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A PIONEER CHURCH.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

PIONEER HALL,

FEBRUARY 7, 1869,

BY

REV. H. W. BROWN,

MINISTER OF THE

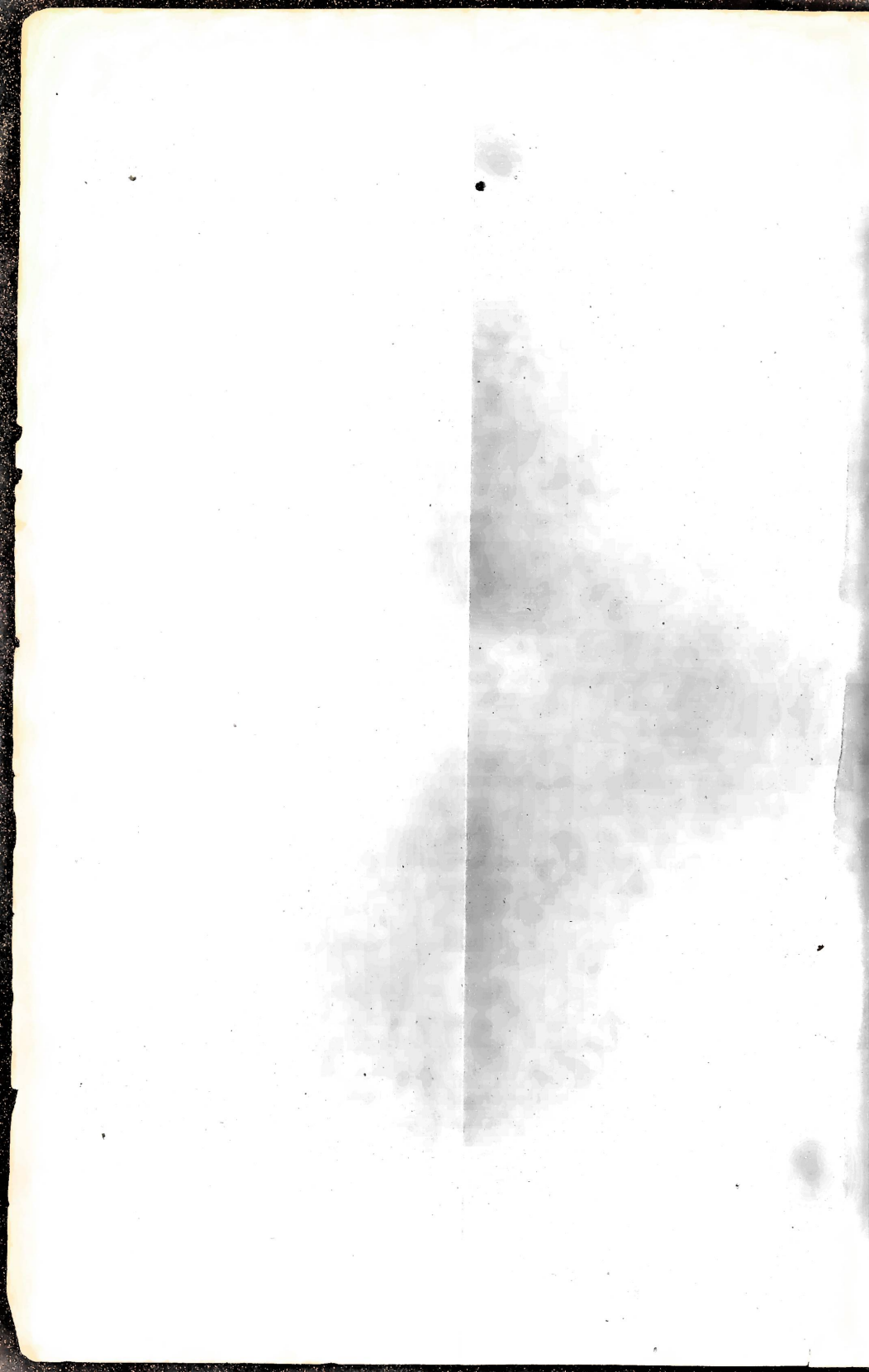
First Unitarian Church of Sacramento.

