resolutions expressive of opinions", the debate was closed by the adoption of a resolution presented by Rev. Mr. Morison of Milton: "This is not an ecclesiastical association for the passing of resolutions, but a ministerial conference for the discussion of subjects". In perfect but appalling consistency with such an attitude, the question chosen for the discussion was: "What is the comparative importance to the preacher of social reform on the one hand and the spiritual regeneration of the individual on the other; or can the promotion of the one be shown in effect to be the promotion of the other?" (3)

There are grounds for surmising that feeling was very intense with respect to the radical and humanitarian leanings of many members of the Conference, particularly those from outside Boston and New England, who did not share the metropolitan animus against Parker's religious and anti-slavery convictions. Feeling on both sides seems to have reached a climax in the meeting of 1848. Brother Samuel K. Lothrop was low in his spirits, as the title of his address indicated: "The Difficulties and Discouragements, the Duties and Responsibilities incident to our position as a Religious Body at the present day", a very "full, extended, frank and able address", in the view of the *Register* reporter. (4)

After resolutions had been passed inviting representatives of the Christian Connection present to take part in the discussion, (5) the question was debated: "How may our Clergy best obviate the

longer met in his old Vestry anyway! It is interesting to note that Dr. Bellows was delegated to the Christian Conference; and that Rev. Mr. Osgood got a committee appointed to collect documents relating to the history of Liberalism in a central depository.

(1) I have been able to find no evidence of an attempt to exclude Theodore Parker from the Berry Street Conference, however severe and general his ostracism from other denominational connections.

(2) This title, minus "Berry Street", was used in 1848. (*Christian Examiner*, 1848, page 157.)

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) *Christian Register*, 1848, page 91.

(5) *Christian Examiner*, 1848, page 152.

dangers that threaten to harm their influence and limit their usefulness?" It led the way to a very "earnest and eloquent" discussion, lasting until one o'clock. Those mentioned as taking part in it were Rev. Messrs. W. H. Channing, Theodore Parker, Sylvester Judd of Augusta and Samuel Osgood of Providence. Resumed at three P. M., the discussion was continued by Rev. Dr. Dewey of New York, Rev. Mr. Sullivan of Boston and Elder MacKinney of the Christian Connection. Of its course and content we are uninformed; but that it dealt with issues vital to the Conference and the denomination seems certain from the fact that it was prolonged on Thursday morning, when Rev. W. H. Channing, having moved that the subject which had been under discussion be laid on the table, offered the following Resolution: "That in fulfillment of the purposes of the body of ministers of this Commonwealth who, agreeing in *liberal and catholic views of Christianity*, formed in 1820 the Berry Street Conference, with the avowed end of *diffusing practical religion and the spirit of Christianity*, a committee be appointed to inquire whether some plan cannot be adopted by this Conference for promoting a *larger unity in spirit, truth and deed*, among Christians". The Resolution provoked wide and significant argument, participated in by Rev. J. F. Clarke, Rev. Dr. Orville Dewey, Rev. Mr. Bulfinch of Nashua, N. H., Rev. Prof. Noyes of Cambridge, Rev. Mr. Greene of South Brookfield. So important did the question seem that again on Thursday afternoon the Conference met, and finally, after further debate, adopted the Resolution of Mr. Channing and appointed the Committee, as follows: Channing, Gannett, Clarke, Osgood, Huntington, Stone of Salem and Lamson. (1)

It is evident that the radical and conservative tendencies of the Unitarian body came to grips in this session as never so briskly before. The radicals, admirers of Parker for the most part, were impatient with the sectarian and, so far as social reform, including anti-slavery was concerned, pusillanimous (as they thought) attitude of the conservatives. The conservatives, valuing the institutions of religion, preferring the deliberate, dispassionate methods of social reform, were resentful of the cocksure, impetuous and often censorious attitude of the radicals. The radicals came to the meetings with inflammatory resolutions and a hodge-podge theology; the

(1) For accounts of this meeting in 1848, see the *Christian Register*, same year, page 91; *Christian Examiner*, 1848, page 152.

Something should be said for the part played by James Freeman Clarke in support of W. H. Channing. It is significant for the understanding of the Resolution that after the former's motion to invite representatives of the Christian Connection, "similar motions were at once offered respecting clergymen of other denominations, but after some discussion they were laid on the table".

conservatives, in the eyes of the radicals, came preoccupied with the scholastic, biblical theology and complacent charitable zeal of a former age. Rev. Mr. Channing (the nephew), who was just completing the Memoir of his great uncle, the founder of the Conference, was by nature fitted to sympathize both with the intensely critical, humanitarian, self-consciously progressive party; and with the brethren inclined by temperament to think of religion as primarily a theological conviction and a mystical communion, expressed in church fellowships of a more or less unworldly atmosphere. To avert the disruption of the Conference, by the defection of this or that party; to avoid the purposeless wrangling which had come to occupy the sessions to the defeat of true fraternal unity and to enlarge the boundaries of the Conference by admitting the liberal-minded clergy of all denominations who might be disposed to participate, he entered the scene and occupied it for three years as reconciler and readjuster of points of view and plans of procedure. Let us pass to his interesting performance of these roles.

II.

One may judge of the sympathy of the Scribe, Rev. F. D. Huntington, later one of the faculty of the Theological School in Cambridge, and after that an Episcopal clergyman, with the radicals as one reads the opening sentence of his report in the *Christian Examiner* (1): "This meeting of brethren . . . which has lost somewhat of its former peaceful and devotional character by the introduction into it of a large variety of subjects of debate, was held on Wednesday morning, May 30, in the chapel of the Church of the Savior". The address, given by Dr. Ezra Stiles Gannett, Channing's colleague, was on "Theology", and he considered a doctrinal basis necessary to character and professional efficiency. He lamented the fact that so many enter the ministry without established views and achieve eminence by their literary or histrionic achievements, like an engineer who should spend his time sketching landscapes. He declared that New England audiences listened to no kind of preaching so readily as to clear expositions of truth. This he applied to the denomination: there are two ways of preserving a denomination, viz., doctrinal and ecclesiastical. Dr. Gannett believed in the kind of sectarianism which stressed insistently its peculiar theology, and he defined that of Unitarianism to be: "the belief in the existence and unity of God, the universality of his Providence, his Holiness and Love; the divine mission and authority of Jesus Christ; the certainty of retribution, the promise of immortality . . . never was a greater falsehood published than that our theology is negative or

(1) *Christian Examiner*, 1849, page 161. *Christian Register*, 1849, page 90.

that we deal in negations . . . the denial of the Trinity and the Atonement is no part of our theology, for the contents of a vessel is not what we pour out, but what we leave in. We have a Bible theology, and it is a shame to ignore it. Its moral power is its glory". His plea was, of course, for an "enlightened sectarianism which sustains true charity and repudiates bigots, who are men of no thorough liberal theological studies. In conclusion, he invoked the memory of departed brethren, the richness of whose spiritual character attested the truth of this theology, and he appealed for loyalty to it. (1)

The Address was followed by the Report of the Committee on the Reorganization of the Conference, read by Rev. W. H. Channing. The Committee had held two meetings, neither of which was fully attended, and had commissioned Mr. Channing to prepare the Report. Next to William Ellery Channing's original address this Report is the most interesting and revealing document of the Conference's history. It began with a brief reminder of the origin and character of the meetings. "It was formed from among Congregational ministers of Massachusetts shut out by theological jealousies from sympathy and intercourse with a large body of their so-called orthodox brethren". Agreeing in liberal and catholic views, to quote the language of the first address delivered before them, they prepared to meet during the Anniversary Week of each year, "not simply for the advancement of their particular opinions, but for the general diffusion of right religion and the spirit of Christianity. They wished to consult as to the best means for quickening in their own hearts, in their congregations, their neighborhoods and the world at large a holy and humane life. Since its first meeting in 1820 the Conference has assembled annually to hear an address from one of their number, and to treat such subjects of interest as were brought before them by the Executive Committee or by private members. These meetings have been for the most part attractive. Aged veterans, ripe laborers, young apostles in the service of a pure and progressive Christianity have come up year by year, drawn together by grateful memories and a good hope of spiritual refreshment. The temper of the body has been to a rare degree generous and just; the tone of its discussions courteous and truthful; and it would be difficult to find, in any part of Christendom, a larger assemblage of earnest, accomplished, influential persons gathered on so broad a ground of free thought, cordiality and honorable, independent fel-

(1) *Ibid.* The Memoir of Ezra Stiles Gannett by William Channing Gannett refers (page 252) to this Address as entitled "The Nature and Importance of our Theology", and E. S. Gannett's Journal refers to it as "poor, poor!" It is probable that Dr. Gannett had in mind certain ministers in the denomination who were criticising Unitarianism as cold and negative and encouraging to eccentrics. (See E. E. Hale, Life of J. F. Clarke, page 257.) F. D. Huntington was among them.

lowship. The opportunity thus gained is certainly a rich one, and should be worthily used. Congregating from distant quarters, instructed by a varied experience, uncommitted to theological partisanship, trammelled by no ecclesiastical fetters, admitting that the past has not satisfactorily solved the problem of man's destiny, aware that human societies are not yet formed after the ideal of human brotherhood, while assured that Providence inspires and guides the Church of God, that the divine life of Love will at last triumph over all modes of self-will, and that the advent of heaven on earth draws nigher—such a body of ministers of religion should make each season of conference an era marked by bright records of growth in goodness, of truth discovered, of fraternity victorious over worldly strife". (1)

On the basis of such a past, with the vision of such an opportunity, Mr. Channing proceeded to state first the position of the Conference: "It is here, One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; One God and Father of us all, Who is above all, and through all and in you all". Therein resides "the catholic unity of all Christians".

He then defined the purposes of the Conference meetings in practical form, adding to each function suggestions for its possible usefulness and development of such great interest and eloquence as to deserve the rather lengthy quotations I give in the foot-notes. The aim of the Conference placed first is, "as Ministers of religion to animate the power of holiness". (2)

(1) In the *Christian Register*, 1850, page 82, Mr. Channing's Report is printed in full. He interprets the appointment of the Committee as "due to a wish to increase the efficiency of the Conference by inquiring if some plan could be adopted for promoting a larger unity of the spirit in truth and deed among Christians. The unsectarian ground taken by this body in principle, though transiently it may be lost sight of in practice, might be more distinctly defined and a plain sign given of our desire for our reconciliation with all followers of our common Master . . . the catholic in spirit of all denominations to commune together . . . an attitude admirably corresponding with the wants and aspirations of the age". A similar craving for larger fellowship was the motive force of James Freeman Clarke's Church of the Disciples, then just founded; the first National Conference of 1865; Lincoln Center, Chicago; the Community Church, New York City. It is a signal phenomenon of Unitarianism illustrating the centripetal tendencies of our principles.

(2) This aim is accompanied by the exordium: "Is there not an aspiration stirring among this circle of brethren for a piety more genial and free, which shall blend Eastern contemplation and Greek joy; the Catholics' saintly communion with the Protestants' austere privacy; the rapture of the Methodists and the quietism of the Friends, all tempered by the Rationalists' enlightened conscience and glowingly fused in the Humanitarian's unlimited love for his race? "Do we not feel the need of meeting once in a year above all clouds of doubt and difference, on this high mount of vision?" Is this not the uncle's "Church Universal" in the nephew's language?

The second aim given is: "By free intercourse, to communicate the results of our solitary study" (1). The third, "as Ministers, to interpret the signs of the times". (2) By this method, "tastes will be gratified, unity will be provided in variety, we shall be organized into a living whole".

