Charles Chauncy (1592 – 1672)

Born in November 1592, in Yardley-Bury, Hertfordshire, England, Charles Chauncy was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. Upon graduation he was elected a fellow of Trinity College, where he professed Hebrew, and later Greek. Later, Chauncy left the position to become a pastor at Marston St. Lawrence, Northamptonshire, from 1633 until 1637, and then a vicar (pastor) at Ware. However, due to his refusal to observe the “ecclesiastical regulation of Archbishop Laud,” he was brought before the court of high commission in 1629, and again in 1634, for resisting the placement of a rail surrounding the communion table, resulting in his imprisonment. He formally recanted in February 1637 and fled to America in degradation.

When Chauncy arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1638 he denied the position of a pastor due to his unorthodox views on baptism and communion. But this did not prevent him from acquiring a pastoral position in Scituate, Massachusetts. However, he was dismissed from his position in 1654 when his “advocacy of the baptism of infants by immersion caused dissatisfaction.” With the transformation of ecclesiastical views in England, Chauncy made a decision to return to Ware. One his way there through Boston he was invited to fill the position of president of Harvard College, then vacant due to the death of President Dunster. Thus Chauncy became the second president of the school, succeeding Dunster on November 27, 1654. Throughout his career as president, Chauncy acquired a reputation for being, “a most incomparable scholar.” His leadership as president was highly regarded in Cambridge, which according to Cotton Mather, “kept a whole day of thanksgiving to God for the mercy which they had enjoyed in his being there.” Aside from serving as president, he also took time to continue his sermons, a small number of which have been published: Twenty-six Sermons on Justification (1659), and Antisynodalia Americana (1662), a ground breaking sermon which proclaimed that all baptized persons were authorized admittance to the church “even if they had not professed a “change of heart.”

Charles Chauncy served as president of Harvard College until his death on February 19, 1672. He was survived by his six sons, all of whom graduated from Harvard, and has been proclaimed the ancestor to all Americans who share his name. His great-grandson, Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), was declared pastor of the First Church of Boston; he was a significant figure throughout the course of the Great Awakening – a period of social and religious revolution in the Eastern Colonies. Also, Henry Chauncey (1905), the first president of the Education Testing Service, understood the importance of mental testing – testing for ability rather than knowledge. His stressing of the importance of selection into higher education “began the chain of events that would lead to the pivotal role of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).” Clearly a legacy of accomplished men in American began with the accomplishments of Charles Chauncy.

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Sources: