

First Parish of Sudbury

How the First Parish Became Unitarian

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Written in 1959

May 7, 1837, was a Sunday. The Reverend Rufus Hurlbut trudged up Concord Road from his spacious parsonage towards the meeting house of the First Parish, as he had done on Sunday mornings for some twenty years. There was a difference, however, on this morning, for a younger cleric walked by his side. The Reverend Hurlbut had not been well and was hoping that this young man would supply the pulpit for him. After all, a minister of fifty years deserved some rest, and some peace.

But peace he was not to get that morning. Upon arriving at the church they found the door locked and they could hear another minister preaching within. According to one who was there, "Mr. Hurlbut informed the committee that he would like to introduce his minister, and, the request being granted, they passed in." Hurlbut made some remarks, but realized that the parish, the legal body of the church, had chosen a preacher to their own liking and there was nothing he could do. Our eyewitness continues, "Understanding the situation, he turned and went down the aisle, but saying, 'I leave amicably.' A large share of the congregation left also and with their minister went over and worshipped with the Methodists." Shortly afterward, Mr. Hurlbut and this share of the congregation formed what is now the Congregational Church.

This was 122 years ago.

Ministers have come and ministers have gone. We live in a new age and we ask "what does this history have to do with us?" we are worried about parking lots, and merger, and church school space. We ask ourselves the question, "what are we?"

But we cannot answer this question, until we ask at the same time, "What were we?" We never live in a really new age, for each new age grows out of an old age -- as an oak tree from an acorn grows.

Let us look at this old age -- this age from which we came. And let us ask two questions of this age, "How did we come to be?" and "Why did we come to be?"

The "How" question is concerned with facts; the "why" question is concerned with value. And yet the two questions are one. We cannot discuss value without reference to the facts. We cannot make order (make history) of the facts, until we have a value position from which to judge and order them. With this prologue in mind let us proceed to the questions of how and why we became a Unitarian church.

The Revolutionary war brought freedom for the United States within the commonwealth of nations; but it also brought freedom within the borders of the country -- specifically, the freedom of religious association and the freedom to think for oneself even on religious matters. These two new freedoms, in turn encouraged two great movements in this country -- the separation of church and state and the rise of Unitarianism. These movements swept the country in their flow and Sudbury, too, was caught in the tide of changing events.

First, let us look at the separation of church and state. For you to grasp this, I must first explain the difference to you between the church and the parish.

You may note that the name of our church is "The First Parish of Sudbury." Why is this so: In the days of the Puritan settlement there was one church for the whole town. The word, "parish," referred to the whole area covered by the town church. The parish in a sense was the town, religiously organized. The parish met as a legal and political body, usually in town meeting, to decide about the financial matters of the church. The parish voted on the repair and upkeep of the church building, the payment (sometimes non-payment) of the minister's salary, the raising of funds, the rental of pews, the purchasing of Bibles and communion ware, etc. It dealt strictly with the financial and political matters of the church.

The church was something else. The church was the community of those who had experienced conversion or regeneration. These were God's elect -- the chosen few who had been saved -- the religious elite. They had been baptized, received communion, and could own every article of the church covenant.

Now obviously only a few people could claim this sort of regeneration. Not everyone in the parish had the inclination or the interest to take religion so personally and so seriously for by as early as 1640 people were coming to the New world, not for religious reasons, but for the sake of worldly gain. They came to hunt, to fish, to trap and to set up new industries. Many of these people had a slight interest in religion and only a nodding acquaintance with churches in general. Never could they admit or undergo an emotional conversion -- no matter how hard they tried. Nor could they subscribe to all the beliefs in the church covenant. The Puritans tried to set up a pure religious state, a theocracy; but they failed. .

And so there developed this church -- the community of the faithful in a degenerate society. While the parish dealt strictly with financial affairs, the church dealt strictly with ecclesiastical affairs. It was the church that agreed upon the covenant -- admitted members to its fellowship -- administered baptisms, funerals and weddings. The church selected the minister and took care of the installation service, called church councils on ecclesias-

tical disturbances, elected the deacons to administer communion, dismissed or suspended negligent members, served communion, decided how the psalms would be sung, etc.

