

✓
ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

✓
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

—
VOLUME IV.
—

NEW YORK:
ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS,
530 BROADWAY.
1858.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1856.

By ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern
District of New York.

JOSEPH STIBBS CHRISTMAS.*

1824—1830.

JOSEPH STIBBS CHRISTMAS, a son of John and Elizabeth Christmas, was born in Georgetown, Beaver County, Pa., April 10, 1803. His parents had thirteen children, of whom he was the eighth. His father, who was descended from an ancient family in the North of England, removed to this country and settled in Pennsylvania, shortly after the close of the war of the Revolution. His maternal grandfather, Joseph Stibbs, emigrated from London, and settled in Virginia, at a still earlier period.

His early years were marked by decisive indications of a beautiful and versatile mind. He had an uncommon taste for rural scenery, and delighted greatly in drawing and painting, and occasionally exercised himself very successfully in writing poetry. Having gone through his preparatory course at an Academy in Beavertown, Pa., he became, in 1815, a member of Washington College, in the same State, where he maintained the highest standing as a scholar, though he still indulged his passion for the fine arts, and intended then to devote his life to them. In the summer of 1819, however, his mind became deeply impressed with religious truth, in consequence of the death of two of his fellow-students; and, after a somewhat protracted season of reflection and anxiety, he was enabled, as he believed, to consecrate himself to the service and glory of his Redeemer. He graduated, with the highest honours of his class, in September; and, immediately after, returned home to Georgetown, and thence removed with the family to Wooster, Wayne County, O. There he commenced the study of medicine; for, though his own feelings were strongly in favour of entering the ministry, yet there were obstacles then in the way of it, to which he thought it his duty to yield; and it was not till the spring of 1821, that the way was made clear for him to engage in the study of Theology. It was in May of this year, shortly after he had relinquished the study of medicine, that he made a public profession of his faith, and was received into the Presbyterian Church in Wooster, under the pastoral care of the Rev. Thomas Barr. He was now a little more than eighteen years of age.

Shortly after this, he went to Princeton, and became a member of the Theological Seminary. Here he continued during the usual period of three years, acquitting himself most creditably in the various departments of study, and availing himself of the many opportunities for usefulness which his situation presented. During his connection with the Seminary he became deeply interested in the state of the Protestant Churches in France and the Vallies of Piedmont, and had resolved to devote his life to a mission among them. But immediately after his licensure by the Presbytery of Philadelphia, in April, 1824,—a messenger from the then new church in Montreal came to him, with a view to secure his services in that important position. Though he was exceedingly reluctant to listen to the proposal,—having previously made up his mind in favour of another field of labour, yet such were the arguments by which the application was enforced, and so unanimous were his brethren in advising him to yield to it, that he finally deter-

* Memoir by Eleazar Lord, Esq.—MSS. from Mr. Lord, and Mr. Christmas' family.

mined to proceed to Montreal, that he might be able to form a more intelligent judgment in respect to his duty. He reached there on the 5th of May; and at the end of three weeks the Congregation gave him a unanimous call. He accepted the call, and, having become a member of the Presbytery of New York, was ordained and installed by a committee of that Body, on the 1st of August. Here he entered a field of labour to which his health was very inadequate; though the strength of his resolution and the vigour of his good affections, achieved, for a time, no inconsiderable triumph over his bodily infirmities.

In June, 1825, he was married to Louisa, daughter of Perez Jones, of the city of New York,—a lady eminently qualified to occupy with dignity and usefulness the situation to which her marriage introduced her.

Mr. Christmas remained in Montreal a little more than four years; during which time he not only discharged with great fidelity his duties as a Pastor, but engaged in many other important services having a bearing on the cause of Christ. In 1827, a revival of religion took place under his ministry, in the issue of which about one hundred were added to the church. He made a number of vigorous and well directed efforts through the press, which exerted an important influence in favour of both piety and morality.

