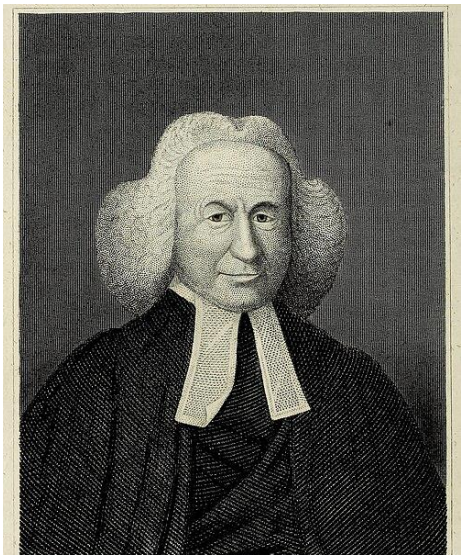
Biography of Jonathan Parsons



Jonathan Parsons (November 30, 1705 – July 19, 1776) was a Christian New England clergyman during the late colonial period and a supporter of the American Revolution. Born in West Springfield, Massachusetts, he was the youngest son of Ebenezer (Deacon) Parsons (1668-1752) and Margaret Marshfield of Springfield. He was intended for an artisan career, but the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, then a tutor at Yale, persuaded young Parsons to prepare for college.

Education and early career

Parsons entered Yale at the age of 20, graduating in 1729. He studied theology with Yale President Elisha Williams and with Edwards, by then minister of the church in nearby Northampton.

Parsons took charge of the Congregational Church in Lyme, Connecticut, in 1731. He fell in love with Phebe Griswold, eldest daughter of the town's leading family (her brother, Matthew Griswold, would serve as governor of Connecticut). For the first decade of his career, Parsons was an upstanding member of the colony's religious establishment: Arminian in his theological inclinations and fond of the material benefits of being a community leader. It is said that he "had a passion for fine clothes, for gold and silver lace, and ruffled shirt fronts, which distressed some of the good Puritans of his Church."

Parsons as evangelical leader

Like many of his contemporaries, however, Parsons would be swept up in the religious turbulence of the Great Awakening. He suffered increasing doubts about the reality of his conversion and the hazards of works as a basis for salvation. After a "severe and prolonged mental struggle," the "doctrine of salvation by faith bursts as a 'new light' on his mind. His preaching was marked by greater earnestness and simplicity. He became, in the words of one contemporary, a "burning and shining light." One great encouragement was his mentor, Jonathan Edwards, also being ‘enlightened’ and preaching in Enfield, Connecticut the famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. The very sermon that started the first Great Awakening.

One witness to his preaching at Lyme in the late 1730s wrote,

> "with what astounding terrors have I heard him represent the torments of Hell, and the imminent, amazing danger of the impenitent sinner. With what glowing colors and sweetly surprising language would he paint the glories of Heaven, and describe the holy and elevated joys of immortality. In what melting strains would he represent the sufferings of Christ and his undying love for sinners. . . . Such was the apparent fervor of his spirit, and the tender emotion of his compassionate heart, that he would sometimes appear as a flame of fire, and then all dissolved in tears."

Parsons' embrace of the Awakening was sealed by his encounter with the great British evangelist, George Whitefield, who toured the colonies in 1740. Parsons was undoubtedly present when Whitefield preached at Middletown, an event that drew thousands from the surrounding countryside. Whitefield later visited Lyme twice, preaching from Parsons' pulpit at a time when many churches were closing their doors to the "New Lights." Converting as Edwards had, to Calvinist Theology; Parsons also tried to deliver the awakening experience to individuals on face-to-face terms, dedicating his time to the converted who needed his guidance. As he recalls in his diary, sometimes as many as thirty people came to his study for counsel one day.

"Fired" for the Lord

In Lyme, as elsewhere, the revival shattered congregational unity. Opposition to Parsons' views—and concern about his evangelical forays beyond his own parish—led eventually to his ouster in 1745. By this point, Parsons was acknowledged one of the most prominent and eloquent leaders of the Awakening. He was invited to preach throughout eastern Connecticut and in Massachusetts. His sermons were published and widely circulated throughout the British colonies. In 1744, at the invitation of Boston minister Thomas Prince, he wrote an authoritative account of the revival at Lyme.

From Lyme to Newburyport

With help from Whitefield, Parsons was invited to take charge of a new Presbyterian congregation in Newburyport, Massachusetts. The church was run along radically democratic lines, without any influence from "councils, conferences or synods". In fact, rather than being Presbyterian in polity, the church was what might be called an "independent" or "strict" Congregationalist body. In the thirty years Parsons served the church, it would grow from nineteen members to being one of the largest congregations

in New England running as much as 2,000 in attendance on any given Sunday. Suffering grievously poor facilities that were practically a glorified log cabin on the King's Highway in Storey's Garden; the members disassembled the structure and re-assembled a huge building on King Street. (Later years, Chandler's Lane, Prison Street and then Federal Street today.) At the construction in 1756, it was the largest church building in all of New England and was designed specifically to be able to house the huge congregations on Sunday. It used the traditional Christopher Wren style in its architecture but on a massive scale.

The Great Awakening Headquarters

Rev. George Whitefield returned and preached at the Old South as it became known, ten times over his ministry. The huge attendance did not go without much persecution. The independence of the congregation and its detachment from the normal churches, caused the local clergy to boycott Reverand Parsons. The church was not allowed to be recognized as a legitimate source for taxation and outside the normal parish obligations. At that time, the colonies were funded by the 'pew tax' at each church. Technically, if a citizen lived inside a particular parish, they would be obligated to attend the 'parish church' where the funds would be deposited. Such animosity was leveled against the congregation that the community gave exemption to Baptists and Roman Catholics but not to the 'Old South'.

