THE UNITARIAN SCHISM

by Charles A. Maxfield

An expansion of material found in *A Pilgrim People*

Several United Church of Christ congregations in New England bear the names Orthodox Congregational Church,[1] Trinitarian Congregational Church,[2] or Evangelical Congregational Church.[3] These names witness that these congregations were formed in the heat of a religious war that deeply divided communities and families in eastern New England. All three names of churches declare emphatically: NOT Unitarian.[4]

In the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries the Congregational churches of New England were moving doctrinally in two opposite directions. On the one hand, New Divinity pastors trained new pastors in the doctrines of Edwards. These Edwardsians provided the interior of New England with evangelical leadership that embraced the *Westminster Catechism* and promoted revivals. On the other hand, pastors in the affluent and cosmopolitan maritime cities preached a gentler philosophy. They believed that people were essentially good and capable of doing the right thing. They elevated Reason over Revelation, which had to be explained in accord with Reason. Skepticism toward the supernatural led some to disregard the divinity of Christ, which led to a disregard of the doctrines of atonement and trinity. They ridiculed revivals and emotional religion. For them, Religion was Morality, and was always reasonable.

As the divide deepened, occasional conflicts occurred over the calling of a pastor or the adoption of a creed. Conflict often occurred between church and parish–the taxpayers of the parish often desiring a less demanding faith than the communicant members. In 1792, when the parish in Taunton, Massachusetts, objected to the *Westminster Confession*, a majority of the church members withdrew to West Congregational Church of Taunton.[5] In Plymouth, when church and parish called a non-trinitarian pastor, the orthodox withdrew to organize Third Church of Plymouth[6] in 1801.

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[1] Mansfield and Petersham, Mass.

[2] North Andover, West Gloucester, Northfield, Warwick, Concord, Norton and Scituate, Mass.

[3] Dunstable, Grafton, Harvard, Uxbridge, Westboro, Erving and Brighton (Boston), Mass., and Langdon, N. H.

[4] In this article, the words "orthodox" "trinitarian" and "evangelical" are synonyms, all referring to the anti-Unitarian party.

[5] now holding Congregational Christian standing in the UCC Conference.

[6] Third Church is now Church of the Pilgrimage, a UCC congregation. Its first pastor, Adoniram Judson, had a son of the same name who was among the first missionaries.

Jedidiah Morse and the Contest at Harvard

Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) was eager to provide the spark and fan the flames of a conflict in defense of the trinitarian faith. Born in Woodstock, Connecticut, to a devout Congregational family, Morse attended Yale College, where he was converted in a revival in 1781, and graduated in 1783. Morse then remained in New Haven, where he studied theology and taught in a girls' school.[7] He then was ordained in 1786, served as pastor of a Congregational Church in Midway, Georgia for a year, then assisted in a Presbyterian Church in New York City. Called to the Congregational Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts,[8] in 1789, he served there until 1819.

Jedidiah Morse had a highly combative personality, "the sort of man who could never stand in friendly opposition to anyone,"[9] and he tended to see conspiracies in the designs of those he opposed. His zeal and vision shaped the beginning of the organized opposition to the Unitarians. But his contentiousness ended up alienating even his friends, and other more temperate personalities assumed leadership of the movement he began.

Once settled in the Boston area, Morse supported revivals and opposed every trend away from orthodox theology. When vacancies occurred in the positions of professor of divinity at Harvard College in 1803 and president of the college in 1804, Morse urged the appointment of orthodox candidates. After many delays and much debate, Henry Ware (1764-1845), whom Morse considered a unitarian, was elected professor of divinity in 1805.

The Trinitarian Strategy

Morse immediately took action to organize evangelical Christians. He first worked to unify the New Divinity and old Calvinist factions of Congregationalism against the common enemy. Then he led that coalition in a fourfold strategy:

1. Establish a periodical to unite and to shape the opinion of the supporters of the orthodox faith.
2. Create a new educational institution to prepare a new army of clergy with orthodox doctrine and evangelical piety.
3. Unify the Congregationalists of Massachusetts in a statewide organization that will defend orthodoxy.
4. Start new trinitarian churches in Boston, to contest with the older non-trinitarian churches for the loyalty of the masses of the growing metropolis.

A religious journal–In June, 1805, one month after Henry Ware's installation at Harvard,

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[7]His lecture notes were published in 1784 as *Geography Made Easy*. His ongoing interest in providing geography text books has earned him the title, "Father of American Geography."

[8]Charlestown is now part of the city of Boston, but was then a separate Town.

[9]Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), 61.

Morse began a monthly publication, the *Panoplist*. Taking its name from *Ephesians 6:11*, "put on the whole armor (panoplia) of God," the *Panoplist* gave a call to arms to the faithful to spiritual combat against the enemies of the faith. In three months it achieved a circulation of 2,000, more than any other religious periodical in America at the time. With articles on doctrine, practical piety, biography, and events in church life, Morse and his associates informed the trinitarians.

