



## CHURCHES OF THE NOT-SO-STANDING ORDER

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When confronted with the mass of material relating to Plymouth's religious life in the last century a vast amount of editing and defining must be done. The task is a difficult one, for it is quite easy to be caught up in the intricacies of memorabilia and artifacts, genealogy and antiquarianism in so broad a topic that the necessary scope and vision become obscured in a welter of details. The details are meant only as illustration of the broader pattern and are of little worth in themselves, to us anyway.

Let me define our area for consideration by telling you what I do not intend to deal with: I shall avoid a discussion of Lutheranism and Catholicism, not out of some capricious whim, but because I am convinced that these religions can only be seen adequately within the context of the European immigration movements of which they were so important a part. I shall further avoid a discussion of the peculiar particulars of the much-discussed and little understood "Unitarian Controversy" of 1801 except as a necessary prelude to greater developments in the Plymouth religious scene. And finally, the various destinies of the daughters and stepdaughters of the Pilgrim Church are also not the proper subject of this paper. It would take a major dissertation merely to consider the schisms, personal and theological, which sprinkled Congregational churches all over the Plymouth landscape.

In order to have anything at all left to say, I concern myself with what I would call "Churches of the Not-So-Standing Order" or perhaps subtitled "Churches Not Seen from Clark's Island." I am devoting myself to the evangelical, minority sects, the pent-up harvest of the first "Great Awakening" of the 1740s, which made their initial presence felt in this ancient Pilgrim town from the coming of the Baptists in 1809 to the celebrated Negro Camp meetings of the AME Church at Morton Park in 1866. This period of a bit over half a century gives us a "swallowable" slice of time, a complete entity in itself, to consider. It is a wonderfully convenient period extending from the first tentative years of the republic to the end of the Civil War. It allows us to see nearly all of the ingredients which later determine almost to this day, the very character and essence of that unique thing called "American religion." These ingredients are not seen in the abstract, but are found in the very concrete form of the religious development in Plymouth from 1809 to 1866. We thus have within our own borders an exciting contribution to the development of American social and intellectual history.

In this age of the "ecumenical thrust" and the spirit of religious cooperation in the face of a growing apathy toward things religious, we find it difficult to comprehend our fathers who seemed only too eager to split theological hairs and found new churches rather than seek the things which could unite them in service to God and man. Our local historian and Register of Deeds, William S. Russell, in his *Pilgrim Memorials and Plymouth Guide* of 1855 notes:

The multiplication of sects in modern times, while doubtless tending to preserve the rights of conscience unimpaired, not unfrequently renders the liberal support of an able ministry

burdensome, and sometimes impracticable. Protestantism, therefore, might do well to consider its actual position, and more earnestly study the things that make for peace, cherishing that enlarged charity which recognizes a brother, not from the stamp of his creed alone, but the divine graces of a pure life; and in no case calling down fire from heaven to consume the adversary.

When you consider that in 1801, there were but 3 orthodox churches in the town to serve a population of roughly 3500, and about 50 years later while the population had increased to about 6800, the number of churches numbered 13, an increase of 10, it is easy to understand Mr. Russell's concern with the "Religious Explosion." We shall essay to discover what it was that made such a growth possible and shall look for signs from within and without the context of Plymouth.

Our story necessarily begins with the "state of religion" in 1808. The Post Revolutionary period had not been kind to the friends of organized religion. Our French allies not only imported arms and soldiers to give us aid, but in their powdered and bewigged Trojan horse slipped in "that accursed Deism" and the foolishness of "that Voltaire" and "that Rousseau." These monstrous doctrines associated with the excesses of the French Revolution constituted a dire threat to the orthodoxy of New England religion. In addition to this foreign threat, the pernicious views of the Arminians (those 18<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians in sheep's clothing) were being circulated via the seditious graduates of "that school at Cambridge" throughout the eastern part of Massachusetts. No clearer view of these rising threats can be seen than in the election of 1800. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia was held to be the bogey man to the children of New England. In addition to being a deist, somewhat of a Unitarian, and speaking and liking French, worst of all, he was a Democrat. To the New England Federalist, such a combination was concocted in the laboratories of Hell itself, if not in Paris.

