

Charles Gordon Ames (1828-1912)

Unwanted Child, Beloved Minister

Charles Gordon Ames had a remarkable spiritual and intellectual journey. It started with a boyhood steeped in the narrowest New England Protestant orthodoxy. It ended spiritual light years away in the pulpit of one of the country's most illustrious Unitarian churches.

Through study, prayer, and an adventure that spanned the American continent, he reached a liberal enlightenment--a transformation both astonishing and admirable. It was not an easy journey; there were hardships, rejections, family tragedies, and wanderings in a spiritual wilderness before he reached his generous spiritual home.

It was mainly through this adventure that the Ames family became Unitarians.

His Early Years

Most of what is known about Charles Gordon Ames's early years is found in "A Spiritual Autobiography," which he wrote in his late 70's. Most remembrances written 60 or 70 years after the fact are somewhat unreliable. But for Charles Ames we may assume their virtual accuracy, given his scrupulous honesty and his sensitivity to his own experiences and those of others.

He was born in secret, out of wedlock. At the age of three, he was informally adopted by Colonel Thomas and Lucy Ames, who had a farm in the village of Canterbury in the Merrimack River valley a few miles north of Concord NH. (This is the source of the Ames family name.)

While his foster parents "were intelligent beyond the average of country people," he writes, "and in touch with much of the best life and literature of the times," they were also "rigid adherents of Calvinistic Orthodoxy." Hard work was a prime virtue. The whole family spent long hours working at the farm. In summers, from the age of seven, Charles spent almost all his waking hours at work on the farm or at prayer and Bible study.

"At home, I was early made to realize the doctrine of total depravity and the exceeding sinfulness of my own nature.... I can hardly have been more than four years old when I was made familiar with the Scripture that 'all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone'.... Often in daytime reverie, and sometimes in dreams of the night, I saw the leaping flames of hell, out of which infernal hands were clutching to draw me in.... There was a haunting feeling that I was hurrying along a downward road sure to end in a precipice and a burning lake.... No one told me how high I might rise; they all told me how low I might sink."

Thus Charles was often made aware of the unfortunate circumstances of his birth. We cannot tell whether the severe lessons he was taught were aimed only at him because of his illegitimacy, or whether the Ames's own children received the same frequent dire warnings.

We don't know why the Ameses gave a home to the little boy. Their motive may have been simple charity -- the desire to help Charles overcome his unfortunate birth and save his soul. Perhaps it was the prospect of another pair of hands to work the farm. They may have been encouraged by an offer of \$300 from Charles's mother's family. It is also possible that Colonel Ames was a relative of a branch of the mother's family.

At the age of about 13, Charles learned that he could be "saved" if he attended meetings of a Free-Will Baptist congregation, rose to be prayed for, publicly confessed his sins, and professed faith. He was so timid that he often thought it best to remain silent and go to hell, where he might work his way out by good deeds. "After a lapse of nearly seventy years, my eyes moisten at the remembrance of what a child can suffer from being misunderstood.... There was no one to show me the sunny side of faith and hope and love. Even God himself seemed austere and forbidding...." But he persevered.

Amid all this discouragement, Charles had an indestructible curiosity and love of learning. He did well in school, especially in arithmetic, grammar, and the study of the stars. He read the Bible through, and novels by stealth, along with weekly newspapers. One can imagine that reading was a temporary sanctuary from hard discipline and fear for his soul, and a preparation for the time when he could leave this bleak childhood behind.

He Becomes a Free-Will Baptist Preacher

In 1842, when Charles was 13, he ran away from the farm and gained employment as a printer's assistant in Dover NH. At the same time, two events helped to shape his future religious life.

General excitement was sweeping Christian congregations throughout the country because of predictions that the Second Coming would occur in the year 1843, that "the Lord Jesus Christ would certainly appear in the clouds of heaven with a host of angels and the blast of trumpets, which would awaken all the dead of all the ages and assemble them before the throne of final judgment."

At the same time, a visiting Free-Will Baptist revivalist from northern New Hampshire visited Dover-- "a man of dark and solemn aspect, and a son of thunder, whose preaching moved the people as a great wind shakes the forest.... The new preacher did not presume to name the day of the approaching advent, but his sermons abounded in the same imagery.... 'If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?' the preacher asked."

Something abruptly changed within Charles's mind and spirit. He saw his way to a true hope for salvation, and for the next three months, he "was among the first to take a seat among the anxious, to confess myself a perishing sinner, to ask forgiveness and for prayers, and soon after to express timid hope of my own conversion.... My heart grew light and happy, very tender and loving toward everybody.... I became very fond of the Bible,...and many passages...now glowed with a heavenly meaning, and were sweeter to my taste than honey...."

Due to his conversion, he now saw humanity as a mixture of good and evil, and seemed more ready to forgive himself than when he was younger. One might infer also that for the first time, he felt invited into a fellowship that truly welcomed him, and where the minister gave him "constant encouragement."

The printing house where he worked published not only a newspaper, but also hymn-books, doctrinal treatises, and other religious material, which Charles gobbled up. One text described the need for more preachers to roam the land. Like Saint Paul and other Christians of antiquity, Charles determined to be an itinerant preacher, "warning men to flee from the wrath to come and telling them of the Savior's love." Like Paul, he was determined to earn a living with his hands so that he would not have to accept payment for his religious work.

Having received permission to preach in the local church as a way of trying his wings, and receiving some approval for his efforts, he set out for the west in September 1846, just short of his 18th birthday. He wandered through Pennsylvania into Ohio and entered Geauga Seminary in Chester Cross Roads, near Cleveland, where he stayed more than two years, all the while continuing his itinerant preaching in the region, talking to groups of a dozen to 40 people, for which he received "no pay and few thanks." Forced to economize to the extreme, he ate so little food that his health was affected.

(He suffered from periods of precarious health for the rest of his life. The exact nature of his infirmities can't be determined because of the vagueness in which illnesses were described in those days, e.g., "nervous prostration," and "excitement nearly wrenched his nerves." He was often "driven into insomnia." One might infer that his zeal was combined with an anxiety to excel -- perhaps caused by his miserable childhood -- that affected his whole system, and which persisted regardless of the ministerial successes he had later in life or the affection and reverence with which he was received in his last 40 years. To all this must be added the economic pressures arising from the uncertainty faced by any minister. This pressure was acute when he and his wife went to Minnesota Territory to pioneer there, and also later, when he was trending toward Unitarianism, which in the West was economically more precarious than if he had ministered to some more popular denomination.)

In 1849, age 20, he was formally ordained as a minister, taught school for three months in the district of Youngstown OH, finally received some voluntary payment from one of his congregations, and thus was able to afford a return trip to New England,

where he was briefly minister at Tamworth Iron Works until forced to give up his position when he fell prey to “typhoid pneumonia.”

He recovered, was married on March 28, 1850, to Sara Jane Daniels in Dover, and returned to the seminary at Chester, where he taught and Sara Jane studied. (It was at this point that Charles, having found out where his mother was living, visited her in southern Michigan.) Later in 1850, he again fell ill from a fever.

In the summer of 1851, he saw an ad in the Free-Will Baptist paper, the *Morning Star*, offering a year’s room and board for missionary work in St. Anthony Falls, Minnesota Territory. The next year, Charles and Sara Jane left Ohio, headed westward.

Looking back on this phase of his life from the vantage point of sixty years later, Charles wrote about his early religious training: “Doubtless it saved me from much evil, doubtless it kept me also from some good, for it gave me a narrow range to the movements of my mind, a poor conception of the religious life, and such a concentration of a few subjects of thought as almost to shut out the whole rich world of culture and many of the larger interests of humanity.... The lurid theology and the hothouse forcing process of revivalism produced an unbalancing and dangerous development of the emotions, and I was near to mistaking these emotions for religion itself....”

Charles was not aware of these effects before he reached Minnesota Territory. But he was nearing the time of his enlightenment.

His Search for his Parents

Charles Gordon Ames’s curiosity about his parentage was spurred by the humiliation of being told, perhaps often, that he had been born in sin. To find the identity of his parents was a quest he pursued from his early boyhood until he was nearly 40. We have only glimpses of this history -- a few events in the long process by which he satisfied his mind and spirit.

When he was about 13, one day when all the family was away from the farm, he found a letter from a Dr. Thaxter in Dorchester, Massachusetts, telling of his birth and the \$300 that was offered for his care. The letter did not identify either parent. He wrote to Dr. Thaxter, but his letter was discovered and apparently never sent.

In 1846, at age 17, Charles, who was now working as a printer in Dover, New Hampshire, visited Dr. Thaxter, but learned nothing new except that after his birth, he had been first boarded out to a family named Clapp. He sought out the Clapps, who advised him to see a woman in Chelsea, Massachusetts (whose name we don’t know). From her he learned that possibly his mother had come from Thomaston, Maine. But nothing more.

The desire to know more was now burning brightly. With legal advice, Charles persuaded the editor of the *Morning Star* to print a story about him in which his illegitimate birth would be mentioned. He then initiated a friendly suit against the editor, daring him to prove the birth story. Dr. Thaxter was forced to testify, saying that Ebenezer Thatcher of Thomaston, Maine, had said that Charles was his son by a woman servant. Charles appeared satisfied for a time with this story, which turned out to be false.

Charles didn't let the matter rest. Three years later, at age 20 and now a Free Will Baptist preacher, he learned from Mrs. Clapp, with whom he had remained in contact, that his mother was Lucy Ann Thatcher (daughter of Ebenezer). He visited Mercer, Maine, where many of the Thatcher family lived, but was not gladly received. He did get to talk to his aunt, Mrs. Henry Thatcher, and learned that his mother was married and living in Reading, Michigan.

He Meets His Mother

In 1850, at age 22, and now an established preacher in Ohio, Charles visited his mother twice in the period of a week, the only times he ever saw her. After the two visits he wrote a letter to his mother-in-law about the encounters:

“This was, for the first time in my life, I have seen my mother! I found where she lived with little difficulty and arrived there in the edge of the evening, just as they were at supper. I introduced myself as an acquaintance of her brother's family, and was very kindly received. I soon told them that I was a Free-Will Baptist minister, that I had been in Mercer, etc.

“Her mother had previously written these facts to her, so that she instantly suspected me. I frequently alluded to matters about which I knew she could not be ignorant, but in such a manner that her husband's mind was not likely to be disturbed.

“The next morning was New Year's, and the conversation turned somewhat on the rapid flight of time and the use we should make of it. She remarked, looking significantly at me, 'If I had my life to live over again, I have often thought I would do a great deal better.'

“Other remarks seemed to indicate that she had found me out, and I embraced the first opportunity when her husband was out to inquire whether she suspected who I was. She replied with much emotion, 'I do,' and warmly pressed my hand, begged me not to mention the matter before her husband, told me something of the anguish of mind she had endured, and the constant yearning anxiety she had felt for her lost child. She spoke very feelingly of the painful sense of sin and shame under which she had labored ever since she stepped aside from the path of virtue. I do not doubt that she is both penitent and forgiven.

“The very limited opportunities I have had for conversation with [her] did not [allow] me to ask many questions that pressed upon my mind, but I derived a great deal of satisfaction from the interview, such as it was.

“Her husband is in poor health as well as herself, and they both seem rather despondent. He is the owner of 120 acres of good land, only 25 acres being improved. They live in a new part of the country, and are deprived of a great many privileges and conveniences. They have one fine little daughter, 3 years old.

“[The] mother is 43, accomplished and rather attractive. You will not wonder that I feel deeply interested in her. Her hair and eyes are black and her countenance is fully of expressions. But alas, her spirit seems well nigh broken with grief, and nothing earthly can bring back the buoyancy of youthful innocence to her soul. ‘God may forgive me,’ said she, ‘but I never can forgive myself.’ ”

One can’t but be impressed by this straightforward report of an encounter that must have raised strong emotions. One can read into his letter his feelings as a minister -- those of pity and compassion for this woman, in ill health and haunted by guilt and remorse: “Her spirit seemed well-nigh broken with grief....”

Given the attitudes of his time, Charles no doubt realized that a daughter of a prominent family, becoming pregnant by a man to whom the family may have objected -- or who was unwilling to marry -- had only the choice of secretly giving up the baby or being the object of public shame and perhaps permanent family rejection. This may have saddened Charles, but his letter shows no anger. A few days later, on his way home to Ohio, he made his brief second visit, during which, according to family legend, his mother gave him a surreptitious kiss.

Who Was His Mother?

Lucy Ann Thatcher, now Mrs. Leeson, was the granddaughter of General Henry Knox, one of George Washington’s closest colleagues during the American Revolution and the nation’s first Secretary of the Army. The Thatcher family had a long history of civic and social prominence in Maine, where the Knox family also lived after the Revolution, General Knox having been awarded a large tract of land.

Further Efforts to Have His Lineage Recognized

In 1864, Charles tried to contact the Thatcher family, asking that they recognize him as Lucy’s son, not in order to claim any inheritance but simply to acknowledge his parentage. At about the same time, his friend, Mrs. Caroline H. Dall, whom Charles had probably met when he was in Boston in 1859, attempted to discover his father’s name. (Mrs. Dall was deeply involved in the Unitarian Church. She was a writer and a devoted worker for liberal causes, including Emancipation and women’s rights. She and Charles had developed a deep friendship, and had a regular correspondence for several years during the 1860’s.)

Both Charles's and Mrs. Dall's approaches were rebuffed. One of Lucy's first cousins, Harriet Thatcher, wrote to Mrs. Dall:

"...I can imagine no possible advantage which would result to him or anyone else even if the facts in the case could be ascertained. While his Mother lived, it was natural that he should wish to find her and be acknowledged by her, but she is now dead and if he is the excellent character you represent him, he must desire that her early frailties may be buried in her grave. He cannot wish to dishonor her memory by reviving long-forgotten scandal...or needlessly trifle with the feelings of those relatives who have been innocent sufferers by the errors of another...."

There is no record of Charles's reaction to this news or to the tone of the letter. But a few weeks before Harriet Thatcher wrote her letter to Mrs. Dall, Charles's new wife, Fanny, wrote Mrs. Dall:

"I cannot help feeling that C. G. should not, or rather need not, go aside one step to seek acknowledgement from a family which left him to struggle unaided and alone,...and whose pride is so sacred a thing that even common humanity must stand aside when it is endangered. He has lived thirty-six good years without such acknowledgement and can, I think, live thirty-six more with the comfort of the promise that 'when the father and mother forsake, the Lord will take him up'.... I am so proud of my husband that I cannot help saying that he needs no ancestral blood 'to prove him tender and true'...and as worthy of all reverence as though his baby life had been welcomed and honored by all the world...."

As for Charles's father, his identify has never been solidly established. Mrs. Dall believed he was Charles Moore, a sailor who died at sea.

After the 1864 contact, Charles no longer pursued the question. But during the 1870's, he did meet some of Lucy's relatives. He wrote, in a letter to his son, that they knew who he was and "received him cordially." The letter, listing all the members of the Thatcher family, was intended to let his family know the whole story.