Alright, bear in mind now that we have two organizations -- the church and the parish. There is one church for the whole town, yet only the regenerate can be inner members of the church. Yet everyone who votes in town meeting has a say about the financial management of the church.

Everyone, whether member or not, was expected to attend church for worship in the morning and in the the afternoon on Sunday. Soon pressure grew in the colonies to allow non-church members to establish their own churches. You know, that in 1635 Roger Williams established a free religious colony on Narragansett Bay. The Quakers came to the Massachusetts Bay colony and tried to gain recognition for themselves. In the early 1700's George Whitefield, a Methodist preacher, came to America from England and preached all along the eastern coast.

After the Revolution and with the writing of the Constitution which explicitly recognized the separation of church and state, the proliferation of sect and denomination was inevitable. There sprang up the Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal and other churches in addition to the congregational town church. The steps were gradual. The law first states that one could belong to any church, but still had to pay a church tax to the parish church. Then the law changed to state that one had to belong to some church and pay a tax thereto. Finally, the law was amended to allow complete freedom as to which church a person might join -- and if he might join one at all.

Now with the separation of church and state -- and with the appearance of new churches -- the parish had to conduct its church financial business away from town meeting. 1836 was the year for the separation of church and state in Sudbury.

Previous to that year all church financial business was conducted in town meeting.

In February of 1836, the parish petitioned the town for permission to conduct their business meetings apart from town meeting and decide their business independently.

They met for the first time as a separate parish on March 31, elected their officers, and voted \$400 towards Mr. Hurlbut's salary. They did not meet again for another year, but when they did, a storm of division had broken upon them.

Let us now look at the second of the two streams of historical force in America -- the rise of liberalism. All through the century of the 1700's occasional and lonely preachers questioned the traditional doctrines of Calvinism. Charles Chauncy in First Church, Boston,

had proclaimed the universal salvation of all men. Jonathan Mayhew in the Old Ship church in Bingham had announced the importance of reason in religion, saying "Yea it is by this we resemble God Himself." William Balch preached the need of good works as well as faith in Bradford, Massachusetts.

But not until the end of the revolution, could the liberals turn their complete attention to the cause of liberal Christianity. In 1797, James Freeman re-wrote the King's Chapel prayer book to eliminate reference to the three persons of the Godhead. In 1805, the Harvard Board of Overseers appointed a liberal, Henry Ware, Sr., to the Hollis Chair of Divinity. This meant that the University and the Divinity school would reflect the new face of religion. In 1803 a young preacher, named William Ellery Channing took the pulpit of the Federal Street church in Boston and proved himself an able spokesman for the new movement. At first, Channing and the other liberals hoped to remain within the fold of orthodox congregationalism. But the attacks of the orthodox preachers and their own beliefs made this impossible.

In 1817 Channing defended Unitarianism at the installation of Jared Sparks in Baltimore. He claimed the right to interpret the Bible from the standpoint of reason. He charged Calvinism with being inhuman and immoral. In 1825 at the Federal Street church on May 25, a small band of ministers met together to form the American Unitarian Association. Ministers and churches from all over New England began to join -- as they did from Waltham, Marlborough and Concord.

Divisions began to occur in New England parishes. It usually happened in this way. The church you recall was the ecclesiastical organization. Being the community of the faithful, it generally contained a majority of the orthodox. But the parish, being a larger and a business organization usually held a majority of the liberals. Thus the parish majority was Unitarian. In 1820 in Dedham came the first legal battle over church records and property. The court awarded the property to the parish which was the legal and political organization. That the majority of the parish was Unitarian was supposedly incidental. The parish was the only organization which the court could legally recognize. Because the parishes were usually Unitarian, when you travel about New England you will find that the First Parish, the oldest church in town is usually Unitarian.

This is what happened here in Sudbury. We discover the premonitions of liberalism in a report of town meeting on May 5, 1832. A motion came up which aimed "To see if the town will choose a committee to wait on Mr. Hurlbut and request him to give his reasons, if any he had, why he declines exchanging with some of the neighboring clergy, as he formerly did." The motion was passed over, but it gives us a hint of the problem. Ministers in those days exchanged with their neighboring clerics about once a month. At this time of conflict orthodox preachers almost never exchanged with Unitarian clergy. By

1832 we discover that the First Parish in every town surrounding Sudbury had become Unitarian. Concord led the trend by joining the A.U.A. at its inception in 1825. Wayland and Natick followed suit three years later. In 1830 Lincoln and Waltham declared themselves for the new cause. And in 1832, Marlborough, Stowe, Framingham and Weston had joined the A.U.A. Small wonder that the Reverend Hurlbut was not inclined to exchange as he did formerly in the halcyon days of unchallenged Calvinism.

