

The More Things Change . . .

A Retrospective on Eldorado Universalist Church

Daniel and Hannah Disher were among those pioneering risk-takers who left “civilization” in the early 1800s and moved West, as independent in their thinking as in their actions, often considered “infidels” by the more staid and orthodox. Though born in Maryland in 1786, Daniel Disher’s family lived Botetot County, Virginia. There he met and married his first wife, Elizabeth Sheets, with whom he had six children. The Disher family moved to the Northwest Territory and by 1814, were settled near what is now Lewisburg, Ohio. After Elizabeth became ill and died, Daniel Disher married Hannah Baker, who was sixteen years his junior. By 1840, the 54-year-old Disher and his wife ,Hannah (age 38), owned a farm in Monroe Township southeast of Eldorado.

One evening Daniel Disher came home from attending a meeting where a man named Jonathan Kidwell was the speaker. Kidwell was a circuit-riding Universalist minister who had started a church in Eaton as early as 1827. Excited about what he had heard, Daniel told Hannah, who was intrigued and curious about the preacher who had so “charmed” her husband. Knowing that Kidwell was still in the area and scheduled to speak at nearby Yankeetown schoolhouse, Daniel saddled up a horse, and with Hannah riding behind him, they rode eight miles through thick woods to hear Kidwell speak.

J. H. Blackford, one of the longest serving ministers in the Eldorado Universalist Church, (his photograph is in the coffee room area above the piano) described Jonathan Kidwell and his impact on the Dishers this way:

Jonathan Kidwell was the earliest preacher of Universalism in this part of Ohio, so far as I know. This was the voice of one crying out of the wilderness. He spake as one having authority. He was clothed as simply as one of the old prophets—a red flannel roundabout and jean trousers in winter an home-made linen in summer.

By 1840 when Daniel and Hannah Disher encountered Kidwell, he had already established a Universalist town—Philomath, Indiana, about five miles southwest of Richmond, Indiana. In Philomath, Universalists built a three-story school with over a hundred students where they could send their youth and be certain that religion was not part of the curriculum.

As Reverend Blackwell wrote of people's response to Kidwell:

The people heard him, but only a few heard him gladly. Among the few was Daniel Disher. He gave the message to his good wife, Hannah Disher, and she was anxious to hear the message that had so charmed her husband . . . They returned to their home with the great desire that others should share with them the blessed hope of the world's salvation.

What did Jonathan Kidwell say that so stimulated the Dishers and others? Among other things, he said:

Those who attack popular opinions, especially religious opinions, however false, must expect to call down the pious scorn and maledictions of popular censure, as well as the contempt of religious bigots. Being well apprised of this fact my mind was well prepared for all the contumely [insult], which ignorance, bigotry, and superstition could invent. But the love of truth has always inspired me with an unconquerable determination to defend truth wherever it may be found. Having long been of the opinion that many of the marvelous tales and dogmas of the Jewish Pentateuch contradict reason and nature, I have not hesitated to declare my honest convictions on the subject. And it is my honest opinion that thousands of the Christian community privately entertain the same opinion, but remain silent for fear of being called *skeptics* or *infidels*. This I know to be the truth with many of my Universalist Brethren who have acknowledged the fact to me by word of mouth and letter, but do not wish their names to go before the public for the above reason. (Preface to *The Alpha and Omega*, 1843)

For the next nine years, from 1840-1849, regular meetings were held in Monroe Township in barns during the summer and in houses during the winter. Similar meetings were organized and “sponsored” by the McCunes in New Paris about the same time. “Father Disher” and Hannah welcomed itinerant Universalist ministers, such as Jonathan Kidwell and Elihu Moore, to their home.

These early preachers were often “unlettered and unlearned,” with no library but the bible and little property except what they carried with them on horseback. Roads were poor or lacking altogether. The circuit riders preached in cabins, school-buildings, barns, bar-rooms and in the open. Their pay was often received in the form of food or clothing (W. P. Strickland, *Pioneers of the West*, p. 137).