Tough Times in Minnesota Territory

Getting to St. Anthony Falls in 1852 was no picnic. The railroad ended 45 miles west of Chicago. From there the Ameses took two days by stage to the Mississippi, and four more days by steamboat to get up-river to St. Paul.

St. Paul by then had a population of about 2,500 people, St. Anthony less than half that number. "Four Protestant sects had made a beginning," Charles wrote. "Was there room for one more church? For better or worse, we were on the ground and committed...."

Charles and Sara Jane made only very slow progress. In a month, he had recruited only four members to the church. It was slow going for a long time--after four years, while the population of the region was growing rapidly, his church had only 40 members. Meanwhile, he and Sara Jane eked out a living, Charles working as a compositor in a printing office, Sara Jane keeping boarders and teaching a few children. Neither was in robust health; Sara Jane especially was often ill. There was also constant concern about how a fledgling minister's family could make ends meet.

When they arrived at St. Anthony, the Sioux were still living on the west side of the Mississippi. But a few months later, the Sioux agreed to a treaty and moved westward, allowing for the founding of Minneapolis. Many of Charles's parishioners moved there, so the Ameses and the church moved, too.

Charles Questions His Baptist Doctrines

Almost as soon as he reached St. Anthony, Charles's began to question his sect's beliefs. Its teachings were too narrow, he felt, unsuited to the needs of people working to bring civilization to the wilderness. His messages were all "other worldly," preparing for the hereafter, while the citizenry, "who had come to a new land with the laudable desire to make homes for their families," were preoccupied with the here-and-now. A young man said to him, "Mr. Ames, if we lived as you preach, there would never be a railroad or a steamboat built in this Territory."

Doctrinal matters also preyed on his mind. He saw that his sect's insistence on baptism by immersion had driven a wedge within the little community of Protestant ministers, all of whom were all having a hard time surviving, and who needed each others' support. "This bore so heavily on the brethren who practice sprinkling as to make me aware that I had wounded their feelings and weakened the bonds of common fellowship." He came to see that the members of his sect "were infected not only by narrowness, bigotry and sectarian feeling, but by pernicious and poisonous conceit of being better and safer than other men..." About people of other religious persuasions, he asked himself, "What business had I to say, 'His inspiration comes from below, mine from above?'"

He was also increasingly troubled by the idea that a person could, after death, undergo eternal punishment. "I asked the ministers [with whom he met weekly], 'How can we defend the doctrine that a little child who dies without repentance after his first sin must suffer forever?'"

But for a while, "my misgivings made me suspect some unsoundness in myself, and I earnestly prayed that I might realize the danger..." He joined a reading club, and "listened in silent wonder to some large and luminous views of God and destiny." But, he thought, "had not Paul warned that Satan himself appeared as an angel of light?... I was afraid of such reading. These heretics carried too many guns...for me to cope with, and they were all the more dangerous because so brilliant, charming, and plausible..."

Nonetheless, his restlessness with Free-Will Baptism grew. "All my theories...had to be tested by the experiences and activities of frontier life.... I was obliged to rethink every night, and to look over my small stock of boyish notions with the eyes of a grown-up man in lively contact with other men...."

"I grew ashamed of my own sectarianism.... There awoke a passionate desire for a more inclusive fellowship, for a Church broad enough to hold all faithful people...."

He came to believe that "man's own being is divinely organized, that every faculty and sentiment which is proper to our nature should be cherished and allowed to play a part in character," and that if any human quality was suppressed, "we might be running counter to the wisdom of the Creator...." He began to lose his belief in the infallibility of Scripture. Equally valid wisdom and truth were available in many other realms of human experience.

His Religious Crisis

A crisis came while driving across the open space between Minneapolis and St. Paul. He was reading a sermon of Theodore Parker, a Boston Congregationalist minister. "It convicted me of cowardice and dishonesty in professing to hold certain doctrines while refusing to hear arguments on the other side. Never, before or since, was I so profoundly agitated. I shook like a leaf and wept like a child. I saw and felt the awful wrong of posing as a teacher of religion while unwilling to face all facts and learn all truth.... An agony, but the agony of a new birth...."

He was still preaching to his Free-Will congregation. "Concealing my inward struggles...I would still deal with practical duties... My heart [still] burned with desire to help men upward...."

The strain was too much for him, and he "ran away for three months to New England." On his return, he heard children in Sunday School giving rote answers to rote questions. "It seemed to me like poisoning the fountains of their religious light...."

In the spring of 1856, he faced his congregation, proposing that the name of their church be the Free Church of Minneapolis, open to all who gave "satisfactory evidence of Christian character." They turned him down cold. He, Sara Jane, and one other member resigned immediately. Despite his apostasy, his congregation mourned his leaving.

"It is not easy," he wrote, "for a man to own to himself that he has been mistaken all his life, much less it is easy for him to confess it to his neighbors and the rest of mankind.... I could not do it without some inward bleeding.... I have entered on a road of which I do not see the end, nor am I anxious so long as I see the next step, and so make sure of walking in the light."

Now 27 years old, he and Sara Jane began a search for a new religious anchorage. (The search was to last three years.) Their family responsibilities were growing. He had become a father -- his son, Charles Melville Ames, born June 30, 1855, while his wrestling bout with his beliefs and his conscience were ascending to a climax. (The son's middle name was soon changed to Wilberforce.) In 1856, he and Sara Jane adopted a teenage girl, Serena, who had been living with them for two years after she had lost both parents and had had an unhappy, tempestuous life in foster homes.

Sara Jane was in bad health, and in 1858 spent several months in the East with her invalid mother and other relatives. Charles's letters to Serena almost never fail to report on some health problem that Sara Jane was suffering. When Sara Jane was feeling well, he says, she works too hard and will not let up, thus, in his view, paving the way for another episode of sickness. Meanwhile, as in his whole life, his own health was far from robust.

Love for His Children

Regardless of anything else happening, Charles lavished love on his son. A letter he wrote his three-year-old begins: "My Little Boy Willie, How I want to see you! I should love to put my two arms around you and bring you right up snug to my heart and kiss you a great many times; for you are my dear sweet baby boy..."

In another letter, written later that year from Minneapolis while Willie is with his mother in the East: "My Dear Little Boy, It is your father who writes this, and he writes it for Willie to see. I am away off in Minnesota, far beyond where you see the sun go down behind the hills, but I think of you every day, and love you very much. I have got your picture, and I love to look at it, and think of my darling son...."

"O Willie, I got the little kiss you sent in ma's letter, and here is one for you." [In the lower corner of the letter appears a drawing of a cloud with the word 'kiss' on it.]

Clearly, he was determined to make sure that his son would never feel unloved, as he, the father, did when young.

Charles's love and concern for Serena were as if she were his natural child. In letters written to her in 1856, while she was at school in Hillsdale, Michigan, he addresses her "Our Far-Off Daughter," or "Our Only Daughter," and closes with such phrases as "Your fond Papa." The letters are chatty, about the health of Sara Jane, and weather, friends, and activities; and almost none fail to give Serena the kind and amount of advice one might expect from a father who is also a minister. The fact that she wrote with great frequency to Charles and Sara Jane must indicate that this 16-year-old did not greatly resent her father's criticisms and warnings, some of which were long and detailed. Serena had had such a tempestuous early teenage period that she was happy just to have a loving family.

His Spiritual Search

Immediately after leaving the Free Will Baptists, Charles was “half-crazed” by the feeling that he must rapidly make up his mind about his future religious course. He felt he needed to give a “full and fair examination to all the theories that might claim attention.” He feared that this might take a thousand years, at the end of which he might still feel confused. “Unhappy I, wandering guideless in a wilderness intersected by a thousand paths.”