(1) An ideal of considerable scope and exaltation informed this definition, as the following words indicate: "A conviction, inspired it may be from a higher plane of thought, is widely spread, that in theology, as in other departments of science, we are nigh to the discovery of a grand central Truth, whose appearance will instantly reconcile Christians of every sect . . . a magnificent synthesis which shall vitally reconstruct what analysis has dis-severed. . . . Can we not here have an annual council wherein, by earnest inquiry and patient revision, we may gradually approximate to a credible creed and possibly arrive at a definite spiritual science?" To this end the ablest scholars that can be found are to be heard at this free Conference on the established truths and unsolved problems of religion, and the remaining hours will be occupied with the presentation of papers lucidly condensing the results of consecrated study and discussions in which "doubtful questions shall be manfully grappled with and intellect meet intellect fairly without apologies, professions of candor or other forms of fear or half-wayness. Thus may our annual meetings be made truly instructive and our published transactions become one streak of dawn amid the darkness of pervading ignorance".

(2) "There is no misunderstanding the Reform movement of the day. . . . Christians should, as a body, reclaim the vantage ground which, through formalism in piety, sectarian feuds and timid concessions to the usurping claims of statesmen and worldly managers, they have all but universally lost. The true position of a Christian congregation is to be the central conscience of the body politic . . . pulpits should be oracles, judging prevalent abuses, uttering warnings against popular delusions, prophetic with the best promise of the age. Now, to fulfill social duties devolving on us as chiefs in religion, we need to feel the incentive and check of a collective life of good will animating the brotherhood of which we are members. Loyalty is the counterpoise of Liberty. Tossed amid difficult circumstances, tried as by fire in this period of social convulsions, impelled onwards by a distinctive radicalism, crushed under enslaving conservatism, jostled on all sides by restlessness and change, we are mutually bound to uphold one another's honorable freedom by the support of our combined influence.

"Let not the apostles of God's truth by profession receive their spur or their chain, their messages of mercy or statutes of limitations, from the mob or monied aristocracy. It would be weak in the extreme to seek to dodge the responsibilities of an era pregnant like this with dread and hope by standing aloof in spiritual abstraction or by obsequious compromise with the rulers of the day. Let Ministers rather confer together as a real (whether or not an acknowledged) Estate of the realm; let them make out for themselves the law of their own conduct; let them send forth from their annual meeting words so dignified in integrity that they must command respect. The spiritual and the civil powers are to be reconciled throughout Christendom only by a firm re-assertion of the supremacy of moral over material interests. The collective voice of Christians is to be the next form under which will re-appear what the Papacy faintly symbolized—the headship of the Church in every State. With a view of doing what is in our power to fulfill this urgent want and truly sublime end, it is proposed"

Such lofty ideals and spacious prospects for the Conference, carrying conviction through their tacit flattery if not by their likelihood of execution, were given focus in five resolutions:

- (1) The position assumed by this Conference is, the catholic unity of Christians.
- (2) A meeting for spiritual communion shall be held by members of the Conference on Wednesday morning of Anniversary Week from 7½ o'clock until 9.
- (3) A meeting for free conference shall be held on Wednesday morning from 9 o'clock onward, when an address shall be presented on some topic of Theology, to be followed by the presentations of papers or by discussion; this meeting shall adjourn at one o'clock P. M.
- (4) A meeting for fraternal co-operation shall be held on Wednesday afternoon at 3 o'clock, which may also be adjourned to Thursday morning at 9 o'clock, when reports in relation to philanthropic movements and pastoral duty shall be offered and their subjects discussed; provided, that the meeting on Wednesday afternoon in all cases adjourn at 5 o'clock and the meeting on Thursday morning at 11 o'clock A. M.
- (5) The appointment of lecturers, the reception and use of papers and reports and the general direction of the meetings shall be the duties of the Executive Committee of the Conference as at present constituted.