In the two decades before the Dishers and others discovered Universalism, religious revivals were popular throughout Ohio, and in some ways, Universalism was a reaction against what was going on in other denominations. Here is a description from James Bradley Finley, a Methodist minister, of the kinds of things that occurred at revivals or “camp meetings.”

These meetings began to follow one another in quick succession, and the numbers which attended were almost incredible. While the meetings lasted, crowds were to be seen in all directions, passing and repassing the roads and paths, while the woods seemed to be alive with people. Whole settlements appeared to be vacated, and only here and there could be found a house having an inhabitant. All ages, sexes, and conditions, pressed their way to the campmeeting. . . .

At these meetings thousands fell under the power of God, and cried for mercy. The scenes which successively occurred at these meetings were awfully sublime, and a general terror seemed to have pervaded the minds of all people within the reach of their influences.

During the religious exercises within the encampment, all manner of wickedness was going on without. So deep and awful is man's depravity, that he will sport while the very fires of perdition are kindling around him. Men, furious with the effects of the maddening bowl [i.e., alcohol], would outrage all decency by their conduct; and some, mounted on horses, would ride at full speed among the people. I saw one, who seemed to be a leader and champion of the party, on a large, white horse, ride furiously into the praying circle, uttering the most horrid

imprecations. Suddenly, as if smitten by lightning, he fell from his horse. At this a shout went up from the religious multitude, as if Lucifer himself had fallen. I trembled, for I feared God had killed the bold and daring blasphemer. He exhibited no signs whatever of life; his limbs were rigid, his wrists pulseless, and his breath gone. Several of his comrades came to see him, but they did not gaze long till the power of God came upon them, and they fell like men slain in battle. I was much alarmed, but I had a great desire to see the issue. I watched him closely, while for thirty hours he lay, to all human appearance, dead. During this time the people kept up singing and praying. At last he exhibited signs of life, but they were fearful spasms, which seemed as if he were in a convulsive fit, attended by frightful groans, as if he were passing through the intensest agony. It was not long, however, till his convulsions ceased, and springing to his feet, his groans were converted into loud and joyous shouts of praise. The dark, fiend-like scowl which overspread his features, gave way to a happy smile, which lighted up his countenance.

Here is another example:

A certain Dr. P., accompanied by a lady from Lexington, was induced, out of mere curiosity, to attend the meeting. As they had heard much about the involuntary jerkings and falling which attended the exercises, they entered into an agreement between themselves that, should either of them be thus strangely attacked or fall, the other was to stand by to the last. It was not long till the lady was brought down in all her pride, a poor sinner in the dust, before her God. The doctor, agitated, came up and felt for her pulse; but, alas! her pulse was gone. At this he turned pale, and, staggering a few paces, he fell beneath the power of the same invisible hand. After remaining for some time in this state, they both obtained pardon and peace and went rejoicing home. They both lived and died happy Christians. Thousands were affected in the same way.

These meetings exhibited nothing to the spectator unacquainted with them but a scene of confusion, such as scarcely could be put into human language. They were generally opened with a sermon or exhortation, at the close of which there would be a universal cry for mercy, some bursting forth in loud utterances of prayer of thanksgiving for the truth; some breaking forth in strong and powerful exhortations, others flying to their careless friends with tears of compassion, entreating them to fly to Christ for mercy; some, struck with terror and conviction, hastening through the crowd to escape, or pulling away from their relations, others trembling, weeping, crying for mercy; some falling and swooning away, till every appearance of life was gone and the extremities of the body assumed the coldness of death. These were surrounded with a company of the pious, singing melodious songs adapted to the time, and praying for their

conversion. But there were others collected in circles round this variegated scene, contending for and against the work.

Among those “contending against the work” were Universalists who generally disapproved of such goings-on, although the first Universalist minister in Ohio, Abel M Sargent, was a bit of a showman himself, but he is another story. By 1840 when Daniel and Hannah Disher began a Universalist meeting in Monroe Township, Universalists in general were more intellectual and somewhat appalled by such emotional extremes.

