

THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY  
OF EASTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
A Sermon



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EASTON, MASSACHUSETTS

A SERMON, PREACHED BY

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UNITY CHURCH, NORTH EASTON



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WITH the present year of 1905, our Unity Church Society of North Easton completes its first half-century, and this seems an appropriate time for me to give some account of its origin and history. I shall also take this occasion to speak at some length on the history of the various churches of the town, confining my attention mainly, however, to the native Protestant societies.

The first settlement of the town was made at what is now South Easton in 1694, by some well-to-do families from Weymouth. Others soon came from Bridgewater and Taunton. Too few at first to support a minister, they, in 1696, obtained permission to worship in the Bridgewater meeting-house, which stood where the Unitarian Church of West Bridgewater now stands, the Unitarian Society now there being, in fact, the ancient church of Bridgewater, organized as early as 1660.

But, in 1711, there settled in what is now South Easton, Elder William Pratt, once of Dorchester, later



of South Carolina, where he ministered to a small church on the Ashley River. He came to the Taunton North Purchase, afterwards Easton, with his wife, and also with two young slaves, valued at fifty pounds sterling, one of whom earned the name of "Honest-man." A church was soon organized, and a little meeting-house built just west of "The Green," where the oldest cemetery of Easton is located. Elder Pratt's house was just west of the Morse factory location. He died in January, 1714, and his tombstone is still in good condition, the date on it, 1713, being "old style."

There was no settled preacher after him for nearly ten years, when Rev. Matthew Short, a relative of Judge Sewall of witchcraft fame, was chosen pastor. Fifty pounds sterling was voted for his salary, which was equivalent to about two hundred dollars. With this meagre sum to support a good-sized family upon, it is evident that, financially, Mr. Short was always in such a condition as "his name might imply." By Judge Sewall's diary, which I have read since the "History of Easton" was written, I found that the judge sometimes visited and frequently helped his impecunious relative. The town made Mr. Short a gift of fifty acres of land, and promised to help him build a house, he to provide "nayles, glass, lime and Iron worke," a promise they very tardily fulfilled. His house was located on Depot Street, just east of its intersection by Central Street.

His ministry lasted eight years, he dying in 1731. His remains were first placed in the old cemetery already referred to, but were subsequently removed to the cemetery at the Centre.

Even before his ministry began, as early as 1718, a question arose which was destined to divide the town into two hostile parties, to make town-meetings and church meetings scenes of bitter strife, to alienate friends, and even to divide the church. This great question was, "Where shall the meeting-house stand?" The first building was outgrown and a new one must be erected. By the year 1728 there was quite a settlement at or near what is now Easton Furnace, and the "West-enders," as they were called, felt it a hardship to have so far to go to church as they had hitherto been compelled to do. They, therefore, made strenuous efforts to have the town vote that when a new meeting-house was built, it should be located at or near the centre of the town, where it would be equally inconvenient to the two sections. Though they did not at once succeed in their efforts, they were enabled to block proceedings so that no new meeting-house was erected for over twenty years.

Meantime, in 1731, Rev. Joseph Belcher became pastor; but after a few years his mind became disturbed,—unsettled, perhaps, by the awful Calvinism then preached,—and he developed the unpleasant peculiarity



of taking a number of sermons with him into the pulpit, and preaching one after another until sundown, regardless of the fact that by this time the congregation had dispersed.

He was succeeded, in 1747, by Rev. Solomon Prentice, a man of ability and originality, the great-grandfather of Gen. N. P. Banks. It deserves note that not only Mr. Prentice, but all the town-church ministers of Easton until the coming of Mr. Sheldon, in 1810, were graduates of Harvard College. I must pass over many very interesting incidents of Mr. Prentice's exciting ministry, the one giving him the most trouble being the fact that his wife became a Baptist, and insisted on being immersed in the stream at South Easton by what Mr. Prentice records in Latin, in his church book, as an "indignissimo laico," a most unworthy layman. It is to be noted that this out-of-door immersion was in the winter. The contention as to the location of the new meeting-house waxed warmer during his stay. The "West-end" people, assisted by a few of the "East-enders," in 1749, got a vote in town-meeting (for parish business was then a town affair) that the meeting-house be built a little to the east of the centre of the town, and the work was begun in 1750. The frame was raised, not only with religious exercises, but with feasting, and doubtless with a liberal supply of New England rum, this being a custom of the times.

