

IDEAS

The Stoneham minister who broke ranks with fellow clergymen to decry the Fugitive Slave Act

After the act became law in 1850, many New England religious leaders either remained silent or spoke in favor of it. William Chalmers Whitcomb was not one of them.

By Ben Jacques Updated February 16, 2023, 3:00 p.m.

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A portrait of Rev. William Chalmers Whitcomb, found in the attic of the First Congregational Church of Stoneham. The photograph shows Whitcomb around the time he spoke out against the Fugitive Slave Act.

In the fall of 1850, President Millard Fillmore signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated the arrest and return of all escaped slaves to their owners in the South. Anyone aiding them or preventing their recapture would face six months' jail time and a \$1,000 fine. The law, repugnant to abolitionists, was part of a compromise bill to appease Southern states.

Soon after its passage, public officials throughout New England called for the new law to be upheld. Even the esteemed Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster, who had spoken eloquently against slavery, argued that the law was needed to prevent slavery's expansion into Western states.

Religious leaders, too, for the most part fell in line. They included Professor Moses Stuart of Andover Theological Seminary and Dr. E. S. Gannet, a well-known Boston minister. In opposition to his Unitarian colleague, the ardent abolitionist minister Theodore Parker, Gannet believed it was his Christian duty to obey the new law.

The failure of many clergy to support the anti-slavery cause led another abolitionist minister, the Rev. Samuel May, to write that “the most serious obstacle to the progress of the anti-slavery cause was the conduct of the clergy and churches in our country. . . . The most violent conflicts we had and the most outrageous mobs we encountered were led by or were instigated by persons professing to be religious.”

Another exception was a 30-year-old Congregational minister in Stoneham, a town of farmers and shoemakers north of Boston. On a cool November morning in 1850, Rev. William Chalmers Whitcomb stepped into the pulpit and launched a blistering attack on the Fugitive Slave Law.

The son of a New Hampshire deacon and one of nine children, Whitcomb had recently completed his training at Andover Theological Seminary. Now he faced a congregation divided over abolition.

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That year, the federal census listed 2,080 residents of Stoneham, all of them white. That had not always been the case. In the Colonial era, as the children and grandchildren of the first settlers prospered, several families in Stoneham, including the town’s first minister, had owned slaves.

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Now, with slavery ended in Massachusetts, the Commonwealth had become a refuge for fugitives from the South. In Stoneham, however, abolitionists met with staunch — and sometimes violent — pro-slavery opposition. Town meetings were disrupted, and one street fight between opposing sides left a man dead. In spite of threats to their personal safety, men’s and women’s chapters of the Anti-Slavery Society formed in Stoneham, made up largely of members of the town’s First Congregational Church.

One of the church deacons, Abijah Bryant, and his wife, Levina, had begun hiding fugitives in their home. It is likely that Deacon and Mrs. Bryant were sitting in their pew as Whitcomb began his sermon that Sunday.

“I make no apology” for speaking on this subject, Whitcomb told the people of his parish. He only regretted that he had not spoken out sooner.

Whitcomb then cited the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 23: 15-16: “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.”

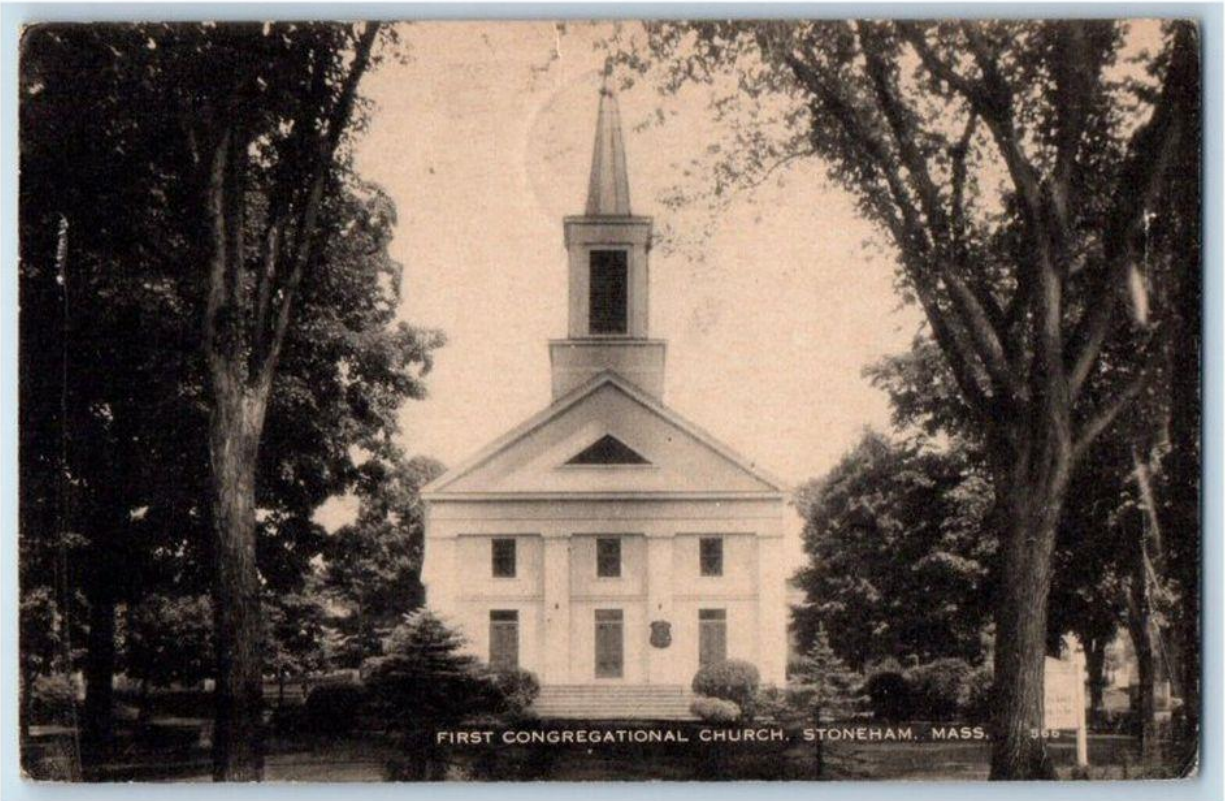
A sepia portrait of Whitcomb, found in the attic of Stoneham’s First Congregational Church, shows a man with a broad forehead and a full beard. He is dressed plainly — everyday collar, jacket, vest, and trousers. He could be a teacher or an engineer.

