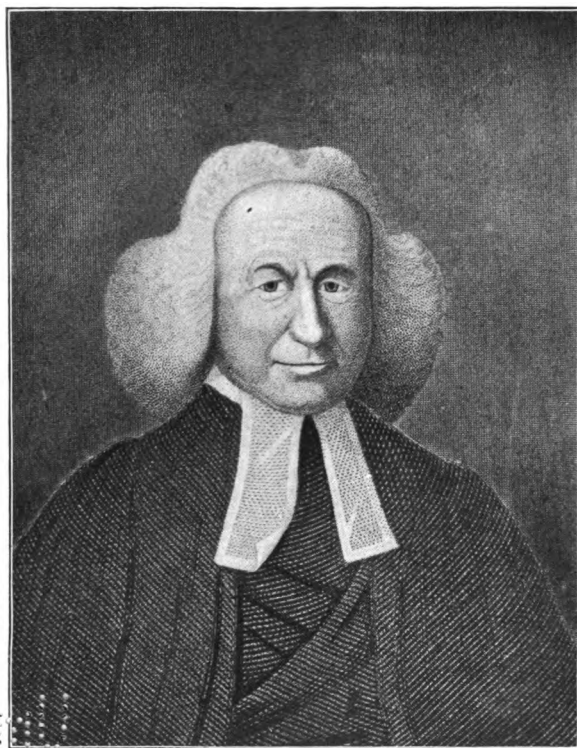




REV. JONATHAN PARSONS.

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REV. JONATHAN PARSONS.

REV. JONATHAN PARSONS was son of Dea. Ebenezer and Margaret (Marshfield) Parsons, and was born in West Springfield, Mass., Nov. 30, 1705. He was early apprenticed to a mechanical trade, but his great desire for an education being promoted by encouragement given to him by Rev. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, he began preparation for college by himself while working at his trade. He entered Yale college at the age of twenty, graduating in 1729.

Apparently he had no design as to his future occupation when he entered college. He was not religious until he was half through his college course, when, while prostrated by a fever at his father's house, his mind was directed to eternal things by the danger he was in, and he became, as he said, very serious, concluding that it was his duty to join the church, which he did. At this juncture he decided to enter the ministry.

Before his departure from college Mr. Parsons began the study of theology under the direction of Rev. Elisha Williams, the college president, and also with Rev. Mr. Edwards, who had encouraged him in his studies at the beginning.

Although his ideas savored of Arminianism, he was licensed to preach and ordained over the Congregational church at Lyme, Conn., in March, 1731.

Some years passed successfully before Mr. Parsons became convinced that he was not a believer in Christ as the Saviour in grace, but rather had faith in his own righteousness. After a terrible mental struggle he was ready to receive the truth,

which ever afterward gave him perfect peace and great success in all his subsequent efforts.

Soon after this time the New Light movement began, and Mr. Parsons drank deeply from the spiritual spring, having been so lately a recipient of the fulness of blessing which the new movement so strongly emphasized. The great English evangelist, Rev. George Whitfield, and Rev. Gilbert Tennent, who were at that time arousing the entire country to a new and lively sense of eternal things, were often at Lyme, and always stayed with Mr. Parsons when they could. With them he labored in all the surrounding region.

In his early ministry Mr. Parsons paid much attention to his manner of writing and delivery. He was possessed of a logical mind, and was noted for his correct, clear, and even elegant style. But after he better understood the truths of the gospel, and salvation of human souls became the principal object of his efforts, his manner and diction were less polished and his style less flowery. But his sermons were enhanced in feeling and force, and his eloquence increased, as, under his new light, he discoursed upon the momentous subjects that filled his mind, being solicitous only that he be clearly understood. His rich and lively imagination made him remarkable as an extemporaneous speaker. One who often heard him preach wrote:—

"Oh! with what astonishing terror 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 dying love to sinners! So lively were his descriptions of the great Redeemer's excruciating sufferings, that the solemn scenes of Gethsemane and Calvary would seem to open afresh to the view, and revive anew to the imagination of his auditors, so that Christ might be said to be set forth crucified before their eyes, in his animated descriptions. With what alluring persuasions would he pray and entreat sinners, in Christ's stead, to be reconciled to God. Such was the apparent fervor of his spirit, and the tender emotions of his compassionate heart, that he would sometimes appear as a flame of fire, and then all dissolved in tears."

After the change in his religious convictions and faith had occurred, it is said that he actually burned the sermons he had previously written, as unworthy of preservation.

Mr. Parsons was of medium height, and had light complexion, blue eyes, and a prominent chin. His voice was clear and commanding, and his countenance indicated strength of character. His manners were easy and polished, though sometimes marred by his hasty temper, which will, education and divine influence had done much to soften, but had not wholly controlled.

He was well versed in Latin and Greek, and a well-read historian. Early in his ministry he became proficient in medicine, and practised it in connection with his ministerial labors for some time.

Difficulties between himself and his church necessarily arose after his religious belief had changed. He was probably settled as one having Arminian proclivities at least, and for several years preached the doctrine of works rather than of grace; and when he frankly confessed his error and came out boldly and strongly for salvation in Christ alone, several of his people became his enemies, giving

erroneous reports of the doctrines he preached, and making his position there so uncomfortable that he asked to be dismissed, in October, 1745, which request was duly granted.

As a result of Mr. Whitfield's preaching in Newbury, in 1740, a number of the members of the Third church organized a new society, erecting a meeting-house on High street in 1742. They were called the New Lights. Joseph Adams of Byfield, a Harvard graduate, preached to them, and the society gained in numbers.

At the time of Mr. Parsons' dismissal from the church in Lyme, this new society in Newbury had become considerable in size, and, at the desire of Mr. Whitfield, Mr. Parsons was invited to visit Newbury. He accordingly left Lyme Oct. 28, 1745, and arrived in Newbury a few days later. "I found," he said, "a number of serious Christians in the congregation which I came to visit, who appeared to be understanding, solid, and in some measure established in the main points of Christian doctrine. But many others appeared of an Antinomian turn, full of vain confidence, self-conceit, false affections, etc., and some that were the greatest Christians in their esteem appeared to be worldly and covetous."

In January, 1746, the society invited Mr. Parsons to become their pastor. After much importunity he consented. Attempts were made by the enemies of the new society to prevent the formal establishment of a church and the settlement of a regular pastor. The installation therefore did not occur until March 19, 1746, when Mr. Parsons preached from 1 Peter, v. 9, "Steadfast in the faith." Without calling a council the church proceeded to install the new pastor. The exercises were very simple. The pastor-elect stood with uplifted hand and said, "In the presence of God and these witnesses I take this people to be my people;" and the clerk of the society, in behalf of the church and congregation, then arose and said, "In the presence of God and these witnesses we

take this man to be our minister." They deemed it expedient to take the Presbyterian form of church government; and it is the same to-day, being known as the First Presbyterian church of Newburyport.

Mr. Parsons resided on High street until 1765, when he built a house on School street. In 1756 a new meeting-house was built on the corner of Federal and School streets;* and it is still standing, having been the place of worship of this flourishing society ever since that early date.

In 1770 Mr. Whitfield made his last visit to New England, and Mr. Parsons' house was his home here, as it had been at Lyme. At this time the famous evangelist, having been in Maine, came to Newburyport on a Saturday night to preach for his friend on the following day. But at six o'clock on that morning, in Mr. Parsons' chamber, he died from exhaustion caused by over-exertion. A few hours later, at the service when Whitfield was expected to preach, Mr. Parsons delivered to an immense audience a sermon from Phil. i. 21, "To die is gain." The remains of the evangelist were placed in a vault beneath the pulpit of Mr. Parsons' meeting-house, such having been the wish of the deceased.

Mr. Parsons survived his friend but a few years. His constitution broke down, and at the conclusion of a long and painful illness he joyously died, July 19, 1776, at the age of seventy. His remains were placed by the side of those of the evangelist. Fifteen years later those of Rev. Joseph Prince, the blind preacher, were also deposited there. And there to-day may be seen the actual remains of these distinguished divines, who in those early days were the subjects of the deepest hate as well as the sincerest love and reverence.

Mr. Parsons was a faithful and vigilant pastor, ever setting up the Bible as the

only and infallible standard of divine truth and unerring rule of practice. He had great success in the ministry, both at Lyme and Newbury.

Many of his efforts were printed: Letters in the Christian History, 1741; Sermon at the Boston Lecture, 1742; Letters on Justification, 1748; Good News from a Far Country, seven discourses, 1756; Rejoinder to R. Abercrombie's remarks on a fair narrative of the proceedings of the Presbytery of Boston against himself, 1758; Sermon on connection between true godliness, etc., 1759; Manna gathered in morning, 1761; Infant Baptism from Heaven; two sermons, 1770; Sermon on the death of Mr. Whitfield, 1770; Controversial Letters to Smith on Baptism; Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Tyranny, 1774; and Sixty Sermons, two octavo volumes, 1780, the last being posthumous.

Mr. Parsons married, first, Phebe, daughter of John Griswold, esq., of Lyme, Dec. —, 1731. She died Dec. 26, 1770; and the next year he married Lydia, widow of Andrew Clarkson, esq., of Portsmouth, N. H. She survived him. He had seven children: Marshfield lived in Lyme; Jonathan lived in Newburyport, being a sea-captain; Samuel Holder graduated at Harvard college in 1756, studied law, became a major-general in the revolution and an Aid to Washington, who subsequently appointed him governor of the North-West Territory; Thomas lived at Newburyport and was a sea-captain; Phebe married Capt. Ebenezer Lane of Boston; Lucia married Capt. Joseph Toppan of Newburyport; and Lydia married Capt. Moses Greenleaf.

The frontispiece is a copy of Pelton's steel engraving of 1841.

ALLEN NOTES.

Ruth Allen published to John Somes, 3d, Sept. 15, 1792.

Sally Allen published to Moses Plummer Nov. 1, 1790.

*See Historical Sketches of Old Newbury, by Hon. John J. Currier, pages 508-525.