The Dedham Decision

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I want to talk this morning about history and people and progress and perspective.

Dedham, Massachusetts was incorporated as a town in the year 1636. It was at that time very much a frontier town: roads were mostly theoretical. There was a village center with a common green for trading of farm goods and grazing of sheep and cows, and a church.

In the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, each town was required to have a public meeting house (meaning a place of worship) to provide for the teaching of Christian morality to the members of the town. To vote in the town, you had to be a property-owning man who was a confirmed member of the church. The term “parish” was used to describe the geographical area and the people within its limits served by the church. The law required that everyone attend church on Sunday. Everyone.

The colonies of New England were settled largely by Puritans seeking to escape the liberal influences of England upon church doctrine. They sought a place where they could establish a church society that was pure of morality and doctrine, and they left England to do that.

Remember that bit. It will be important later.

So, the village of Dedham was established, and it grew into a healthy small town. It connected with other towns in the area, and the churches in the area towns worked out an arrangement of mutual aid and support.

In the early years of the colony, with each town having its own church, but no larger system to bind them together in a larger community, leaders from each town/church gathered in Cambridge Massachusetts to establish some rules about how they would be in relationship with one another. It was a covenant between churches, which was to say, between towns, because the town was the church, remember. The group developed a thing called

the Cambridge Platform which is an agreement among its members to establish the rights and responsibilities of each parish and community.

Because they had left England in part because they did not like being stuck with whatever minister the local bishop sent them, they decided that each church or parish would call their own minister and make its own decisions about things like a church building, upkeep of the parsonage, and the like. Doctrine at that time was assumed to be standard Calvinism, so consideration of differences in scriptural interpretation did not really occur to the authors of the Cambridge Platform. This also will be important in a bit.

The idea that church and government should be separate was utterly foreign to these colonists. *Of course* the town supported an official church. That's how it was done. The only argument was about who would make the choices regarding the operation of that church, and they decided that all such decisions should be made locally, by the people who belonged to the town/church/parish.

Things chugged along in a satisfactory fashion for some years, and as the towns grew, and the colonial settlements grew, ideas developed as happens in any society. Educated people at Harvard College argued about fine points of philosophy and Christian doctrine as happens in any academic setting. Those ideas were discussed and considered in a variety of newspapers and pamphlets, which were widely distributed along the network of trading routes and merchant connections among the towns in the colonies.

As happens with new ideas, some like them, some don't like them, and ministers were among that crowd as well. Harvard College became known for educating ministers who were more liberal than many of the churches in the area, which caused no small amount of concern among learned religious men. When Henry Ware was appointed to the faculty at Harvard, filling the particularly important Hollis Chair of Divinity at the school, causing a split between the liberal and orthodox members of the faculty, many local Calvinists decided that Harvard was thus utterly disqualified to

prepare ministers of orthodox Christianity and withdrew to Andover, Massachusetts, where they established an academy for the education of ministers in rigid, orthodox fashion.

As churches in the area would seek a new minister, it was understood that one from Harvard would be more liberal, leaning toward a new radical theology being defined as Unitarian, and a minister educated at Andover would be a more conservative, orthodox kind of Calvinist.

Now into the 1800s, nearly 200 years since the first colonizers landed in Plymouth and began to spread up and down the coast, Dedham needed a minister. So the town searched for a minister and decided they liked a guy named Alvan Lamson, who had been educated at Harvard. The previous minister was not terribly popular, and had been a product of Philips Andover Academy. His ministry in Dedham saw attendance at church diminish, leaving just a handful of very orthodox members when he died.

Because the municipality and the church were officially linked, the town voted to call Lamson to be the new minister. The conservatives who populated the pews were upset and made that clear. Several ecclesiastical councils were called, resulting in different recommendations, depending on which group empaneled each council.

Eventually, by force of numbers, the town was able to enforce its authority and install Lamson to the pulpit.

This was not received well by the orthodox members of the church, so they withdrew to eventually form another congregation of their own. The rest of the town happily returned to Sunday services.

But. It didn’t end there.

On their way out, the orthodox members took with them all the portable belongings of First Parish Church, including the valuable silver communion service. The valuables were stashed in barns and attics around town, never in once place to be conveniently found and returned.

First Church then took the former members to court to have those belongings back. The church, after all, needed its hymnals and chairs and tables and whatnot, and especially the communion service. That was the

most expensive bit, and also the most sacred representation of their Christian practice. Some of those disaffected members argued that because those items were given to the *church* by individuals that they were not the property of the town, and therefore, understanding themselves to *be the actual church*, separate and apart from the town, they took the *church* stuff with them as they left.

It was a mess. The town was split because the church was split.

