

PARK STREET CHURCH - A HISTORY

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Park Street Church has had three defining characteristics throughout its 205-year history: a commitment to learning and understanding the inerrant Word of God, preaching that Word to the ends of the earth, and wholeheartedly loving its neighbors.

In 1809 it was that commitment to the truth of Scripture that led its founding members to organize in response to the rapid wave of Unitarian theology that was sweeping New England. The creation of the American Board of Foreign Missions was inextricably linked to the founding of Park Street Church, with Dr. Edward Griffin serving as the initial leader of both. Park Street Church, at the behest of Dr. Griffin, was the first congregation to communally commission a group of American missionaries, who were sent to the Sandwich Islands. Park Street's commitment to living out the gospel in society continued through the 19th century, when many social justice organizations were founded such as the American Education Society, the Boston chapter of the NAACP, the Animal Rescue League, the Prison Discipline Society, and the American Temperance Society. Its Puritan zeal for education ran so deeply, the church even raised its own sanctuary to the second floor in order to make room for a children's Sunday School space beneath—one of the first in the US Sunday School movement.

Movement into the 20th Century brought a renewed call to spreading the gospel. As soon as it was feasible, pastor A.Z. Conrad started preaching over the radio airwaves (started in 1923, it is thought to be the longest continually-running sermon radio broadcast in the United States). The consecutive ministries of A.Z. Conrad and Harold J. Ockenga lasted from 1905 through 1969, and their teaching reinforced the fundamentals of the Bible while championing a holistic approach to missions. Ockenga was instrumental in the creation of Christianity Today magazine, the National Association of Evangelicals, the War Relief Commission (now World Relief), Fuller Theological Seminary, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Now, having reached the 21st century, Park Street has continued to reach out to the community in alignment with its passion for education. Pastor Gordon Hugenberger presided over the founding of two local schools, Park Street School and Boston Trinity Academy. And, in a policy change that reflected Gordon Hugenberger's personal commitment to community, pastoral care and missionary support, he implemented a policy to fully support Park Street's foreign missionaries, financially and spiritually. Today Park Street Church remains devoted to the pursuit of truth in the company of friends, and the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

"There is one, and but one living and true God, subsisting in three persons, The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost; and that these three are the one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory..."

With those words the founders of Park Street Church pronounced the standard upon which they could not compromise: Jesus Christ was no mere messenger sent from God—He was God himself. As New England ministers rotated from pulpit to pulpit, even a discerning turn-of-the-century ear would have had difficulty distinguishing much difference between a progressive Unitarian and an orthodox Calvinist sermon. Nevertheless, with the election of Henry Ware to the chairmanship of Harvard Divinity School in 1805, the "Unitarian wave" could not be denied. At its founding, Park Street Church found herself only one of two churches out of 17 that still rigorously adhered to belief in the tri-personal nature of God.¹

It is hard to understate the turbulence of business and politics in the Boston of 1809. The congregation of Park Street's spiritual mother, Old South Church, had been homeless for the duration of the Revolutionary War—their meeting house having been confiscated by British soldiers. The "stone church" (King's Chapel) hosted them for five years until they were able to return to church whose interior had been virtually destroyed.² A few years later, an adolescent US government led by Thomas Jefferson attempted to prove its strength by the Embargo Act of 1807. As a result, the ships which provided incredible wealth to Boston sat rotting in the harbor and the incessant cash flow came to a sudden halt.

The first few ripples of the Second Great Awakening were beginning to be felt, and suddenly large formerly-unchurched crowds were looking for a home. A small group at the Old South Church, keen on both preserving the doctrine of the trinity and promoting revival, resolved to establish an uncompromisingly orthodox church in the very center of the Boston peninsula. They were inspired by a visiting minister, Rev. Henry Kollock from Savannah, GA, and invited him to be their first shepherd. Rev. Kollock was inclined to accept, and made the organization of a church and the building of a church structure dependent upon his move (Englitzian, 1968, pp. 25-26). The committee immediately purchased a plot of land on the corner of the site of the old Granary building and began construction, "but he chose not to [come] when he realized that the church wanted a full frontal polemic assault on Unitarianism, which Kollock refused to do preferring instead to positively preach the Trinity" (Waugh, 2016).