The church would suffer double-taxation for many years, and the members were often accused of being tax scofflaws and dragged into the local courts for demand of payment. It wasn't until the church joined the regional Presbytery that the community allowed some form of tolerance.

Often Jonathan Parsons, many times accompanied by Rev. George Whitefield, would suffer clods of dirt, rocks and dead cats thrown at them as they attempted to cross from the sanctuary three doors down School Street to the parsonage.

Whitefield became a fast friend with Parsons and used the Old South as his staging ground to reach out to New England communities in the early years of his ministry. Finding a disturbing pattern of being evicted by ministers from church sanctuaries and thus having to use open fields as a preaching area; George Whitefield borrowed Jonathan Parsons' drafting table to preach his sermons. They would put it on a cart and wheel it into a field. (This

situation persisted until Whitefield later in his ministry created a portable pulpit that could be collapsible and would hang off the side of his horse. He ended up using it in the Americas and in Europe.)

Whitefield visited Parsons during his last tour of New England in 1770. Taken ill, Whitefield died in Parsons' house and was interred in a crypt constructed under the pulpit. He had become gravely ill some years back and new that his ministry would be ending soon. His son and wife had previously died. He informed Parsons that he wished to be buried under the pulpit because the church doors were always open to him. Because of that, the church had prepared a crypt before his death though not sure if he would instead by passing away at sea or in England. His funeral, at which Parsons preached, was attended by thousands. The tomb, which would soon carry Parsons own remains as well, became a shrine for New England evangelicals.

Revolutionary agitator

Like many of his fellow New Lights, Parsons became an early and outspoken supporter of American resistance to England. Being loosely outside the Parish System, made it easier for many fervent patriots to join the church, and it later became a center for Newburyport's support for independence from England. Unfortunately, the Anglican Church led by Rev. Mr. Robert Abercrombie advocated strongly for control. Often these royal emissaries would be sent packing back to England. Rev. Jonathan Parsons, already widely read across the colonies; produced the pamphlet, "A Rejoinder to the Reverend Mr. Robert Abercrombie's Late Remarks on a fair Narrative of the Proceedings of the Presbytery of Boston, against himself." 1758, Boston.

From a minister's perspective, it was the arrival of governor's sent by the King that began a burning anger in the colonies. New England's congregations' ran counter to the Anglican Church whose head was directly the King. Several of these sent leaders made an initial attempt to bring these independent churches under the direct control of the British government. It was clear it wasn't for theological reasons but an effort to take a more active control of the colonies' revenues so it could be filtered back to an impoverished British government scarce in funds due to the French and Indian Wars.

When great resistance from the Stamp Act greatly agitated the colonials; Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin travelled to England and appealed to Parliament resulting in most of

the Act being revoked; but the stamp act dealing with British Tea was not. The King had direct investment in the British East Indian Tea Company. Thus, the outrage of the colonists against the growing authoritarianism was firmly turned against the tea shipments.

When New England revolutionaries resolved to resist the tea tax, Parsons organized the young women of his congregation to host tea parties at his Manse (parsonage) at 11 School Street. They were to brew Labrador Tea, an Indian herbal in place of the imported tea. Parsons, widely read, spread word throughout the colonies to do the same which caused a huge negative impact on the King's coffers.

The Boston Massacre victims were mourned by the tolling bell of the "Old South," Parsons' church. On that day, Parsons preached a notable sermon on the sacrifices of the dead and the duties of the living. "As the clouds darkened and the skies thundered, the voice of Parsons grew louder and clearer, like bugle notes summoning the good men and true to battle."

Shortly thereafter, Parsons produced a pamphlet that was spread across the 13 colonies and had the similar effect of Thomas Paine's Common Sense but years earlier. "Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Slavery" had a galvanizing effect across the British colonies.

When the news came of Lexington and Concord, Parsons stood in his pulpit to preach to the people of liberty and their rights. "As he closed his final appeal, his people hung breathless upon his words, and each seemed more anxious than the other to catch his every utterance.

> 'Men of America, citizens of this great country hanging upon the precipice of war, loyalty to England lies behind you, broken by the acts of the mother country--a cruel mother, deaf to the voice of liberty and right; duty to freedom, duty to your country, duty to God, is before you; your patriotism is brought to the test; I call upon those ready to volunteer for the defense of the provinces against British tyranny to step into the 'broad aisle.'"

Those who responded were the first volunteers to join the Continental Army and after some short-time training ended up participating in a crucial role in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Parsons died on July 19, 1776, on the very day that the Declaration of Independence arrived in Newburyport. He was buried next to his mentor, George Whitefield, in the crypt under the pulpit from which he had preached for more than three decades. One

son, Samuel Holden Parsons, would rise to the rank of Major General in the Continental Army and was on George Washington's personal staff. Another, Jonathan, would participate in the Penobscot Expedition, the boldest naval adventure of the Revolution. A grandson, midshipman William Walter Parsons, would be taken prisoner by the British during the Penobscot Expedition.

Phebe, his widow, received the Parsonage as a gift from a grateful congregation and supported by her sons who lived for many years and passed away and is buried in the First Parish cemetery. The house remained in the family for several generations.

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A notebook of handwritten sermons by Jonathan Parsons is in the Harvard Divinity School Library at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.