But he soon realized that the still small voice within was the “voice of the Spirit of Truth,” that he would “try to be faithful to my light and let doctrinal questions get settled when they would.” There was no hurry. He “never felt on better terms with Him than when I finally got to the point where I could look up and say, My Father, thou knowest my ignorance and blindness. I cannot tell which creed is nearest truth....”

Meanwhile, he continued to be involved in public affairs, just as he had soon after coming to Minnesota Territory. Beginning in 1854, he made many speeches about Abolition and temperance. He participated in the forging of a platform for the Territorial charter and in the formation of the Minnesota Republican Party, which attracted him because of its firm stance against slavery. He became the first editor of St. Anthony’s first newspaper, the *Minnesota Republican*.

After his withdrawal from the Free-Will Baptists, he became even more active. He was elected Registrar of Deeds. He continued his anti-slavery work, making hundreds of speeches, wherever the occasion arose. (This work increased and reached its peak only in the early days of the Civil War, in the period after he had found Unitarianism and lived and preached in Bloomington, Illinois, Cincinnati and Albany, New York.) The text of an 1859 sermon he gave on the execution of John Brown was widely circulated. In it he said, “No Christian minister has the right to be silent.” (Excerpts from this sermon appear at the end of this brief biography.)

His spiritual search continued. He had given up the image of God as a stern judge before whom all must cower. He credited this change in outlook in part to the birth of his son Willie. “What would I not do or endure for the sake of that child?... My heart might break if my boy should grow up in evil ways; but I could never, never be his enemy, nor turn against him in permanent anger.... Was the Heavenly Father more changeable or less reasonable-minded to His little ones...? It was a sorrowful conviction that I had slandered the Father of mankind, whose mercy endureth forever....”

He came to believe that truths derived from books, living men and personal experience might be as divinely inspired as Holy Scripture if properly sifted and thought through. During this period of searching, “there was a great passing away of clouds with every month.... My creed grew longer, deeper, and more insistent within myself.... I thought with wonder of the poverty and thinness of my early theories and childish thinking....”

“I had gradually become aware of religious value in which I had once regarded as merely secular; might not all things be tributary to the formation of right character...? My early concern was for the safety of the human soul; I continually asked, What will become of us? My new concern was for true soundness and completeness of life and character; I now asked, What shall we become?”

Though he would not disparage or reject Holy Scripture, he vowed to avoid “sectarian entanglements. I must never more be shut up in any narrow creed or organization which might threaten to impose limits upon the search for truth or its open expression.”

He now saw religion as an evolving, not-yet-completed search. “I saw that the coming of the law by Moses and of grace and truth by Jesus Christ were incidents in a longer and wider history--and stages in the still incomplete education of mankind.”

He Adopts Unitarianism (or vice versa)

Sara Jane, continuing in precarious health, had been spending time in the East, and had written him about Unitarian sermons she had heard. When he, too, traveled east, he heard his first Unitarian sermon. He was greatly attracted to the Unitarians, but held back, afraid of a commitment that might limit his spiritual or intellectual freedom.

He later wrote, “I cannot say that I ever took the Unitarian name, rather it took me.... I found among Unitarians those three great blessings which I had coveted, freedom, fellowship and opportunity.... I saw with great satisfaction that the Unitarian people were working and worshiping together without cramping or crowding each other, that everyone, minister or layman, was left perfectly free to form and re-form his doctrines and guide his life...”

His reputation as an effective preacher spread rapidly through the Boston area. Though he did not immediately accept Unitarianism, he was frequently invited to preach to Unitarian congregations. But when he preached Emancipation and women’s rights, he encountered such hostility that Serena, writing to her future husband, George Wright, said the Ames family might become “new and valuable additions to pauperism.”

Through a chance meeting with an old friend, also an ex-Baptist, he was brought to the attention of a group in Bloomington, Illinois, who wished to establish a liberal religious society. In 1859, they invited him to visit for a month and see what would come of it. He went and preached, and after four weeks, the Society for the Study and Practice of Christianity was formed, with 52 members. Arrangements were made with the American Unitarian Association, who helped raise \$500 to support them through their first year. So Charles, now 30 years old, with Sara Jane, her invalid mother, Joann, along with Serena and little Charlie, made their way to Bloomington.

Glad to Move to Bloomington

For fifty years after discovering Unitarianism, Charles's ministerial career was a nearly uninterrupted success. But his life was often far from smooth. Sara Jane, who was ill most of her life from age 26, died in September 1861, after only eleven years of marriage. In June 1863, he was remarried to Julia Frances (Fanny) Baker. They had two daughters, Alice, born in Albany, New York in 1865, and Edith born nine years later in Philadelphia. They had lost two more children in infancy: In 1864, a daughter, Lilian, age five months, and in 1871, a son, Theodore, age 15 months.

Due to Charles's constant travel and his movements over a period of 20 years, from Illinois to Cincinnati to Albany, New York and then to California, Philadelphia and Boston, the family was often separated for significant periods. He continued to suffer periods of ill health when it was difficult for him to be as active as he felt called to be.

At age 30, he was glad to move to Bloomington. He had not felt fully at home in New England. His style of preaching, he believed, was not sufficiently intellectual or literary to be fully satisfying to congregations there. To him, the people of the West were "fresh, free, unfixed, wide-awake, electric; more responsive, more hearty; easier to reach, harder to hold; coarser-grained but more open hearted, more hungry and needy..."

A Season of Turmoil

In the *Spiritual Autobiography*, written decades later, he writes that in Bloomington (from 1859 to 1862), there came "a succession of good, great years of happy freedom in thinking and speaking, of joyous relations with the people.... There were newspaper denunciations and pulpits resounding with warning and hostile prayers, which did hurt a bit...." Little by little, even the ministers of other sects came to like and respect him, not only for his openness, honesty and eloquence, but also for the zest with which he dived into community affairs.

But letters he and Sara Jane wrote reveal the grim underside of their years in Bloomington, especially in 1861, after the outbreak of the Civil War, when Charles suffered a great deal of depression and turmoil, and Sara Jane rapidly approached the end of life.

In the summer of 1861, Sara Jane, was critically ill, though it is possible that neither she nor Charles fully realized she might soon die. She went to visit daughter Serena in Minneapolis to escape the Illinois heat and perhaps recover some of her health. But she continued to suffer from such severe stomach pains that often she could not eat. Charles was torn between wishing her at home and urging her to stay in Minnesota so long as the change seemed to help her. He writes, "Keep good heart and spare yourself whatever will revive your stock of life..." Though he wrote to her several times a week, he seldom heard from or about her. She was too sick to write.

His letters to her were not always designed to lift her spirits. Either he showed depression or he spoke of his eagerness to seek a chaplaincy in an Illinois regiment that was being formed to join the Union forces. He was unsure that the congregation in Bloomington would be able to keep him on, and the chaplaincy might offer a fresh start. Faced with uncertainty in several directions at once, his letters about the prospective chaplaincy veered back and forth between optimism as to what it would do for him as a man and pessimism as to whether his health and his spirit were up to the challenge.

In several letters he writes about his eagerness to do his patriotic duty, which, because of the slavery question, he saw as a holy crusade. Furthermore, he writes, "I hope, too, I should be instrumental in blessing and liberalizing many of those who will return to take up high positions in Western life...."