But before the work was done the contest about the location revived. In the archives at the State House in Boston I found petitions and counter-petitions of the contending parties, addressed to the Legislature, where the matter was earnestly debated and acted upon, committees being appointed to come out and "view the situation." The State sustained the action of the town, and then the protesting people of the east part, headed by Mr. Prentice, who now broke his promise to acquiesce in the location of the church at the Centre, withdrew from the town-church, established a Presbyterian Church, and began to erect a meeting-house of their own. This was situated on the southeast part of the place we call "The Green," at South Easton. It was roofed in and boarded in, but never completed, although some services were held in it.

Meantime the town-church people had finished the meeting-house at the Centre, and they settled, in 1754, the Rev. George Farrar, who lived here but two years, dying in 1756. His house was a few rods due west of the present site of the almshouse. There was then an interval of six years without a minister. Mr. Prentice had been deposed by the Presbytery, the very power he had himself invoked to aid his cause. Religion, naturally enough after the angry contentions I have alluded to, was at a low ebb in town. There had been twelve years of bitter strife in the church and in the whole



town on the question as to the location of the meeting-house.

In 1763 Rev. Archibald Campbell was settled as minister of the town-church. The Presbyterian Society had perished beyond resurrection, and its unfinished meeting-house on "The Green" gradually fell to decay. Mr. Campbell was a man of unusual ability, but he was handicapped by the drawback of a drinking wife, who had no interest whatever in his work — his marriage to whom was, in fact, compulsory, although this was not known in Easton for some years after his ministry began. The history of Mr. Campbell, which is recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the "History of Easton," is very sad and pathetic. Opposition to him began when the facts connected with his marriage became known. He was the victim of a gross slander, which was retracted on the dying bed of the slanderer, but not until it had done its venomous work. His reputation was gone, his salary was unpaid, and he was compelled to leave. To a bad wife and misbehaving children were added poverty and blindness, and he died, at last, a heart-broken man.

He was succeeded in the ministry in Easton by Rev. William Reed, who settled here in 1784. For the first time in our town history there was now a peaceful ministry in this religiously belligerent community, for probably no town in our Commonwealth has seen more

church fighting than ours. There was, however, at this time one subject that promised to make trouble. The Taunton North Purchase Company, which bought of Plymouth Colony the land of this section in 1668, set apart two tracts of land for the support of the ministry, one in the west part, now Norton, and one in the east part, now Easton. The town and the parish were originally and for many years one, the holding of the parish property and management of parish affairs being as much town business as anything else, parish business being conducted in town-meetings. In 1753, when the Presbyterian Society was organized, the Presbyterians claimed that, being citizens of the town, they were entitled to a share of the parish property. In order to settle this contention, the Taunton North Purchase Company, on April 2, 1753, voted that the parish land be used for maintaining ministers of the *Congregational Churches* of Norton and Easton, and "for that end only." But later than this there had arisen in Easton a Baptist Society, and in 1790 there was starting a Methodist Society, and the old contention arose that, as the ministerial land had been voted to the town as a parish, now that the town was divided into several parishes there should be an equitable division of the property among them all. In order to set this question at rest, the parish was in 1792 incorporated and became separate from and independent of the town. This took the parish property out of the



control of the town, vesting it all in its own corporation. This act of incorporation exempted from taxation for the support of the historic church all persons who were connected with other churches. Citizens connected with no other church organizations were, however, still liable to taxation for the support of the established church, and continued so until 1832, when the old State law legalizing it was repealed.

I pause here in my narrative to note certain differences in the religious customs prevailing then and now. One of the most surprising is the fact that in early New England days the reading of the Bible was not a part of the order of the public church service. Not until May 20, 1760, for example, did the Third Parish of Newbury vote that "the Scriptures be read in public on the Lord's day." In the Dorchester meeting-house, this custom was begun Sept. 23, 1752. This custom was, therefore, an innovation on the old order of worship, but its appropriateness was so evident that before 1800 it had probably become quite general.

