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HISTORY  
OF THE  
BOYLSTON CHURCH

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A BRIEF HISTORY  
OF THE  
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,  
BOYLSTON, MASS.

BEING A SERMON PREACHED BY THE PASTOR,

REV. ISRAEL AINSWORTH,

SUNDAY EVENING, AUGUST 15, 1886, AS A PRECURSOR TO THE  
CENTENNIAL OF THE TOWN, OBSERVED ON THE  
FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY.

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# HISTORY OF THE BOYLSTON CHURCH.

A SERMON BY REV ISRAEL AINSWORTH.

CALL TO REMEMBRANCE THE FORMER DAYS.—Heb. x, 32.

WE ought not to forget the past, nor be unmindful of its lessons. Observation and experience beget wisdom. The history of nations, states and towns has always been interesting, but we realize the true ideal of history only when we discover God in it, shaping its ends for the evolution of His own designs, edueing order from its vast confusions, resolving its complications into one grand and marvelous unity, and making it a body of completeness and symmetry, with Himself as the informing soul."

It will not be difficult to recognize God in the history of this town and church. The early settlers of Boylston were believers in God and worshipped and served him. If any one should attempt to give the history of this town and leave the church out such a history would be very uninteresting. It was the desire for Christian and "sanctuary privileges" that made the North precinct of Shrewsbury and the town of Boylston possible. From 1705 to 1740 the inhabitants of this place were connected with the churches of Lancaster and Shrewsbury; when we remember that they had to go either upon the backs of horses, or on foot, along cart roads or bridle paths through the woods, we do not wonder, even though they were willing to overcome any reason-

ble difficulties to meet with the people of God, that they should desire, poor and few as they were, to support the gospel in a place nearer their homes. It was this desire which led them to move in 1740 for incorporation as a separate precinct. They succeeded in their object, after considerable opposition from the people in Shrewsbury, and the General Court granted their request December 17, 1742

In seeking for an act of incorporation at the hands of the representatives in the General Court, they did not forget the chief reason which had prompted their petition. Part of that petition read as follows :

“ And they (the committee) are further of the opinion that the ministry lands lying within the North Parish should always be for the use and improvement of the minister for the time being that may be settled in the North part aforesaid. And inasmuch as the South part have freely offered to allow the North part, on going off, in consideration of their interest in the meeting-house, a certain sum of money, we apprehend it will be but reasonable that they make payment thereof, viz : £32 10s., lawful money, when the North part shall have erected and covered a suitable frame for a meeting-house for the worship of God among them, and that they be vested with the powers and privileges of a precinct accordingly.”

January 19, 1743, about a month after the granting of the charter, the first meeting of the new precinct was held, and the first parish officers were chosen : Deacon John Keyes, Moderator ; John Bush, Clerk ; John Bush, Joseph Biglo, Deacon Cyprian Keyes, Joshua Houghton and Abner Sawyer, Parish Committee.

The next meeting was on February 7, when the following, among other items of business, was transacted :

“ 1. Voted £26 8s. old tenor for eight days' preaching past. 2. Voted £50 old tenor for preaching for the future. 3. Voted that Daniel Hastings, Abner Sawyer and Joseph Biglo be a committee to provide a minister 4. Voted that the senter of the North precinct in Shrewsbury, that is South of the Quinnepoxet

river, or the nearest convenient spot to the senter, be the place to set the meeting-house on. 5. Voted that Captain Flagg be the surveyor to find the senter of the North precinct in Shrewsbury."

This meeting was adjourned to the 18th of February, 1743, when it was :

" 1. Tryed whether they would adjourn the building of the meeting-house for the present, and it was passed in the negative. 2. Voted to build a meeting-house forthwith. 3. Voted to build said house forty-five feet long, thirty-five wide and twenty feet between joints. 4. Voted to choose a committee to build said house, and that said committee shall have the frame of said house up and covered with boards and shingles agreeable for said house, and rough boarded around the sides, by the first of June next."