But in another letter, five days later, he writes, "I am trying to prepare a sermon on courage, but am not quite sure that I have enough of it to know exactly what it means. It certainly must differ from stupidity. I doubt if they can even co-exist. So since I am stupid all these bilious days, I doubt if I have, for the time being, any valor to speak of...." And he worries about the sacrifices that Sara Jane would face, while at the same time expressing his confidence in her ability to cope with Willie and her invalid mother. (If he had been truly aware of the state of her health, he would, one would hope, have given up any thought of the chaplaincy.)

In the end, the chaplaincy went to another minister. Charles guessed that the regiment preferred someone from a more popular and established denomination.

Expressions of Love

Even during these nervous times, he never forgets to send Sara Jane words of love. The following is a typical close: "O, my love, I am and will be everlastingly your C. G. Ames." In another, he writes, "I have sometimes written to you that I was happy in having such a wife, even though far removed. Daily do I know that you are giving me light and cheer and sympathy.... My life will ever be more to me than it could have been, but for my knowledge of you...."

His love of Willie, now sometimes called "Charley," shows, too. Just after Sara Jane has left, he writes, "I hardly yet realize that you are gone and half look to see you coming up the stairs to our chamber, in which now sleeps so quietly and sweetly our little boy." And three days later, "Charley is very manageable, though he needs frequent attention. I think he is a good boy, and can hardly let him sleep o' nights from a desire to hug and kiss him."

Sara Jane's Death

During her stay with Serena in Minneapolis, Sara Jane's health deteriorated markedly. She returned to Bloomington on August 30. Her life slowly ebbed away, and she died on September 16, after three days in a coma. An autopsy, performed because she made her husband promise to have one, showed a long-diseased pancreas, which is key to neutralizing acid in the stomach, and whose malfunction was the cause of her severe stomach pain. The autopsy showed that her condition had never been accurately diagnosed.

Charles wrote to Serena earlier in the day of Sara Jane's death: "Though one smile of recognition or one farewell word or kiss would be worth a world, I cannot wish her to revive only to making her closing hour one of mortal agony. Rather let her pass from a state of unconscious-ness, which seems like the sleep of a child, to the Great Awakening--the blessedness of life immortal."

He continues to write to Serena daily, sometimes twice, feeling that she is the only person to whom he can fully express his feelings. The series of letters is astounding in their openness. He goes through days of despair, but in the end, is calmed by his belief that Sara Jane is beyond suffering, among the angels. He tells Serena everything--the many people who come to help, the laying out ("her whole form seems a majesty of repose"), the funeral, the autopsy, and above all, his powerful, shifting feelings.

The day after Sara Jane's death, Charles writes to Serena this tribute to his departed spouse:

"I have thrilled all day nearly, under powerful excitements; and have felt that my own exercise of mind and heart were consuming all my strength; but the pain has been mingled with a peace which far passes my understanding. I never before knew that sorrow itself may be sweet and sacred and ever fascinating. My own life and that other life have run on as two streams mingling in one channel. And our true marriage--the wedding of our spirits--never seemed so certain and so complete, so real and so blissful, as now.

"And the divine meaning of it has been unfolded to me today with such clearness that I found myself just about to fall on my knees with uplifted hands in awe and thanksgiving toward the wonder-working God, who I know has sent an angel to walk with me through all these years, and to be to me as His Messiah and Savior. If my feet ever stand on the summit of the celestial life, if my voice ever knows the melodies of heaven, if my spirit ever mingles with the company of just men made perfect, I know it will be through the rich grace of God shown me in the gift of such a wife...."

Cincinnati and a New Marriage

Though the association he helped to build in Bloomington survived for many more years, Charles moved on. One would guess that economic uncertainty and the siege of illness and death in Bloomington must have made him eager to leave it behind.

He lived in Cincinnati for half a year in mid-1863, studying at Lane Seminary and serving as minister to a troubled church. There he met and married his second wife, Julia Frances (Fanny) Baker, twelve years his junior.

In a letter to his friend, Mrs. Dall, he wrote he had known Fanny soon after coming to Cincinnati. The Lord, he said, had “shut us up together in this boarding house the last three [months]..., without consulting us in the matter at all. Thus we had a fair chance to find out that we belong together.”

His letter continues: “Fanny, who is quite as much of a woman as I am of a man, is 23 years old, not large, but short and sweet, with blue eyes and dark brown hair; has lived and suffered and bravely borne herself through the most saddening domestic shadows which can cloud a daughter’s path...; is womanly, wise, well-poised, capable and sure to grow; understands me and loves me quite as much as I deserve; will be just and kind to my boy.... You will know that I am attracted to her both by what she is and also by her evident possibilities.”

His ebullience just after the wedding shows clearly: “Well, we’ve got this first week so happily that we feel quite encouraged to try a second. Indeed, since our first beginnings of acquaintance, no ripple or ruffle of incompatibility has disturbed the serene growth and steady flow of this wonderful new life....”

Charles’s and Fanny’s partnership lasted 40 years. In her maturity, Fanny seems to have had a tough mind, a tender heart, substantial energy, though she, like her husband, from time to time had periods of sickness. She knew how to take charge, which made her a bit of a trial in her old age. But she was the right wife to brave the challenges that faced the family in California, despite her initial aversion to going there. Later, in Philadelphia and in Boston, she was an equal partner in many of Charles’s civic and spiritual activities.

Their letters to each other show a great deal of affection. A rather typical Charles beginning: “Dear My Dear,” and an ending, “May the good Lord, bless and keep thee, my dear.” Fanny’s addresses are always, “My dear Charles G.,” and one ending went “Love and love and love.”

In a memoir written decades later, daughter Alice wrote of Fanny, “It is hard to think of her apart from her teamwork with my father. I always picture her as if with arms extended to protect him from anything that would make incursions on his work, and his rather frail body.”

The marriage, Alice wrote, was “one that increased her own liberty and personality. I think my very early recollection was listening to them laughing as they were going to bed, and evidently recounting to each other all the events of the day.”

From Cincinnati to Albany

Of Cincinnati, Charles was not wholly enamored. There was too much “secessionist sentiment” for his fiery abolitionist tastes, and he found his congregation “at its best...below my Bloomington average, and I have found it difficult to feel deeply interested in the Society as much, though I like the human specimens as individuals.” In addition, the congregation was forced, through a lawsuit, to sell its church building, and its future was uncertain.

Charles therefore decided to move again, partially, he said, to judge his Cincinnati experience from “a thousand miles away.” A week after they were married, he and Fanny left Cincinnati to try his fortunes in Albany, New York, where he had been invited to preach, rather as a probation.

Things worked out well for him and Fanny in Albany. The congregation there liked him, and Fanny threw herself into the role of minister’s wife, becoming involved in the Army Relief Association, organizing a church sewing circle which produced goods for Union soldiers, and making and receiving a growing number of visits with parishioners.

Charles’s monthly letters to Mrs. Dall show ambivalent feelings about his congregation. Some of his comments:

“Albany still seems a tough, hard place, and I have my doubts whether I can make much useful impression on the life or thought of the people.... No great number of people here seem to have a firm grasp on the great life-truths, and still fewer are courageous in assertion and vindication of those truths....

“The Society grows upon me. My second month with them finds them already somewhat endeared...though it is a little oppressive to consider how little such well-informed and well-behaved people can need any words of mine....

“Whether I belong here or not is still, and must be for some time, an open question.... No fear of being thought a changeling will keep me very long in a place where the people simply take good care of me but will not let me do them any good....”

Meanwhile, he “was drawn into a great deal of public work,” mainly speaking against slavery--nearly a hundred speeches in Cincinnati, Washington, Philadelphia, Albany and Boston. He was convinced that the Civil War would last a long time and make great demands on the courage and steadfastness of the North. As in years before, he accurately and deeply saw the struggle against slavery as the most important moral challenge of the age.