Early in the summer of 1828, he left Montreal, with his health greatly reduced, though not without some hope that it might be restored; but, finding himself little benefitted by travel, he felt constrained to ask for a dissolution of his pastoral relation; and his congregation, though devotedly attached to him, were so well persuaded that his removal was probably essential to the continuance of his life, that they could not oppose the measure. The Presbytery accordingly released him from his charge in October; and, immediately after, he and his family took up their residence in the house of his wife's father, in the city of New York.

In December, he made his arrangements for a voyage, as Chaplain of one of the public ships, in the hope that his health might thereby be improved. But, in consequence of the unexpected delay of the vessel in which he had intended to sail, he took passage, early in January, 1829, for New Orleans, as Agent for the American Bible Society. Finding, on his arrival there, that he was unfavourably affected by the climate, and too feeble to prosecute his Agency to advantage, he returned almost immediately to New York. On reaching his family, he found that his youngest daughter, an infant six months old, had been dangerously ill during his absence, and was then apparently near the close of life. She died on the 7th of April; and a few days after, the other daughter, and only remaining child, nearly three years old, was taken ill, and was also removed by death on the 3d of May. The health of Mrs. Christmas had become seriously affected by the fatigue and anxiety incident to her repeated bereavements; and partly from the hope that she might experience benefit from breathing a different air, and mingling in new scenes, he accepted an invitation from his friend, S. V. S. Wilder, Esq., to pass the summer at his residence in Bolton, Mass. There his own health was considerably recruited, and he preached to a newly formed congregation in that place, and was invited to take the pastoral charge of it. Mrs. Christmas, however, was steadily declining under a pulmonary disease; and, after a few weeks, little hope was entertained of her recovery. They returned to New York early in July; and on the 9th of August she died in the exercise of a triumphant faith.

With such exquisite sensibilities as Mr. Christmas possessed, nothing less could be expected than that he should feel most deeply this desolating stroke; but, instead of allowing himself to become paralyzed with sorrow, and to sink into a state of hopeless inactivity, he girded himself anew for his work, resolved to devote to the service of God whatever of life and strength might still remain to him.

About the beginning of October, he accepted a unanimous call from the Bowery Congregation, New York, to become their Pastor; and his installation took place a week or two afterwards. His health had now considerably improved, and strong hopes were entertained that it might be permanently established; but scarcely had he entered his new field, before death terminated his earthly career. He died after a brief illness, and in the confident and joyful hope of a glorious reward, on Sunday morning, March 14, 1830, aged twenty-seven years, wanting one month. His Funeral Sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Spring, and was published.

The following is a list of Mr. Christmas' publications, exclusive of his contributions to periodicals:—A Poem, in two Cantos, entitled "the Artist," 1819. Report of the Montreal Bible Society, 1826. Tract on Repentance: No. 183 of the American Tract Society, 1826. A pamphlet on Romanism. A Discourse on the nature of that Inability which prevents the Sinner from embracing the Gospel, 1827. An Appeal to the inhabitants of Lower Canada on the disuse of ardent spirits, 1828. A Tract published by the American Tract Society, entitled "Mary Le Fleur." A Farewell Letter to the American Presbyterian Society at Montreal, 1828. An Address to Physicians on Temperance, 1829. An Appeal to Grocers on the same subject, 1829.

A Memoir of Mr. Christmas, by Eleazar Lord, Esq., was published in 1831, to which are appended some of the more important of his writings.

FROM THE REV. EDWARD N. KIRK, D. D.

Boston, December 27, 1848.

Dear Sir: My recollections and impressions of Mr. Christmas are summarily these:—

He was more than ordinarily beautiful in complexion and expression; but of only medium stature. The beauty of his face would have been of feminine softness, but for the manliness of the intellect and sentiment which redeemed it. His understanding was penetrating, clear and sound. His memory was uncommonly retentive. His social qualities were of a high order; a constant sunshine of cheerfulness accompanied him; a meek and unambitious spirit allied to great firmness formed the basis of his character. He was one of a little group of twelve in the Seminary, who together practised extemporaneous debating on the profounder questions of Theology and Metaphysics. His rank among us there was high. Of his religious character I retain no other recollections than that I always regarded him as a peculiarly spiritual man.

