



CHAPTER V.

Ecclesiastical History — Congregational Churches — The First Church.

THE FIRST CHURCH. — There is no record of the organization of this church. It is simply recognized by its name at the earliest mention as an established institution well known to contemporaneous writers. It has already been stated that with the Gorges Company in 1623 came Rev. William Morrell, a clergyman of good reputation in the Church of England, of culture and learning; that he remained in the plantation for perhaps a year and a half, and then gave up his charge, returning to England by way of Plymouth. He was an amiable gentleman of refinement and remarkable discretion, well suited to have the charge of an English parish, but scarcely adapted to the needs of a New England settlement at that day. Mr. Morrell brought with him a commission from the Ecclesiastical Court in England to exercise a kind of superintendency over the churches already existing or which might be established here. This commission was to empower him with authority over all churches in the colony, and as "all" meant only Plymouth, over which he was hardly in a position to claim jurisdiction, he obeyed the dictates of his good sense and refrained from any attempt to exercise his authority.

The conditions under which the settlement at Weymouth was made rendered it unnecessary to organize a parish, for it already existed as a matter of fact, and the church was a branch of the Church of England in this remote corner of its kingdom; and evidently to the

care of his parish Mr. Morrell devoted himself so long as he remained. The religious element does not seem to have been predominant in this settlement, and the surroundings and influences being such as to give but little promise of future benefit, Mr. Morrell returned to his own country, leaving the remnant of his flock to the mercy of circumstances. In the following year, 1624, according to "Prince's Annals," which, from the facilities in the hands of the compiler, seems fairly conclusive, there came in another company, to join the planters at Wessagusset, from Weymouth, England. These were probably a mixed party, with the independent element predominant, since it is stated that they brought with them a non-conformist minister by the name of Barnard, who remained with them until his death. Nothing more is known of him or of his administration over this people. There was no need to organize a church, since one after the Episcopal form already existed. It simply changed its "rector" for a "minister." There was no need even to throw off the authority of the bishop, since there was no officer of that order to claim the rule, and thus for a dozen years affairs remained, the continual influx of planters of various religious ideas preventing, probably, any very decided opinions from becoming predominant.

There was unquestionably some kind of a house of worship erected, probably a rude, temporary structure, corresponding to the dwellings of the people. No mention, however, is made of this, which in a few years was replaced by a more convenient and substantial building erected upon Burying Hill.

In the summer of 1635 a large addition was made to the little settlement by the arrival of a company of about a hundred people, under the leadership of Rev. Joseph Hull, sailing from Weymouth, Eng., but gathered from the county of Somerset and the neighbor-

hood. Mr. Hull came in the interest of the Episcopacy, being a graduate of Oxford of 1612, and as recently as 1632, rector of Northleigh, Devon; but finding that the condition of the plantation was such as hardly to justify an attempt to establish the Episcopal form of worship in the immediate vicinity of so many dissenters, and probably with a leaning in the latter direction himself, he fell in with the current and became a moderate dissenter. There having been no minister here since the death of Mr. Barnard, the situation seemed favorable for the selection of Mr. Hull to fill that office, and he undoubtedly preached here for a time as minister of the church, but other elements were at work which soon developed themselves as an opposition. There were remnants of the Gorges Company still favoring their old order, while there were many new-comers from Dorchester, Boston and other places, who favored the Puritans and the authority of Gov. Winthrop. These latter seem to have been a strong party, and were evidently dissatisfied with Mr. Hull, for they soon gave a call to Mr. Thomas Jenner, of Roxbury, who, in the early part of 1636, came into the settlement and became its minister, while Mr. Hull seems to have removed temporarily to Hingham.