Charles and Fanny's first child, Lillian, died in late 1864 at the age of five months. This, plus the great amounts of energy required by constant travel, once again broke his frail health in the spring of 1865, and his energies were seriously depleted for the rest of that year.

A Year Alone in California

It was perhaps partially because of his health that the American Unitarian Association asked him to spend a year in California "in reconnoitering the religious situation," so far as his strength would permit. Though Fanny was seven months pregnant, he departed Albany in September, reaching California a month later.

His initial assignment was to assist the minister of the Unitarian association in San Francisco, who had succeeded a very popular man and was finding his relation to his congregation difficult. Charles had to limit his work to match his slowly healing health, but he preached nearly every Sunday. He wrote:

"I am still trying to be idle, only sharing Mr. Stebbins's work on Sundays.... I have bought a pony, and by daily riding and an immense amount of nothing, have rested, rallied and accumulated more corpus than I lost on the voyage.... If He [the Lord] has a small use for me in the future, perhaps He will signify it by giving me a little physical reconstruction during these months of exile."

As his health slowly returned in the winter of 1865-66, his thoughts turned to prospects for organizing congregations elsewhere in Northern California. In March, 1866 he sent a circular to various towns as a way of initiating contacts, and received a number of enthusiastic responses.

"Indeed," he wrote, "I am sure that we might soon have three or four more churches, if we only had the right view to nurse the infant interests and devote the time steadily..." Given this challenge, he decided he wanted to stay in California: "I want to do some work on this Coast which will take more than one year, work nobody else seems likely to do, and I think, too, that the climate is friendly toward improvement in health."

He began to travel, and addressed meetings and nascent congregations in Sacramento, San Jose, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz. What he saw and experienced in the latter community settled his mind: This would be his home.

“To this little village beside the sea, on the north side of the glorious Bay of Monterey..., it has seemed good to give five Sundays, and the result is a Society larger than any in this place except the Catholic, organized in spirit though not in form, a congregation of over a hundred adults, including a large part of the intelligence and representing much of the property, and an interest and influence in this community which is foothold enough for just such work as I am fit to do in my present chronic physical depression.

‘Does it seem something like desertion and banishment to let go my growing hold on great population [in San Francisco]...and settle down in a village of 1,700 souls, with no prospect that it will in the next ten years contain more than 5,000 or 8,000...? So it may. But a year of such weakness as the last has shown me that to persist in city work is mortal peril.’

Moreover, he say, he has accomplished more with five sermons in Santa Cruz than he did in thirty-three in San Francisco. He is confident that he is doing good “for these hungry, open-hearted few whom I have met in the schoolhouse of Santa Cruz.... In short, I believe here is the place to which I am called.... An amount of work which I am competent to attempt promises larger good here than in any place I know of, while at the same time the outward conditions are wholly favorable to the improvement of my health, and will permit me to keep my family in tolerable comfort. I understand the AUA is inclined to render me some further help, and the people here will do nobly.”

He adds that another community 20 miles away, Santa Clara, has welcomed his first sermon, and there are other places not far away where he can serve as his health and energy allow.

The Family in California

Thus Charles’s one year in California became seven. For much of the first year, Charles was uncertain that Fanny would be willing to come. If not, he would return to the East. Fanny finally did consent to come. She, Charley, and infant daughter Alice joined him in the fall of 1866, having journeyed by ship to Panama, crossed the Isthmus by rail, and continued to California on another ship.

Only a decade after the height of the Gold Rush, California was still caught up in the mother-of-all-get-rich-quick psychologies, a place of great social and financial fluidity, where there was less scruple for honest dealing than in more settled parts of the country. To Charles, it “was like going to a new world, giving one a sense of Arcadian freshness.... Its population had [included] the most enterprising and competent, mixed in with reckless adventurers.... In a climate so genial...life took on a certain bare wide-openness...the prevailing restlessness and craving for sensations made life something of a circus and gave a certain dramatic quality to the best things as well as to the worst....”

In her memoir, his daughter Alice comments, "It was a land of hasty connections in business, society, and marriage.... Prizes of wealth and ambition, gained by crowding and clutching, slipped out of hand like a football. Men went up by bold operations to giddy political or financial heights, only to fall with every broken bone...."

For the family, the years in California, Alice wrote later, "were radiant, too, with a health-giving out-of-doorishness and serenity.... On many wonderful mornings, there were breakfast picnics on the meadow [overlooking the Pacific]..., where the broiling of steaks on the live coals alternated with readings from Emerson."

Our superficial idea of Gold-Rush California as a totally lawless, amoral society must be modified when we recognize Charles's success in organizing Unitarian congregations in Santa Cruz, San Jose, Santa Clara, and Sacramento, and by being able to raise funds to build churches in Santa Cruz and San Jose. He had a long series of well-attended lectures in San Francisco, which might have gone on longer had he not suffered one of his periodic physical breakdowns.

In these California years, from age 37 to 44, Charles seems to reach his full maturity and self-confidence as a preacher and an organizer. But his health continued precarious.

Deciding to Return to the East

In early 1872, just as Charles was wondering if he could maintain enough vigor to continue his strenuous work and constant travel in California, he received the "call" to become pastor of the Unitarian Society in Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia, an assignment that lasted for five years, and kept in close, informal touch with the congregation for many years more.

It was not an easy decision for Charles. He was being wooed by the San Francisco Unitarians, and was worried about the future of Unitarian congregations in California, since two other ministers were about to return to the East. However, he had just made a three-month tour of the East, giving sermons and lectures in more than a score of cities, so one infers some initiative on his part to explore possibilities there.

But doubts about leaving tortured him. "It might be wrong," he wrote teenager Charlie, "to desert this Coast where my roots are so well set, ...and these congregations, most of which owe their existence to my coming and working, would suffer great discouragement...."

The lure of Philadelphia won out. He believed his family would prosper more, intellectually and socially, in the East. Moreover, he confessed to a feeling that "after seven years of this nerve-wearing work, a change of scene and field would prolong my days."

At Germantown, he wrote, the congregation was “a young society of intelligent, earnest, and wide-awake liberal-minded Unitarians, in whose pleasant Gothic stone church I preached one morning last December... On my way homeward, I was intercepted by a letter; later came a formal call, and more warm letters; and finally I was drawn into saying I would go.”

In Germantown

Shortly after the family’s arrival in Germantown, the panic of 1873 caused vast hardships. Efforts to aid the poor were fraught with graft. Charles came up with a plan under which committees would tour eight areas in Germantown to ensure that the money went only for dire emergencies. An important side effect, Charles and Fanny believed, was that the affluent committee members would see for themselves how the poor lived.

As Charles wrote: “We shall not really consider the poor unless we live under the law in the spirit of brotherhood. Is there danger of one being unwise? There is greater danger of one being unloving. Love is more likely to lead to wisdom than wisdom is to lead to love.... Our money contributions will lose their finest value if we do not give ourselves....”

Charles called the years from 1872 to 1880 the busiest years of his life. In addition to his duties in Germantown, he and Fanny met and began working with Peter and Susan Lesley to organize the Spring Garden Unitarian Society in the Philadelphia center city. And then came a move to Boston

Editor of the *Christian Register*, Boston, and back to Philadelphia

In the midst of this period, in 1876, Charles was offered the editorship of the *Christian Register* in Boston. The family moved to the Boston suburb of Grantville (now Wellesley Hills). The work and the daily train trip to the city were not entirely to his liking. But he felt “these the most useful years of my life, as certainly they were the most laborious,” even though he was unhappy that it too often kept him from what he most liked to do—preach and advocate social action.

