

Sinners!

By Christine Comiskey

Perusing the old church records can be dull work, but every now and then, among the usual notations of everyday church life, a few entries stand out; the confessions of the sinners!

There was a time when those of our church who were accused of a sin had to suffer the humiliation of confessing in front of the entire congregation. Those who refused were excommunicated.

The first sinner seeking forgiveness was David Thurston, who, in 1792, stood before the membership to confess to “the heinous sin of fornication.” The church accepted his confession.

In 1801, Elizabeth (Bridges) Dresser was “restored to favor” after confessing to being guilty of a breach of the seventh commandment (adultery).

In 1826, Elizabeth (Herrick) Pengree confessed to having a child “born sooner than usual after marriage,” as did Mahala (Dresser) Pickett in 1832; and in 1834, Harriet (Perley) Perley confessed after having “delivered of a child not fully grown before marriage.” Where were the men, and why didn’t they need to confess? Weren’t they just as guilty?

Roosbe Chaplin had to confess in 1833 to “having improperly broken connection with John Coker, who had paid her particular attention for several years with the expectation of marrying her, to the great wounding of the cause of religion.” It was easy to figure out what happened in this case; five days after her confession, Roosbe married Caleb Tyler of Alabama. But how did she wound the cause of religion?

In 1834, with sinning apparently on the rise, the church appointed five men to be a “Committee of Vigilance.” It was their duty “to watch over the members of the church and as much as in them strive to see that all do their duty and walk circumspectly as becometh the professed Disciples of Christ.” Whenever a rumor was heard of someone’s sinful behavior, they would be called to investigate.

Among the charges brought against Isaac Platts by the Vigilance Committee in 1834 were that he “went to the theatre last Spring and there took an improper seat” and that he had “generally chosen improper associates.” Regarding his testimony in a Salem Court case, it was felt that his statements were “inconsistent and contradictory” and his conduct “improper and unbecoming.” Isaac refused to appear for confession and was excommunicated.

Moses Wright confessed in 1838 to being guilty of a breach of the seventh commandment. Though the congregation accepted his confession, they decided to suspend him for a season to prove the genuineness of his repentance. He was restored in 1840 by a small vote, but was eventually excommunicated in 1842 when he joined the radical anti-church abolitionists known as the Come-Outers.

John Lovering, a former chairman of the Georgetown Board of Selectmen, was charged in 1849 with “taking a woman who was not his wife to a hotel in Boston and occupying the same chamber with her during the night.” Mr. Lovering refused to appear and was excommunicated.

Nathaniel Hoyt confessed in 1858 and several more times after that, to the use of intoxicating drinks, and while under their influence, profanity. He was forgiven each time.

Fortunately, before the turn of the century, our church put an end to the Vigilance Committee and these humiliating public confessions.