There was no instrumental music whatever in church services, and its introduction, about a century ago, was bitterly opposed by conservative persons. When a bass-viol was brought into the Methodist meeting-house, corner of Washington and Elm Streets, in 1815, some of the members were greatly scandalized; and when the bow was first drawn across the strings they arose abruptly

and left the house. People said, "If they begin by fiddling, there will be dancing soon." Without instrumental accompaniment, and dependent upon the lead, often, of incompetent persons, the singing was often dolefully inharmonious. Judge Sewall narrated that once in starting the tune he pitched it too high, and then too low. Long metrical psalms were slowly sung, and, where hymn-books were scarce, were sometimes "lined off," the leader reading two lines, which all sung, and then two lines more, and so to the end—and the end was sometimes long in coming. On one occasion, a minister who had left his sermon at home, a quarter of a mile from the meeting-house, gave out a long psalm and had time to go for his sermon and return with it before the people had finished singing.

The sermons were long, all the way from three-quarters of an hour to two hours long, and on special occasions sometimes longer. The prayers were, proportionally, longer than the sermon. Twenty minutes only raised suspicions concerning the minister's devotional gifts. Half an hour was common, and even an hour was sometimes exceeded. I have the diary of Rev. Thomas Smith, of Falmouth, now Portland, Me., who, under date of April 13, 1738, has this entry: "Public Fast. I had extraordinary assistance: was an hour and a half in prayer, A.M., and above an hour P.M." On another Fast Day, he records that he was "an hour in the first



prayer, and an hour and a half in sermon." Some prayers lasted two hours. It is to be noted that the people were accustomed to stand during the prayer. About the middle of the prayer, the minister sometimes paused to allow the aged and infirm to sit down, the rest standing to the end. It is also to be noted that these long prayers and longer sermons were listened to in meeting-houses into which the profane luxury of stoves had not yet been introduced, and which were sometimes icy cold. The minister might be compelled to wear in the pulpit his heavy overcoat, cap, and gloves, the right-hand forefinger of the latter being slit to allow him the free use of his finger to turn the leaves of his sermon. Sometimes he paused midway in sermon or prayer to allow the shivering listeners to thrash their arms about, and knock their feet together for warmth, — and sometimes people felt compelled to do this even while prayer or sermon was in progress. Judge Sewall records that on one very cold Sunday the communion-bread froze, and "rattled sadly in the plate," as he passed it about. Small foot-stoves of perforated tin or sheet-iron in a wooden frame, inside of which an iron pan held some coals, were in much request, and, being passed from one to another in the pew, served to make the feet comfortable. The coals might be replenished at a neighbor's during the noon hour. Permission was sometimes given to bring dogs to church on very cold days, which, lying

at their master's feet, proved a source of grateful warmth. Commonly, a tax of sixpence apiece was paid for this privilege. Not until 1822 was a stove introduced into the Easton meeting-house, so long did it take our forefathers to discover that comfort was not a sin.

In very early times no religious services were held at funerals in New England. *The Boston News Letter*, in 1730, says that an address at a funeral was rare at that date. It was quite common to give away at funerals mourning-rings and mourning-gloves. In thirty-two years the Rev. Andrew Eliot, of the North Church in Boston, had 2,940 pairs given him, which, thrifty man that he was, he sold for over six hundred dollars. He also accumulated, as the record narrates, "more than a mugful" of mourning-rings. Most noteworthy, too, was the prevalent use of intoxicating liquor at funerals, as at all special occasions. Hawthorne speaks of the influence of wine and strong drink at funerals, where a sort of "grisly jollity was sanctioned by universal practice." I was much struck by what my dear old friend Samuel Simpson told me of the funeral of a child at South Easton, at which he, then a young lad, was a bearer — how the person in charge took the young bearers upstairs, where was a table well supplied with liquors, and gave them what he considered radical temperance advice when he said, "Now, boys, I would advise you to take nothing stronger than wine!"



One thing further in the way of these reminiscences. It is the common impression that in the old times ministers exercised a good deal of authority in the communities where they lived, were regarded with reverence, and treated with great deference. This may have been true of some exceptionally strong characters among the old New England clergy. But I see no evidence of such feeling towards ministers in Easton in earlier days. On the contrary, the town sometimes treated them with scant courtesy, failing to fulfil its contracts with them, so that at least three of them, before 1800, had to sue the town for pay for preaching. Easton was never priest-ridden, nor in the least afraid of its clergy.