“It still requires self-denial to turn away from the opportunity to speak to my fellow man about the things that pertain to the Kingdom of God,” he wrote. The Kingdom he most often discussed was God’s Kingdom here on earth and our roles in it. He stuck it out for three years, all the while traveling twice a month to preach at Spring Garden in central Philadelphia.

In 1880, five laymen pledged five years of support to the newly formed Spring Garden Unitarian Church, so Charles and his family returned to Philadelphia. He was pastor from 1880 to 1888. He and Fanny worked with the Lesleys to help the church prosper, as well as to found the Children’s Aid Society and the Organized Charities of Philadelphia.

In 1882-83, son Charley and Mary Lesley became engaged and married. This happy outcome brought the Ames and Lesleys even closer together. Mary's letters to Charley (while he was in Europe) report that Charles or Fanny were continually dropping in to see the Lesleys. And Charles used the American Philosophical Society library (where Peter Lesley was long-time Secretary and a Board member) to write many of his sermons.

A memoir of Edith's paints a picture of family life in Philadelphia--comfortable, emotionally and intellectually rich. They attended performances of Gilbert and Sullivan, Shakespeare, and symphony concerts. They saw Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in their primes. While elder daughter Alice was away at college, Charles often took young Edith on walks and sometimes, when there was enough snow, he pulled her along on a sled. When young Charlie came home from college, his stays were like "so many Christmases," Edith remembered.

Boston's Church of the Disciples--Capstone to His Career

He had known the pastor of Boston's Church of the Disciples, James Freeman Clark, since his stay in Boston in 1859, and they saw each other frequently while Charles was editor of the *Christian Register*. In 1888, Clark, ready to retire, nominated Charles to be his successor. "I was sure it could never be," Charles wrote. Alice adds in her memoir that the Church of the Disciples was a "powerful and thoughtful congregation with ideas of its own..., one of the most democratic aristocracies in Boston." There could have been doubt about her father, she writes. He had never attended college, had been a convert from a narrow sect, and had preached for many years in what Bostonians considered the backwoods of America. [Anywhere west of Worcester, the old joke goes.] And his congregation would include many a Boston blueblood.

On the occasion of Charles's 75th birthday, Walter Leon Sawyer, a member of his congregation, wrote: "But after a month or two, when the spiritual radiance of the man had permeated the congregation, he was taken to its inmost heart.... His nature bound him to simple friendliness and sincerity. 'You say I shall soon learn that you are not so good as your might be,' he once wrote a man who attended his church. 'I suspected that, because neither am I. But keep on coming, and perhaps we can help each other to be better....' "

Sawyer continues: " 'The handsomest homely man I ever knew,' his friend Dr. Hale once termed him, and the playful phrase contained a significance beyond the humorous.... He was never too busy to be interested in other people--small folk as well as great.... His sympathies never stopped at parish boundaries."

By the time Charles Ames retired to emeritus status at age 80, he had won the hearts and minds of Church of the Disciples' congregation many times over. He continued his advocacy work in the Boston community as well. Alice writes that in many years, he averaged one address a day. In a year when the family kept a record, there were only two luncheons or dinners at which there was no guest. On his 80th birthday, he received tributes from President Eliot of Harvard and other dignitaries. It is probably not stretching a point to say that in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was among the most revered Unitarian preachers in America.

Charles's letters in the Philadelphia and Boston years reflect his happiness in his work with his congregations and his feeling that he was effectively spreading the intellectual and doctrinal freedom of Unitarianism. Toward his family he let all his affection show.

He signed off letters to his son with "Your fond old dad," "Your affectionate father," and "Your father and brother." He sometimes sent humorous newspaper clippings. In letters addressed to the whole family, he signed off, "Blessings every one!" "I am yours and yours ever," and "Your own and constant pa."

His letters are chatty and bright. He always seems to be running out of paper before running out of things to say—in almost every letter, the handwriting becomes smaller and smaller as he approaches the bottom of the last page. There is almost no letter in the collection in which both sides of a sheet are not filled. In one letter he ends with: "There would be another sheet if I were not a bit tired, but each heart-beat is loyal and loving to you all."

Lifelong Misgivings

Throughout his life, Charles Gordon Ames's happiness and successes were often clouded with doubts and misgivings. Much of these undesired feelings were likely the result of a childhood in which he was constantly reminded of his sinfulness and lack of worth, as well as the turmoil of leaving his early faith and anxieties about employment in the first twenty years of his career. One can also imagine that the ill health, his frequent "nervous prostrations," stemmed from the same causes.

Writing later in life, he commented on the moment when he felt called to be a Free-Will Baptist preacher: "In every serious moment I felt the difference between what I was and what I ought to be, and was filled with self-reproach."

In *A Spiritual Autobiography*, he wrote about his feelings on leaving the Free Will Baptist church, obviously a wrenching experience for anyone: "At all stages of life, I have distrusted my own judgment and have feared to be too positive.... Unless a man is comfortably padded with a conceit of his own infallibility, I do not see how he can avoid misgivings and frequent hesitation.... At one period before I left the Free Baptist Church, I passed through a deep gulf of depression.... I think it is like the fright of a child out of sight of the nurse and surrounded by strange faces."

In 1910, in celebration of Charles's 82th birthday, his daughter-in-law, Mary Lesley Ames, wrote a poem in his honor, called, "A Lighthouse Reverie (Father Charles and the Lighthouse)." One stanza reads:

How we have lived and loved and worked together
For the good of what we called mankind.
Was it all wise? I wot not--
God above can tell.
But yet the strife with evil--*that* I know was good.
It toughened every muscle, warmed the heart, gave
purpose to each day!
Oh, life was good. And we have done our share.

Charles responded, in part, "...the lovely Lighthouse lines found their mark.... I felt as if admitted to a private interview with a soul...."

"But I could not receive them with unmixed pleasure. They put me to shame. My recent experiences have not risen to any such level.... The voice which reproves me most was never quite silent; but I did not heed--did not walk in the shining light. And one soon learns how little human approval, praise, or even love, can offset defects in character. But forgive me!... Forgive me for this too frank confidence."

Some might see this as false modesty, or sorrow at his fading powers. But given Charles's scrupulous emotional honesty, we must take his thoughts at face value. He had worked hard all his life in a truly moral, proactive way. He had had more than his measure of success. But his aspirations were always impossibly higher than his achievements, and he did not enjoy his successes as fully as he deserved to do.

During times when his health was especially frail, he often bemoans his inability to pursue his work, and perhaps sees it as a chastisement. As he once wrote from California, "You know I want to do much, because there is much to be done." Thus his health contributed often to a feeling of inadequacy.

It is impossible to judge a person's mood from a single photograph. But looking at formal photographs taken in his old age, one sees, in that open and kindly face, an unmistakable sadness about the eyes.

When he was 75, he said in an interview, "With much of joy in these more than fifty years of public work, it is yet the joy of an apprentice who is glad to be learning a business not yet to be mastered."

Like his parishioners, his descendants have much to rejoice in this man, who brought literally thousands of people warm friendship, high inspiration, wise counsel, and a broad, liberal view of human potential. His most important memorial, created in a career of over 60 years, was the near-universal love and respect of friends, family and colleagues wherever he lived and worked.

END

(Excerpts from Charles Gordon Ames's 1859 sermon on the execution of John Brown begin on the next page.)