Three months to build a meeting-house in those days will compare very favorably with these days, when we take into consideration the disadvantages under which the fathers and founders of this church and town labored. Deacon John Keyes and twelve other disciples of Christ, residing in the the North precinct, signed a petition September 7, 1743, which read as follows :

"*To the Church in Shrewsbury* : A number of the members of the same, and dwelling in the North precinct, in said town, wisheth grace, merey and peace : Reverend, Honored and Beloved. Whereas, we, the subscribers, together with others of said precinct, and covenanting with us, are, as we trust, in God's providence, called to incorporate into particular church unity of our Lord, these are therefore, humbly to request your leave therefore, and that you grant us a dismission from you, and an interest in your prayers, that God would not only settle the gospel ordinances and institutions among us, but also grant that pure religion might in this place flourish and abound. We subscribe ourselves your brethren in faith and fellowship."

This request was granted. October 6, 1743, the church in Shrewsbury, by their elder and messengers, assisted in organ-

izing this church, which by the grace of God continues to this day, having had an unbroken fellowship with the churches of the Puritan faith. The church had but nineteen male members at its inception, but sixteen females were added to the number in August, making the membership thirty-five, all from the South Church in Shrewsbury. The next thing in order was to secure a minister. So on February 23, 1743, in the sixteenth year of his majesty's reign, etc., and five days after they voted to build the meeting-house, a precinct meeting was held, and Mr. Ebenezer Morse, a graduate of Harvard University in 1737, was called to settle over them in the gospel ministry. They agreed to give him £400, old tenor, for settlement, and £160, old tenor, a year salary for the first two years, and then £5, old tenor, more every year, gaining £5 a year till it comes to £180, old tenor; provided that the said Morse shall give a quit claim of the ministerial lands that are in the North precinct of Shrewsbury to said precinct, if it be by them requested. These terms not being accepted by Mr. Morse, another meeting of the precinct was held March 23d, at which a committee was chosen to invite Mr. Morse to meet with them, and it was voted to increase his salary £10 per year after the first two years till it became £200, old tenor, a year, and so to be higher or lower as provisions shall rise or fall from this time forward, allowing wheat to be at this time twenty shillings per bushel, rye fifteen shillings, Indian ten shillings, oats six shillings, in the North precinct of Shrewsbury, and pork eighteen pence per pound, and beef at eleven pence per pound in Boston."

Mr. Morse agreed to these terms and accepted the invitation to settle over this parish. Six churches were invited to meet in council, and they ordained the first pastor of this church October 26, 1743, one hundred and forty-three years ago next October. The services took place in the new meeting-house, which had been erected on the common, in front of what is now the old burying ground.

The house at the time of the ordination was in a rough, unfinished state, having neither pulpit nor pew—even the floor



was not laid, nor the door nor windows provided. The next season, 1744, the meeting-house was finished." November, 1745, must have been a memorable month for the new church and parish. Rev. Ebenezer Morse was married to Miss Persis Bush, the daughter of John Bush, the first clerk of the parish. He married a member of his own congregation. What this had to do with his future relations to the church and parish the records do not say. But so far as we know pastor and people worked harmoniously together until the beginning of the Revolutionary war. Excitement throughout the colonies was intense. Mr. Morse was a Tory, and that meant to many of the enthusiastic revolutionists—a traitor. The majority of the people here were in favor of separation from the mother country. So few were the royalists that their names have been preserved: Rev. Ebenezer Morse, William Crawford, Jotham Bush, Benjamin Fisk, and Timothy Ross. Mr. Morse and Mr. Crawford were forbidden to keep arms in their possession, the minister was not allowed to go outside his parish, and Mr. Crawford was confined to his farm. The minister in those days was settled for life, and it was not an easy matter to dissolve the pastoral relation, unless the pastor resigned. But in time the numerous difficulties were overcome, and an ecclesiastical council dismissed Mr. Morse November 19, 1775—thirty-two years and fifteen days after his ordination.

He remained here during the rest of his life, preaching for a time to a small congregation, practising medicine, for he was said to be "from the first, a skillful and eminent physician" and fitting young men for the university. Mr. Morse was a man of uncommon intellectual ability, and no doubt an earnest Christian minister. It has been said of him that "he was so bright in the classics as to command, in his retired location, a school of young gentlemen preparing to enter college; and it was under his thorough tuition and inspiring influence that the foundation of the literary eminence of many in our early history was laid." Mr. Morse continued to live in this town until his death in 1802, at the age of 83 years 9 months and 21 days.