There does not appear to have been the utmost harmony among the inhabitants, for in the following year a council of the elders was called to "reconcile the difference between Mr. Jenner and his people," and the difficulty was so serious that the governor and his council were compelled to step in and arrange matters. This trouble offered a favorable opportunity for a third party to throw itself into the breach in the hope of becoming possessors of the field. These, in 1637, gave an invitation to Rev. Robert Lenthal to become their minister. Mr. Lenthal had recently come from England, where many of the Weymouth people had been under

his ministry; hence the invitation, which he did not hesitate to accept. He, also, remained here for several years, but was in constant trouble and difficulty, and in 1639 was tried for heresy before a council held in Dorchester, but the result was unsatisfactory, as it settled nothing. An attempt seems to have been made at this time to form another church, the difficulty was so great, but without success.

The Weymouth Church, then, in 1638-9, found itself in this position. Mr. Hull claimed to be the minister, and occasionally exercised the office, with a strong body of adherents. Mr. Jenner still remained, with the official favor to sustain him; while Mr. Lenthal preached as circumstances would permit, and had a large following. This condition of things in a village no larger than Weymouth of that date could not be supported, and in the latter year, 1639, Rev. Samuel Newman, a graduate of Oxford of 1620, and a man of excellent reputation, was invited to come in as a harmonizer. How this was to be effected does not now appear; nevertheless he came, and there was displayed the extraordinary phenomenon, for those days, of four ministers of the same denomination contending for a single pulpit in one small community. This, however, did not continue, for Mr. Hull and Mr. Lenthal retired in 1639, and Mr. Jenner in 1640, leaving Mr. Newman in possession; but the conflicting elements were too many and discordant for his peaceable nature, and after a ministry of about four years he, with a large body of his friends, removed to Rehoboth, leaving the church without a pastor. He was succeeded by Rev. Thomas Thacher, who was settled Jan. 2, 1644, and remained pastor of the church for twenty years, when he removed to Boston, and was afterwards installed as the first pastor of the Third Church (Old South). He was the first minister ordained in Weymouth, all of his predeces-

sors having received their ordination in England. He had an excellent reputation as a preacher, and was also an able physician, a man of talent and education. Under his ministrations the people, by whom he was beloved and revered, enjoyed a long period of rest and prosperity, very pleasant after the vexations of the previous years.

During the pastorate of Mr. Thacher the old meeting-house, which stood upon Burying Hill, on the westerly side of the present highway, and nearly opposite the site of the soldiers' monument, had become so much in need of repairs that the townsmen, Dec. 14, 1652, were directed "to do what was necessary to make it more comfortable, and prevent any further decay." In the early days of the town, until it was divided in 1723 into two precincts, it constituted one precinct, and all parish business was transacted in town meeting. The minister was hired and his maintenance provided by the town; and as it possessed at this time no parsonage, the minister provided his own dwelling, which, upon his leaving, was purchased by the town and sold to his successor, with the condition that should he leave or die without children, the town should have the privilege of buying the property.

Mr. Thacher was followed in the ministry by Rev. Samuel Torrey, who was ordained Feb. 14, 1665. Rev. Emerson Davis says he preached there from 1656, as colleague of Mr. Thacher. He was certainly there Nov. 28, 1664. Mr. Torrey was son of Capt. William Torrey, born in England in 1632; educated at Harvard College, but owing to an extension of the course of study for a year he, with some of his associates, became dissatisfied and left the institution without graduation. He remained pastor of the church in Weymouth until his death, April 21, 1707, a period of over forty-two years. He was a man of great and acknowl-

edged ability, of excellent reputation as a preacher, and in 1684 was chosen president of Harvard College, which position he declined. Three times he preached the election sermon,—an honor never before conferred.