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A PIONEER CHURCH.—A Sermon preached in Pioneer Hall, February 7, 1869, by REV. H. W. BROWN, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Sacramento.

Let us congratulate one another, friends, upon a new year of our church. Let us be thankful that the "lines are fallen unto" us in such "pleasant places." We may feel at home in Pioneer Hall, for we are a *Pioneer Church*.

We are organized upon a principle which is in advance of the practice of churches in general; the principle of union in the spirit of religion without any formal expression of belief. We are a church without a creed. The principle itself is not a new one. We are not the first church to organize upon this basis, but we are among the first; we are of those who have caught the sound of the evangel before the main body, and who go forward to prepare the way. It is pioneer work to remove obstructions, to prepare the way for others. We remove the creed from the threshold of the temple of worship, where we feel that it has too long been an obstruction to fellowship in the spirit. This will be called negative work. Is it negative work when the pioneer cuts down and digs away, that there may be free entrance to fair fields and broad rivers, so that willing multitudes may settle in the rich domain? Here are the "green pastures" and "still waters" of Religion—of reverent adoration and trust and communion, of kindly sympathy and humane activity—and many are kept from entering in and dwelling joyously in company with their brethren and friends, by the requirement of assent to doctrinal statements of belief. For ourselves, and for others so far as they choose to avail themselves of our efforts, we do away with the obstacle. We found our church on the basis of the *religious purpose*. We say to all: Do you wish to unite with men and women to worship God and to serve men? we welcome you to our fellowship; to full fellowship, with all the privileges which any of us enjoy. We do not ask what your beliefs are. We shall try to have the truth preached among us from week to week, and we think you will

believe that when you hear it ; will very likely find it just what you already believe, though you may not have admitted it to yourself, or acted upon it.

Be it understood, however, that in doing away with creed we are not doing away with belief. We are not saying that we have no belief as individuals or as a church ; we are not saying that we think belief of no consequence. We think the belief of the individual of so much consequence that we will not ask him to surrender it, to limit it, to trim it in any manner, in order to avail himself of the benefit of our fellowship or to give us the advantage of his company. We thus recognize, we thus help men to feel, the importance and the responsibility of individual conviction. And as a church we have beliefs, beliefs implied in the very purpose on which we are founded. We are united for the Worship of God and the Service of Men. The worship of God implies belief in God. And although it is impossible for any one to express his whole thought about God, and none can give satisfactory expression to the thought of others, it would not be difficult, probably, to make some general statement about the Divine Being and Character in which we should all agree. That God is One, with various manifestations in nature and in humanity ; that His Spirit is in our minds and consciences and hearts, and may be communed with there so as to be the strength and joy of our lives ; that He is good, too good to create any being that shall by any possibility come to suffer eternal torment ; that the best names we can give him are Light, and Life, and Truth, and Righteousness, and Love, and Father--I suppose all of us believe this about God. Why should we not say so in a formal statement, and make it a platform on which all who join us shall stand ? Because the platform is already under us and does not require to be laid down ; and because the laying it down would give to belief a prominence which we wish, in a religious organization, to give to religious purpose. We want to emphasize the religious purpose as the main thing in a church. A belief may be a dead thing, but a purpose is a live thing. And so we ask not Do you believe in God ? but Do you want to worship Him ? If you do, we know you believe in him.