As might be expected, an "animated discussion" followed this "elaborate and eloquent report", in which Drs. Parkman, Hall and Gannett; Messrs. Channing, Sawyer, Shackford, Judd, Niles, Huntton, Osgood, A. Hill, Morison, Pierpont, Burnap, Conant, Bacon and Bellows participated. Out of the *melée* of courage and caution the Resolutions emerged victorious. Mr. Channing, amid his grandiloquence, had pointedly remarked that "however pleasant it may be to unite in a leisurely, off-hand, companionable way, these occasions could become more lively and permanently invigorating in influence . . . if this society should devote itself less to kindly entertainment and more to combined work wherein truest recreation is always found". In short, the Conference at the urgency of the two groups of malcontents, decided to adventure the strenuous life, in the pursuit of piety, theology and philanthropy! It is to be noticed that the one sectarian element of the original scheme of Conference procedure, "the reports of the state and prospects of Christianity (presumably Liberal) by each brother" was eliminated, and the session devoted to social reform substituted.

III.

At the outset the "new arrangement for the conduct of the Conference" (*Christian Examiner*, 1850, page 162) resulted, as was hoped, in securing order, economy of time and division of topics, while much confusion, hitherto encountered, was wholly avoided.

A meeting was held for devotional exercises early in the morning⁽¹⁾; at 9 o'clock Rev. Mr. Burnap of Baltimore delivered an address on "The Importance of Systematic Theology and the Duties of Unitarian Clergy in Relation to it".⁽²⁾ At 3 o'clock the Rev. W. H. Channing delivered an Address in which he presented his view of the divine order of Society of which Jesus Christ is the exponent.⁽³⁾ "The meetings were attended throughout the day by almost every one of the brethren, and the interest of the occasion in the afternoon drew in a few of the other denominations for the first time within our memory". (*Examiner*, loc. cit.)

Pursuing the fortunes of the new program, we find that in spite of the reproaches of the editor of the *Register* the morning prayer session languished, and by 1852 we hear no more about it. The theological session of 1851 was engrossed by an Address by Rev. F. H. Hedge, "very able and eloquent", on the "Ecclesiastical Prospects of the Christian World".⁽⁴⁾ The remainder of the morning was occupied by an interesting discussion upon the comparative strength and weakness of the Catholic and Protestant churches, in which Rev. Messrs. Samuel Osgood, G. E. Ellis, Alonzo Hill, W. G. Eliot, W. H. Channing, Barzillai Frost and Sylvester Judd took active part. In the afternoon the Rev. John Pierpont of Medford delivered a discourse on "Social Reform", which was listened to with profound interest and attention. But what a contrast it presented to the extreme optimism of W. H. Channing the year before! "After allowing the claims of this age on the score of practical benevolence and giving it credit for its measures and agencies of good, Mr. Pierpont

(1) The editor of the *Christian Register* (1850, page 90) roundly scolded the brethren for the small attendance: "Really, if our preachers fail to be interested in such a service as this may it not afford some color of support to the suspicion that they are more concerned with what is literary, intellectual, national and public in their high calling than in the very essence and heart of their work, which is, spiritual, devotional and pertaining to private and personal piety?" He complains that "scarcely six" ministers from Boston and vicinity were present. How many is "scarcely six?"

(2) Published in full in the *Christian Examiner*, September, 1850, page 1.

(3) The reporter of the Conference for the *Examiner* (page 162) was probably defective in the sanguine qualities needed by a social reformer, for his comment was: "The Address was characterized by the genial spirit, the elevation, sincerity and singleness of heart which are uniformly manifested by the speaker; and while it gave proof of the intensity and full conviction of his faith, it was unintelligible to some and too imaginative and impractical in the views of others to excite the hope that its ideal ever would be realized amid these anxious and toiling scenes of human life". The attendance of clergymen of other denominations at this session is the only indication we have that the more comprehensive and Catholic spirit of the Channing reform had any results.

(4) *Christian Register*, 1851, page 89.

drew a sad picture of the actual state of Christendom, its tolerated iniquities and outrages, and contrasted the sway of all these with the efforts put forth against them. In conclusion he adverted to the difficulties which attend the faithful preaching of Christianity, especially under the voluntary system where any parishioner who may take offense at the honest rebuke of a preacher, or rather at the truth spoken from his lips, may promote dissension, and may drive off a minister". (1)

At the conclusion of Mr. Pierpont's Address, the Rev. Samuel J. May of Syracuse, an ardent Abolitionist, brought up the prickly question of the Fugitive Slave Law, obedience or disobedience to which was the paramount ethical and political challenge of the day. It had already been refused a hearing at the business meeting of the American Unitarian Association on the previous day. After a good deal of commendatory and deprecatory discussion the Conference adjourned to Thursday morning for further debate. (2)

On Thursday morning there was apparently an effort to temperize and to sophisticate the issue. One of the members defended Dr. Orville Dewey of New York City, who was said to have declared publicly his willingness to send his own mother into slavery if it was necessary to preserve the Union. (3) The defense consisted of casting doubt on the accuracy of the report and in exonerating Dr. Dewey from motives of timidity or sycophancy. A leading minister of Boston explained how he could abet the execution of the law in question with "a pure heart and unsullied conscience". His speech was a fabric of deplorable confusion. To disobey this law would involve disobedience to all law, which spelled anarchy. To disobey this law would entail the dissolution of the Union; and with the Union's collapse would go the hope of the world for freedom and human rights!

(1) Mr. Pierpont was evidently "bearing testimony". Much that he said had a direct bearing upon his own unfortunate experiences at the Hollis Street Church, where he had involved himself in an ecclesiastical trial because of plain speaking about the financial interests of prominent members of his church in the liquor traffic. Mr. Pierpont's remarks recall the solemn warning against intimidation of the minister by W. E. Channing in the Ordination Sermon of Rev. John S. Dwight.

(2) See *Life of Parker*, by John Weiss, II, page 112; *Life*, by O. B. Frothingham, page 416; and the *Christian Examiner*, page 156, for the details of this important debate.

(3) J. W. Chadwick, in his *Life of Parker*, page 256, states that Dr. Osgood of New York City made the defense, on the ground that the word used was "son" or "brother". For Dr. Dewey's own statement of his general position toward slavery, see his *Autobiography and Letters* (1883), pages 117-119; 241, 254-5. Especially page 117: "I would have had the South take in hand the business of putting an end to slavery by laws providing for its gradual abolition, and by preparing the slaves for it; but I did not believe then and do not now [1868?] believe that immediate

Mr. Parker then spoke. It is probable that the Conference never heard such a speech as his. He appealed from human law to the law of God; he chose the dissolution of the Union rather than the surrender of fugitive slaves to the kidnappers, some of whom, officials of the State, "were members of Unitarian churches". "I have in my church black men, fugitive slaves; they are the crown of my apostolate, the seal of my ministry. It becomes me to look after their bodies, to save their souls. I have been obliged to take my own parishioners into my house to keep them out of the clutches of the kidnappers; I have been obliged to keep my doors guarded by day as well as by night. I have written my sermons with a pistol in my desk, loaded, a cap on the nipple, ready for action—yes, with a drawn sword within reach of my right hand—this in Boston, in the middle of the nineteenth century. . . . My brother justifies the Fugitive Slave Law; demands obedience to it; calls on his parishioners to kidnap mine and sell them into bondage forever. He is a 'Christian' and I am an 'infidel'.

"O my brothers! I am not afraid of men; I can offend them; I care nothing for their hate or their esteem; I am not very careful of my reputation; but I dare not violate the eternal law of God. You have called me 'infidel'. Surely I differ widely enough from you in my theology. But I cannot fail to trust the Infinite God, father of the white man and father also of the white man's slave. I should not dare to violate his law, come what would come".

It is gratifying to learn that the discussion, though conducted "with warmth and earnestness", did not lack "a good spirit that led to a mutual understanding of the positions and views of gentlemen who are supposed to differ very much on these subjects. *No action was taken on any of the subjects introduced*". (1)

emancipation was theoretically the best plan". Is it not instructive and impressive to observe the convictions and arguments of the opposing sides in this great question? Particularly because the Conservatives have been unmercifully disparaged by the Abolitionists! Drs. Dewey and Gannet were certainly as wise and as conscientious as their critics. Firm believers in the methods of rational persuasion, inveterate opponents of war, scrupulously considerate of the intelligence and conscience of every human being (even of a Southern Slave-owner!). They refused to sacrifice these sacred principles to the taunts and philippics of their more impetuous colleagues, who in one convention would excitedly vote for "immediate emancipation" and in another convention, on the following day, declare for world peace and the abolition of war! It might be added that Dr. Dewey's noble explanation of his own position contains a remarkable prophecy of our present day negro problem.

(1) The reporter of the *Register* seemed to feel that a discreet veil of silence should be drawn over the debate, and in view of Mr. Parker's disclosure of his militant preparations, he may have been right: "as it has not been the custom to make the proceedings of the Conference public". (The *Examiner* reporter felt no such reticence!) In *Register* editorial comment

In 1852 the session of the Conference for spiritual communion was merged in the early services of worship held in certain Boston churches, attended by the laity, led by the ministers. The attendance was encouraging. The theological address was delivered by Rev. J. H. Monson of Bolton on "Theology, a Science resting on Facts which are to be learned from our individual Observation and Experience and from the Observations and Experiences of Others". There is no indication, however, that the "grand central Truth" prognosticated by W. H. Channing as the fruit of such "scientific" research in religion put in appearance. In the afternoon, Rev. A. P. Peabody of Portsmouth dropped several century stitches in speaking on "Reform". (1) What is to be reformed? Not external institutions, whether governmental or social. Sin is the only evil! Stop one of its outlets and it makes another. Therefore the Gospel minister's work, as a social reformer, is to regenerate the individual soul. (2)

The session devoted to social reform was continued at least until 1857. In 1853 Rev. T. T. Stone of Salem spoke on "Social Reform" (*Christian Examiner*, 1853, page 158, has it "Moral Reform"). (3) In 1854 Rev. Barzillai Frost on "The Relation of the Church to the Reforms of the Age". (4) In 1855 Rev. Samuel J. May dealt with "Reform as affecting the Rights of Property". (5) Rev. Caleb Stetson took "Reform" as his theme in 1856 (6); in 1857 Rev.

on the week's meetings (page 90) one finds the following paragraph: "But to us the most interesting and profitable meetings were those of the Ministerial Conference, beginning on Wednesday with an able, learned, beautiful and weighty dissertation by Rev. Mr. Hedge, and closing on Thursday with a most affecting discussion in relation to the Fugitive Slave Law. It was marked by solemn earnestness of purpose and at the same time by a most catholic charity. There was pleasantry, but it was the pleasantry of men thoroughly in earnest. We have never seen so remarkable an instance of the readiness with which a body of men, when most deeply moved, pass from one extreme of emotion to another. We came away from this meeting with an impression greater than we have ever before had of the moral and religious power of our denomination. No one could listen to these short but emphatic speeches on either side without feeling that they came from men competent to think for themselves and not easily to be put down or intimidated by any human authority". (The phraseology of this comment resembles that habitual to W. H. Channing, whose friend, F. D. Huntington, was prominent in the councils of the *Register* at this time. Evidently the non-attendance at morning prayer complained of in the *Register* editorial of 1851 had not seriously affected the moral and spiritual power of the brethren!)

(1) They were picked up handsomely by Professor F. G. Peabody, sponsor of Social Ethics in the Divinity School curriculum.

(2) *Christian Register*, 1852, page 88. *Christian Examiner*, 1852, page 156.

(3) *Christian Register*, 1853, page 87.

(4) *Christian Register*, 1854, page 87.

(5) *Christian Register*, 1855, page 87.

(6) *Christian Register*, 1856, page 87.

E. B. Willson discussed "The Relation of the Individual Christian to the State". (1) Between 1857 and 1863 it is difficult to follow the career of the Conference; but when clear light falls upon it again in 1863 the social reform session seems to have been discarded permanently. Perhaps its demise may have been due primarily to the predominance of the conception of "The Preacher's Duty", which was set forth in the morning session of the Conference of 1863 by President Hill of Harvard: "The main work of the ministry is to convert sinners and edify saints; to persuade men to be reconciled to God; to interpret the principles of morality and the doctrines of the cross". (2)

The ambitious program of Mr. Channing and his Committee of 1848-9 had not commended itself; indeed, it never arrived at a full test functioning at all. The Conference simulated Asia in that, having watched the legions of revolution thunder past, it plunged into theology again!

IV.

This plunge into theology was coincident with the imposition of a rule of silence upon the proceedings of the Conference. Reference has already been made to the *Register's* statement that these proceedings are supposed to be confidential. In 1857 the Conference voted that no report of its meeting be made in the press. (3) The precedent soon became a tradition, and the historian bookworm starves to death. Reminiscences, printed or oral or epistolary become his only hope and thus far the auguries for survival are very dark! Very infrequently do we find comments even upon the addresses themselves, such as that quoted for 1863; that on Rev. Joseph May's "delightful and inspiring" discourse of 1886 (4); that on Dr. Merle St. Croix Wright's exposition of "The Religion of the Heart" in 1906. (5) There are occasional warnings that no representatives of the daily press, but only by vote of the Conference, ministers and divinity students are admitted to its meetings. (6) From time to

(1) *Christian Register*, 1857, page 87.

(2) *Christian Register*, 1863, page 90.

(3) *Christian Register*, 1857, page 87.

(4) *Christian Register*, 1886, page 338.

(5) *Christian Register*, 1906, page 590. The editor had the temerity,

in spite of the excellence of Dr. Wright's essay, to suggest the consolidation of the Berry Street Conference and the Ministerial Union, so that the joint meeting might be allotted one hour more on the schedule of Anniversary Week! He also complains that: "Certainly there is less spontaneity and individual initiative than ever before. The old declarations of independence which used to make the blood tingle are no longer heard. Even the Berry Street Conference, from which, a generation ago, it was difficult to drive ministers at one o'clock, now dissolves at half past 12".

(6) *Christian Register*, 1880, page 264.

time the addresses themselves have been published, and when circumstances favor, the writer of this sketch proposes to track them down, digest their contents and trace the development, certainly not a monotonous one, of Unitarian thought; for it is probably true that the most profound and original views of the leaders of that movement are to be found in these addresses. (1)

It is apparent that the Conference of 1930 is not what Channing and "some of us" in 1820 expected it to become. Its character as a professional union of Liberal ministers has been appropriated by the Ministerial Union, which is practical in purpose and program. Its place for the reception of reports on the "state of religion in the Commonwealth" and the suggestion of methods and means of Liberal propaganda work has been usurped by the American Unitarian Association. Only the method of organization, the opening prayer and the theological address remain. A philosophical continuity might be discerned in the tendency of most of the addresses to pursue Channing's inaugural query ("How far is Reason to be used in explaining Revelation?") by discussing the impact of current philosophic systems and the latest scientific hypotheses upon Liberal theology; or by the tendency of others on humanitarian themes to elaborate his premise that Liberal Christianity is not only rational but practical in its genius. It is safe to prophecy, nevertheless, that none of the ancient landmarks of the Unitarian movement will survive longer than the Berry Street Conference; for it is both a stronghold and a symbol of the singularly intellectual nature of the parent body.

(1) A list of those delivering the addresses is given at the end of this paper, so far as I have been able to secure the names.

The majority of the meetings since 1865 have been held in the Vestry of the Arlington Street Church. Channing Hall at 25 Beacon St., the Alliance parlor of the Second Church, Hale Chapel of the First Church and King's Chapel have also sheltered the Conference.