The parish, you remember, met for the first time in March of 1836. On October 18, of that year the church, the ecclesiastical organization, held a meeting. It seems that there had been a falling out between the Rev. Hurlbut and one of the parishioners -- Dr. Thomas Stearns, one of the two town doctors. It seems that Stearns was holding the record book of the church organization and refused to surrender it either to Hurlbut or to the church. In this book was contained records of baptisms, marriages and funerals, as well as the notes about church meetings. We do not know just how Stearns got hold of this book or why he kept it. It may be that he foresaw a division between the church and the parish and realized that in giving the record book to the church, he might be symbolically yielding all church property to the orthodox. At least, so it could be interpreted in court. At any rate, he was hanging on to it.

From the dusty verbiage of the church clerk, the meeting of October 18, 1836, sounds rather dull. My guess is that it was a pretty hot session. Mr. Hurlbut gave a paper stating the object of the meeting. Dr. Stearns presented a paper explaining part of Hurlbut's paper. The two of them agreed on a council to advise them with respect to their difficulty -- Hurlbut was careful to select, Calvinists from the pulpits Wayland, Natick and Southborough. A committee of local churchmen agreed to arrange accommodations for the visiting clergy and laity.

A snow storm prevented the council from meeting on November 3, as originally planned, but they got together on the 24th and the 25th. Evidently the council decided in favour of Hurlbut, for the church voted to accept the council's report and then called Stearns on the carpet. On December 14, Stearns was requested to return the church book to Hurlbut with the proviso that Stearns could borrow it when he wished. Then two charges were made against Stearns: "1. unchristian conduct towards the Pastor and other church members., and 2. absenting himself from our communion and thereby violating the church covenant."

Two weeks later the church convened again and a paper from Dr. Stearns was read. The Christmas spirit evidently had not warmed the chill Puritan hearts of the orthodox, for more charges against him were made and it was voted that, if he did not surrender the book to the church, he should be excommunicated.

Thomas Stearns did not surrender the book to the church, and so it was on February 1, 1837, that he was excommunicated from the Church of Christ in Sudbury.

Recall now -- the church is controlled by a majority of the orthodox, the parish by a majority of the liberals. Thomas Stearns is holding the church book for the parish, we presume.

In March of 1837, the parish held its second independent annual meeting. According to the court records, there were 128 members of the parish. On the day of the annual meeting, March 27, 63 persons presented a petition to the clerk of the parish, Nahum Thompson, stating their desire to become members. At one o'clock most of these 63 showed up at the old meeting house to take part in the meeting. A cry of protest went up from the orthodox for it looked as if the liberals were trying to stack an already loaded deck. The parish had no rules on membership, so that no one was quite sure of the status of these 63 persons.

There were 100 members of the parish present. The following vote counts do not include those 63 whose membership was uncertain. John Hunt, the liberal's candidate, was elected Moderator by a vote of 50 to 12 for another candidate. When Hunt was elected, about eight persons withdrew from the meeting, objecting to the presence of non-members. Then who should be elected the clerk of the parish but our old friend Thomas Stearns. No wonder he was holding the church book. This was too bitter a pill for the orthodox to swallow and fifty people withdrew from the meeting. They went to another hall -- formed a separate parish, electing their own officers and assuming the name, "The First Parish of Sudbury."

Meanwhile, back at the meetinghouse, two motions faced the assembly. The first was "to hear proposals from the Rev. Rufus Hurlbut (if any should be offered) respecting his being relieved from the duties of Pastor for a season." This was too crude and bold, and was passed over. Secondly, it was proposed "to see if the Parish will take any measures to call on Dr. Thomas Stearns to deliver the church records to the parish clerk or any such person authorized to receive them." The assembly voted to keep the books in Stearns' hands.