I have spoken of the Baptist and Methodist Societies. About the year 1760 a Baptist Church was organized in the north part of the town. Rev. Ebenezer Stearns preached a short time, and was soon followed by Rev. Esek Carr, who came here from Rhode Island, and is the direct ancestor of one branch of the Carr families of Easton. Mr. Carr was a good cooper as well as earnest minister. His cooper-shop was half way from Main Street to the railroad track, on Elm Street. On Saturday afternoons it was carefully swept, seats were extemporized, a barrel, with the Bible on the top, served for a pulpit, and in cold weather (many years before stoves were allowed in the regular meeting-houses) a cheerful fire blazed and crackled in the large fireplace. Before

the services, the hospitable pastor used to refresh his people with foaming cider brought up from the cellar. With these facts in view, and the more important fact that belonging to this inexpensive society exempted persons from the town ministerial tax, it is easy to understand that the Baptist Church became very popular. It was maintained for nearly thirty years, but with Mr. Carr's declining health, it weakened, and before 1790, disbanded. The present Baptist Society of North Easton was organized only a few years ago, and built a church on Centre Street, where services are held.

Rev. William Reed, minister of the Easton Church, died in 1809, and was succeeded in the pastorate, the next year, by the Rev. Luther Sheldon. Mr. Sheldon was, as his son informed me, a very conservative minister of the old Calvinistic school. His ministry here was at a time when a great change was taking place in the old Massachusetts churches, many ministers and people revolting from the rigid Calvinism that had prevailed. This change caused a split in many of the churches, the larger number of which in the Old Colony, and in Eastern Massachusetts, declaring for liberal views, and eventually becoming Unitarians. Such a change was going on in the Easton Church, and was sharply antagonized by Mr. Sheldon. Some of the neighboring ministers had become liberal, and Mr. Sheldon was unwilling to exchange with them. His Society requested



him to do so, but he refused. His persistent refusal to continue the fraternal relations hitherto existing between this and neighboring churches was regarded by his society as sufficient ground for his dismissal. But Mr. Sheldon held on, alleging that the refusal of a minister, for conscientious reasons, to exchange with other ministers, even at the request of his parish, was no sufficient ground for his dismissal from his pastoral relation. The parish voted otherwise, and in September, 1832, notified him that his services would be dispensed with, and engaged another minister to preach. Mr. Sheldon, however, on the next Sunday took possession of the pulpit before the new minister entered, and conducted the services. In the afternoon the new man got the pulpit first, and Mr. Sheldon was not allowed to enter it. The excitement in the congregation was intense as he was prevented from doing so, and Mr. Sheldon, stepping into his own pew, said, "If those who wish to hear me preach will retire to my grove, I will speak there." The congregation then divided, a majority of them following Mr. Sheldon to his grove, where he conducted services. The actual, though not the technical, division of the Parish dates from this time. The two parties never again united. The matters in dispute finally went into the courts, and the position of Mr. Sheldon was sustained; viz., that his refusal to exchange with neighboring ministers was not a sufficient ground for his

dismissal, nor did it absolve the Parish from the obligation to pay his salary. This was in 1837. When the Parish found that they must pay his salary they directed him to preach to them, although he had now been preaching to his own people for four years and a half. Mr. Sheldon complied, and one is filled with amazement, not unmixed with admiration, at the nerve and resolution of a man who for more than a year could face an unfriendly audience, preach and pray before them, knowing that they were bitterly opposed to him. This state of things was too intolerable to last indefinitely, and late in 1838 an agreement was entered into by the contending parties, Mr. Sheldon receiving about what was due for his unpaid salary, and giving up all further claim upon the Parish.

It deserves notice that in this settlement nothing was said about any division of the parish fund. This fund was derived from the sale of the land originally set apart for the support of the ministry by the Taunton North Purchase Company, and the right of the First Parish to hold this fund will never be seriously questioned.

