

## Chapter XXXI.

Rev.Nathaniel Bouton,D.D.

Considering its influence upon the contemporary generation and its significance for generations to come,the outstanding event of the year 1825 was the ordination of Rev.Nathaniel Bouton as Minister of First Church.Mr.Bouton himself,believed profoundly that God directed him to service in Concord and,reviewing his long pastorate from the vantage point of a century later,one finds ample justification for his belief.

When Dr.McFarland's health broke in 1823 and the faithful Minister sent his resignation to his beloved church,it was a time of crisis very general in secular and religious affairs throughout New England.The old order was passing and nowhere was the change more obvious than here in Concord.A capital city could not remain rural and more and more the pioneer tradition of conservative and simple standards was overborne by newcomers intent upon material prosperity and political advantage.Turn-pikes,stage routes,the Concord Boating Company-all tended to outmode the simple life of by-gone days.Worldly ambition and economic progress took its toll of spiritual purpose and vision.

First Church felt the restlessness of changing times.The Toleration Act was a step in religious freedom:it was also an influence toward church disintegration,as evidenced by the rapid development of rival sects in Concord.Newcomers to town introduced a liberalism alien to the orthodox theology of the pioneers:a liberalism intellectually stimulating but seldom potent in character building or moral leadership.The lottery as a method of financing public improvements and worthy institutions,became the accepted procedure although it undermined the old standard of thrift and,with new ease of living,paved the way for a wild speculation which,in another decade,was to produce a most disastrous financial panic throughout the nation.The old self-discipline relaxed and drunkenness had become a local problem.

Concord needed a Minister with a valiant soul to maintain the Faith

which had built our town in righteousness: a Minister with an understanding mind to meet the problems of the day: a Minister with a consecrated purpose to uphold the standard of Christian morality in a time of decadence. Such was the challenge which Nathaniel Bouton accepted when, at the age of twenty-five, he arrived in Concord. Forty-two years later he completed his task, able to say-"I have kept the Faith."

The doubts common to all youth of keen intellect and inquiring mind had troubled his student days, but through prayer he won such shining assurance that he came to his first pastorate ready to accept the traditional belief of First Church. A very old member of the Church, Miss Mary Frances Gibson who died in 1936, had a vivid memory of Dr. Bouton's preaching in the last years of his pastorate and she wrote: "In declaring and affirming the accepted Articles of Faith, the Doctor would marshal arguments ever growing stronger until he sometimes brought on their irredeemable climax with a ringing 'a fortiori'; when his descending fist would strike the desk with resounding triumphant emphasis."

Our first picture of Nathaniel Bouton is copied from an early portrait and shows him as he looked when he arrived in Concord in 1825. He was born in Norwalk, Conn. in 1799, the youngest in a family of fourteen children. His parents were of English stock with French Huguenot ancestry and his father had a small farm with a comfortable living but never much money. Nathaniel's ambition was to become a printer and he was apprenticed to that trade when, attending evangelistic meetings held by a young Yale student, he was profoundly stirred. His sixteenth birthday found him at the cross roads with an entirely new outlook for the future. "As I arose," he says, "I resolved that I would give myself, without reserve, wholly and forever to the service of God, my Maker and Benefactor, that Christ henceforth should be accepted and owned as my Saviour and that in whatever condition I was placed, religion should be my chief concern."

Thus dedicated to God, he never faltered in his purpose, although it

was with misgiving that he recognized his call to the ministry. The way was far from clear for there was no money to buy back his indenture as apprentice, to say nothing of the great expense of education for the profession. But good friends appeared to supplement his own effort and "by the good providence of God", he prepared for college, graduated at Yale and completed the three year course at Andover Theological Seminary, graduating as valedictorian of his class. "In regard to college expenses and bills", he writes, "I most gratefully remember that somehow my wants were all supplied."

At the close of his course at Andover, a committee of Boston men engaged him to preach for three months for a new church in process of organization at the North End, and immediately following graduation he left the Seminary for a brief visit at home before entering upon his engagement. Thereby he just missed a Concord man who had gone to Andover candidate hunting, and to whom young Bouton had been recommended by his professors. Samuel Fletcher, Esq. was a cautious representative of a cautious church and so he decided to listen to the young man's valedictory essay before approaching him. By this narrow margin the Concord church lost, for the time being, its opportunity.