According to Rev. Jane Rzepka of the Cleveland Church of the Larger Fellowship, a native-born Ohio Universalist, in a book entitled *The Universalist Church in Ohio* (1923), Elmo Arnold Robinson

. . . claims that in the old days, there were two kinds of people who weren't affiliated with conventional churches: The first type was (and I quote) "men of evil character," and the second were "thinkers of an advanced type, rebelling at the narrowness of conventional religion, and attracted "by the philosophy of the so-called atheism of the day." The book goes on to tell us that apparently "a great proportion of these people became pronounced Infidels," that is to say, Universalists. [Charles W. Hoffman, cited in Elmo Arnold Robinson, p. 3] One Methodist minister, upon hearing of a new Universalist group in town, said, "I have been fighting the devil for a great many years, but now he has settled right here in our midst!" [Historical Sketch of the First Universalist Church of North Olmsted, Ohio, 1947, p. 11]

These Universalists were folks who said right out loud that parts of the Bible "contradict reason and nature." [Jonathan Kidwell, *The Alpha and Omega*, cited in Robinson, 48] You go back and read old Universalist sermons and commentaries and you begin to understand that what the Universalist ministers were known for around here was their intellectualism. As one source put it, "Pastors came and went--all good and intellectual men." [Historical Sketch, p. 17] Now you've probably heard that it was the Unitarians who were intellectual, and what the Universalists were known for was their "hearts." But in Ohio at least, that just wasn't true. In fact, Universalists were proud to preach a "religious intellectualism," and not only that, they were known frankly to be "cold"--as one author put it in the 1920s, "The Universalists did not 'put much of their life in their religion.'" [Henry C. McComas, *The Psychology of Religious Sects*, 1912, p. 199]

(From the sermon “Cantankerous Reclacitrants by Rev. Jane Rzepka, Cleveland Church of the Larger Fellowship)

In 1849—the same year that Jonathan Kidwell died in Philomath, Indiana—after nine years of meeting in barns, schoolhouses and homes, the Eldorado Universalist Church was organized. One of the circuit-riding preachers, Elihu Moore, became its first minister, serving from 1849-1855. After 1855, for about ten years, Eldorado had no regular minister, but relied on various circuit riding ministers. After the Civil War and several short-termed ministers, an Eldorado native named J. H. Blackford became minister, serving Eldorado Universalist Church from 1874-1895 and again from 1898-1899, longer than any other minister.

We tend to think of the sniping and bickering between religious denominations, and even within them, as something that has occurred in our own lifetimes, but the American people have apparently done this from the beginning. Only recently have I begun to appreciate what “freedom of religion” really means. We take such freedom for granted and rarely think about it, but imagine for a moment what it actually created in this new nation. Before, for millennia, in patriarchal Roman Catholic or Anglican cathedrals, our ancestors were pressured by peers and leaders to believe a certain way. Always, of course, there were those who could not believe the proscribed dogma—they either kept quiet in silent objection, or they died as “infidels” (which means “unfaithful”). With the United States Constitution, for the first time in human history, a government was established that insisted on the individual right to choose a particular faith among many or even to choose no faith at all.

One would think this would have led to peace and harmony. Quite the reverse is true.

Throughout the early settlement of the Northwest Territory, religious debate was frequent and religious movements rose up around the best speakers. Universalist speakers

often met in formal debates with non-Universalist believers. These Universalists believed that no one would go to Hell, and in fact, that Hell did not even exist. Imagine how shocking such statements were to those who built their lives around avoiding Hell after they died. In fact, however, such statements still surprise and shock and Universalists are still regarded by more orthodox thinkers as “not really a church.” The French have a saying: “Plus ca change, plus c’est le meme chose” usually translated as “The more things change, the more they remain the same,” more literally translated as “the more it changes, the more it’s the same thing.” So it is with religious intolerance.