A school to train ministers–After a couple of years of coalition building, fundraising, and promotion in the *Panoplist*, Andover Theological Seminary opened on September 28, 1808. This was a new kind of educational institution (*LTH* 3:13). Previously candidates for ministry completed college, then studied with a pastor or college professor before ordination. Andover offered college graduates a three year program with a growing faculty.

Leonard Woods (1774-1854), pastor at Newbury, Massachusetts, and assistant editor of the *Panoplist*, was appointed first professor of theology at Andover. Through his long tenure he influenced the formation of thousands of Congregational and Presbyterian ministers. Andover graduates would pioneer in establishing churches on the frontier, engage in mission around the world, found and support numerous missionary and benevolent societies and staff them as agents, and found and give direction to numerous new educational institutions across the country and around the world.

Connectionalism–A General Association of Massachusetts had been organized in 1803, consisting of representatives of the voluntary district clergy associations. However, for several years only three to five of the twenty-four associations were represented–all in the west. Promoted by the *Panoplist*, the General Association slowly grew to ten associations in 1810 and more thereafter. The General Association had no authority over churches or clergy. By affirming the doctrine of the *Westminster Catechism*, it presented itself as a defender of the historic faith.

Some Congregationalists feared any church organization to be a threat to local autonomy. Nathanael Emmons (1745-1840), New Divinity pastor who had educated eighty-seven other pastors, had declared,

> Associationism leads to Consociationism,[10] Consociationism leads to Presbyterianism, Presbyterianism leads to Episcopacy, Episcopacy leads to Roman Catholicism, and Roman Catholicism is an ultimate fact.

The Mendon Association, to which Emmons belonged, was the last to join the General Association, after Emmons' death in 1841.

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[10]Associations were regular meetings of clergy in an area; consociations were regular meetings of clergy and lay delegates from churches in an area.

Many of the *Panoplist* leaders did want consociations, and had no problem being Presbyterian when outside New England. They encouraged the General Association in 1814 to study the proposal of 1705 for consociations (rejected in Massachusetts, but adopted in Connecticut as the *Saybrook Platform*), and promoted it in the *Panoplist*. After being studied by committees for two years the plan was dropped. The Congregationalists of Massachusetts were not prepared to go that far.

New churches in Boston–Of nine Congregational churches in Boston, only Old South Church was clearly trinitarian. The *Panoplist* leaders organized new congregations in Boston, preaching the evangelical faith, and attracting the many immigrants to the city from the more orthodox rural areas. The first new congregation, Park Street Church,[11] was organized February 27, 1809, with a core of members from Old South. The new church called Presbyterian Edward D. Griffin (1770-1837) to be its first pastor. By 1842 twelve more trinitarian congregations had been organized in Boston.[12]

The War of Ideas

Jedidiah Morse's son, Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872),[13] an art student in England in 1815, noticed a book in a bookstore, *Life of Theophilus Lindsey*, by Thomas Belsham. The book included letters to British Unitarians from Boston area clergy, in which they claimed that most of the city's clergy held unitarian views. They further acknowledged the clergy were unwilling to fully disclose these beliefs to their parishioners. Samuel sent a copy of the book to his father, who promptly published the relevant sections, titled *American Unitarianism*, in April, 1815. The *Panoplist* reprinted much of the material in a review. Jeremiah Evarts (1781-1831), new editor of the *Panoplist*, pointed out that here were disclosed the true views of Boston's "liberal" clergy, and also a pattern of deception which showed contempt for the people.

One of Boston's clergy who felt offended, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), wrote a tract criticizing the publication and review. Samuel Worcester (1770-1821), one of the *Panoplist* group and pastor of Tabernacle Church, Salem, replied with another tract. By December 1815 Channing and Worcester had each published three tracts. The trinitarians considered these tracts to be the definitive statements of the controversy. The Unitarians were forced to acknowledge their true views; their hypocracy was exposed. Worcester clearly articulated the doctrines of the trinity, atonement, and the divinity of Christ. He argued that these doctrines were central to the Christian faith, and that the failure of preachers to proclaim them was sufficient cause for the orthodox to separate and to organize new churches.

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[11] now affiliated with the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (CCCC).

[12] many have since merged, closed or left. Continuing in the UCC are the Church of the Covenant and Mount Vernon Congregational.

[13] he would later invent the telegraph and Morse Code.

Channing made the clearest defense of the Unitarian position in an 1819 ordination sermon, *Unitarian Christianity*. This resulted in numerous other tracts and rebuttals. Moses Stuart (1780-1852), professor of sacred literature at Andover, in *Letter to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing*, and Leonard Woods, in *Letters to Unitarians*, replied to Channing's challenge. Henry Ware replied to Woods, leading to more tracts by each.