Even before 1800 signs of these rumblings can be noted in our own First Parish records. Dr. Robbins, an upright and venerable pillar of orthodoxy, did all within his power to preserve the faith of the fathers. By the sheer genius of his personality, if not his theology, he was able to prevent a threatened secession of "liberals" in the mid-1790s. We of course know the succeeding history: Dr. Robbins' death, the settlement of Dr. Kendall, the setting apart of the Third Church of Christ on the green. Beyond our own borders, the same scene was repeated in the halls of Harvard College. Henry Ware, an Arminian minister of the Church in Hingham, was elected in a closely-contested race as Hollis Professor of Divinity in the College (a chair endowed by a good 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptist) and as a result the orthodox minority withdrew and established in 1808 Andover Theological Seminary.

Apparently the old answers and old situations were not proving adequate to the presumed needs of the day. New sources, new answers must be provided, at large, and in Plymouth.

The first church to attempt to provide these new answers in Plymouth were the Baptists who gathered themselves together into a church estate in 1809 at the house of Heman Churchill in Summer Street. The doctrines and views of the Baptists were hardly foreign to New England and even to Plymouth. In fact, the first two Presidents of Harvard College, Doctors Henry Dunster and Charles Chauncey, affirmed a belief in adult baptism by total immersion as the only means of baptism. In a sense such anabaptist views cost them both their jobs. Roger Williams, that erratic good fellow whom Bradford deemed a "little unsettled in judgment," after serving a term in the Pilgrim Church, went on to Providence to found his Baptist colony and the first Baptist church in America. Even Dr. Robbins baptized a Mrs. Desire Holmes in the summer in 1794. The record reads "... baptized one woman by immersion which was a new thing in that town."

There were Baptist churches in Kingston, Carver, Pocasset, and other towns in the Old Colony at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It seems somewhat inevitable that a Baptist church should be gathered in the

shiretown itself, Plymouth. It must be remembered that this Baptist church was settling in alien territory. There were three large and influential orthodox churches in Plymouth in 1809: the First Parish, the Second Church at Manomet Ponds, and most recently the Third Church of Christ in their handsome meeting house on the Green. It must also be remembered that the Congregational Church was still the established Church of Massachusetts, supported by state taxes. The Federal Constitution forbade the establishment of a national religion, but of course made no mention whatsoever of the establishment of a state religion. In fact, the rates for the support of public worship in Massachusetts were in effect until 1833.

The small company of Baptists asked that a council of neighboring Baptist churches consent to their organization in Plymouth and ordain their brother Lewis Leonard to be their pastor, which indeed the council did. The Church met in private homes and in public halls for their worship, as they were unable to afford a meeting house. Their presence was not unnoticed in Plymouth, if the following tale be true. It is said that Mr. Adoniram Judson, the minister of the Third Church, remarked to his colleague Mr. Kendall of the First Church: "What are we to do with these Baptists? They are turning the town upside down!" It is further said that Mr. Kendall replied: "We had better let them alone; if this work be of men, it will come to nought." Apparently, it was not, for Mr. Judson within a couple of years resigned his pastorate over the Third Church and assumed the pastoral care over the Baptists, having changed his views on baptism and the Baptists. He also contributed his son to the cause of Baptist foreign missions, and his name for a time to what is now Pleasant Street, which in the early times was known as the "Way to Mr. Judson's House."

In 1822, the Baptists built a small meeting house on Spring Hill which was dedicated with seemly pomp on November 6, 1822, and combined with the installation of their new pastor, the Rev. Stephen S. Nelson. The *Old Colony Memorial* said:

The performances were appropriate, solemn and impressive, and free from censorious remarks on the principles and practice of other sects. This is true liberality, which consists not in the articles of our faith, but in a becoming candour and respect for the opinion of others.