But Mr. Fletcher was not to be discouraged and so, in spite of Mr. Bouton's Boston contract, he would not abandon hope. The young preacher began his work at a chapel on Charlton St. in Boston and very soon he heard that Mr. Fletcher was making the effort to secure from the Boston group a release from his contract. Very generously the group put the question up to Mr. Bouton and gave him free choice in the matter. The offer was a flattering one for so young a man, but, through genuine modesty, he hesitated to accept. "I had heard that Concord was a difficult place because it was the capital of the State, and there were many lawyers and educated men who were critical, and not easy to suit.\*\*\*\* I was distrustful of my ability."

Consistently with his dependence upon God, the young minister gave prayerful consideration to his problem and finally decided to go to Concord for a conference with its church representatives. He made the trip by stage and was met at the Columbian Hotel by Esq. Fletcher and Hon. Samuel Morrill. At their earnest solicitation he agreed to supply the church as a candidate for seven weeks beginning on the last Sabbath of October, 1824. His first sermon was under embarrassing conditions, for Rev. Mr. Galaudet, principal of the Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in Hartford, Conn., was present by invitation, and gave an eloquent address in behalf of that institution. The young candidate had the unhappy task of following an able and experienced speaker before an unusually large congregation which included many members of the legislature then in session.

During these weeks in Concord, Mr. Bouton boarded in the Fletcher home (formerly occupied by Hon. Thomas W. Thompson, and now 6-8 Elm St.) giving his forenoons and evenings to preparation of his sermons and the afternoons to calls upon such families as his sponsors recommended to him. In this way he became familiar with the parish, but it was a trying ordeal for he found little co-operation from the people. During all seven weeks of his stay, only two men—George Kent and Judge Samuel Green—called upon him socially. At the end of the period he left town without the slightest hint as to whether he had proved satisfactory or not—"except Dea. Jonathan Wilkins remarked to me after my last sermon, that 'seven weeks was rather a short time for a candidateship.'" But, on January 1, 1825, the church called Rev. Nathaniel Bouton to be her first Minister under the new dispensation which removed church from town jurisdiction.

What sort of a young man was this, called to the responsibilities of a great parish in the capital of New Hampshire? He was modest and unassuming and his only assurance in accepting the call was his profound belief that God was leading him. Mr. Bouton had an excellent mind, lofty ideals, a steady purpose and infinite capacity for self-discipline. This

XXI. 5. latter characteristic found expression when he entered college, in a set of six resolutions for daily living:

I. Early rising (about 5 o'clock) and early retiring.

II. Private devotions upon rising and before sleeping.

III. Ten hours study, two hours reading, four hours exercise, seven hours sleep.

IV. Regular attendance upon chapel prayers and all college classes.

V. Oppose vice and promote virtue among his companions, and "keep a strict watch over my own conduct and conversation."

VI. "That in all my pursuits I will aim to keep the glory of God and the interests of the Redeemer's Kingdom in view."

From that time until the end of his days, Nathaniel Bouton's life was keyed to this sixth resolution and all his preaching was inspired by a sense of his personal obligation to Jesus Christ. His opinions were calmly considered, carefully weighed and when accepted as convictions, there was no compromise. He was fearless in expressing such conviction in his pulpit even though, as in the case of temperance reform and the slave traffic, it cost him friends and sometimes parishoners. His own life was "a rich experience of the Gospel in his own heart" and he was able thereby to proclaim the truth with authority.

The period of Dr. Bouton's ministry in Concord was a difficult and trying one because of current theological, social and moral problems. The physical demands of his large parish were somewhat appalling and, when he sought counsel of good Dr. McFarland the latter gave him little comfort: "Do all you can and you must leave the rest undone." The young pastor realized that his self-discipline must be kept rigidly-early rising and retiring, careful diet ~~and exercise~~, and due amount of exercise that his mental and physical powers might be equal to his task. His program of private devotions, study, cultural reading, sermon writing and parish visiting, necessitated the subordination of every private interest, even that of his family, to the service of his church.

At the end of a quarter century of such disciplined life and labor, he found time to write his invaluable History of Concord, a task made possible by his established mode of life. In the early days of his ministry he was called upon to make various historical addresses and their preparation, because of his routine duties, was spread over several months. Such was the case when he prepared the address for the centennial anniversary of his church in 1830. The work fascinated him as he slowly gathered stories and traditions of pioneer days while making his parish calls. The results so delighted him that he continued the habit of talking about the old times as he visited the homes of his people until, after twenty years, he had a mass of data. In addition he made a thorough study of the manuscript town records—all being done, as he said, "con amore". But the task of preserving this material in published form was, in his busy life, "teal to which I confess, human endurance was hardly equal."