It was a disappointing and embarrassing initial blow for the small congregation, which had raised \$70,000 to build what was plausibly the grandest church in the city at the time (The Committee for the

1) "In the summer of 1811 a Philadelphia minister, of Unitarian opinions, visited Boston, and, soon after, wrote a letter to England, in which he gave a glowing account of the spread of Unitarianism in this town. All the ministers, he said, of eight of the congregational churches were anti-Calvinistic and anti-Trinitarian" (Hill, 1890, p. 366).

2) An argument within Old South Church about who had the authority to decide what should be rebuilt—the members or the pewholders—certainly had a big impact on the way the Park Street real estate was handled. From the outset, the confessing members of the church were the ones who held ownership of the church in trust, rather than those who paid for a pew (from whom a confession of faith was not necessary) (Englitzian, 1968, p. 36).

PARK STREET CHURCH - A HISTORY

Page 2

Preservation of Park Street Church, Boston, 1903, p. 24). Seating over 800, the building had been designed by Peter Banner in a style similar to that of Christopher Wren. The steeple, more ornate than usually seen on a congregational church, at 217 feet made Park Street the tallest building in the United States for 36 years (until the construction of Trinity Church in New York) (List of tallest buildings in the United States, 2016) and in Boston for 57 years (until the construction of the Church of the Covenant). Combined with the sudden loss of income due to the limits on international trade, the lack of a minister to draw early pewholders made the endeavor seem to some like a failure from the outset.³

Despite initial setbacks, the congregation's original commitment had not been superficial. The group invited Dr. Edward Griffin, a man of "great power," whose "brief ministry in Boston was a very exciting and aggressive one" (Hill, 1890, p. 366) to be their pastor. He agreed (although torn between his other responsibilities on the faculty of Andover Theological Seminary). Dr. Griffin's ministry was short but influential, and he returned to New Jersey in 1815 having left an indelible mark of doctrine and missions on the church.

The establishment of the American Board of Foreign Missions is deeply intertwined with Dr. Griffin and Park Street Church. "[T]his relation which has existed between us is not a relation alone between one organization and another. We were born together, as has been said, the Board and Park Street Church, the children of one mother..." (Conrad, 1909, p. 180). Although individual support for missions was common at the time, Griffin's church-wide backing of some of the earliest missionaries sent out from the United States is believed to be a first. On October 15, 1819 at Park Street Church, fifteen people bound for the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) were given official recognition as the "Sandwich Islands Church," including three native Hawaiians and five children.^{4,5} The relationship between Park Street Church and the resulting Mokuaikaua Church in Kailua Kona, Hawaii, has continued through

today, with correspondence and congratulations from Park Street to Mokuaikaua Church on the recent celebration of their 195 anniversary.^{6,7}

With Park Street's zeal for the spread of the Gospel throughout the world it did not neglect its own neighborhood. In subsequent years numerous improvement societies originated there, including the American Education Society, the Boston chapter of the NAACP, the Animal Rescue League, the Prison Discipline Society, and the American Temperance Society (Rosell, Boston's Historic Park Street Church, 2009, p. 52). William Lloyd Garrison gave his first antislavery address from that pulpit on July 4, 1829. Two years later a children's choir performed the hymn "America" (My Country, 'Tis of Thee) set to music by Park Street's own director of music, Lowell Mason.⁸

Charles G. Finney, a familiar evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, had preached in Boston in 1832 and 1843, but his 1856 series had a profound effect on Park Street Church's senior minister, Andrew L. Stone. After several months of Finney's intense preaching at Park Street, Stone announced to the congregation that he himself had been converted (Englitzian, 1968, p. 149). This declaration fascinated and touched the congregation, and they packed the sanctuary to hear Stone's messages long after Finney's tenure at the church had ended (Rosell, Boston's Historic Park Street Church, 2009, p. 96).