The site of this little meeting house on Spring Hill, later known as "Baptist Hill," is forever lost in the midst of the urban renewal area, but I understand it stood where the old VFW Hall recently stood. The place burned in 1860 and the large Victorian Church and tower was erected at the head of Leyden Street. By 1866, the Baptists in Plymouth had "arrived."

The next body to set up shop in Plymouth were the Universalists, a denomination likewise the product of the Great Awakening, but quite antithetical to its teachings. Contrary to the preachings of the orthodox Congregational churches, which stressed God's election of a limited number to salvation and his election of a larger number to damnation, the Universalists, as their name implied, believed that all would be saved. Christ's atonement on the cross was for every man, not merely reserved for those who had been arbitrarily chosen by the Calvinistic God from the beginning of all time. They differed from their Unitarian brethren in that they placed the entire responsibility for salvation in the hands of the triune God who through his nature and the action of Jesus Christ would save all men. The Rev. Thomas Starr King, prominent Unitarian of the last century, illustrates the distinction between the two groups by means of this clever quip:

The difference between the Unitarians and the Universalists is this: The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn anybody; and the Unitarians believe that they are too good for God to damn!

One of the foremost preachers against the rugged Calvinism of the Great Awakening, and an early exponent of Universalism, was Dr. Charles Chauncey of Boston. Dr. Chauncey preached the sermon at the installation of the Rev. Thomas Frink over the Middle Street Church in 1744. This church was created by seceders from the first Parish who rejected the excesses of the revivals in that church under the pastorate of Mr. Leonard. In this sermon, which is in the Library of the Pilgrim Society, one can see the traces which within half a century would cast Dr. Chauncey into the Universalist camp.

The Plymouthans organized a society for the promotion of Universalist preaching in 1822, and on July 17, 1826, dedicated their meeting house on Cole's Hill. Large and active, the Plymouth Society was part of a tremendous upsurge in Universalism which spread throughout New England in general and southeastern Massachusetts in particular in the '20's and '30's. To read the *Old Colony Memorial* of those years is to read of the dedication of Universalist churches on the average of one every six months! It was a very popular religion and found its strongest adherents in those nonurban people caught between the Evangelical or orthodox piety of modified Calvinism on the right and the rational and still somewhat suspect Unitarianism on the left.

The most singularly interesting body to appear in Plymouth in this period, however, is that of the "Christians," who gathered themselves into a religious society in 1825 and erected their chapel in Pleasant Street in 1827. Dr. Thacher says of the society:

We have a small society in town of the denomination called Christians. The sentiments of this denomination have been explained at large by Rev. Mr. Clough. They object to the trinity and other Calvinistic doctrines. By some they are called Free will Baptists. Mr. Joshua V. Himes was ordained their minister in 1825. The connection was soon dissolved but without any faulty conduct on his part.

Strangely enough, this sect was a reaction against sectarianism. Discontent with the practices of the existing denomination, namely the "unscriptural views" of the Presbyterians, the leaders of this group resolved to call themselves simply "Christians." They denied such church organizations as councils, associations, synods, and dioceses, which did not have a firm basis in scripture. Their chief motive was to promote the unity of Christian peoples, a goal which could not be pursued in any of the presently organized and corrupt churches. They adopted the method of baptism by total immersion, finding warrant for it in the scriptures. They looked to the scriptures as the rule of faith and of practice and had little to do with the doctrines of the established churches which were floating about. There was a pronounced evangelistic flavor to their doctrine, or lack of same, which made it very easy for the Christian Church to become involved in the Second Advent movement.

William Miller was an uneducated farmer of Low Hampton, New York, a Baptist lay preacher, and an ardent student of the Bible, especially the "chronological portions" of the apocalyptic literature. After careful readings in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, he surmised that the Biblical day was actually a year, and that one could actually predict the second coming of Christ to the day and year. By this computation he arrived at the conclusion that the Lord would "Cleanse the Sanctuary" as predicted in Daniel 9:25, or come to the earth in the second advent somewhere between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. In 1818, he began preaching that all would end on this date and the world would be purged of the wicked.