We have two parishes now -- a liberal one and an orthodox one, and both claiming to be the First Parish of Sudbury. But the members of the two parishes are still worshipping together.

In April of 1837, the liberal parish called another meeting. First they defined membership very carefully. To become a member one had to be voted in by a majority of the Parish. Thus they guarded against the chance that the orthodox might come to the meeting en masse and vote it into an organization of their own liking.

Secondly, they had to decide what to do with Hurlbut. He was getting along in years, he had not been well, and he definitely favoured the orthodox parish. The meeting first heard a motion which, in effect, would be firing the man. They passed over this in favour of a more subtle weapon. The article in the warrant requests that the Parish Committee "propose to Mr. Hurlbut the desire of the Parish to procure some suitable person to supply the pulpit during his illness." They voted that a committee "wait on the Rev. Mr. Hurlbut and also procure a supply for the Pulpit at their discretion." Under no circumstances were they going to allow this orthodox minister to choose their preacher for them. They would find a man to their own liking.

It was just such a man who was preaching from this pulpit three weeks later when the old Rev. Hurlbut arrived outside with his unwanted young cleric.

With the departure of Hurlbut and the formation of the congregational church, the split was complete. There were now two churches -- worshipping separately. There were also two parishes, conducting their churches' business separately and each claiming to be the First Parish. The issue, of course, was not just over the name and the tradition. The real battle was over that commodity, the love of which purports to be the root of all evil. As Melville said, "how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition." In this case the money took the form of the church records and the church property -- land and buildings. The possession of the church records was a symbol, in effect, of being the legal First Parish and thus enjoying rightful ownership of the property. In other words, if the orthodox could prove they were the First Parish and had the rightful ownership of the church records, they could then prove in a subsequent court case that they also owned the church lands and building.

In 1838 at a March meeting of the liberal parish, we find this article before the group: "To see if the Parish will authorize their clerk to deliver to Enoch Kidder and Lyman Howe, calling themselves a committee of the First Parish in Sudbury any books or papers belonging to said First Parish." Of course, they voted that the books be kept in the hands of the present clerk and they re-elected Thomas Stearns to office.

So it was in April of 1838 the orthodox parish commenced legal action against the liberal parish. Upon hearing of this the liberal parish in that same month voted to enter nonsuit.

There was a long wait of nine months before the case was actually heard in court on January 25, 1839. The issue centered around the meeting of 1837 and whether the election of the officers, John Hunt and Thomas Stearns, was legal or not. Farley argued for the plaintiff that the presence of 63 non-members invalidated the meeting and that the departure of a significant number of the legal voters did the same. Choate and Keyes were

lawyers for the defendant. The court's opinion was delivered five days later on January 30. [citation below]

It was stated that the sixty-three persons present at the meeting were not members and had no right to vote, until the society itself had acted on their application. How the orthodox must have chuckled when they heard this. But the court went on. The presence of the sixty-three persons did not make the meeting itself illegal. A majority of legal voters had elected John Hunt and Thomas Stearns to their positions. If they objected, the disaffected orthodox should have remained and exercised their franchise. When the majority dissent, but do not vote, an election by the minority is valid. The presence of illegal voters does not change the legality of a vote, unless it affects the majority. The defendant, Thomas Stearns, has a right to the records. The liberals had won the title of the First Parish -- and with the title had won the books and the property.

What a fine day for celebration that must have been. I can't help but wonder if Thomas Stearns, John Hunt, Choate and Keyes and a few parishioners didn't go across the river to the Union Oyster House and enjoy a most uneclesiastical blast.

Two months later in March of 1839, the First Parish formally discharged the reverend Rufus Hurlbut since he "since May 7, 1838, voluntarily and formally, withdrew from the said First Parish and has not since that time discharged or performed the duties pertaining to the office of minister...and has officiated as minister elsewhere."

Although the Unitarians won the court case and the church property, the church did not equal the success of the parish.

Thomas Hurlbut, son of the minister and a deacon at the congregational church, was accustomed to say that "but one member was retained with the old Parish." It probably was not that serious, but we do read on page 38 of the old record book, "After the division took place in the First Society and a portion of the Church and congregation withdrew, and formed a new society enjoyed the outward Services of the Gospel irregularly, and the members of the church were reduced to a small number." According to the record book of Captain Israel Haynes, between March and September of one year no less than twelve different ministers preached at the First Parish.