And the purpose to serve Men implies belief in men ; belief that men are worth serving. We believe in men as spiritual beings ; and we want to serve them as such by ministering to

their spiritual nature. To that end we have prayer, and singing, and preaching, and try to have it of a spiritual sort, such as will do spiritual service to those who join in it. We believe in men as moral beings; and we try to serve them as such by moral education, by appealing to the sense of Right in them, by urging them to cultivate the conscience, by applying the laws of Justice to practical affairs, and by pointing out the way of Duty. We believe in men as social beings, and we try to serve them as such by cherishing the social sentiment, in its deeper and its lighter forms; by proclaiming Brotherhood and acting it out as far as we can, by sympathy and help for one another and for all within our range, and even by providing amusement and entertainment of an innocent kind. And we believe in men as rational beings, and we try to serve them as such by addressing their reason, not endeavoring to exercise religious dominion over them or authority upon them, which would be like the princes of the Gentiles, though done by those who would be great among the Christians. We believe in men after this fashion; that they are not so good but they need to be better, and not so bad but they may become good by the help of God and men. But we have no dogma about their "Fall," or about their rise and progress, which one must agree to before he can take hold with us to keep them up and on. And so we enquire not Do you believe in the Depravity of men, or their Regeneration but do you want to serve them? If you do, you believe enough, at least to begin with.

We apply no test of character as a condition of membership in our church, but we do not thereby imply that character is of little consequence. If there is anything we are agreed on, I suppose it is that character is of first consequence; that it is more than belief, more than action. Belief is what a man thinks, action what a man does, character what a man *is*. One may be saved by "faith," if his faith be such as to transform his character; one may be saved by "works," if his works induce in him the righteousness of heart which did not spring up till he forsook his bad ways and began to do right; faith or works may thus lead to salvation, but character *is* salvation. We do not make it a condition of fellowship in our church, however, because of the impossibility of our judging it accurately. We can't undertake to divide men into saints and sinners. We

think if men are very bad they will not feel much at home with us until they change for the better; and we are very sure that if they resolve to do that, and try to do it, we can put up with them if they can put up with us; for we all need that change. As an organization we stand simply on the ground of the religious purpose. That is the thread on which we are all strung; not for us to say who of us are precious stones, who only beads of glass; not to be determined by any profession of faith or performance of ceremonial, but by the Lord of the hosts of men, in the day when He makes up His jewels.

What makes us a pioneer church is that we organize the religious spirit in its two-fold relation toward God and toward men, without the ordinary obstacles of fellowship. We believe a great deal—a great deal more than we could put into any creed; but if people want to know what it is, we ask them to come and hear our preaching, or to talk with us as individuals. We lay great stress on character, but whether our character is good or not, people will judge for themselves.

We feel that we are really organizing religion by the method we adopt. It seems to us that to lay down tests such as are employed in most of the churches is, as has been well said, to organize not religion but the negation of religion, viz: "exclusiveness, limitation, privilege." The profession of belief in certain doctrines unites those, doubtless, who agree in those doctrines and in professing them, but it separates them from others; marks them off as distinct: and all that "union" can mean in a Church which insists on belief in these doctrines as a condition of fellowship is a union of those who thus believe, with separation from those who believe differently. And the inevitable differences of opinion must forever prevent the union which Christians are so much desiring to secure. Opinion is divisive; theological opinion as much as any. It makes sects, that is, portions cut off from a main body. Religion means "binding together." The religious spirit would bind together all who share it, and the church which would organize that spirit should welcome all in whom that spirit moves. It is true that, practically, differences of theological opinion, when they are great, will prevent men from working together in a religious organization; that, in fact, the members of any church will agree in the main, and those who do not believe as they do will