"My history," he relates, "went on till, after three years, the work came to its termination. It was a little too much: toward the close, I found myself becoming nervous and uneasy. After writing an hour or so, my hand would tremble; I thought the pen was tired of my fingers, and wouldn't make a good mark. Then I would lay it down and walk across the room, or run out into the open air. But thanks to the good Providence which watched over me, I finished the composition of the history in just about three years, and wrote the whole with one gold pen—nor was I hindered in this, or any part of my work by a single day's sickness."

When Nathaniel Bouton was ordained in Concord in March 1825, his was the only church building in town except for the Friends' Meeting-house where only a few families worshipped. The only other settled pastor was Rev. William Taylor of the new Baptist organization then in process of building its church edifice. During the forty-two years of Dr. Bouton's ministry, sixteen churches of the Congregational and other denomina-

tions were built in Concord, each taking, more or less, toll from the old First Church. As a result the old Meeting-house no longer had its congregation of seven to eight hundred each Sabbath, and the parish decided that a modern church of smaller capacity should be erected (1842).

This was in no sense defeat but, rather, the inevitable result of the Toleration Act. In spite of increasing competition, Dr. Bouton's ministry brought nearly eight hundred new members into his church, many of them through the influence of evangelistic services in which he had great faith, since by that method he, himself, had been brought into the Kingdom.

So able a leader became automatically a strong influence in his denomination throughout the state and he gave himself generously to its enterprises, especially those along missionary lines. With two exceptions he felt constrained to refuse all positions of honor in the secular field for he had neither time nor energy for such responsibility. The two concessions which he made were in serving as president of the N.H. Historical Society and as trustee of Dartmouth college, the latter over a period of thirty-seven years. The college trusteeship was hardly secular in nature for in those days the college was definitely a Christian institution. It was one of Dr. Bouton's greatest satisfactions that to this college which bestowed upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity, he was instrumental in bringing as its new president, Rev. Asa D. Smith, pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City.

In 1866 Dr. Bouton resigned his pastorate entirely upon his own initiative, because he felt that the old order was changing again and that his beloved church needed a younger man. He trusted implicitly that God would provide for his temporal need and that faith was justified. For a number of years he was in great demand as a supply preacher and, in addition, he was appointed State Historian by special act of the legislature. For eleven happy years he busied himself editing and transcribing by hand, the old provincial papers from the original manuscripts—a task for

which he was eminently fitted. Then, having no further task, he who had never known illness fell briefly ill and quietly yielded his spirit to his Maker.

In a little leaflet of memories of this "outstanding figure", Miss Mary P. Gibson, member of the pioneer Stickney family, gave this vivid picture of Dr. Bouton. He was, she says, a little below medium height, erect, brisk and firm of step and physically vigorous even in old age. During later years he wore a "brown wig inclined to curl" which "bade defiance to symptoms of passing Time." Under that wig shone keen eyes through gold rimmed spectacles. He always wore "black broadcloth, a standing 'dickey' and high white stock, a long black circular cloak in winter, and a tall black hat at all seasons. He carried a stout cane not for support," but wielded in such a way that it suggested to my imagination a symbol of authority." His presence was invariably dignified although "blended with a very courteous kindly manner." This dignity was not assumed: it was, rather, the natural result of his abiding sense of holy stewardship.

The debt which Concord owes to Nathaniel Bouton for preserving her pioneer traditions and old family history, is obvious; but there is another debt quite as actual although less tangible. During the years of chaotic and bitter controversy in public affairs, he held before our people the Christian standard of righteousness. This was his great contribution to the up-building of New Hampshire's capital. To him, in no small degree, we owe the preservation of a proper balance in values during a period of definite spiritual decadence. Under his leadership, First Church consistently maintained its orthodox principles while consenting to provision for the changing spiritual demands of many Concord people.

Timothy Walker planted this vineyard for God: Nathaniel Bouton brought it to its greatest period of fruitfulness, and that in a period of moral confusion. The traditional power of First Church in moral and spiritual leadership still blessed the town and the state, as Concord faced the second century of her history.