October, 1776, the church gave a call to Mr. Eleazer Fair-

banks, who was graduated at Brown University in 1775. He accepted the call and was ordained March 27, 1777. He was offered £133 6s. 8d. settlement and a salary of £66 13s. 4d., which was afterwards increased to £70 and his settlement to £180. He also married a daughter of one of the officers of his church, Miss Sarah Biglo, whose father was Deacon Amariah Biglo. At the time of the ordination of Mr. Fairbanks the church numbered seventy-one members, twenty-nine males and forty-two females.

About this time Watts psalms and hymns were introduced. At a precinct meeting, held December 24, 1781, it was "voted to continue congregational singing; also voted to choose a committee to propose some way in which singing should be performed in this congregation." The precinct "chose seven choristers to tune the psalms." "Also, voted the two hind seats, below, both men's and women's, for the use of the singers." Nothing remarkable is on record concerning the ministry of Mr. Fairbanks, but this town was incorporated while he was here—March 1, 1786. In December, 1792, Mr. Fairbanks asked the church to dismiss him. The church objected at first, but afterwards consented, and he was dismissed with the consent of council April 23, 1793, after a pastorate of more than sixteen years.

March 12, 1794, Mr. Hezekiah Hooper was ordained and installed. At this time the question was raised before the council in reference to the organization of a new church. "This move grew out of a controversy between the inhabitants of the Eastern and Western portions of the town in reference to the location of a meeting-house which they had finished the year before. The first move towards the erection of this house was made in the year 1791. A warm controversy arose as to its location, frequent committees were chosen both from this town and neighboring towns. The town was surveyed and measured to find the center, or in some way to fix upon a spot that would be satisfactory to all parties, but without success. The location where the center school-house now stands was finally selected, and the majority, controlling the town, built the house upon that

spot, which was finished in 1793, at an expense of about \$4,500. Its location was the immediate cause of a division in the town, of the organization of a new church, the incorporation of a second precinct, and after much contention and litigation, resulted in the incorporation of the town of West Boylston."

When Rev. Mr. Hooper began his labors with this people there were one hundred and eighteen church members. His salary was £115. He admitted fifteen members into the church on confession and five by letter. He died of consumption among his friends in Bridgewater, December 2, 1795. He was minister here one year, nine months and twenty five days. He was a graduate of Harvard in 1789, and is said to have been "a young man of good talents and attainments, a gentleman in his manners, and a pattern of meekness and humility." After the death of Mr. Hooper, "the church set apart a day for fasting and prayer, that the death of the late Rev. Hezekiah Hooper might be sanctified to the church and town, and that the church and town might be directed in the choice of an able minister to settle in the work of the ministry, in and over said church and town."

In September, 1796, the church voted to call Mr. Ward Cotton "to settle with and over them in the Gospel ministry, according to the Cambridge Platform." The call was accepted, and the ordination took place June 7, 1797. Rev. Ward Cotton was a graduate of Harvard College in 1793. Soon after he began his work here he sought to have the rule in reference to receiving members into the church upon the half-way covenant altered, and he succeeded. This half-way covenant was arranged by a council convened in Boston by order of the General Court in 1662, and it was adopted so as to allow moral persons to "own the covenant" receive the rite of baptism themselves and present their children for the same rite. At that time none but baptised persons could vote. This half way covenant was the ground of much trouble in the churches of New England, and had been discussed on several occasions by this church. Long before Mr. Cotton began his ministry there had been doctrinal differences in the Congregational churches of New England.

The early church of the Puritans in America was strictly Calvinistic and Trinitarian. The church in Shrewsbury was in accord with the Puritan faith. In their covenant, adopted in 1723, they say: "We are of judgment that the whole of the well-known Westminster Catechism, as explained by Calvinistic divines, contains a just summary of Christian doctrines, as revealed in God's holy word.

We have no reason to think that this church had departed from the faith of the church from whence it came, up to the time when Mr. Cotton was settled over this people. Nor has this church ever in its history, as a church, departed from the evangelical faith. It has with all the churches of the same order acted upon the thought of John Robinson in his famous farewell to the Pilgrims of "The Mayflower," that "there was more light to break out from God's word." Mr. Cotton did not claim to be a strict Calvinist when he came here. He entertained some of the views of the so-called "liberal" divines. The majority of the members did not sympathize with his views. A party spirit grew up in the church, which finally resulted in the dissolution of the pastoral relation, June 22, 1825. On the dismissal of Mr. Cotton he received from the parish, in addition to his salary, four hundred dollars.