Mr. Sheldon remained the minister of the Evangelical Society of Easton until 1855. I need not trace the history of this society since his time in detail. The succeeding ministers holding longest pastorates have been Rev. Lyman White, Rev. F. P. Chapin, and Rev. A. H. Fuller, many others having been here, but holding short pastorates.



After the final division just narrated, the First Congregational Parish extended a call to Rev. William H. Taylor. Soon after his call the parsonage was built. Mr. Taylor did not remain long, and there was no settled minister for several years. In 1845 the meeting-house was thoroughly remodelled. A second floor was built, making a church audience-room above and a hall below, the hall being used by the town for a town hall until it was destroyed by fire. This meeting-house was completed in 1817, and was the third one of the Parish, the first one being built on Church Street, about 1711, and the second at the Centre, in 1750. The third building was destroyed by fire Jan. 27, 1886. Rev. Paul Dean became pastor of the First Parish in 1845, and remained for five years, a well-known and highly respected minister, after whom the Masonic Lodge of Easton is named. He was succeeded by Rev. William A. Whitwell, who was here for seven years. In May, 1858, Rev. George G. Withington became the minister, and continued as such until his resignation in November, 1870. He was the last settled pastor of the First Parish. Until the meeting-house was burned, in 1886, there were occasional series of services in the summer months. As the larger number of parishioners lived in the southeast section of the town, it was thought advisable to have religious services there, and the Grand Army Hall at Eastondale was engaged and used for the purpose. This

arrangement continued until last year, when, assisted by members of Unity Church Society in North Easton, and by other friends, the Parish built a pleasant church at Eastondale for its religious home, and bids fair to enter upon a new era of usefulness and success.

Methodism in Easton dates from about 1790. A society was organized in 1795, and at that date built a meeting-house at the corner of Elm and Washington Streets. This meeting-house is now the last tenement-house but one of the row on the north side of Lincoln Street, in North Easton. The building that replaced it, which was recently torn down, was erected in 1830. For thirty or forty years the Methodist Church had a large membership and was very flourishing. It was the parent church, not only of the Methodist Society in North Easton village, but of the Methodist Churches in Stoughton and the West Shares. Under the ministry of Rev. L. B. Bates, in 1860, this church divided, the village members organizing a church in North Easton. The older society had a lingering existence until 1885, services in the church being discontinued from that time. The village society built a church on Main Street, and afterwards were presented with the church once occupied by the Unitarian Society, and which they enlarged and still worship in.

After this sketch of the church history of Easton, we come now to that of our own religious society. It is surprising that, although the population of North Easton



village rapidly increased during the first half of the last century, no religious society was organized here during that time. The reason for this was that three churches already existed in town, and were flourishing,—the Unitarian and Orthodox at the Centre, and the Methodist, on Washington Street. But attendance at such a distance was inconvenient, and the need of a church here was strongly felt. In 1843 a movement in opposition to the form of government of the Methodist Episcopal Church developed in the Washington Street Society, led by James Dickerman, Sr., and he, with others, withdrew from that society and organized a Protestant Methodist Society, holding out-of-door meetings in pleasant weather, and finally worshipping in Torrey's Hall, which stood on Main Street, just south of the present location of the railroad bridge. The need of a meeting-house was felt; \$2,200 was subscribed by the village people, and a building erected where the "Rockery" now stands, the edifice once occupied by our own society. It was dedicated by what were thought to be imposing ceremonies, chief among which was the playing of a full band composed of citizens of the place, and led by Mr. Jason Howard. This Methodist Protestant Society did not thrive, and in 1850 the services were discontinued.

Then the village members of the Methodist Episcopal Society on Washington Street, disliking to go so far to church, hired various preachers to preach in the village

church. But the selections were unfortunate, the new movement languished, and those who had started it returned to their allegiance at the Washington Street Church. Some years later, however, they separated from that church and organized the Methodist Society of this village. In 1855, a half-century ago, the church building, then ten years old, was unoccupied; the field was open, and the following democratic method of inaugurating a new movement was adopted. The village people agreed that they would come to church and hear candidates from several different denominations, and that then those who were interested should take a vote, and the minister who received the largest number of votes should be selected, and all the people, regardless of his or their own denominational connections, should contribute to his support for one year. The choice fell upon Rev. Mr. Farnum, an Orthodox minister. But it is easier to vote money than it is to raise it, and the sight of the subscription paper cooled the ardor of the voters; the money needed to support Calvinistic preaching could not be raised, and Mr. Farnum could not, therefore, be settled. Things were then at a standstill, when it occurred to Mr. John H. Swain to say to Oliver Ames, Sr., "Why can we not have *Unitarian* preaching? How much will you give towards it?" Mr. Ames, who had been giving a hundred dollars, replied, "I will give three hundred dollars." With that generous beginning, the needed money was