In 1667 the meeting-house was again repaired, and a bell procured and hung. Up to the year 1671, although there is much upon the records concerning the minister's rates and providing for his maintenance, there is no amount stated for his salary. This year the matter was thoroughly discussed, and arrangements were made to pay Mr. Torrey fifty pounds per year, and five members of the precinct became bound for its payment, ten pounds per man. This was to be paid in money, or its equivalent of eighty pounds in current pay. In 1673 ten pounds in wood (twenty cords) was added, and in 1680 his salary was increased ten pounds. In 1682 the meeting-house had become so old and decayed that the town voted to pull it down, and a new one was erected upon land bought of Capt. John Holbrook, the site of the present meeting-house. This house was forty-five feet by forty, and twenty feet between joints, with four gable-ends, costing in all two hundred and eighty pounds. In 1697–8 the town voted an addition of twelve pounds to the minister's salary.

After the death of Mr. Torrey a call was given to Mr. Peter Thacher of Boston, a grandson of Rev. Thomas Thacher, the former minister, at a salary of seventy pounds and a "convenient settlement." It was a custom of those days to grant the minister upon his settlement a certain sum to pay his expense of removal or "setting up housekeeping," equal usually to one or more years' salary. This did not appear to be quite satisfactory, and the sum was increased ten pounds, with his firewood added. This call was accepted, and Mr. Thacher was ordained Nov. 26, 1707. He was a popular preacher, and very highly esteemed by his

people, among whom he lived in great harmony until 1718, when a prospect of a call to Boston introduced a disturbing element, in consequence of which he was dismissed, and afterwards settled, as colleague of Rev. Mr. Webb, over the North Church, Boston. He was a graduate of Harvard of 1696. His manner of leaving Weymouth was very unsatisfactory, and the cause of much ill-feeling on that account. During the ministry of Mr. Thacher the town purchased a parsonage for the minister of Zachariah Bicknell, which has been a permanent establishment in the parish since that time.

On March 27, 1719, the town concurred with the church in a call given Feb. 26 to Mr. Thomas Paine, of Barnstable, to be their minister upon a salary of ninety pounds and the use of the parsonage. He was ordained Aug. 19, 1719. He remained the pastor until April 15, 1734, when he was dismissed. It was during his ministry, in 1723, that the south part of the town was set off as the Second Precinct. This withdrew a large part of the population and property, so that it was with great difficulty that the parish expenses were met, and in consequence much trouble arose with Mr. Paine during the later years of his service, which was eventually the cause of his leaving. For several years his family had resided in Boston, while he performed his official duties in Weymouth. Mr. Paine graduated at Harvard in 1717, and was, in point of ability and acquirements, the equal of any of his predecessors, with the possible exception of Mr. Torrey. He was of a kind and amiable disposition, and won the affection of his people to a remarkable degree, and had it not been for the unfortunate pecuniary condition of the parish there would have been no occasion for his leaving.

In August, 1634, after the dismissal of Mr. Paine, a call was extended to Mr. William Smith, of Charles-

town, to become the minister, at a salary of one hundred and sixty pounds and three hundred pounds settlement, the latter to be paid one hundred pounds annually for three years, all in bills of credit. This invitation was accepted, and on the first Wednesday of December he was ordained as pastor of the First Church and Parish in Weymouth, which office he retained until his death, Sept. 17, 1783, in his seventy-seventh year. He was a graduate of Harvard of 1725. The following epitaph upon his gravestone gives, probably, a correct estimate of his character: "As a Divine he was eminent As a Preacher of the Gospel eloquent and devotional in life he exhibited the Virtues of the Religion which he had taught in Death felt its Supports and closed a long and useful life with hopes full of immortality." Prepossessing and conciliatory, he soon became a favorite, especially among the young. He was lively and animated as a speaker, and through his long ministry of nearly forty-nine years—the longest on the record of the church—he was highly esteemed and beloved. He, however, is best known as the father of three daughters, who married three men, all of whom became eminent. Hon. Richard Cranch married Mary, the eldest; Abigail became the wife of John Adams, the second President of the United States, and was the mother of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President; the third daughter, Elizabeth, married Rev. John Shaw, of Haverhill, a man of standing and reputation.