Excerpts from Charles G. Ames's Sermon on John Brown

Charles Gordon Ames was in his first few months as pastor in Bloomington, Illinois, when news came of John Brown's hanging in West Virginia. On December 4, 1859, two days after Brown's execution, Ames delivered a sermon entitled, "The Death of John Brown." He preached this sermon when the whole nation was in turmoil over the event. It was more than a year before the Civil War broke out, and it was not yet totally clear that the war would happen.

Brown, raised in Ohio and Pennsylvania, went with five of his sons to Kansas in 1855 to work to ensure that Kansas would be a "free" (as opposed to "slave") state. When the pro-slavery forces won, Brown turned to violence, murdering five pro-slavery men on the banks of the Pottawattamie River, saying he was an instrument in the hand of God. Having gained national notoriety, he assembled a small band dedicated to freeing the slaves by armed insurrection. His last act was to capture the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, in what is now West Virginia. A detachment under the command of Robert E. Lee soon arrived, attacked Brown's stronghold and killed ten of his men. The wounded Brown was captured, tried, and hung six weeks later.

Following are excerpts from Ames's sermon--eloquent, passionate, balanced. It is all the more remarkable coming from a newcomer not yet fully accepted by his congregation. The whole sermon occupies a pamphlet of 38 pages, and must have taken well over an hour, perhaps two, to deliver.

"On any topic of such absorbing public interest as to set all tongues in motion, a Christian minister has no right to be silent. Every event which excites the feelings and rouses the thought of the people must deeply affect their moral character and spiritual life....

"There are two ways in which the pulpit may abuse its power, two ways in which a minister may dishonor his position....rashness and cowardice.... The pulpit is...disgraced by the minister who betrays his trust through the timid, temporizing policy of withholding the fitting truth because it may be unwelcome to his hearers.... He knows the right, but dares not defend it. He will not attack the wrong, because it is still popular.... There are no baser men than those who use holy words to hide an unfaithful and cowardly spirit.... No man ought to venture on the duties of the Christian ministry until he can look the world in the face, and say from his heart with Paul: 'It is a small thing that I should be judged of you.... He that judges me is the Lord....'

“I am to speak today not as a prosecuting officer to prove John Brown guilty of a capital crime, nor yet as his defending counsel, to make out, by any special pleading, a case in his favor. But I am to join with you in seeking to find a just verdict--the calm, impartial verdict which history will render.... ‘I go to eternity but a few years before you!’ said John Brown to the Governor of Virginia; and he might have said to all of us who sit here, as it were to hold an inquest over his dead body....”

Ames continues, “The armed invasion of Kansas and the pollution of its ballot boxes by proslavery ruffians from Missouri roused his spirit; and though growing gray, he started with several of his sons for the field of strife.... Avoiding public meetings, and despising the men who dealt in talk....he gathered a small band of trusty men, inspired them with something of his own bravery and confidence, and then performed such daring exploits as made his name a terror to evil doers.... It is doubtful whether any man contributed so largely to break the force of proslavery violence and open the way for Kansas to become a Free State as did John Brown....

“For the last twenty or thirty years...John Brown had been revolving in his mind a project for the overthrow of slavery in the United States. Whether he has always thought that violent methods were best I cannot say. But it is probable that what he saw in Kansas destroyed all hope that the slaveholder would ever let go his victim peacefully.... And so, for the last two years, he seems to have been diligently engaged in organizing the rash expedition which cost his life.

“In statements made after his arrest, he told his questioners, ‘I think you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity. It would be perfectly right for any one to interfere with you, so far as to free those whom you willfully and wickedly hold in bondage....’

“When asked if he expected to bring about a general rising of the slaves,...he replied, ‘No; nor did I wish it; I expected to gather strength from time to time; then I could set them free.’

“Their cry of distress, he says, impelled him. He heard, or thought he heard, a sound of woe from nearly four millions of human beings.... He goes to their relief at the risk of his life....”

[Ames goes on to point out that the violence in which Brown was involved was sharply targeted. When he held up a train, he did not rob the passengers of money. When he held 40 citizens of Harper’s Ferry captive for hours, “not one of them suffered the least indignity--not one of them even had his hands tied....” He was quoted by one of his colleagues as saying to his men, “You all know how dear life is to you. Remember that it is equally dear to others.” In the armory he seized at Harper’s Ferry were \$17,000 in public funds. His men took arms, but none of the money was touched.]

“But while all these things...furnish ample evidence of John Brown’s humanity and unselfishness, they cannot relieve him from the charge of wrong-headedness.... What folly for twenty-two men to seize upon a town and public arsenal in the very neighborhood of Washington and Baltimore! What folly to suppose that the ignorant and brutal crowd of slaves...could be restrained from the violent and revengeful use of their newly-gained liberty...and that no mercy could be expected! What folly to suppose there would be no civil war...! And what utter blindness led that humane-hearted old man to imagine that no innocent person would suffer through the general and violent disorganization of society...! He seems to have supposed that all these terrific forces of wild volcanic fury could be controlled by his authority....

“I give thanks to God that John Brown has failed; for I believe the only success...which was possible to him, would have drawn after it consequences at which his own kind heart would have revolted. His wisdom was like that of the man who puts a match to a magazine of powder, hoping to control, regulate, and graduate the explosion with his hand....

“What John Brown did was on his part a sad mistake; but what he meant in his inmost thought was neither treason or murder, but duty, humanity and patriotism. And sooner or later he will get credit for it....

“They [those upholding slavery] are the traitors, who have perverted justice and prostituted the powers of the government, so that it is made an instrument for the perpetration of crimes so foul that they drive the purest-hearted men to madness! That will be a sad day for our country when no citizen feels his spirit roused, and his ‘sinews change to steel,’ when the gates of justice are slammed in the faces of men simply because they are poor and weak, and wear a skin of such color as their Maker gave them....

“The world will glorify the memory of John Brown because he died for liberty.... His heroism, his self-forgetfulness, his simplicity of character..., his honest zeal outrunning all prudence, his manly bearing and high religious faith and self-possession before the court--all those will be faithfully studied and duly honored....

“Like the first gun of the Revolution, which, as Emerson says, ‘was heard round the world,’ so is the deed of John Brown. No other man, living or dead, has ever struck a blow which so shook the system of slavery to its foundations. God grant it may never get over it, but go tumbling to its utter destruction....

“....The knowledge of what John Brown has done and suffered, and the reason of it, will travel to the remotest plantation.... John Brown’s blood, freely shed, will moisten and warm into more vigorous germination, all over the South, that idea of liberty which God has planted in all souls....

“We have striven in vain to dodge the whole matter of our duty by compromises, political tactics, and resolutions against agitation. But John Brown has moved the previous question, and forces us to vote. God loves the nation too well, he loves the North and the South, the slave and the master, too well, to let us rest in peace under the shadow of our great crime.... He bids us choose this day which we will serve, freedom or slavery; for however we may desire it, neutrality is now out of the question....

“Let me here say to you what I deeply feel, that these are no times for passion, or uncalculating precipitancy of action. Let every man hold his mind in sober, even balance, that the duties which coming events may devolve upon us may be discharged firmly and promptly, but in the highest spirit of wisdom. We can ill afford to lose our wits in this double crisis of difficulty and danger....

“Equally deep is our common interest in settling it without blood.... We want no strife between North and South, nor between the black man and the white. But it is both idle and foolish, if not wicked, to seek tranquility while slavery exists....

“John Brown’s fame or infamy is not the great matter at issue.... Slavery is on trial for its life; and we are in court, interested parties, likely to be arraigned before God and the world as accomplices in the guilt of upholding it.... God help us to wash our hands in innocency of the great transgression, and serve our country by serving with our highest wisdom the holy cause of Human Brotherhood and Universal Justice....”

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