During the ministry of Mr. Cotton the first Sunday-school was organized in this town. This was in 1818, and it has continued to be an important auxiliary to the church down to the present time. Mr. Cotton was pastor of this church over twenty-eight years, and received into its fellowship ninety-eight persons and baptised one hundred. He continued to reside here, preaching for some time in a separate building, and died in November, 1843, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

Mr. Sanford says of him: "As a man, he was amiable, with strong sympathies for those who were in affliction, obliging in his disposition, took pleasure in conferring favors, and never sought to give unnecessary pain and trouble to those around him."

It was not an easy thing for the church to decide upon another pastor. Some were for securing a "liberal," others

were in favor of a Calvinist. But after having heard a number of candidates, the successful one says: "I came into this place an entire stranger, and happened providentially to pass a Sabbath with this people. I was employed as a candidate. The committee to supply the pulpit had already a letter written to a Unitarian candidate which was not sent. I supplied the people, till finally I was settled." This was Mr. Russell. He received a unanimous call from the church: the parish, by a very large majority, concurred with the church. It is said of the council which was called to ordain Mr. Russell that it "represented all the isms by which the Congregational Church of New England was at that time distracted." "The candidate was made the medium of controversy between them; the examination was conducted with unusual warmth, and the foundation laid for serious future trouble to the pastor, to the church, the society and the town."

Mr. Samuel Russell was ordained June 21, 1826, at a time when a division in the Congregational church of New England was taking place, and when both the liberal and orthodox in the church were, many of them, very illiberal, very far from having the spirit of Christ. It is, no doubt, true that Mr. Russell lacked firmness and decision of character, but he was, nevertheless, a man of God, and those who sought to traduce him and take advantage of his natural timidity, did not prove themselves to be better Christians than he. God honored this his servant. His Holy Spirit was poured out, and during this short ministry of less than six years over one hundred persons professed conversion. One hundred and four were added to this church. Mr. Russell noticed that "this awakened prejudice," which was no doubt true. When God works the adversary of God and man works also. Rev. Samuel Russell was graduated at Dartmouth College in 1821. Dr. Todd says of him:

"In his manner and appearance he was simple, unaffected and kind. I have seen him in situations peculiarly trying, and yet I never heard him make a severe or unkind remark about any man. His judgment was clear, sound and discriminating. His humility was such that he never performed those duties, to

which most ministers become professionally hardened, without trembling. As a preacher he was plain in manner and plain in matter, but he was uniformly judicious and practical. His talents in the pulpit were not those which astonish and dazzle, but his messages of life were never from an indifferent heart." He was dismissed April 17, 1832.

Rev. William H. Sanford was the next minister. He was ordained October 17, 1832, and was a graduate of Harvard in the class of 1827. He resolved in the beginning to take no part in the controversy which was going on in the town. His religious sympathies were with the church. His religious principles he could never sacrifice nor compromise. It was his earnest desire that peace and harmony might be restored to the town. He knew that all the blame was not on one side. He had no party triumphs to achieve, no wrongs, either real or imaginary, to redress. He approached every man in town as one who had had no part nor lot in the matter.

While it may be said that this church owes much to Mr. Russell for saving it to Evangelical Christianity for the future, it also owes a debt of gratitude to Mr. Sanford for making the existence of any other church in this town impossible. Mr. Sanford was not only an educated man, but a man of sanctified common sense. Those who differed from him felt that he was their friend. So that while in the beginning and during the continuance of his ministry, there were other religious organizations in the town, there was but one when he left, and there has been but one since. He taught this church a lesson, which it has not yet forgotten, in its treatment of Christians of other denominations, so that now all who really love Christ and His worship may realize that they are welcome in this church. We are neither Calvinists nor Arminians, but are aiming to be Christians.

In the spring of 1835 the church and parish determined to build a new meeting-house on a new spot, in place of the old house, which had been a cause of division in the town and church. So the building we now worship in was built and solemnly dedicated to Almighty God, December 10, 1835. "The

Ladies' Benevolent Society," which has existed since 1815, did good service (as they have since) in aiding the parish in the building of this church. We are pleased to notice that previous to building the new meeting-house, the church had "voted unanimously that hereafter candidates shall be admitted to this church only upon their subscribing to the principle of total abstinence from the use of ardent spirits; and that every violation of this principle by persons hereafter admitted shall be subject to church discipline.