He was minister through the Revolutionary war, with its stirring scenes, and died just as the day of peace was dawning upon the land. The difficulties of the times, with a divided town and a fluctuating currency, made it often hard to raise the amount necessary for his support, and the records are largely filled with endeavors to arrange this matter. At the commencement of his ministry, in its second year, he had a long

and severe sickness, which disabled him from service for the time; and later on, in 1769 and 1770, he was again disabled by the same cause, and for several months his pulpit was supplied by James Blake, A. B., of Dorchester, a graduate of Harvard, of 1769, a young man of rare excellence and promise, who came to Weymouth to teach school, and after a little time, supplied the pulpit during the illness of Mr. Smith, in which position he died, Nov. 17, 1771, within a month of his twenty-first birthday. A volume of his sermons was afterwards published.

On the 23d of April, 1751, a great disaster befell the parish in the loss of its meeting-house by fire. The loss was a severe and heavy one for the people at that time, especially as the parish was passing through the most fatal epidemic that has ever been known in the history of the town, one in ten of the population perishing with the terrible "throat distemper," among others Major Adam Cushing, the foremost man of his day in town and in the parish. They were not discouraged, however, but set to work with energy and determination; and within a year a new house was ready for use, which was occupied by the parish eighty years. It was with the commencement of Mr. Smith's ministry that the earliest records now in possession of the church had their beginning, and these are exceedingly meagre, other than the noting of statistics, admissions to the church and baptisms, with a few marriages and deaths.

After the death of Mr. Smith there was a vacancy in the ministry for more than four and one half years, when from various causes they were unable to obtain a pastor. Rev. Huntingdon Porter preached for a time in the year after Mr. Smith's decease. On the 24th of May, 1784, the parish voted a call to Mr. Samuel Shuttlesworth, of Dedham, in which the church concurred,

but after supplying the pulpit until Aug. 1, he declined the position. On the 22d of November the parish voted unanimously to invite Mr. Asa Packard, of Bridgewater, to become their minister, but he also declined.

Ever since the division of the town into two precincts, there had been trouble between them concerning the parsonage property, which culminated in a suit, in 1785, by the South Parish for claimed rights, which were denied by the North. The issue of the contest was in favor of the latter. During the summer and fall of that year, Rev. Mr. Judson supplied the pulpit; but on the 16th of January of the following year (1786), the parish made choice of Mr. Israel Evans to fill the vacancy in the pastorate. This invitation he accepted under date of 24th of March; but some unfortunate reports reaching his ear before settlement, he felt obliged to decline, which he did in a letter dated 26th of September. Soon after this Mr. Jacob Norton was hired to preach, and on the 12th of March, 1787, the committee was instructed to engage him for a further time. His ministrations proved so acceptable, that on the 9th of April it was voted to give him a call, at a salary of ninety pounds per year, his firewood and two hundred pounds settlement, fifty pounds per year for four years (the latter instead of parsonage, which had been first voted). Mr. Norton accepted the call, and was ordained 10th of October, 1787. He was a graduate of Harvard, of 1785 or 1786, a man of strong mental powers, with thorough intellectual training, and a keen controversialist. He excelled as a classical scholar, and had a high reputation as a Hebraist. During his ministry he was frequently engaged in theological discussions, which he sustained with great learning and ability. He was, however, changeable in his religious belief, particularly during the later years

of his ministry, which was the cause of great trouble in the church and parish, and eventually led to a dissolution of the pastoral relation, which took place 10th of July, 1824, after a service of nearly thirty-seven years. He was a man of irreproachable character, and highly esteemed for his amiable qualities.

On the 23d of August, 1824, a hearty call was extended to Rev. Josiah Bent, Jr., of Milton, by the parish to become its pastor, at a salary of six hundred dollars and his firewood. This call he accepted, and he was ordained, Oct. 13, 1824, to the pastorate of the First Church of Weymouth, which position he held until Oct. 10, 1833. His ministry was a very successful one, one hundred and twenty-nine persons having united with the church during the nine years. While Mr. Bent was the pastor of the church, the meeting-house, having become old and out of repair, was taken down in 1832, and a new one erected upon the same spot, which, with some important changes, has been occupied by the parish until the present time. This is the third meeting-house built upon this spot. Mr. Bent was a graduate of Harvard, of 1822, a man of deep piety, in excellent standing among his associates, and holding a warm place in the affections of his people.