Most evangelists had preached the second coming of Christ, but none had determined it with the accuracy of Miller. He preached his views at first in churches around his home. His first major audience, however, was in the Chardon Street Church of Boston of which the Rev. Joshua V. Himes, founder and first pastor of the Plymouth Christian Church, was the pastor. The message took and he reached of the second coming in a number of large New England churches. As the year of Advent

drew nearer, something like a frenzy caught up the eastern seaboard. Calls came for preachers of the advent message all over the nation. Journals were started and Mr. Himes became the publishing evangelist of the movement. *The Signs of the Times* was a best seller in Boston, as was *The Midnight Cry* in New York, and the *Philadelphia Alarm* in that city. At the height of the movement in 1843, Miller's followers numbered nearly 1,000,000 persons. At first, there was no attempt to organize churches. Miller was content that the members of the other churches receive the news. But as the date of the Advent drew near, friction with the orthodox churches resulted, and Second Advent Societies were formed. One was formed in Plymouth, and the Christian Society merged with this body in 1843, in preparation for the Coming of the Lord.

As March 21, 1843 approached one can imagine the intensity of emotion on the part of the Adventists. They resigned the cares of the world, sold their goods and gave their money to the poor. They retired to the churches, graveyards, and hilltops to await the coming of the Lord; and when the day passed without anything unusual occurring, Miller reminded them that he had set a year's period, and so the Lord might well come at any time within that year. When the Lord failed to keep the second date on October 22, 1844, the movement splintered. As to the fate of the Christian Church in Plymouth, Davis notes:

For a time after 1843 it was united with the Second Advent Society, under the care of H.L. Hastings, again for a time separated, and finally in 1868, reunited, since which time it has continued in the occupation of its Pleasant Street Church under the name of the "Christian Society."

We of course know it as the Advent Christian Church. Exceeded by one year by the Second Church in Manomet, it is the oldest house of worship still standing in Plymouth, however feebly.

One of my most invaluable sources in the preparation of this paper has been the volumes of the *Old Colony Memorial*. The refreshing candor of these early 19<sup>th</sup> century columns cannot be equaled by a paper I know of today. For example, in the August 9, 1822, edition of the paper we find this letter:

Sir: Having read in the public papers that the Methodists are to hold a camp meeting (as it is called) in the town of Marshfield, in this county on the 12<sup>th</sup> instant, having made inquiry why that denomination of Christians prefers holding their meetings, day and night, in the woods rather than occupy those buildings built and prepared for the worship of God in which there is every convenience, both for speakers and hearers, and not having received any satisfactory answers to the inquiry made; if a Methodist or any other person well disposed, would give correct information on the subject it would be very acceptable to many.

In the August 17 edition of the paper we find an account of this camp meeting at Marshfield that hardly builds up a good case for camp meeting revivals.

The road of the Methodists in Plymouth has been a peculiarly rocky one. While Methodism was officially organized in Boston in 1790, it did not reach the relatively near town of Plymouth in concrete form until about 1843. Prior to that time, people of Methodist connection had moved to Plymouth from both north and south, there being Methodist churches on the Cape as well as in Boston; but they usually kept their membership in their home church. The Methodist circuit riders on their way to Cape churches would often stop off in Plymouth on their way back and hold services in the homes of members. As the friends of Methodism were few and of small means in this area, they could not support the establishment of a church and regular preacher. The Methodist Church provided for the establishment of classes in circumstances such as these, but the classes often failed in Plymouth for lack of support. By 1843, however, the situation was stable enough and a congregation of fourteen members was organized with the Rev. E.B. Bradford appointed Preacher-in-Charge by the Presiding

Elder. Mr. Bradford lived in Duxbury and came over to Plymouth to preach. The Church was formally recognized by the Providence Conference of the Methodist Church and the next year the Rev. Nelson Goodrich was appointed preacher. The Society held its first Quarterly Conference in the vestry of the Green Meetinghouse on June 22, 1843. Members were not readily found and a meeting house was not available as the town was desirous of using the Green Meetinghouse for a schoolhouse. The records of the Quarterly Conference for May 15, 1845 exhibit the distress of the society:

Voted that it is the opinion of this quarterly conference unless the General Conference will provide means to build a meeting house and send us an able and experienced preacher it is not expedient to send us a preacher the ensuing Conference Year.