In the summer of 1841 the church invited the Reverend Linus Shaw, then the minister at Hampton Falls, to preach. In 1842 they voted to alter the meetinghouse into two levels at a cost of \$1,485.93. In the summer of 1844 the Reverend Linus Shaw returned to preach, and remained as the first Unitarian Minister of the Sudbury church.

We have looked at the "how" part of our becoming Unitarians. Let us now take a glance at the "why" part of the story.

First, we must ascribe one cause of the split to a difference in age and association. The leaders of the orthodox were men who had helped get Hurlbut in as minister in 1817. The parish, made up of younger people and men with a more businesslike inclination, was likely to take this new philosophy so in vogue in Boston.

And just what was this new philosophy -- this Unitarianism of the nineteenth century? For it was this that really split the congregation. we find the difference clearly marked in the covenants of the two churches. we can see the Unitarian covenant pasted inside the old church record book and written in the hand of the Reverend Linus Shaw. The congregational covenant is to be found in their record book. .

First, the nature of God. The first article of the Unitarian statement is simple and explicit: "You believe in one God." The congregational formulation is also explicit, but not quite so simple. It refers to the three persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, "the same in substance, equal in power and glory."

Secondly, the nature of Jesus. Here there is close similarity. The Unitarian covenant refers to Jesus as the Son of God who spoke "in the name and on the authority of the Father" and whose words therefore "are to be received and obeyed, as the words of the Father." (The last clause is underlined.) The two covenants also coincide in their attitude towards the Bible. The liberal formulation has it that the Holy Scriptures are "a record of the revealed will of God" and "contain all that is necessary in order to receive forgiveness of sins and obtain salvation." The congregational creed says something very like this.

But we find the two dissenting on the nature of man and on salvation. The Evangelicals claimed "that in consequence of the fall mankind is by nature destitute of holiness and alienated from God." Because of this salvation is a matter entirely in of God's hands. "The Son of God became incarnate...and opened the way for salvation of all who believe on him." But "mankind do of their own accord most wickedly refuse to comply...no one accepts the gospel except by the influence of the Holy Spirit. All who obtain salvation through Christ were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world." There is nothing left for man to do, but attend public worship, read the Bible, and pray for the best.

The Unitarians instruct their followers to "acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Savior -- and resolve, by the help of God, so far as you are able, to obey his commands and to imitate, in your life, his holy example." This says nothing about the evil of man's nature. On the contrary it assumes that men can imitate the example of Jesus and obey his commands

because it instructs them to do just that. It implies that salvation comes from man as much as it does from God.

Perhaps the difference between the two churches do not strike us as being very significant. We take this sort of belief for granted -- an optimism about man's ability to do good; a belief in one God; a more human and humane view toward Jesus.

Yet we hold these beliefs and enjoy this freedom only because men like John Hunt and Thomas Stearns were willing to make an issue of them. They knew that God could not be ultimately defined by men. They won for us as for themselves the right to interpret Christianity -- not to accept one formulation of it.

The Unitarians of the 1800's won the right to their difference. They were true to the forward-looking spirit of this country's settlers. Hear the pastor, John Robinson, preaching to his parishioners on the decks of the Mayflower just before it leaves for the New world. He says, "If God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry; for I am very confident the Lord hath more light and truth yet to break forth out of his holy word."

The Pilgrims, the Puritans, the early Unitarians have made their journeys. They take us to the edge of a new territory and say to us, "Thus far came we; now, press you on." The journey is an adventure and we are under oath not to fail them or ourselves. It matters not that our minds are clouded and hath more light and truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.

- Carl Scovel

The Inhabitants of the FIRST PARISH IN SUDBURY v. THOMAS STEARNS. Mass. 1838. Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. The Inhabitants of the FIRST PARISH IN SUDBURY v. THOMAS STEARNS. October Term, 1838.

2011.10.31 jch. Note: The last name Hurlbut is, in the present, most commonly spelled Hurlburt. Some First Parish records refer to Rufus Hurlburt.

2011.11.15 Incorporate more proofing. OCR - YON - Jan C. Hardenbergh

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