remain apart from them. But this very fact makes it unnecessary to enact any exclusion. The centrifugal force of opinion is strong enough without our pushing one another away in the name of religion. Differences of political opinion often prevent men from worshipping together, but would it be wise to make a man's politics a test of church membership? Is that a very different matter? Not so different, when the fact is that what is called political opinion is sometimes a moral judgment, far more intimately connected with religion than a question of mere speculative theology or religious history. So also differences of social position, of wealth, or of general culture, will work in religious bodies, and people will be brought in or kept out more or less by facts of this nature; but would it be the part of religion to insist on any special degree or rank in such matters? It cannot be said that these are unimportant; they are of more consequence than theological notions over which churches have sometimes quarreled to the death. There are circumstances in which it is of far more consequence to us what a man's tastes, habits, manners are, than what are his religious professions. It is for those who would organize religion not to encourage any of these divisive tendencies, but to unite in the central purpose of religion. This holds them together and does not cut them off from others. Others may not come to them, but the door is not shut against any, and none will be or will feel excluded. The Church likes to be figured as an ark, in which alone is safety in the flood of divine retribution that sweeps over the earth. Is it for those who see men struggling in the waters to say to them: "Come in hither! This is your only chance; but before you can be taken aboard you must believe as we do; must believe that this ark was made by a different process from anything else in the world, and out of different timber, grown by miracle and put together by miracle." And if those in the ark do act thus, is it strange that the strong swimmers say irreverently: "Go along with your old ark; there won't be much of a shower!"—while the weak and struggling feel that such offers have very little "grace" in them. Is it not the part of the Church to say, Welcome to such shelter as we can give! we will do all we can to save you. You want to come—that is enough. Such a church is not exclusive, but reaches out its hands to all with a free invitation. It is not in

an attitude of separation from other churches, on the one hand, or from the multitude who are outside the churches on the other. We may feel that we are with the other churches in this city, not against them; we stand for religion, as they do, against irreligion; for morality, as they do, against vice and iniquity. If they shut us out by any test of belief, we do not put up any barrier against them; there will never be more than one wall between us—the one they erect. And, on the other hand, we are with the multitudes of people who do not belong to the churches. We are with those who do not and cannot assent to creeds and ceremonies which have no truth or interest for them, but who desire a fresh interpretation of the everlasting gospel of Truth and Righteousness, of the Divine in Humanity, of the Kingdom of God on Earth. We know, indeed, that there are many outside the churches who do not care for this gospel or any other; who are utterly indifferent to spiritual growth and health, given over to sensual and wicked living. We are with these, not to encourage them in their wrong but to help them to the right; we are for them, to help and rescue them, and we wish we could make them feel that if they have any earnest desire to forsake evil courses, and to lead a better life, they may find with us tender reception and sympathy, encouragement and aid. Peace and Good Will to churched and unchurchd! these are in the principle of our organization. If we will live up to the principle we shall get religious union embodied in our Church.

Is it a cold intellectualism, this religion we are undertaking to organize? It means a piety so genuine that it can employ no forms which are not the natural expression and furtherance of its own spirit of devotion; it means a sympathy so deep and tender that it will reach out after the lowly, though in order to save them it must let go the hand and lose the company of the high. It means devout aspiration, consecration, holiness of heart and life; it means kindly feeling and helpful deed. It means Love to God and to Man; it means "doing justly, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with God;" it means "visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction and keeping one's self unspotted from the world."

Is it not Christian? Then so much the worse for Christianity. For this is the divinest religion yet revealed to man. But we

think it is the very sum and substance of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, as it is also of the Hebrew Law and the Prophets.

Some may question the need of a church like ours, on the ground that the free thought and the liberal opinions which are recognized and entertained by us make their way of themselves, without the aid of special organizations to promote them. There would be force in this if free thought and liberal opinion were the chief need of society, and the only or the main purpose of our union. Society wants freedom of thought, will have it; and does not ask any church to give it, having learned to get it in spite of the Church and to regard the Church as an adversary of it. But society needs also religious impulse and inspiration, needs moral instruction and education, needs humane development. It is the office of a church to give these, but the churches in general give them in connection with a creed and a discipline which repel free-thinkers, liberal minds. Hence the need of a church which will do its religious work without limiting freedom of thought. And it is for the lack of such a church that many people are outside of all religious and moral influence whatever, and others, who will have these in some shape for themselves and their children, feel their common sense, and their inalienable right to liberty of thought, attacked Sunday after Sunday, and see their children taught doctrines which will be a burden to them in mature years. We are not undertaking to organize freedom of thought; we believe that might do very well without a church, might get along by itself, or by the agency of the press, or by a system of lecturing. We are trying to organize *Religion*, allowing freedom. We want to impart vigor to the sense of the Divine in men; to educate the conscience, and to stimulate the sentiment of humanity; and to do it without infringing in the least upon the natural and sacred rights of the mind, and we feel that the need of doing this is great. There is a demand for the religious pioneering which we propose to do. People might get along somehow in the ways of the spirit, but with stumbling and delay; we want to make the road easy and inviting, to bring low the mountains and hills and to bring up the valleys; "to make straight in the desert a highway" for religious progress.