After the dismissal of Mr. Bent, Mr. John C. Phillips, of Boston, was employed to preach during the month of November, 1833, which he did with such effect that a unanimous call was given him by parish and church, at a salary of seven hundred dollars per year, which he promptly accepted, and was ordained on the 18th of December, 1833. He remained pastor until Nov. 13, 1837, a ministry of a little over four years, the shortest in the history of the church since the settlement of Rev. Samuel Newman, about two hundred years before. Mr. Phillips was a graduate of Harvard, of 1826, and of Andover Theological Seminary. He also com-

pleted a full course of legal study with Hon. Samuel Hubbard, Judge of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts. He was a fine scholar, a strong thinker and a close reasoner. His rare social powers made him a general favorite, and it was with deep regret to his many friends that circumstances compelled him to ask his dismissal.

The interval was very short after Mr. Phillips left until the call to Rev. Joshua Emery, Jr., of Fitchburg, Jan. 2, 1838, at a salary of eight hundred dollars per annum. He accepted the invitation, and was installed on the 25th of the same month. This is the first installation unaccompanied by ordination in the history of the church for two hundred years. His pastorate extended until April 1, 1873, a period of over thirty-five years, when he was dismissed at his own request, feeling with the advance of years that the burden of the parish was too great for his strength. His ministry was a long and successful one, during which one hundred and eighty-five were admitted to the church. He was a forcible and energetic speaker, especially gifted in prayer, and the estimation in which he was held by his people may be measured by the length of his pastorate. He was also a valuable citizen, being strongly interested in education, for many years the chairman of the school committee, performing at times nearly the whole duties of the board. At the beginning of his service the parish built a new parsonage house, that now used for the purpose, upon the site of the old house, some parts of which had stood there for one hundred and fifty years. During many years the social meetings of the church had been held in the hall of the schoolhouse, opposite the meeting-house, for want of a chapel or vestry, a need that was greatly felt, and which was provided for in 1856 by the erection of a neat and commodious chapel by the church, and attached to

the rear of the meeting-house, with which it communicated.

On the 28th July, 1873, the parish concurred in the unanimous call of the church to Rev. F. P. Chapin as pastor, at a salary of fourteen hundred dollars, and the use of the parsonage. This call was accepted, and Mr. Chapin was accordingly installed, and remains in the pastoral office at the present time. An important event in the history of the parish took place in 1875, when it fell heir to a legacy of ten thousand dollars, for the "support and maintaining of the present religious doctrines of the parish," by the will of Mr. Joseph Loud, lately deceased, who for many years was an active member of the church and parish, and who thus gave substantial evidence of his good-will.

This ancient church has suffered greatly from circumstances beyond its control: first, in the establishment of the Second Church, in 1723, its hundredth birth-year, whereby a large number of its active supporters were withdrawn; and again, in 1811, upon the formation of the Union Church of Weymouth and Braintree, a large part of whose members came from this church; still later, in 1822, its membership was once more greatly depleted by the withdrawal of many to form a Methodist Church in East Weymouth; and last, in 1852, the most serious loss of all, in the removal of fifty-one members to form the Pilgrim Church in Old Spain. Thus the mother has been exhausting her resources and impoverishing herself in the establishment of a family of vigorous and prosperous children; but it has been at a serious cost to her, since the removal of so many members, and the decline of business in the village near, have reduced it from the one only church in the town to the smallest of six of the same fellowship. Yet she still keeps on her way and bravely sustains the burden that is thus cast upon her, doing her work with diligence and fidelity.