Activities were suspended until the providential reunion of the Robinson Church with the Pilgrimage Church in 1852 made the now vacant Robinson Meetinghouse available for purchase. William R. Drew, proprietor of a hardware store in Town Square for many years and a loyal life-long steward of the Methodist Church, with some others, purchased the Robinson property, and the Plymouth Methodist Episcopal Society was reorganized. The Quarterly Conference report for September 3, 1853, has a brave and optimistic sound to it:

Preacher-in-Charge reported that prospects for a revival are very good indeed before camp meeting with 8 or 10 persons forward for prayers at a time and some conversions. Have great confidence in a more general revival being experienced. There are strong influences against us, but our congregation is increasing.

Things seem to have been on the up, for the Quarterly report of January 4, 1856, reads:

Methodism is evidently gaining ground in this not the most promising locality ... There is obviously an increase of respect for it. This we deem important for in order that adjustment be made, the wall of prejudice must be broken down and ignorance with reference to our doctrine and piety must be overcome.

And on the eve of the Civil War, we note at the Feb. 14, 1860 Quarterly Conference :

Voted unanimously to petition the General Conference to pass a rule excluding slavery from the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The first twenty years were very difficult in spite of these hopeful signs. The Sunday School, the most important adjunct of Methodism, was not very successful, and the minutes of the quarterly conferences cry out for some attention to it. Also being in the connectional system, the church was unable to have a stabilized pastorate under which it could grow and develop as did the churches of congregational polity. But in spite of all this, it brought the Gospel of Wesley to Plymouth and contributed its part to the evangelization of the town.

It is interesting to note that within the very matrix of the Millerite Second Advent excitement of 1843-1844, we find the establishment of the Christ Episcopal Church, founded by the minister of the Church of the Pilgrimage, Robert B. Hall, who had resigned his charge to become an Episcopalian. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1844, an Episcopal service was held in Leyden Hall, Theodore W. Snow officiating. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, a Society was formed; and Mr. Snow was chosen rector in April of 1846. On the 3d of October in that year, the new Gothic Church in Russell Street was consecrated by Bishop Eastburn. The edifice cost \$4,000 and the *Old Colony* reports that it was consecrated "Debt Free." The coming of the Episcopal Church marks the beginning of the end of the period of radical Protestant expansion in Plymouth. It faced a situation somewhat similar to the Universalists over twenty years before; it found itself between the aloof and cooling doctrines of orthodox Calvinism

on the right and the fervent heat of Methodist evangelism and Advent excitement on the left. The stable middle ground of the Universalists was now to be shared by a much more venerable partner in the longevity of the Christian Church.

We conclude our study with a brief consideration of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. From the coming of the Baptists in 1809 to the gathering of this little evangelistic church in 1866 hangs much of the development of American Protestantism. More than a Negro version of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, referred to from this point as the AME, was often a way of life to the Negro. It combined the ordered forms of Methodism with a fiery enthusiasm and evangelism of an earlier day. Once again we rely upon the *Old Colony Memorial* to orient us. In the issue of August 3, 1866, we read

The annual camp meeting of the colored people of this area will commence on Thursday, August 23 at Little Pond Grove. The meetings at this place have become very popular and are anticipated with a deal of pleasure by our citizens and those of neighboring towns.