This war of words was conducted in a better spirit than most such wars. Both sides refrained from name calling, ridicule, and the distortion of the other's positions. They stuck to the issues. Stuart and Woods commended Channing for clearly declaring his convictions. They identified large areas of agreement, then challenged Channing in other areas.

- Stuart stated that he, too was not a literalist, but interpreted scripture with the tools of reason. He challenged Channing to interpret scripture by the same objective standards with reference to the divinity of Christ and the atonement.
- Stuart conceded that the classic description of the Trinity as "one God in three persons," was inadequate, because it did not use the word *person* in its common meaning. Stuart explained there were *real differences* in the Godhead, which was in divine essence and attributes one.
- Woods emphasized that God is good and God is love; that it is consistent with God's goodness to punish the wicked; but this always must be understood in the context of God's love.
- Woods had no trouble citing scripture to indicate the "innate moral depravity" of humanity, and encouraged Channing to use the scientific method of observation to test this doctrine.
- Woods defended the traditional understanding of atonement: that the Father sent the Son to die in the place of sinners. Woods argued that this could not be understood unless one made distinctions in the Godhead. He argued that the overriding motive of God is love. He classed references to Christ's death to "appease the wrath of God" as metaphoric language, of which the Bible was filled, not to be taken literally.
- Woods agreed with Channing on the mission of Christ and several other points.

Ware, in reply, asserted that he and Channing believed that Jesus Christ was sent from God with a unique mission to the world, and that Christ was more than human, although not equal with the Father. Ware defended the moral nature of humanity against the orthodox doctrine of human depravity.

<u>The Battle in the Courts</u>

The decade of 1810-1820 saw a series of battles in local parishes, fought out in church councils and the courts of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. These cases set precedents that determined events in scores of other churches in the succeeding decades. Prominent Senators, cabinet members and state officials were retained to present the cases of the contending parties

in church councils; the cases were widely reported and discussed.

The *Cambridge Platform* had provided that a church with problems could call on representatives from neighboring churches to come to a meeting–called an Ecclesiastical Council–to hear the case and give advice. If the two parties could agree on the issue and whom to invite, a mutual council was called. If they could not agree, either or each party could call their own *ex parte* council. By the nineteenth century these councils had ceased to have a geographical base, each party inviting those clergy and churches that would favor its cause. Also, by the nineteenth century, state law had recognized the right of the parish to call a council.

Sandwich–Under the leadership of Jonathan Burr (1757-1842), pastor since 1787, the congregation at Sandwich, Massachusetts, adopted a more orthodox creed in 1809. A small group of dissidents withdrew and agitated for the removal of the pastor. On September 5, 1811, the Parish terminated its relationship with Burr and barred him from the meetinghouse. The dissidents organized themselves as a congregation in January, 1812, and claimed to be the First Church of Sandwich. Unable to agree on a mutual council, each party called a series of *ex parte* councils to support their position. In *Burr v. Sandwich* (1812) the state Supreme Court ruled that the Parish could determine which was the real First Church and entitled to the support of the Parish, without regard to the actions of the church. Burr's trinitarian group met elsewhere and supported themselves.[14]

Dorchester–The Second Parish of Dorchester[15] was created in 1808 as a non-geographic parish within the Town of Dorchester. John Cadman, a strong trinitarian, was ordained pastor there on December 7, 1808. He soon received criticism for not following the custom of exchanging pulpits with the other clergy of the Boston area. Cadman did not want anti-trinitarians preaching from his pulpit. After the Parish asked him to resign in October, 1811, and the church asked him to not resign, a mutual council was called. Divided equally between the delegates nominated by each side, the council could not reach a decision. A second Council, in May, 1812, likewise could not reach a decision, but urged Cadman to voluntarily increase his pulpit exchanges. Cadman began to comply to a limited extent. Then, November 24, 1812, the parish voted to dismiss him.

The following Sunday, November 29, Cadman went to church early, and found eight sturdy men positioned on the pulpit stairs. When he approached, they physically prevented him from ascending the pulpit. So Cadman conducted a service from the floor in front of the pulpit. When he had dismissed the congregation, a minister hired by the parish preached from the pulpit. Fearful of losing his position, the Parish's Unitarian preacher remained in the pulpit over the dinner hour and had his meal brought to him. Following the Unitarian afternoon service, Cadman

[14]These two Sandwich congregations united in 1965 and are affiliated with both the UCC and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).

[15]Dorchester is now part of the city of Boston; Second Church is now affiliated with the CCCC.

returned to preach to his congregation, on the text, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

The Unitarians had won a battle, but lost the war. Public opinion opposed so strongly their violent occupation of the pulpit, that they agreed to a settlement earlier proposed by the trinitarians. The church purchased the pews of the dissidents, and promised to not oppose their organization of a new parish.

