

First Anniversary Address

Hugh Owen Pentecost

January 10, 1889

Unity Congregation has completed its first year of existence and, I hope, of usefulness. As we look back on that year I think we shall agree that it has been a year of peace and prosperity for which we should be profoundly grateful. Our career thus far has exceeded my most sanguine expectations. The congregation have been large and enthusiastic, probably averaging during the year nearly two thousand persons in the three cities where our meetings have been held each Sunday.¹ They have come together with remarkable steadiness as to numbers and without resort to special advertising, house-to-house visitation or any other persuasive device. Every indication seems to confirm the belief that these congregations are composed of intelligent persons who assemble weekly for no other reason than to hear a discussion of important questions in which, as thinking and earnest persons, they are interested. And I do not scruple to say that this is particularly gratifying to me, not because I accept this as a testimony to my personal abilities as a thinker and speaker, but because it confirms the idea I had when these meetings were started—that many persons are hungering and thirsting for a gospel which is not ordinarily preached and which could not be preached from any pulpit or platform controlled by an organization committed to particular doctrines or bound by traditions.

When I abandoned the pulpit of the Christian church a year ago, it was because I thought I had a message which some persons were willing to hear, but which I would not be permitted to deliver in either the orthodox or liberal church.² I believe this as firmly and in very much the same way, I fancy, as the grand old Hebrew prophets believed they were commissioned by Jehovah to speak to their fellow-men. It was not so much that I had some particular thing to say as that I saw how many persons there are struggling against intellectual and social and religious tyranny, and I want to say, “Come, brothers and sisters; let us have a meeting place where religious and social heretics may assemble in unity of spirit and recognize the sincerity of each other, even in our errors; recognize the mind-hunger, the heart-hunger, and the soul-hunger for truth that is in

¹ The three locations were: Masonic Temple, New York City at 11:00 Sunday mornings; Criterion Theatre on Fulton Street, Brooklyn, Sundays at 3:30; Belleville Avenue Rink, Newark NJ at 7:45 Sunday evenings.

² On November 13, 1887 Pentecost delivered a sermon entitled “Four More Men Murdered” from his pulpit at the Belleville Avenue Congregational Church (located adjacent to the rink), denouncing the execution of the Haymarket anarchists two days earlier. This in addition to his campaigning with Henry George’s Anti-Poverty Society brought him heavy criticism from church members and he was forced to resign as pastor one month later. The church then asked him to return, but he refused. The first meeting of his new Unity Congregation was held on January 8, 1888.

each of us. Let us come together with all our differences in such a spirit that our fellowship in human friendliness shall be more potent to bind than our intellectual differences are to separate.”

This invitation has been very largely accepted, and I have every reason to believe that the atmosphere of this Congregation is congenial to many persons who do not agree with much that I say, because I think that every intelligent person who comes here understands that I do not pretend to infallibility in my opinions and that I freely concede that wherein we differ he or she may be right and I wrong. I think every intelligent person who comes here understands that the object of these meetings is not to secure unanimity of opinion but to cultivate the habit of thinking which so few persons have, even among those who read a great deal.

It is true that some persons who began with us have fallen out by the way. This has generally resulted from the curious but common fact that many persons are intelligent and broad-minded upon all questions but one, or else are intelligent and broad-minded upon some one question and absurdly narrow upon all others. Such persons delighted when I said what coincided with their particular heresy, but when I propounded some doctrine that offended their especial or general orthodoxy, they stopped coming. They were pleased to listen to what they believe, but refused to listen to an opinion contrary to their own.

For example: some used to enjoy my criticisms of the church, for they are ecclesiastical heretics, but when I questioned the supernatural character of the Bible and doubted the occurrence of miracles and declared my doubt in the deity or divinity of Jesus, they left. Some used to enjoy all my religious heresies, no matter to what extent I went, but when I attacked the doctrine of protection to American monopolists they left, and left as if dogs were after them. Some too, there were who approved of all my religious heresies but objected to my arraignment of the present system of land-holding and to my recognition of socialists and anarchists as economic thinkers, they left. And some spiritualists have gone because they are intellectual and religious “rounders” –they fall in with every new movement and soon fall out because they get tired.

Now, all these persons who have abandoned these meetings because they could not listen to opinions different from their own are what I once described as “finished people,” in certain areas at least. They do right in not coming. These meetings can do nothing for them. I do not wish to speak disrespectfully of them, as if a person should be criticized because he prefers to not come here. I refer to them as persons who made the mistake originally of supposing they would long enjoy these meetings, for most of you have discovered by this time, what I am gradually coming to believe myself, that I am a heretic on almost every subject, which makes this rather an uncomfortable place for anyone who is orthodox on any subject, unless he is sufficiently broad-minded to enjoy listening to opinions different from his own and accord me the same respect as I accord him.