In 1862, in answer to President Abraham Lincoln's call to arms, 80 men from the pews of Park Street Church joined the 45th Massachusetts Regiment. Pastor Andrew Stone agreed to serve as chaplain. Several heartbreaking wartime letters to the congregation live today in the archives at the Congregational Library: "Let your prayers hover constantly over the pillows of our sick and wounded. The touch of loved fingers is far away, but your intercession may be as the shadow of an angel's wing to faces growing white under the signature of death" (Rosell, Boston's Historic Park Street Church, 2009, p. 97). He returned home after eight

3) "...it may be well to mention that a very large and expensive place of worship, which has been recently erected to enforce Calvinistic doctrines, has completely failed, and it was expected would be sold to its opponents" (Hill, 1890, p. 367).

4) The decision to go to the Sandwich Islands lay primarily with the renown of a young Hawaiian man at Yale named Henry Opukahaia (Rosell, Boston's Historic Park Street Church, 2009, pp. 62-63). He died of an illness just months before the missionary contingent departed Boston, but his own Memoirs of Henry Obookiah were posthumously gathered and published by Edwin Dwight.

5) More about the arrival of the missionaries can be found at Susanna Moore's blog: <https://paradiseofthepacific.wordpress.com/2016/01/01/what-pinched-in-bodies-parts-1-and-2>.

6) See <http://mokuaikaua.com/konahistory> for a history of that church.

7) "It is with great joy that we send our greetings across the ocean to you at the Mokuaikaua Church as you celebrate your 195th anniversary.

We rejoice in the intersecting histories of our two congregations that began on a Friday evening, October 23, 1919, as a small ship prepared to set off from Boston Harbor filled to the brim with seven missionary families, four native Hawaiians and the Good News that Jesus saves.

We marvel at what the Almighty can do! In those days, the trip was daring and the journey took 163 days - nearly six months. The group safely rounded the Cape Horn and persevered until it arrived safely in Kona.

We rejoice that your church was born out of the influence of those missionaries sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions at Park Street Church.

We further rejoice that yours was the first Christian church established in the Hawaiian Islands, and lives on to this day as an active and caring fellowship.

We also remark that our beloved former pastor the Rev. Paul A. Toms also shared in that mutual history as he served for years as a pastor at your church.

We enjoy the pleasure of God plans knitting us together again as he drew dear members of our Park Street family recently - Dereck and Lea Plante and their children - to Kona for training as missionaries. We rejoice that they will be able to act out the part of one of the original missionary families, honoring this history as part of your celebration.

We rejoice in all these ties that bind our hearts in Christian love and pray that God will continue to strengthen and protect those who proclaim his name. Happy anniversary!"

8) Lowell Mason is an outsized figure in the American history of sacred music, received the first Doctor of Music degree awarded by an American university (Englitzian, 1968, p. 120). He set many well-known hymns to music, including Joy to the World, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing, My Faith Looks Up to Thee, and Nearer My God to Thee.

PARK STREET CHURCH - A HISTORY

Page 3

months of service to a motivated church. The Woman's Benevolent Society contributed bandages, socks and food items for soldiers.⁹ The church also supported local chapters of the Christian Commission and the YMCA. The joyful news of the surrender at Appomattox was eclipsed by the shock of the assassination of President Lincoln. The congregation, prepared to rejoice, was wrenched into lament instead. A photograph of the sanctuary draped in yards of black mourning cloth preserves the grief the church felt at the announcement. Just months earlier, Stone had urged Park Street Church to release him to serve as a senior minister at First Congregational Church of San Francisco, CA. After months of refusal and renegotiation, he was reluctantly released with words of heartfelt love and blessing.