Princeton–This Massachusetts Town was without a pastor in 1816. The Parish invited Samuel Clarke, a person of unitarian views, to supply the pulpit, but the church refused to call him. On February 11, 1817, the Parish voted to call Clarke, but the church refused to concur. A mutual council was called.

This Council, with a slight Unitarian majority, took unusual actions. Some dissidents had objected to an 1810 revision of the church's creed. The Council took the old pre-1810 creed, revised it to remove all reference to the trinity, and called on the church to meet and consider this old/new creed. The Council declared that they would recognize those who adopted this creed as the church at Princeton. As a result, a Unitarian congregation was organized, and granted the assets of the Parish, and the orthodox withdrew to reorganize as a separate congregation.[16]

Dedham–The Dedham, Massachusetts, church and parish were looking for a minister in 1818. The Parish invited only Unitarians to fill the pulpit; the church would not call one to be its pastor. In August, 1818, the Parish voted to call an Ecclesiastical Council to ordain Alvan Lamson as teacher of the Parish. A Council of Unitarian clergy met October 29. The protests of the church, that only churches could call and ordain, were not heeded. At the ordination service the following day, the two deacons walked out. A congregational meeting on November 15, which the trinitarians boycotted and called irregular, voted to call Lamson as Pastor. An Ecclesiastical Council called by the trinitarians on November 18 disapproved of the Parish calling a council to ordain, but urged the parties to be reconciled.

So there were two groups, each claiming to be First Church, Dedham. Deacon Samuel Fales of the trinitarians possessed the church records, communion silver, and Deacons' Fund. The unitarians sued. In *Baker v. Fales* (1820), Chief Justice Isaac Parker (a Unitarian) made a ruling that would establish the parameters for all future cases (*LTH* 3:14). He ruled that the Parish was the legal trustee of all assets and property of the church, and these assets belonged to whatever group the Parish declared to be the church.[17]

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[16]The two congregations reunited in 1836, and is now a member of the UCC.

[17]Allin Congregational Church, Dedham, is a member of the UCC.

Summary–The battle in the courts of church and state was conducted with more animosity, pettiness, and cruelty than the battle of the tracts. The system of mutual and *ex parte* councils had proven ineffective, causing the *Panoplist* group to call more desperately for a system of standing geographic consociations. In battles between Parish and Church, the parish was often anti-trinitarian and the church, orthodox. The courts–dominated by Unitarians–took a legal position that gave all the power to the Parish. As a result, trinitarians were repeatedly driven from their meetinghouses and forced to start afresh, free of the Town's financial support. Each case increased the antagonism and deepened the divide between the two parties.

Division of the Churches

Slowly but steadily, the plague of schism spread from Town to Town across eastern New England. Over one-third of the Congregational churches of Massachusetts divided. By 1840 the General Association of Massachusetts counted 126 "exiled churches"–orthodox churches having to start over from scratch, without any share of the property, furnishings or invested funds of their former parishes. Many of the most affluent and influential persons had been left behind, but in the cases of the exiled churches alone, 75 % of the membership came out.

Thousands of trinitarian Congregationalists had to find new ways to fund their churches, and a new way to function independent of the Town government. In 1818 the General Association established the Domestic Missionary Society of Massachusetts Proper, to aid these exiled churches. Joseph S. Clark (1800-1861) directed the Society from 1839 to 1857. Clark grew up in the southern part of the Town of Plymouth with a unitarian father and a trinitarian mother. Of unitarian beliefs until conversion, Clark attended Andover Seminary and planned to become a missionary. However he could not go against his father's death-bed wish that he not go overseas. After a pastorate in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, Clark directed the Domestic Missionary Society. It gave small amounts of money to struggling churches, enabling them to survive a little longer until they could support themselves.

The Unitarian schism was social and political as well as theological. The affluent, highly educated, urban Unitarian leadership often appeared condescending toward the less affluent trinitarians with more emotional religion. Trinitarians criticized the Unitarian monopoly of the leading offices of the state government.

New England Congregationalism was "born again" in the Unitarian schism. In crisis, it created institutions to bind churches closer together in mutual support. In crisis, New England Congregationalism recovered its identity as a faith community. Exiled from buildings, funding sources, and all the familiar memories, New England Congregationalism had a new beginning founded on faith in Christ rather than in tradition and memory.

The trinitarians won the "religious war" by portraying themselves as the true inheritors of New England's ancient religion, and by portraying their opponents as innovators. By moderate

behavior the trinitarians won the moderates. Trinitarian institutions produced another movement that gave more energy, cohesion, and strength to their cause than all the other institutions: the missionary movement.