And this is one reason for the pride that I feel in this Congregation and for the admiration that I have for you. I know perfectly well that you do not all agree with me, but you listen to me and you think, and you write me letters that make me think, some of which, indeed, almost take the skin off me; but as the wife said when her husband hugged her until the bones cracked under the loving pressure, “I like it.” I appreciate the letters of approval and agreement that come to me, and am very thankful for them; but the letters which afford me the most intellectual pleasure and are of the most benefit to me are those which call in question my views and attempt to show me, sometimes successfully, where I am wrong.

Probably no man in these three cities who speaks in public enjoys his congregation more than I mine, not because you have adopted my creed, but because you are capable of having a creed

of your own, which is far better for you than mine would be, and at the same time of listening respectfully to mine.

The probabilities are that there will be less withdrawing among the regular contributors during the current year than during the last, because you understand pretty nearly what the tendency of my thinking is, and I have little in reserve that is calculated to act as dynamite among those who have been regular attendants during the past year.

I have learned one thing since we began to look each other in the face, *viz* : that it is impossible to conduct a series of services like these without making mistakes. I have made mistakes which you have borne with most kindly, but as I remember them, most of my mistakes have been in the nature of departures from my original idea with regard to these congregations.

I saw so much of the evils of organization while I was in the church and suffered so much from it that I determined to have absolutely none in this work, because I saw that we had nothing for which to organize. At the end of a year I am more than ever convinced that such a work as this is thrice blessed by having no board of trustees, no elders and no deacons, and no meetings of such committees for the transaction of business. It would have been impossible for this heterogeneous body to have gone through the year in peace and quietness if we had decided things by votes in meetings wherein it is possible for differences of opinion to develop into unpleasant feelings over matters of little or no consequence.

Almost all societies of a heterogeneous character such as this go to pieces ultimately through friction in business meetings. We avoid this danger by having no business meetings, and there is not the slightest necessity for any. All our bills are paid weekly, and there is nothing to do but what can be done by one or two persons without any authority from a committee or board of any kind. My advice, therefore, to all public speakers who wish to establish a congregation for intellectual and moral inspiration is that which has been so often given. It is simply "Hire a hall." Intellectual, moral and spiritual assemblies need no organization. Organizations in these spheres become tyrants and workers of evil. Jesus of Nazareth organized nothing, and his influence has come down the ages like a sweet and holy benediction, heavy as are the clouds through which the sunlight of his life shines. The Christian church is nothing if not organized, and her influence has been and is like the breath of a despot who only speaks to slay the mind and crush the heart. All that is charming about the church is that she contains so much individual goodness that cannot be destroyed by the blight of organization. Where organization is, in intellectual, moral, and spiritual matters, there is authority; and where authority is, liberty is dead.

I said I have learned how impossible it is to conduct or co-operate in the conduct of such a work as this without mistakes; but I have learned also that I should have made many more mistakes if I had followed all the advice I have received. One person tells me that I should confine my discussions to religious questions and drop the economic or social or labor question, otherwise the congregation will go down. Another man tells me that I should confine my discussions to the social question and drop the religious problem, otherwise disaster will overtake me and my work. And these two instances illustrate how many others wish me to conduct these meetings along their particular train of pet thought.

The especial danger in this sort of work is that one is apt to get confused by the multitude of counselors who are ready and earnest with advice or warning. I am thankful for the advice or warning, but I am always more impressed with the necessity of doing only what seems to me right and best. And my conviction is, as it has been all along, that the religious and the economic questions are one, and that religious and economic orthodoxy stand or fall together. If

this world is governed by the arbitrary will of God, then whatever is right, in the sense that it should not be altered, and consequently the present social system, which tends to improve a few and impoverish millions, should be submitted to as to the will of God; but if this world is best governed when it follows the operation of natural law, then it is right for us to attempt to have our social arrangements correspond to natural law. If the saying of Jesus, so often quoted by the orthodox in defense of the present system, "The poor ye have always with you," is applicable at all times as an expression of God's will, then any attempt to abolish poverty is a wicked rebellion against the plans of God. The new political economy proceeds upon the supposition that the happiness or misery of man depends most largely upon his social environment, and that our social environment is what we make it, not what God makes it.