After a near-three year search, William Henry Harrison Murray was installed, "unquestionably the most unique individual ever to pastor Park Street Church" (Englitzian, 1968). "Adirondack Murray" as he came to be called, was a hot-blooded and zealous preacher and adventurer.¹⁰ He felt constrained by the aristocratic and intellectual personality of the members of Park Street Church and intensely desired that the church focus on the poor and outcast around them. "A pioneer and trailblazer at heart, he had no fears or qualms about instituting untried programs and methods even in the sacrosanct headquarters of New England orthodoxy" (Englitzian, 1968, p. 166). Finally, his differences with the Park Street deacons having become irreconcilable, he resigned in 1874, only to immediately open his "New England Church" a stone's throw away in what is now the Orpheum Theatre (Bendroth, 2005, p. 160).¹¹

The ensuing years were marked by a series of competent and orthodox (if less charismatic) pastors, a demographic shifting noticeably to the suburbs, and the building surrounded and nearly blocked by years of subway construction (Bendroth, 2005, p. 160). The decline in attendance forced the church to rent out space in its basement to street-level vendors, which served to stall a seemingly inevitable downturn (Englitzian, 1968, pp. 197-199). On December 11, 1902 the Park Street Congregational Society officially voted to sell the church building, believing that the money received from the purchase could be used to relocate to a more convenient location (Englitzian, 1968, pp. 202-203). The Boston Herald jumped at the chance, offering \$1.25 million and announcing plans to tear down the church and replace it with an 11-story office building (Bendroth, 2005, p. 163). Startled at this news, a group of Bostonians unaffiliated with the church rapidly formed a "Committee for the Preservation of Park Street Church," arguing that the historical value, cultural influence and architectural beauty of the church had inestimable worth to the city of Boston and should be preserved by all possible means. "Do you realize that here is a building that itself is older than the city of Chicago?"

the report exclaims. "Such a thing as Park Street Church they cannot reproduce, to save their souls" (The Committee for the Preservation of Park Street Church, Boston, 1903, p. 44). Indeed, the spine of the Back Bay project, Columbus Avenue, was orchestrated by Ralph Huntington (as in "Huntington Avenue") to aim directly for the Park Street Church steeple (The Committee for the Preservation of Park Street Church, Boston, 1903, p. 56).

Perhaps due to pressure from the public outcry in combination with the loss of confidence in the real estate market, the purchasers failed to present the necessary down payment at the required time (The Committee for the Preservation of Park Street Church, Boston, 1903, p. 65). The pastor of Park Street, Dr. John Withrow, who had felt that the sale of the church was in the best interest of the congregation, in a change of heart asked the membership at the annual meeting in January of 1905 to hire a new associate minister who could reenergize the church. He offered up two-thirds of his own salary and every expense the church may incur in the search process (Englitzian, 1968, p. 207). Dr. Arcturus Zodiac Conrad accepted the position that October. A year later Dr. Withrow retired, having shepherded the church through its lowest point and eager to propel it into the 20th century.

Perhaps no one could have been better suited to initiate the church into modern era than A.Z. Conrad. As aggressive in business as he was in theology, Conrad capitalized on the recent goodwill of the city and raised \$10,000 within three months of his installation to refurbish the building. So began a series of improvements, which included remodeling the front of the sanctuary, the purchase of a new organ and the removal of decades of gray paint from the original red brick exterior (Englitzian, 1968, pp. 211-212). "After three years of ministry, the Sunday morning crowds had more than doubled; the number in the evening services had quadrupled. Prayer meetings were regularly attended by two hundred to three hundred persons. Social attitudes among members and the general morale of the church markedly improved with the aid of monthly suppers attended by hundreds" (Englitzian, 1968, p. 212).

