

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF PEPPERELL
Commemorating 100 Years
Historical Moment

Trinitarians and Unitarians

Today, I will cover the events and their causes that led to the split of the First Parish Church into Unitarians and Trinitarians.

First a short history of the Congregational and Unitarian Churches in the United States: The Congregational Church is a Protestant church in the Reformed tradition of church governance in which each congregation independently and autonomously runs its own affairs. Congregationalism traces its origins to the Pilgrims, who first settled in Plymouth in 1620. Many early church parishes in New England were also descended from the religious practices of the Puritans. The Congregational Church believes in the Trinity: God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Unitarians believe that mainline Christianity does not adhere to strict monotheism, but that Unitarians do by maintaining that Jesus was a great man and a prophet of God, perhaps even a supernatural being, but not God himself. Unitarians believe in the moral authority but not necessarily the divinity of Jesus. Their theology is thus opposed to the trinitarian theology of other Christian denominations.

The first official acceptance of the Unitarian faith on the part of a congregation in America was by King's Chapel in Boston in 1782. In 1800, Joseph Stevens Buckminster became minister of the Brattle Street Church in Boston, where his brilliant sermons and literary activities helped shape the subsequent growth of Unitarianism in New England. Buckminster's close associate, William Ellery Channing, became the pastor of Federal Street Church in Boston, in 1803. In a few years he became the leader of the Unitarian movement. A theological battle with the Congregational Churches resulted in the formation of the American Unitarian Association at Boston in 1825.

The First Parish Church, established in 1747, was organized in the tradition of the Puritans. Though not referred to as a Congregational Church at the time, it would be considered so today. In 1830, the Unitarian revolution championed by William Channing reached Pepperell. Some members of the First Parish Church embraced this new theology, but the pastor of First Parish was the Reverend James Howe who believed in the Trinity.

A common practice at the time was that churches would occasionally exchange pastors to preach on Sunday. Reverend Howe was not particularly in favor of this policy. The members of First Parish Church who wished to hear Unitarian pastors forced a vote at town meeting on May 11, 1831. The town of Pepperell voted that other ministers would preach at First Parish Church six times each year. Reverend Howe viewed this action as an expulsion from the pulpit. Along with a majority of the members of the First Parish Church he peaceably withdrew and formed the Second Parish, under the name of the Evangelical Congregational Church, in January 1832.

On October 31, 1832, the Evangelical Congregational Church dedicated its first house of worship on the site of a former tavern and the present site of the Community Church. On February 13, 1833, Reverend Charles Babbage was installed as the Pastor of the First Parish Unitarian Church. Thus began over 80 years of animosity and rivalry between the Second Parish Evangelical Congregational Trinitarians and the First Parish Unitarians. If you want to know what happened, stay tuned for the next moment in history.

Presented 3/31/19