

**A DISCOURSE ON THE LIFE AND
CHARACTER OF THE REV. AARON
BANCROFT, D.D.: SENIOR PASTOR OF
THE SECOND CONGREGATIONAL
SOCIETY IN WORCESTER, DELIVERED AT
HIS INTERMENT, AUGUST 22, 1839**

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A Discourse on the Life and Character of the Rev. Aaron Bancroft, D.D.: Senior Pastor of the second congregational society in worcester, delivered at his interment, August 22, 1839 by Alonzo Hill

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ALONZO HILL

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BY ALONZO HILL,
Pastor of the Second Congregational Society in Worcester.

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Reverend Amos A. Truett
Episcopal House of Bishops, London

TO
MY PARISHIONERS,
THIS HUMBLE TRIBUTE
TO THE
MEMORY OF OUR VENERATED SENIOR PASTOR,
PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

DISCOURSE.

2 TIMOTHY, iv. 7, 8.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith :
Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord,
the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.

UNDER the most ordinary circumstances, it is impossible to contemplate the termination of human life, but with the interest of a personal relation. It is the end of so much that is known, and the beginning of so much that is unknown, that it is not easy to witness, much less to approach it, without a solemn pause in the current of the thoughts ; for how much is crowded into this brief hurrying period, and what scenes await us at its close !—Then cometh the end. The account on earth is terminated. No more temptations, no more trials, no more conflicts. The battle is fought, and the victory is lost or won ; the race is run, and the prize is missed or gained. The past cannot return, nor its decisions be reversed. The page in its history is written, and the page in God's book of life. And to him who sat and talked with us but yesterday with all the familiarity of friendship, the veil which hides the future is raised, the dark mysteries of the unseen

world are revealed,—faith has ripened into reality,—and hope into fruition. If, then, we were met to pay the last offices of respect to the remains of an ordinary individual,—in the lofty speculations and solemn reflections of the hour—in contemplating the loss of a single mind on the social condition—in following that mind in its lonely path through the dark valley, where all must travel, to its final home—there would be room for the most interesting and awakening thought.

But the presence of this numerous assembly—the drapery of mourning hung around this church—the weeds of woe in which so many are clad—the grief pictured on so many countenances—are indications that no ordinary man lies before us ; that he, whom the shroud now covers, was largely endowed by the Creative Spirit ; has acted a conspicuous part on the theatre of life ; and in acting that part, has maintained his integrity, and kept the faith ; that he was endeared to many hearts, and has left memorials behind him which will not soon perish. May we not then pause a few moments, before we deposit these remains in the tomb, to contemplate the long and useful life that is just now closed, to gather up the fading images of departed worth, and, before they have quite vanished, to impress them upon our hearts ?

The Rev. Dr. BANCROFT is principally known abroad, and will be known to posterity, as among the distinguished advocates of religious freedom in New England. Mayhew, and Chauncy, and Gay* led the way in vindicating the rights of the human mind—and he, above all others, with his cotemporaries, James Freeman, and

* See Note A.

Noah Worcester, now gone to their rest, entered on their labors, and carried on the great work which they had begun. He was remarkable, beyond any man whom I have known, for his deep-seated abhorrence of every thing like mental slavery, and was jealous with a godly jealousy of every thing that might interfere with the mind's entire freedom. He believed that Christianity was intended to emancipate the soul, not only from error and sin, but from prejudice, from narrowness, from the fear of man; and to impart to it liberty to act, to choose, and to follow its convictions, wherever they might lead. And he entered upon the stage of life at a time when the great contest for civil freedom was going on—but when he thought that religious liberty was endangered. It is true the period had gone by when the cross, fire, faggots, the prison—those fearful arguments to which bigotry had so often resorted—could longer be used;—the body was free—but the mind still worked in chains; it was pent up and stifled, and could not move towards the truth without obstructions that almost crushed it. Men had so fenced religion around with creeds and confessions of faith that it could not be approached freely. Legal persecutions had indeed ceased, but those quite as intolerable followed the slightest whispers of dissent from established dogmas. Not death, but that which the generous mind scarcely prefers to death—the censures and excommunications of ecclesiastical bodies—the blackening of a good name and the blighting of fair prospects—the altered tone and averted eye of former friends—constant vexations in social and domestic life,—these were the penalties paid for the love and earnest pursuit of truth. And the venerable man who lies

before us, ever regarded the use of these in checking or intimidating the human mind, as an enormous imposition. He could not abide the intolerance which interferes with the soul's anxious inquiries after truth and duty. Nothing moved him so much. He esteemed civil liberty but a name, while the mind was not left free. He thought the social blessings enjoyed among us of but little avail, while this system of mental slavery existed, and he was ready to consecrate his life to its removal. In this cause he counted no sacrifice a hardship, and was willing to labor early and late, and with a zeal and perseverance which could not fail to be crowned with success. Nor did they. Blessed beyond most reformers, he lived to witness the fruits of his labors.* They are before the eyes of the present generation; and they will be acknowledged by a grateful posterity. If there is now a shadow of Christian liberty in our own fair New England; if the different sects among us have learned and are learning more and more to respect each other; if the time shall come, as we trust it will, when they will strive together to promote the improvement and happiness of mankind, to build up and adorn the Church universal—for that we are indebted, in no small degree, to the late Dr. Bancroft, and the venerable men who were associated with him in the great contest for religious liberty.

That you may appreciate his character and labors, let us trace such facts in his history as have been preserved, and are known to me. His life was not eventful—theirs are not generally so who have done the best service to mankind. He was born in Reading, Mass., Nov. 10, 1755, and would, therefore, had he reached the approaching autumn,

* See Note B.

have arrived at the advanced age of eighty-four years. He belonged to that class in society from which New England has received many of her noblest and best men.* His father was a farmer, and, as he has been represented, was a man of a strong and original mind whose conversations and modes of thinking had much influence in producing those habits of manliness, activity, and free inquiry for which the son was afterwards distinguished. His early youth was spent in the genial and healthful labors of the field; but when the hour arrived for him to select his profession, with a respect for learning which belongs to the yeomanry of no other country, but which is almost universal in this, at his own solicitation, he was "released from the furrow, and sent out at no small personal sacrifice to be fitted for the husbandry of the Church, or the honorable toils of the state."

Having been prepared for college at the grammar school, and, during its temporary suspension, under the instruction of the clergyman in his native town, he entered at Cambridge, and was graduated in 1778. He was of the class of which that eminent jurist, Nathan Dane, and the historian of Massachusetts, Judge Minot, were distinguished members. He survived all the companions of his early studies but two, of whom one remains with us to this day, to call to mind the forms full of young life, that were around him when he began his career, and to witness the unsparing havoc which death has made among them. Let it be remembered, however, that only a very imperfect education could then be obtained at the best institution in New England. It was at the commencement of the revolutionary contest. The

* See Note C.