In October of that same year, a society was formed for promotion of public worship according to the usage of the AME Church in the United States. The Rev. William Johnson, an itinerant Negro preacher of the town was instrumental in organizing the society, interest for which had been generated by the success of the revival and camp meeting above described. The Trustees for the Society were Mr. William Gray, Mr. Jeremiah Lee, and Mr. Charles B. Allen. Mr. Johnson purchased a dwelling house on Billington Street from Mr. John Hadaway and fitted up the small house as a chapel for worship. The Negro population in Plymouth was not large and the society struggled to continue. In 1870, they were able to sell the house to the Plymouth Mills and with the generous assistance of many citizens of the town (chief among whom was Mr. Henry Barnes, Sr.) they were able to acquire a new meeting house on Sever Street. From the dedication of the Bethel AME Church in the *Old Colony Memorial* of October 13, 1870 we read:

That branch of the church known as the AME which in some localities thrives as healthily as any other, on Pilgrim soil has experienced some difficulty in attaining a healthy and vigorous growth. The reasons are various and well known to our citizens, particularly to those who have assisted in establishing and maintaining the little society. After many struggles, they now find themselves in possession of a neat and attractive church edifice situated on an eminence near Russell Street, and on Sunday last, the same was dedicated to the worship of the living God. ...The building is that formerly known as the gymnasium, erected, we believe, by the late A.S. Russell. It has been recently owned by Major Bates who sold it to this society.

Then continues an account of the service and how the new minister, the Rev. Joshua Hale, called upon those present to help liquidate the debt by bringing their gifts to the front of the church. The article continues:

Our citizens have been very liberal in assisting the society in their efforts to establish this place of worship: contribution of their funds and other materials required in fitting up the church. ...The church is to be known as the BETHEL, and as we have stated before, is a neat and commodious building. The interior is plainly furnished; the preacher's desk is enclosed by a railing, the platform and aisles are carpeted, and the body of the room filled with short settees.

Names of the Negro community in Plymouth associated with the Bethel in those early days include the Lyles, the Grays, the Allens, the Mellencourts, the Chummucks, the Logans, the Moodys, the Moores, and the Websters.

We conclude our study with the Bethel simply because it is the logical extension of the evangelical

spirit which filtered into Plymouth back in 1809. It is the last and most vivid example of organized religious excitement in the town. All which follows is a period of consolidation and adjusting to the endeavors and enterprises of the first half of the century. The Bethel is the end of the first and the start of the second.

By way of footnote, the evangelical spirit was not at all confined to the environs of Town Square. Before the years 1865-7, the people in the vicinity of the South Ponds had regular preaching in the school there. Mostly supplied by students and retired clergy, the gospel was given to that fairly substantial community of persons unable to attend with ease services in town or at Chiltonville. In the early 70's, a chapel was erected on land donated by Isaac Burgess, and regular services were held in the South Pond Evangelical Union Church. Membership and communion were open to all of the evangelical persuasion, a qualification defined by their fourth article of faith which reads: "Voted, the following denominations are considered as Evangelical: Freewill Baptist, Calvinist Baptist, Methodist, Christian Baptist (Advent) and Congregationalist." A similar enterprise was embarked upon at about the same time at Long Pond under the influence of the Rev. Edwin Faunce. Preaching services were held in the schoolhouse for the residents and a church building was later built. This Society still regularly meets and now is ministered to by Mr. Mayhew of the Chiltonville Church from which the original society and minister came.

I could continue and mention the rise of the benevolent societies, the activities of the anti-slavery societies, the rise of the temperance movement. All of these belong part and parcel with the development of the religious sensitivities of the last century. I could indeed emphasize the concern with moral decorum and civility, the concern with individual piety, and the perfection of society. I could discuss the church's reaction to the presumed threat of Darwinism, and the beginnings, however slight, of the Social Gospel movement. All of these and more are part and parcel of the religious configuration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But perhaps what is most important in this regard is to see in Plymouth what was happening in the nation. In America, the pietistic, low-church current of revival became largely dominant, and an evangelical conception of Christian faith with characteristic attention to the winning of souls set the pace in American Protestantism. The old answers to the old questions were no longer relevant in a society which was daily becoming more and more pluralistic. From three like-minded churches to thirteen quite diverse churches in less than sixty years underscores the decline in theological insularity of this little village, and the leaping rise of diversity within it. The story of course will be completed with the fascinating stories of the Catholics, the Jews, and the Lutherans, and those other religious bodies which share our soil with us. But the story could not be told at all without the exciting, sometimes sad, often rather funny, and always most courageous record of the "Churches of the Not-So-Standing Order."