I am sorry to have reached so meagre a result in answer to your inquiries concerning my old friend.

I am yours most affectionately,

EDWARD N. KIRK.

FROM THE REV. HENRY WILKES, D. D.

MONTREAL, L. C., December 10, 1848.

Rev. and dear Sir: To note down some recollections of the gifted and now sainted Christmas, is a task affecting, yet pleasant. It is fitting that your forthcoming work should contain a sketch of the character and course of this young American clergyman, who, though early removed to his reward, was distinguished by no ordinary qualities, and was favoured with more than usual success during his brief ministry. Lovely in his life, his memory is still fragrant after the lapse of eighteen years. One loves to recall his dignified and graceful mien, his blameless life, his powerful utterance of the truths of God, and his untiring, earnest consecration of all his faculties to the one object of his life,—the glory of Christ in the salvation of souls. Most profitable is such an exercise of the memory, too often encumbered with things of little value. It is refreshing to dwell awhile on one “who feared God above many,” and who has left behind him a bright example of devotedness to Christ’s cause.

A calm review, at this distance of time, gives rise to the conviction that his was a special mission to this Northern frontier of American Christendom,—designed to begin a work of spiritual amelioration, which, receiving then an impulse and an impression, has steadily advanced until this present, through various channels, and in quarters, and by instruments, then unlooked for. A quarter of a century has passed away since that mission was introduced, and truly wonderful have been the results. As your space will not admit of enlargement on a merely collateral topic, it may suffice to notice that there were then only four Protestant places of worship in the city, and that the aggregate number of those who “loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity,” was lamentably small. There are now nearly twenty Protestant houses of prayer. In most of these there is an intelligent and earnest ministry, while the aggregate of those who “know the truth in the love of it,” is large. It is not my purpose to trace the influence of the short ministry of my loved friend, as giving impulse and impress to this movement—*that* would be to write the history of religion in Montreal during the last twenty-five years; but the opinion may be recorded that He who orders all things well, and who knows the end from the beginning, has made use of that ministry in a very marked manner in the achievement of the progress, imperfect as it still is, over which we now rejoice.

Mr. Christmas was the first pastor of a small church, formed of individuals who had been connected with a congregation, gathered by a clergyman from Scotland, belonging there to a Dissenting Presbyterian Body, whose place of worship in Montreal had been erected chiefly by pecuniary aid from the United States. On the demise of that clergyman, a bare majority of the owners of pews determined to become identified with the Established Church of Scotland, and, as a consequence, the above mentioned persons,—chiefly natives of the United States, seceded, and formed themselves into a Church and Society, having at length the corporate designation of “the American Presbyterian Church.” This infant body had enjoyed the temporary services of several able young clergymen, but at length received the pastoral labours of the subject of this notice. Not personally identified at the time with the church, I have yet a distinct recollection of his first appearance in this sphere of labour, and of the attractiveness of his ministry, notwithstanding the absurd prejudice which then existed in the minds of the English-speaking people generally against every thing and every body not of British origin. My impressions are of his personal gracefulness and manly beauty, as he appeared in the pulpit, attired in clerical vestments,—as also of the finished style and forcible character of his discourses. Quite young, he was yet manifestly “a scribe well-instructed,”—a workman who “rightly divided the

word of truth." His literary and theological advantages, which had been great, he had used to good purpose, so that he appeared on all occasions "thoroughly furnished."

The people of his immediate charge, not having yet completed the erection of their place of worship, were indebted to other congregations for the use of theirs', at hours during which they did not occupy them. This was in some respects a disadvantage in the work of organization; yet it had the effect of bringing the young minister to the notice of many, who might otherwise have never heard him. There were at the time scattered through the other churches, certain well-instructed and devout adherents of several of the Dissenting Churches in England and Scotland, of which there were no representatives here. There were Baptists, Independents, and Presbyterians not of the Church of Scotland—men and women of intelligence and piety. Some of these were drawn around Mr. Christmas, because of sympathy with his doctrinal views, and with the forms of Divine worship adopted,—as, for instance, the use of Dr. Watts' Psalms and Hymns. Part of them united with the church, while others merely became identified with the congregation. With much that was excellent and effective, however, this was not the characteristic period of our friend's ministry. It was the Lord's purpose ere long to vouchsafe to him a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit.