Conrad did not limit his influence to within the walls of the church. As soon as it was possible, on January 14, 1923, Park Street Church sermons were broadcast over the newly incorporated airwaves of WNAC (Radio Programs for Today, 1923). Some fun was had by the minister, congregation and local reporters at the apparently hilarious thought that remote listeners might send an offering check through the mail, although presumably the levity eased when the prospect turned quickly to real possibility. Conrad accidentally participated in another modern first one

9) The Woman's Benevolent Society, established in 1815, is the longest continually-serving auxiliary organization in the United States. It continues to meet weekly on Wednesdays and devotes itself to missionary support and prayer.

10) "His popularity was unexcelled, not because of his pastoral ministry however, but because of personal prowess in these most diversified areas of human endeavor: lecturing, preaching, sportsmanship, breeding horses, and authoring tales of the Adirondack wilderness. His nature was as free and as galloping as one of his Morgan thoroughbreds" (Englitzian, 1968, p. 164).

11) W.H.H. Murray, after wild church growth (which included plans to build a 4,000 seat venue) left on a fundraising tour and was not heard from again for years. His story is outlandish, and while there is not space to iterate more of it here, some fantastic anecdotes regarding his presence (and subsequent absence) can be found in the archives of the Boston Globe.

PARK STREET CHURCH - A HISTORY

Page 4

day when a church in Belmont found their pulpit unexpectedly empty. Amplifiers were set up in that building for the benefit of the Belmont congregation who joined the Park Street Church congregation in perhaps the first “multi-site” church experience.

100 years after the founders of the church deliberately resisted a progressive Unitarian wave, a new theological current was pulling strongly in the opposite direction. The “fundamentalist-modernist” controversy was in full swing during Conrad’s era, and while he whole-heartedly embraced the fundamentalist’s insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture and the literal virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, he also soundly rejected their tendency toward anti-intellectualism. Conrad’s contribution not only to Park Street Church, but also to American evangelical history in general may have been more present in the public mind, if not for the enormous visionary influence of his chosen successor, Harold John Ockenga.

Ockenga’s worldview was conceived against the backdrop of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he began his theological education. When his professor and mentor, John Gresham Machen, left the inhospitable environment at Princeton to found Westminster Theological Seminary, Ockenga followed, graduating from Westminster in 1930. (Even the hymnal we continue to have in our sanctuary pews today is that of the Orthodox Presbyterian denomination—established by Machen in 1933.) From the start Ockenga showed a tendency for overachievement. During his first senior pastorate at Point Breeze Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, PA, he grew the Sunday school to over 400 people, added a 60-voice choir and retired the mortgage, all while working toward a PhD in economics at the University of Pittsburgh (Strachen, 2015, p. 56).¹²

Ockenga had a deep love for Boston (Strachen, 2015, p. 59), and Park Street Church turned out to be an ideal site from which he could launch his initiatives. While serving as senior pastor, Ockenga helped organize Christianity Today magazine, was the founding president of the National Association of Evangelicals, founded the War Relief Commission (now World Relief), was a founding father and the first president of Fuller Theological Seminary, was host to an unprecedented Billy Graham crusade in 1950, and authored 12 books. After his retirement he orchestrated the merger of Gordon Divinity School and Conwell School of Theology and served as the first president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

The tie binding these incredible accomplishments was Ockenga’s sincere faith in the God of the Bible. He feared neither the reality of the supernatural, considered absurd by academic peers in Boston, nor the rigorous intellectual practice viewed as dangerous by fellow fundamentalists. His “neo-evangelical” commitment to theological orthodoxy flowed deliberately into a pragmatic lifestyle devoted to serving

the whole person—soul, mind and body.

Despite the lengthy list of Dr. Ockenga’s accomplishments, his greatest gift to Park Street Church was his legacy of support for foreign missions. Ockenga’s spring Missions Conferences are legendary, even to this day, both for their celebratory flair and the surprising sums of money raised for foreign missions.