While Mr. Sanford continued to labor for the religious and educational improvement of this town, "It was not an uncommon thing to hear the inquirer ask what he should do to be saved, nor to hear young converts rejoicing in believing in the Lord Jesus Christ." During the first twenty years of his ministry, one hundred and ten were added to the church on confession of faith. Rev. Mr. Sanford was dismissed September 15, 1857, having been pastor of this church a little less than twenty-five years. He resigned his pastorate because of ill-health. He was greatly beloved by his people. He died in Worcester, where he resided after his dismissal, November 27th, 1879, aged seventy-nine years, nine months and thirteen days.

The church did not succeed in settling another minister, though they had attempted to do so, until October 17, 1861, when Mr. A. Hastings Ross a graduate of Amherst College was ordained. Before Mr. Ross received and accepted a call to become the pastor of this church, the pulpit had been supplied by several ministers and candidates. But the parish did not concur with the church in calling any one until Mr. Ross came here in the providence of God. He was a minister of growing ability, and attended to matters of discipline which had been, in the absence of a pastor, neglected. He was also very careful to impart necessary religious instruction to candidates for admission into church fellowship. During his pastorate the country passed through the great civil war. Mr. Ross offered himself to the Christian Commission, and was away from the parish for some time in their service, and in the service of his country. He was equally patri-

otic with the forty one brave men who went from this town into the war of the rebellion

Mr. Ross resigned to accept a call from the Congregational Church at Springfield, Ohio, and was dismissed from this church and parish January 16, 1866. He has become quite prominent in his denomination, having written a manual for Congregational churches, and he has also been for several years the Southworth Lecturer on Congregationalism in Andover Theological Seminary, and Special Lecturer on Church Polity in Oberlin College. He is now Rev. A. Hastings Ross, D. D., of Port Huron, Mich.

The longest period of pastoral vacancy in the history of this church elapsed between the dismissal of Mr. Ross and the settlement of his successor. So little is to be found in the church and parish records concerning those who supplied during this time, that but little can be said in reference to them. Rev. Andrew Biglow, D. D., a native of this town, and a descendant of one of the early settlers, supplied the pulpit longer than any acting pastor of this church—from August, 1866, to April, 1873. He died in Southboro September 23, 1882, and left \$1,000 to the church here, the income of which is to go toward the support of the gospel. The parsonage was built in 1873. Next to Dr. Bigelow Rev. H. S. Kimball supplied the pulpit for the longest period, being here from October 1, 1877, to 1882. While Mr. Kimball was here special meetings were held, in which brethren from Worcester assisted, and considerable religious interest was the result.

The present pastor was installed April 29, 1884. No council had met in this church up to that date for nearly a quarter of a century. The church had had no stated supply for over a year when the present pastor began his work. The means of grace were not largely attended, and the faithful few had become somewhat discouraged. But the work of the Lord has prospered in our hands, and pastor and people have reason to rejoice together. The attendance upon the Sabbath service is much larger. The Sunday school has grown, and the weekly meetings are unusually large. The church building was repaired and thoroughly



painted and beautified in July, 1884, and the young people of the parish built a neat and convenient barn for the parsonage last December. The Boylston Young People's Society of Christian endeavor was organized December 7th, which numbers already fifty-five, forty-four active and eleven associate members, and others are waiting for admittance.

The work of grace among the young people here is remarkable, so many young men have given themselves to Christ.

An event which occurred the 18th of February last, brought sorrow to our hearts. One whose warm, loving heart had ever beaten in sympathy with all that was highest and best in this community, who was a real friend to the church and ministry, was called by the Master he so ardently loved and so gladly served, to his reward. *John B. Gough*, the great temperance orator and philanthropist, is no longer a member of this congregation, no longer a resident of this town, which he had made his home for nearly forty years: he is now a resident of the New Jerusalem. He bids us, by his life and death, press forward in the work for Christ and the souls of our fellow men. And shall we not be faithful in the performance of Christian duty? Let us do what we can to make this town a Christian town in every sense of the word. We shall not live to see its bi-centennial. But our acts of love, our self-denying opposition to sin, may tell upon the next hundred years in this town's history. If the one hundred and fifty-four members of our Sunday-school, the one hundred and thirty-six members of our church (thirty of whom have united with us during the present pastorate), will only give themselves fully to the Lord Jesus Christ, this whole township shall come under the reign of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords long before the close of another century!

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