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His bearing is more military than ministerial. Yet there is something calming about his bright-eyed gaze. He looks confident, like a man unafraid of saying what he believes.

Whitcomb went on to read an appeal from fugitive slaves living in Boston, addressed to the clergy of Massachusetts. “We implore you to lift up your voices like a trumpet against the Fugitive Slave Act recently enacted by Congress and designed for our immediate and sure re-enslavement.”

Two years earlier, two married slaves from Georgia, [William and Ellen Craft](#), had escaped north to Boston. Ellen, a light-skinned Black woman, had disguised herself as an ailing young man and boarded a train, traveling with her “servant” to Philadelphia, then on to Boston. Hearing that warrants had been issued for their arrest, Whitcomb said, had filled him with a deep sadness.



The Rev. William Chalmers Whitcomb preached a fiery sermon against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in Stoneham's First Congregational Church, pictured here in a 1911 postcard. STONEHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM.

“And now I very much fear that some of our brethren, almost as dear to me as any of the people of Stoneham, or the members of my own father’s family, ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,’ will be doomed to hopeless captivity.”

Whitcomb said humans are required to be law-abiding citizens. But when a civil law causes us to break a divine law, we must ignore it. When following the simple precepts of Christ is to commit a crime — that is, to shelter a fugitive slave — we must, when called on, commit that crime and be prepared to pay the penalty.

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He also stated a truth that, just over a century later, Martin Luther King Jr. would often proclaim: When freedom is denied to one, no one is free.

“Fellow-citizens and Christian friends,” Whitcomb said, “the new Fugitive Law . . . will enslave you and me as well as the black man — it will make slaves of us all.”

He called on his congregation to join him in his resolve to pay the price, whatever it may be, for following their conscience.

“Hide the outcast or help him on his journey to a safer place,” Whitcomb said, “even though you may risk personal security, property, and life.”

He urged nonviolent action based on the principle of love. “Shed no blood,” he said. “Wield no weapons but those of truth and love. Use no arms but those God hath given you.”

I can only imagine what it was like that chilly Sabbath 173 years ago, as the young pastor finished his sermon and called on his congregation to join in the closing hymn. The air must have been electric as all assembled sang:

Oppression shall not always reign;

There comes a brighter day,

When freedom burst from every chain,

Shall have triumphant way.

Whitman’s sermon marked a turning point in popular support for abolition in Stoneham. In coming years, the town that had once shut abolitionists out of Town Hall would largely embrace their cause. Anti-slavery fervor carried into the Civil War, and Stoneham volunteers, part of the Massachusetts Sixth Regiment, were among the first to arrive in Washington, D.C.

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According to historian William B. Stevens’s 1890 account, Stoneham sent more men per capita than any town in the state. By the end of the war’s second year, 269 men from Stoneham had enlisted. They included William Whitcomb, then 42, commissioned as a chaplain.

When in 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Whitcomb was stationed at an Army hospital in North Carolina. Ministering to the wounded,

sick, and dying, Whitcomb served until the fall of 1864, when he, too, succumbed to the malarial fevers ravaging the troops.

His body was brought home to Concord, his wife, Harriet's hometown, and buried on Authors' Ridge in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

About universal human freedom, Whitcomb and the other abolitionists never equivocated. They speak to us still today.

Ben Jacques is a retired English professor and freelance writer. He is the author of "[In Graves Unmarked: Slavery & Abolition in Stoneham, Mass.](#)"