By this time, its around 1820. The nation is grinding toward what is sure to be an unpleasant civil war. The balance between slave-holding states and free states in congress hangs by a thread, and there is much anxiety throughout the land. While none of that is mentioned in the historical documents from that time, it must have been a factor in how people were thinking and behaving in this smaller, more local conflict.

The court ruled, eventually, that because the town and parish and church were established as a single entity back in 1636, that the town *was* the parish, and *was* the church, no matter who showed up on Sundays, and therefore the town had the right to call the minister to serve the officially supported church, and any gift made to the church was essentially made to the town, as such, what belonged to the church belonged to the town and the dissenters had to return the stuff.

Except they didn't return it all.

The silver remained hidden until … get this … 1969, when it was gifted to the Dedham Historical Society as a neutral third party. The silver communion set is now on permanent loan to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and replicas are owned by both churches.

While this has been a mildly entertaining trip through Unitarian history in North America, there are pieces of history that are relevant today.

First, it was the Dedham Decision that began the formal disestablishment of the Congregationalist Church and created the separation of church and state. While the First Amendment guarantees the rights of people to

worship how, where, and with whom they choose, it did not address the historical relationship between colonial towns and their established churches. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it was understood that communities were served by having a public teacher and leader of Christian morality, and thus those teachers and preachers were paid for by the town.

When the orthodox members left First Church in Dedham, they, and others like them in towns around the growing country, complained that their taxes were being used to support what they saw as blasphemy. Rules were written then that permitted people to record their annual donations to the church they *were* attending, and present that figure with their tax bill to have that amount deducted from what they owed. Before long, Baptists and Congregationalists and Episcopalians and all other religious faiths were demanding the same treatment, and eventually the laws were changed so that no church was officially endorsed or supported by any governmental body. Understanding that churches still served an important role in the welfare of the community, church buildings and income, and other things have remained tax-exempt, but without prejudice or preference. All churches are tax exempt now, not just the ones that have the most members.

The second thing that I find significant in this story is what it illustrates about human nature and the nature of the people who immigrated to and colonized North America.

These were people who were willing to leave their homes in order to maintain their own religious freedom – BUT – the freedom they sought was to be free from progress.

The Puritans came because they did not like changes happening in England and on the European continent. They wanted to go somewhere where they could enforce their preferred strict rules.

When Harvard got too progressive, some of the faculty were gathered by leaders of the orthodox Calvinist churches and created their own new seminary in Andover, Massachusetts.

Every time churches make progress, they lose people.

Now, one could say that progress is bad for church attendance, and I suppose that might be true in some regards. But I tend to find that insisting on staying put rarely works out well in the long run.

Progress moves like a never-ending game of leapfrog. Each generation surges forward and plants a flag where none has gone before. The previous generation looks at this group and thinks “hurrah! Look at them go, taking our work even farther than we could!”

But when the next generation goes speeding past those two I just described, the original group now begins to question whether all this progress is such a good idea. The world is becoming a bit confusing now, unfamiliar and a little off-putting.

And when the *next* generation of progress happens (this is four now) the first group begins to think the world has gone mad. The second group is alarmed and thinks this new group might be just a bit too radical. The third group – the ones who made the most recent accomplishments – they say “hurrah” look at them go, taking our work even farther than we could!”

When we apply this leapfrog understanding of progress to the realms of religion and social justice, we tread on dangerous ground. Because we understand ourselves to be moral beings, ideally *morally superior* beings, when we see the world speeding on without us, we have to acknowledge that what we thought was ground-breaking work we did all those years ago turns out to be not just unfashionable now, but is judged now as actively harmful to the issues we care so deeply about. Authors we regarded as paragons of virtue and intellect are left in the dust, exposed as imperfect and limited by the age in which they wrote.

None of us likes to be left behind. None of us likes to think that what we’ve done was wrong. Sometimes, when we feel like we are being judged that way, we become protective of ourselves, we retreat into a kind of orthodoxy, or an understanding of the way things were when we understood the world, when we felt like we had some control.

I have said before that humans don’t like discomfort. We avoid it whenever we can.

And yet, a commitment to progress, to expansion of our minds and hearts and our understanding of the world around us, demands that we be willing to experience discomfort. We expand our comfort zones in only one way – by continually stepping out of them.

I invite you now to imagine – for January is a month of imagination – imagine, then, what we might do if we can be willing to be uncomfortable, willing to learn new things, willing to keep moving forward.

Those who stay with the church get to make the decisions, even if those who left took the silver with them. We who stay with the congregation get to say where we go and what we do next.

Be brave.

Get uncomfortable.

Look forward.

And imagine what we can accomplish.

History shows us what happens when we drop back into orthodoxy. We stagnate.

Lets keep moving forward.

May this be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.