Dr. Paul E. Toms, Ockenga’s associate minister and eventual successor, is himself something of a product of Park Street Church’s missions’ history. Before coming to Boston he and his wife, Eva, served as missionaries in Hawaii, even for a time pastoring the very church started by those early missionaries to the Sandwich Islands. His passion for world missions matched Ockenga’s, and during his tenure as senior minister, Park Street’s relationship with its missionaries deepened. “During the years he served as pastor of Park Street Church, more than forty career missionaries left for the mission field and the church’s budget for missions nearly tripled (Rosell, 2009, p. 77).”

As a pastor, Tom’s greatest desire was that his congregation find a deep knowledge and love for God. The college ministry (“Seekers”) was a vibrant group who reflected this focus, and many went on to a life in missions or ministry (E. Carroll, personal communication, October 26, 2016).

While attendance at Park Street Church college ministries has ebbed and flowed through the years, university students and faculty have always been a primary target audience for Park Street Church ministers. When attendance among college students in the evening service dropped off in the mid-90s, Senior pastor David Fisher handed it over to associate minister Daniel Harrell for a complete rebranding in what was arguably Boston’s first postmodern service. Growth was dramatic. Years later, after Gordon Hugenberger had replaced David Fisher as senior minister, a lengthy expose in the Boston Globe reported: “Park Street is the flagship church for college evangelicals from about 20 campuses in the Boston area. Ten years ago, the church’s traditional Sunday night service was attracting only 40 people and was about to be canceled. Church leaders instead decided to refashion it to suit college students and partnered with Campus Crusade and Intervarsity. These days, more than 1,000 students show up at Park Street most Sunday evenings. Church leaders have had to expand to two services (Swidey, 2003).”

Although credited with the initial reboot of the evening service, Fisher expanded way beyond innovations with worship services. He encouraged the integration of computers in the office, wired the Sanctuary for sound, increased pay for female church employees to equitable levels, and purchased numbers two and three Park Street from neighboring Houghton Mifflin Publishers. Although he was only the senior minister for six years, Fisher

¹² He finally completed his dissertation three years after joining Park Street Church: “Poverty as a Theoretical and Practical Problem of Government in the writings of Jeremy Bentham and the Marxian Alternative.”

PARK STREET CHURCH - A HISTORY

Page 5

urged a 20th century church into a 21st Century mindset.

Following Fisher's departure, a search committee presented an offer to lead the church to Gordon P. Hugenberger, the pastor of Lanesville Congregational Church in Gloucester. Hugenberger is a true native son of New England, and in some ways, of Park Street Church itself. Although having come to a saving faith through the work of the Salvation Army, Hugenberger sat through Harold Ockenga's sermons as a young college student of engineering and applied physics at Harvard University. Ockenga's preaching profoundly affected the way that Hugenberger himself thought about ministry. During his tenure at Park Street Church, Gordon Hugenberger heavily promoted Ockenga's definition of the "neo-evangelical"—encouraging his congregation to both think deeply and love deeply. He frequently could be heard quoting the leitmotif: "the pursuit of God in the company of friends."

Although history has yet to be fully realized, Hugenberger is likely to be mostly remembered for his exegetical, scientific approach to understanding Scripture. Among his most notable accomplishments is a shift from partial support of foreign missionaries to the adoption a "full support" or "staff missionary" strategy, targeting the most unreached parts of the world. He also spearheaded the birth of two local schools: Park Street School and Boston Trinity Academy. During the 200th anniversary celebration of Park Street Church, Hugenberger presided over a yearlong celebration that included preaching from special guests, among them Ravi Zacharias, Joni Eareckson Tada, John Piper and Francis Collins.

Throughout the years, Park Street Church has remained remarkably consistent in its dedication to worship in spirit and in truth. Although culture and politics fluctuate locally and globally, the words of the original members' commitment abide:

"Finally, we hereby covenant and engage as fellow Christians, of one faith, and particulars of the same hope and joy, to give up ourselves unto the Lord, for the observing the ordinances of Christ together with the same society, and to unite together into one body, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification of one another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus; exhorting, reproving, comforting and watching over each other, for mutual edification, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. Boston February 27th Anno Domini 1809."

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