The new political economists know that the poor will be with us as long as natural opportunities and the instruments of production are monopolized, and that there will be no poor when each individual has an equal opportunity with every other individual to produce and to enjoy the full fruits of his labors. One reason why I have attempted to show you the unreasonableness of orthodox Christianity is that I wish you to comprehend that the industrial emancipation of man will never be accomplished until the prevalent conception of a God who enriches some of his children in order that they may distribute his bounty to others is destroyed, and until we understand that the business of religion is to make this world a better place to live in rather than to plan and wait and hope for another and a better world.

The only reason why any new political economist is an orthodox Christian is because he is not logical enough to see that religious orthodoxy is the bulwark of industrial slavery. If it were simply a question as to whether we should believe this, that or the other tradition or myth, I should not bother with the religious problem. If men, women and children are to remain forever the abject slaves of their favored fellows, the religion that lures them into contentment by hopes of a painted heaven is probably the best. But when there is hope of redeeming men by destroying their sacred delusions, it is worth while to brave the displeasures of the church by telling them that the word "God" is synonymous with justice and fair dealing, and they can only be saved by their own thinking and doing, rather than by praying to the kind of God who does not exist, or if he does, has always been kinder to pharisaical robbers than to honest people.

And it is my conviction, too, that this platform will be most useful by advocating no particular hobby, for no hobby contains the whole truth, and our final redemption will probably come not in precise accordance with anyone's particular idea of how it should come. I profoundly believe in the efficacy of the single tax on land values as a key with which to open the doors of the future, and I think that is the thing which should now be attempted as the foundation of all future social greatness and goodness. Just as nothing could be done for the slave until he was free, just as freedom was not the settlement of the black man's destiny, so I believe that nothing can be done for the oiling millions until land is free for their occupancy; but the freedom of the land is only the first, if it is, as it is, the longest step toward human redemption. After the freedom of the land will probably come state socialism in some form, beginning with semi-public industries, such as railroads, or rather continuing what we have already begun in our post office and public school system; and after state socialism, probably far, far in the future, when men have learned that the highest form of selfishness is unselfishness, will probably come anarchy, by which I mean co-operation without force or authority, except that which inheres in natural law. This is the highest possible conception of human society, wherein the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and

the calf with the lion, and a little child shall lead them; wherein whatsoever men would that others should do unto them, they do to others.

The single-tax men and the socialists fight each other; and the socialists and the anarchists fight each other; and the orthodox economists look upon their discussions with satisfaction. I share none of these bigotries. I look upon the orthodox economist as more blind than cruel. He despises his heterodox brothers because he will not take pains to understand them. Those of us who are believers in the single tax should not make the same mistake with our more radical brethren. That the socialists and anarchists are given a bad name just now does not prevent me from extending my hand to them, not as a patronizing superior, but as a fellow-worker with them for the betterment of the world; only, however, as economists seeking betterment by peaceful means. If all of you do not sympathize with me in that feeling, it is probably because you believe the worst that is said about them and do neither yourself nor them the justice to out what manner of people they really are; and if that is so I cannot see why you are not acting under willfully ignorant prejudice.

There is much more that I wish to say but may not now. I desire to thank those who have been so active and faithful as ushers and fellow-helpers. This work, I perfectly well understand, has not been done because of personal devotion to me, but what is much better, through devotion to the same principle that interests me.

I desire to express my gratification that we have no financial debt and that you have paid me enough to keep my wife, two children and myself in comfort.³ I received one letter during the year from a young man who earns ten dollars a week, who seemed to think that twenty-five dollars a week would be enough for me. When I left the church I took the risk of having to go to work in my trade, and I am willing to yet if I must. But I do not see but that I have fairly earned my income for the past year. I am not preaching a gospel of poverty. I am preaching a gospel of anti-poverty. I do not see what would be to gain to anybody if I were forced to live on less than I do. I think I can do more good by trying to make the poorest of you as well off as I am than by voluntarily making myself as poor as the poorest of you.

As my last word let me say this: The mere fact that these three congregations have lived and thrived for one year in these three cities, considering what has been said from these platforms, is a significant sign of the times. It means that we are in the dawning of a new day; a day in which a public teacher may be true to himself and not starve; a day in which the great doctrines of religious liberty and social regeneration are beginning to get the ear of the people. Let us hope that most of us will live through the dawning and be permitted to behold the rising, in splendor, of the Sun.

³ Pentecost's second wife, Ida Gatling Pentecost, would typically sing at her husband's meetings. She was always described as very pretty, and she was 30 years old at the time of this sermon. Their daughter Ida Marguerite was 3, and daughter Christie (of Hugh's first wife) was 15 years old.

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Retrieved on 16th May 2024 from www.deadanarchists.org
Delivered on January 6, 1889 to the Unity Congregation at Newark, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.
Published in *Twentieth Century* on January 10, 1889.

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