Some will tell us that we cannot succeed, that we cannot hold together without a common profession of belief, and distinctions

between godly and ungodly among us. But we think that a union in the religious spirit will bind us more firmly than a profession of faith, by as much as sympathy is more than agreement. There is no need of laying down a platform of theological opinion. A platform does not hold together the people who are standing on it. What holds them together is the purpose with which they stepped upon it. And as to distinction between "converted" and "unconverted," they are no more essential in a religious society than the distinctions of noble and commoner, patrician and plebeian, in civil society. Our forefathers were told that their community would go to pieces because they left out these things. But they thought not; they thought these divisions were divisive, that partitions kept people apart, and that the best hope of union was in having no upstairs and downstairs, no parlor and kitchen, built into the national mansion, but in living on the same floor and meeting in a common room. Differences would come, no doubt; the less need of enforcing them; better keep as clear of them as possible. Is there less union, less strength of cohesion, in the United States than in governments that recognize and sanction differences of rank and quality? Differences will exist in a church; noble and villain; no criterion of professed religious experience will avail to prevent them; the spiritual peerage is not pure in any of the churches about us, and among those not admitted to it there are many nobly born; but a stronger union is probable where no artificial division is wrought into the ecclesiastical constitution.

Of course there is question of every experiment so long as it is an experiment. Pioneering is work that calls for trust and energy and endurance. The main question of our success is whether we have it in us. There is going to be outward growth enough in this city to ensure the stability of our organization, if we can answer for its inward growth. We must not be easily discouraged. We are trying to raise the religious grade of this city, which some think is as low as the natural level of the soil. We are a corporation to effect just that. We want to make healthful and clean and convenient the ways of social and moral life for this community; to get rid of theological sloughs, and to lift men out of the mud of sensuality. It will cost us money and labor, and it will be hard to get all

we want of both, and it will take time. And to make a good road we may have to be put to inconvenience, and the new way for a while may seem not so pleasant as the old; and it may have a bad odor, as of tar and asphaltum in the nostrils of some of the community; and some of the work may be poorly done and need to be done over again; and those for whom we work may be dissatisfied with our survey and our plans, and our execution of them, and we may sometimes be dissatisfied ourselves. But we are doing a good work and one which the city will yet bless us for. It is work we are put into the world, into our generation, for. If we can realize that, we shall do it cheerfully; shall not be surprised that it grows upon us, but shall expect it to make more and more demand upon us, and only desire that our ability and our will may increase with our opportunities. We need something more than belief in the ends we propose; we need devotion to them; as in order to be a California Pioneer it was not enough to believe in California, but to go there, and to go early. If we are content to forget our own comfort and convenience in consecration to the common good, we shall not be discouraged, and we shall succeed.

When I say we are a pioneer church, I do not claim that we are discoverers of any new or unknown country of the spirit. We are merely taking possession of the region of religious faith and humane work which has been heard of from the earliest times, and where the great leaders of religion have always pitched their tents. There may be truth which we have not yet come up with even in our belief, to say nothing of our practice. Let us always keep an open ear for that! But we propose to camp on what seems to us the most advanced ground; to settle down here into some sort of orderly living—to become a religious community. There is a respectable number of us already; we are not scattered so much as to be out of hail of one another's homes, and we want to make society. We want to concentrate and organize our religious sentiment and conviction, that they may be more efficient, may make better way. And we invite and welcome the fellowship and assistance of all, though we depend mainly on ourselves—on the Divine Spirit in us which leads into all Truth and Right if we only follow.

THE HISTORY OF

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REIGN OF
CHARLES THE FIRST
BY
HENRY MATTHEW
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD