

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.

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## JOHN NELSON ABEEL, D.D.

1793—1812.

FROM THE REV. PHILIP MILLEDOLER, D.D.

New York, February 23, 1848.

Rev. and dear Brother: I regret that I have not been able sooner to comply with your request for some account of my lamented and excellent friend, the Rev. Dr. Abeel; and I regret still more, now that I have set myself to the work, to find that I am in possession of only enough of the facts of his history to form but a very general outline of his life. With the material that I have, however, I will endeavour to serve you as well as I can.

JOHN NELSON ABEEL, a son of Colonel James and Gertrude (Nelson) Abeel, was born in the city of New York, near the close of the year 1768. The rudiments of his classical education he received at Morristown, N. J. In due time he was admitted as a student in the College of New Jersey, where he graduated, an excellent scholar, in 1787.

Shortly after his graduation he commenced the study of the Law, under the direction of the Hon. William Patterson, of New Brunswick, afterwards Judge of the Supreme Court of the United States. But within about a year from that time he experienced a change in his views and feelings, in regard to religion, that determined him to devote himself to the work of the ministry. Accordingly, he became a student of Theology, under the direction of the Rev. Dr. John H. Livingston; but, in 1791, accepted a Tutorship in the College of New Jersey, which he held for two years. In 1793 he was licensed to preach the Gospel by the Classis of New York. Shortly after this the Second and Third Presbyterian Churches in Philadelphia entered into an arrangement to obtain his services, with an understanding that two-thirds of his time should be given to the Second Church, and the remaining third to the other. He was accordingly ordained, and installed as Colleague Pastor with Dr. Green, of the Second Church. The plan, however, did not work satisfactorily, though the relation between the two Pastors was altogether agreeable. In June, 1795, Mr. Abeel received a call from the Collegiate Reformed Dutch Church, in the city of New York, to become one of its Pastors. He accepted the call, and was installed on the first Sabbath in October following. In August, 1805, he was called to the Pastorship of the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia; and, if my memory serves me, he was invited to become the Pastor of one or two other prominent churches; but he declined in each case and remained with his charge in New York till the close of his life.

In the year 1804 the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by the Corporation of Harvard College.

In 1809 Dr. Abeel was assailed by that insidious and fatal malady, the consumption. This obliged him frequently to suspend his labours for a considerable time. He passed one winter in South Carolina, and also made a voyage to Rio Janeiro; but in neither case experienced any permanent benefit. No medical skill could arrest the progress of his disease. It was slow but sure, and on the 19th of January, 1812, he gently fell asleep in Christ, being in the forty-third year of his age.

In person Dr. Abeel was of middle stature, of spare habit, and always appeared to be in delicate health. The expression of his countenance was decidedly and highly intellectual. He had an uncommonly amiable disposition, fine colloquial powers, and manners at once calm and dignified, polished and attractive.

Dr. Abeel possessed a mind of a naturally superior order, thoroughly disciplined and highly cultivated by the best advantages of education, and by a subsequent habit of close study. His style of preaching was simple, luminous, searching, pungent, and sometimes marked by extraordinary bursts of eloquence. He usually preached from short notes, and occasionally without any notes at all; but his sermons were never lacking in well-digested thought, logical accuracy, or close discrimination. They were especially remarkable as exhibiting an uncommon depth and richness of Christian experience; and while all were attracted by the eloquence that characterized them, they were most acceptable to those who received the truth in the love of it. He delivered a series of Discourses on Education, which were of a very high order, and were thought, by the best judges, worthy of being given to the world through the press; but I am not sure that they ever existed even in manuscript. He was celebrated for his fine efforts on charitable occasions—few preachers could make more powerful or successful appeals in behalf of human want and suffering than he. As a watchman on the walls of Zion, he was most vigilant and faithful. He took great delight in visiting his people, and his presence was always greeted by them as a benediction. He was especially attentive to the youthful members of his flock. He lost no opportunity to place himself in contact with them; and, while he rarely, if ever, failed to win their hearts, he was always endeavouring to impress upon them, directly or indirectly, those great truths, the reception of which makes wise unto eternal life.

Though Dr. Abeel was himself, in his religious views, a decided Calvinist, he was distinguished for catholic feeling and action towards those whose creed was not, in all respects, in harmony with his own. Wherever he recognized the image of Christ, there his heart opened in expressions of fraternal sympathy and goodwill. He had no patience with that spirit of bigotry, which rends the seamless robe of Christ, hurls abroad its anathemas, and raises the senseless cry,—“The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, are we.”

With such qualifications for usefulness, and pursuing such a course as this, it is no cause of wonder that he had an eminently successful ministry, and enjoyed in a high degree the affection and confidence of both the congregations that he served. A revival of religion occurred under his ministry in New York, as the result of which large numbers were gathered into the church, and a great and enduring influence for good is believed to have been secured.

I do not say that Dr. Abeel was faultless,—for that cannot be said of any human being; but I may safely say that I have known few men whose characters had so little in them that seemed to require correction as his. I have known few ministers of the Gospel, whose course through life has been marked by so much wisdom, dignity and quiet efficiency, or which has secured such universal respect. I venture to say, you cannot find a person who knew him, who does not still hold him in cherished remembrance.