You are doubtless informed from other sources of the fact that, after labouring a number of months, it became needful that he should visit the neighbouring States, and his own native region, partly for the purpose of obtaining aid in the erection of the large place of worship in which he was to minister; and that, during this visit, he met the late Dr. Nettleton, and enjoyed the unspeakable advantage of beholding one of those wonderful works of grace by which the ministry of that remarkable man was at this period attended. During his absence, the little flock was much in prayer, while the Sabbath School was maintained with unwonted vigour. By uniting with that institution as a teacher, I became, at this time, connected with the congregation, and was also, I humbly hope, "found" by that Good Shepherd who seeketh and saveth the lost.

Unless I am greatly mistaken, Mr. Christmas returned to his charge under the influence of what might perhaps be denominated, not inappropriately, a second conversion. Truly has the German poet sung

"Earnestness is life."

And it has been recently well said by a Quarterly Reviewer,—“The acorn is a quiet little nut; but let it be nourished in the bosom of its mother earth, silently building up its massive trunk amid the passing generations of trees and of woodmen, and you behold the living oak that wrestles stoutly with the storm. The lion's whelp, reposing in his lair, is a gentle creature: but give him time, and he will show you what is in him. The lightning sleeps in the thunder-cloud, but when it tears its prison, how it seathes and blasts the works of nature and of man! How cold a thing is gunpowder,—only let the *spark* touch it! Even so is it in the world of mind. Let a man's soul be quickened, called forth by some great principle, some grand ambition, and up to the measure of his strength, and according to the fashion of his inward thought, what deeds will he not do, for good or for evil, just because he is in earnest, believing strongly, and so acting out what he believes.”* This “great principle,” this “grand ambition,” this master passion, in Mr. Christmas, was henceforth the conversion of sinners, and the advancement of our Lord's Kingdom. Devout before, and devoted, he had served the Lord in a manner superior to many of his contemporaries; but now it was absorption: “this one thing I do” was his practical motto; and everything was subordinate to this great object. In him “earnestness was life,” and

* British Quarterly Review, No. XI., p. 244.

a noble life did it prove. Would that such impulses quickened us all—how great then our effectiveness!

My impressions are distinct of the unwonted solemnity and power of his pulpit exercises. His preaching was doctrinal for purposes of instruction, and occasionally controversial for the important end of discrimination. He “chose acceptable words,” and handled the weapons of this warfare with the skill of a master. I have sketches of many of his discourses taken down at the time: they bear the marks of adaptation to the existing wants of the people, as well as of much beauty and force. Usefulness is obviously the design according to which they were composed. Some of the practical appeals are remarkably pungent and searching; others are full of earnest tenderness. He understood the sentiment in its highest sense,—“*Omnia vincit amor.*” And yet I recollect one or more instances of individuals becoming so infuriated by the scorching discrimination of some of his sermons, that, as confessed afterwards, temptation was felt to shoot the preacher. I do not remember ever leaving the house of prayer, with the impressions, in some quarters so common, which suggest the remarks,—“that was a well written sermon”—“there was much originality of thought in that discourse”—“that minister’s style is very chaste.” No. It was all home work—the preacher was forgotten in the truth, and so earnest was he that people should hear and feel *that*, that he stood modestly behind it, not desirous of himself being noticed.

Yet his style was easy and graceful, and frequently of a high character. I think you will agree in the opinion that “*Valedictory Admonitions*,”—a pamphlet of thirty-six pages, octavo, is beautifully and vigorously written, and, so far as I recollect, such was his accustomed style. Many of his discourses were written fully out, but he never read them in the pulpit. He appeared there usually, and I think uniformly, without notes. His delivery was chaste and very solemn; but too unimpassioned for the higher flights of oratory. His public prayers were quite remarkable for scriptural phrases happily introduced, as also for fervour and solemnity. I never heard him use a coarse, or familiar, or slang, expression in prayer. My impression is that he frequently composed prayers in order to improvement in this part of public worship. Occasionally, after the introductory devotional exercises, he would pronounce the text of his discourse, and then pause, saying,—“Christians, I am about to address the unconcerned (or some other class) from these words; it will be in vain without the Divine blessing—let us spend a minute in united, silent prayer.” That minute or two of stillness, only here and there broken by the sigh of the earnest petitioners, was an affecting preparative for a discourse full of “Christ and Him crucified.” Truly did he say in “*Valedictory Admonitions*,”—“During four years, I have testified to you the Gospel of the grace of God. I have sedulously avoided all curious questions, doubtful disputations, and every subject whose radiations do not branch into the very heart of Christianity. The Heart-searcher is witness that I have been anxious to engrave such truths upon your mind, as it were worthy an immortal spirit to bear recorded on the tablets of the heart, and such as I knew must one day be exhibited as evidence of what was written on my own.” “When I think that perhaps a little more pains-taking on my part, a little more travail of the heart in prayer, a little more labour of the intellect in the presentation of motives, a little more toil of the body in following you with entreaties of solicitude to your dwellings, might possibly have saved some one, I feel that there may be a propriety in adopting the Psalmist’s petition,—‘*Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation.*’” What earnestness!

His character was simple, childlike, spotless. He knew comparatively little of the world—occasionally this was a disadvantage in the midst of a mixed and busy population like ours. Still, whatever observers or opponents may have said

of his enthusiasm, or even of his fanaticism, they could not question the sincerity and consistency of his godliness. Into the details of the blessed revivals of religion which occurred here and in the neighbouring town of St. Andrews, your limits will not permit me to enter. But it may be noted with respect to his own course, that while he laboured untiringly and to exhaustion, he also found employment for others. Christians were instructed in their responsibility as stewards, and they were earnestly enjoined to be faithful. Although a personal matter, it may not be without interest for me to state that, having united with the church some months after Mr. C.'s return from the visit to the United States above alluded to, he ere long kindly but solemnly called my attention to the Christian ministry. He was only two years my senior, but I well recollect the impression his appeal produced upon my mind. At the time, I did not yield, having doubts as to the matter of duty. It may be well to state, however, for the purpose of exciting others to "go and do likewise," that he was authorized by a gentleman in Philadelphia of whose name I was then and still remain ignorant, to offer me the needful pecuniary advances in the way of loan or otherwise. At the time, I was just entering into new commercial relations. But the suggestion of my beloved friend never left me; the path of duty gradually opened to my own mind; and, having acquired sufficient pecuniary means in business to pay my own expenses through a course of study, Mr. Christmas had the gratification of seeing me abandon profitable commercial engagements for that higher work to which he had been the first to direct my attention. You will pardon this allusion to a personal affair—it is made in order to illustrate the fact that the subject of this notice endeavoured to press all into that department of the Lord's service, for which he supposed them respectively qualified.

I have already exceeded your limits, and must not extend my remarks. It is now more than twenty years since we parted, to meet no more, until the Father's house is opened not for one only, but, if it may be, through grace, for both. He, prostrated in health, and compelled to relinquish his charge, was on the eve of returning to his native South—1, on the eve of sailing to my native East on the other side the Atlantic, there to pursue literary and theological studies. In two years more, after laying his lovely babes and his admirable wife in the grave, this gifted, useful servant of Christ was called home to his rest and reward. But he lived much and long in a short time, if life is to be measured by effective service. Some of us would joyously hail the comforting assurance, could we know that as much hath been done for Christ's glory in the salvation of men, during a ministry of three or four times the length of his, as he was honoured to achieve in a very few years. The Lord make us faithful; and the results may be safely left with Him.

Believe me, my dear Sir, yours faithfully,

HENRY WILKES.