soon forthcoming, and the Unitarian Society of North Easton, now known as Unity Church, in 1855 thus began to be. There was no settled pastor here for five years, although Rev. Charles Brooks, a well-known educator, supplied the pulpit for about a year, as did also the Rev. Joseph Angier, Mr. Brooks organizing the Sunday School in 1856. During the rest of the five years prior to 1860 the pulpit was supplied by different clergymen, over eighty of them preaching here, many of them being the most eminent in our denomination.

In 1860 Rev. Christopher C. Hussey, a Unitarian Quaker, was installed here as the first minister of the society, the Rev. James Freeman Clarke preaching the installation sermon. Mr. Hussey's ministry was a successful one. It was during his stay that the Vesper Service, then a decided novelty in this section, was inaugurated, and was largely attended, many persons even coming from neighboring towns. Mr. Hussey left here in 1866, to accept a call at Billerica, where he had a long pastorate. He died at Wellesley Hills, in 1897.

My own first settlement as a minister was over the Second Unitarian Society of Philadelphia, where I remained three years and a half, leaving there in the autumn of 1865. I then received a call at Fitchburg in this State, but was prevented from settling there because of ill health. I first preached in North Easton in October, 1867, and began my engagement as minister

of this society on the first Sunday of 1868, and have now just completed thirty-seven years of my ministry here. Only two Unitarian ministers in this country now in active service have been settled longer in their present parishes than I have. These two are Rev. Mr. Bartol of Lancaster and Rev. Mr. Stewart of Lynn, and the latter has just resigned. Prior to my coming here there was no business organization of the society, but one was effected on Jan. 1, 1868. Until 1875 we worshipped in the little meeting-house built for the Protestant Methodists, but on August twenty-sixth of that year we engaged in the dedication services of this beautiful church, the gift of Oliver Ames, the second of that name here. At the next annual meeting of the society Mr. Ames made a formal transfer of the church building and property to the society, and at a later meeting it was voted to adopt the name of "Unity Church of North Easton." The parsonage was built by a fund left by Mr. Ames, and was occupied in July, 1878.

I find by consulting my records that in 1868 fifty families were represented in our society. Ten years afterwards the number had increased to seventy families, and for nearly twenty years past the number has varied from ninety to one hundred families. During the thirty-seven years of my ministry here I have officiated at 210 weddings, and of the 420 persons then married by me



only 77, or 18 per cent of the whole number, were from our society. I have also attended 530 funerals, of which but 130, or 24 per cent of the whole number, were of persons connected with our society. The bare recital of these figures gives no suggestion of the tender memories and associations connected with these losses by death. I shall not venture to refer to them individually. Their memory is fondly cherished in the several homes from which they were taken, and some of them have enriched our lives and added to the sacred associations of this place where they worshipped with us by the exceptional worth and beauty of their character and influence.

Fifty years must always make a great change in the membership of any organization, and the thirty-seven years I have been here leave, at the end, very few of those to whom I preached in 1868. Losses by removal from town or by death have, of course, been made good, but all of my congregation of the first year—that is, of the adult members, whom I was accustomed to see in the little church we first worshipped in—are gone, except ten or twelve, although many of the families are still represented by children now grown to manhood and womanhood.

It was not my purpose in this discourse to write a complete history of the churches of Easton; but in order that

none shall be entirely omitted I will add the following statements: Roman Catholic services were first held in North Easton about 1840. A chapel was completed in 1851 on Pond Street. The first Catholic Church was built, on Main Street, in 1865. A splendid new stone church was built and dedicated last year. This society is in a flourishing condition.

There are two Swedish Churches in this place. One of them, the Evangelical, was organized in 1883; the other, the Lutheran, somewhat later.