Dr. Abeel was married on the 29th of January, 1794, to Mary, daughter of Mr. John Stille, of Philadelphia. This excellent and accomplished woman was, in all respects, the suitable companion of such an husband. She survived him several years, and died in New York, on the 13th of January, 1826, universally and deservedly esteemed by all who knew her. They had seven children, three of whom survived him. One of his sons, *James*, is an officer in the United States army, and another, *Gustavus*, is now the Rev. Dr. Abeel, of Geneva.\*

Dr. Abeel's only publication, during his life time, was a Sermon delivered, in April, 1801, before the New York Missionary Society, which attracted great attention as a splendid effort of eloquence. In August, 1827, another of his discourses was published, posthumously, entitled "An Old Disciple."

Wishing you, my dear Brother, the highest measure of success, both in your ministerial and literary pursuits, as well as every other blessing,

I remain, most truly and affectionately,

Your friend and servant, in the Lord,

PH. MILLEDOLER.

FROM THE REV. SAMUEL MILLER, D.D.

PRINCETON, February 28, 1848.

Reverend and dear Brother: You request me to give you my impressions of the character of the late Reverend John N. Abeel, D.D., for a number of years one of the Pastors of the Collegiate Reformed Dutch Churches in the city of New York. Though pressed with the burden of official duties, and bending under the infirmities of age, I could hardly have been called to a more welcome task. When the name of Dr. Abeel is mentioned, a chord is touched which always vibrates with mournful pleasure to my heart; and calls up the image of a brother, whose loveliness as a Man, whose piety, talents, and fidelity as a Minister of the Gospel, and whose lamented removal, in the midst of his days, from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant, crowd with the deepest interest on my mind.

Dr. Abeel was naturally one of the most amiable and benevolent of men. This was evident to the most cursory observer of his character. No jealousy, no suspicion, no species of littleness or social obliquity, seemed to have the least place in his natural temper. In looking back over the whole course of my long and unreserved intimacy with him, I cannot call to mind the minutest instance of conduct which seemed to demand an apology, or which I could wish to cover with the mantle of oblivion. I know not that I was ever acquainted with a man who habitually manifested more simplicity, candour, kindness, and straightforward, unaffected probity and honour, than did this dear friend.

But the greatest glory of his character, as a Minister of the Gospel, was his ardent and eminent piety. This was uniform, prominent, and habitual. In every situation, public or private; in the pulpit or the prayer meeting; in the chamber of disease or the social circle; it was manifest that he walked with God, and that his great concern was to lead souls to Christ, and to minister to the spiritual good of all. His religion was personal, cordial, and practical; not merely official. It was evident to all who conversed with him, or who listened to his conversation, that his great object was, like his Master, to "go about doing good."

\*Since removed to Newark, N. J.

As a Preacher, Dr. Abeel occupied a high rank in the estimation of enlightened and pious hearers. In the commencement of his ministerial course, his preparations for the pulpit were in a high degree ornate and beautiful, abounding in rich matter, and manifesting much taste and evangelical eloquence; and in all these respects he was capable of great things. But, as he advanced in life, his sermons became less elaborate and less rhetorical,—not, however, less instructive or less useful. He retained, indeed, to the last, a sufficient amount of ornament in his preaching to attract and to gather round him the young people of his congregation; but his discourses, in the pulpit and in the lecture room, were so clear, so unaffectedly faithful, so full of precious truth, and so richly experimental, that probably no preacher in the city was more sought after or admired by the anxious inquirer, or the mature, experienced believer. I have known members of other churches besides his own to attend his weekly lectures with steadfast perseverance and with the deepest interest.

Dr. Abeel was eminently a catholic Christian. Though he was warmly attached to the Dutch Church, and spared no labour to promote her extension and honour, yet he had nothing narrow or sectarian in his feelings. He had no community of spirit with those who can see no good out of their own denomination, and no evil within it. He had a large mind, and a large heart for real religion, wherever he found it; and could sincerely rejoice in the advancement of the Saviour's Kingdom, no matter by whom it was accomplished. Hence he was ever ready to favour any plan which promised to do good to the souls of men, by whomsoever proposed or undertaken. Yet no man was more tenacious than he of what he believed to be sound, scriptural truth, or more ready to "contend earnestly" for it against all gainsayers. His catholicism was not the offspring of either indifference or indolence; but of a sound, sanctified discrimination between the essentials and the non-essentials of religion, joined with a strong predisposition to love all who seemed to love the Saviour.

Dr. Abeel never published much. His talents and his learning were, indeed, both such that he might have given instruction from the press with great acceptance and profit. But he had no particular "publishing propensity;" and his mind and heart were so much absorbed in the great practical work of doing good by personal labour, that he found less time than he desired for the liberal use of the pen. To this may be added that, during the last seven or eight years of his ministry, he was so much of a valetudinarian that the extra labour necessary for preparing work for the press became irksome, if not impracticable.

When, therefore, this eminent man was removed by death, at the age of forty-two, he was universally lamented. The most enlightened and serious Christians of New York felt as if one of the ablest and best of their spiritual guides was taken away. Seldom, I believe, has a minister died, who left a richer monument of affection and confidence in the hearts of thousands who were best acquainted with him, than did this faithful servant of Christ.

I wish it were in my power to convey a more vivid and adequate impression of the esteem and love with which this friend of my youth was regarded by all who knew him. But little as has been the leisure, and less the strength, which I have enjoyed in framing the present communication, I feel constrained to thank you for giving me the opportunity to offer this humble testimonial to his beloved memor—

I am, Rev. and dear Brother,

Cordially yours, in Christian bonds,  
SAMUEL MILLER.