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ANNALS
OF THE
AMERICAN PULPIT;
OR
COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES
OF
DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN
OF
VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,
FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.
WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.
✓
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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JONATHAN PARSONS.*

1730—1776.

JONATHAN PARSONS was born at West Springfield, Mass., November 30, 1705. He was a son of Ebenezer Parsons, who was a deacon in the First Congregational church in that place; and a grandson of Benjamin Parsons, who emigrated from England to this country, and settled at Springfield about the year 1635. His mother's name was Margaret Marshfield.

In his early youth, he was put to a mechanical trade; but so decided were his intellectual tastes that, in connection with the labours of the workshop, and without any other assistance than he derived from books, he contrived to carry forward his preparation for College. At the age of twenty, he became a member of Yale College, and was graduated there in 1729.

It does not appear that, at the time of his entering College, he had any intention to devote himself to the ministry, or even that his mind had been formed to any decided habit of seriousness. Indeed, it would rather appear from his own recorded testimony, that he was averse to the contemplation of religious subjects, and that he imposed little restraint upon his vicious inclinations. After he joined College, though he was not lacking in application to study, he still gave no attention to the one thing needful; and he more than intimates that his decent appearance before the world was a mere cover to a course of habitual wickedness.

When he had reached about the middle of his college course, he was the subject of a dangerous illness, which led him to consider his ways, and at least to form a purpose of entering on a religious life. He now became serious and exemplary in his deportment, and shortly after, made a public profession of his faith in the Gospel. Though he fully believed, at the time, that a radical change had passed upon him, he was afterwards equally convinced that he had been the subject of a mere delusive experience.

Having resolved to give himself to the ministry, he commenced a course of theological study, shortly after he left College, under the direction of the Rev. Elisha Williams,—then Rector of the College, and subsequently completed it at Northampton, under Jonathan Edwards. Within less than a year after he was graduated, he was licensed to preach, and his early services in the pulpit marked him as among the more promising young preachers of the day. Not long after he was licensed, he was invited to the pastoral charge of the Congregational church in Lyme, Conn., and was ordained there in March, 1731.

After his settlement in the ministry, his mind underwent a great revolution in regard to both the doctrines of the Gospel, and the nature of Christian experience. The following account of the commencement of his labours, together with the severe conflicts which issued in the change above referred to,—a change which gave a new complexion to his character and ministry,—is from his own pen:—

* Searle's Fun. Sermon.—Coffin's Hist. Newbury.—Amer. Quart. Reg., XIV.—Stearns' and Vermilye's Hist. Disc.

Soon after my settlement, there was a great and general concern about religion, especially among the young people. I was very zealous in my work, and urged them to come to the Lord's table, and, in less than ten months, fifty-two persons joined the church.

"After I had been settled nigh two years, I was convinced that I had built my hopes of Heaven upon the sandy foundation of my own righteousness. The terrors of the law were very dreadful upon me for several months. Sometimes I thought I must be in hell in a few minutes. I thought every one who saw me must see my wretchedness, and often wondered how they could treat me with common respect,—much more with the respect due to a minister; and yet I believe my people were never so respectful to me, as at the time when I had those apprehensions of misery. If I had any quiet at this time, it was when I was upon my knees, begging for mercy or reading the Bible. These duties I attended much of my time. But when I read Mr. Stoddard's 'Safety of appearing in the righteousness of Christ,' especially his use of reproof to men trusting their own righteousness, and not submitting to God, I could plainly read my own character. Still I dare not let go my self righteous hold, till, one morning, as I came out of my study to attend family worship, I found myself naked, and saw the justice of God, though he cast me off forever. My struggles were all hushed in a moment, and I think I submitted to sovereign mercy. It was not ten minutes, I believe, before I saw the justice of God fully satisfied in Christ, and how he could save the chief of sinners. I saw the sufficiency of Christ as the Surety of the covenant of grace, to redeem the most helpless, wretched and hell-deserving. This put an argument in my heart to plead with God in prayer, and afforded some relief for a time. Still I was not satisfied of a change of heart till several months afterwards. Some time after this, I preached to the Indians at Nehantic, on the nature and necessity of regeneration,—Mr. C—— and Mr. A—— being present. After service, Mr. A. told me he was afraid I was not converted. My heart said there was reason to fear it. I had been several days in distress about it, and his discourse increased my distress. I went home eight miles very pensive. Slept but little that night and rose early. Mrs. Parsons, taking notice of something extraordinary, asked what was the matter. I told her I could not live so; and, after I had attended family worship, I retired into a secret place in the field, resolving never to see any body till I had my state cleared up, whether good or bad. I had not been alone with my Bible and upon my knees more than two hours, before light broke in with such assuring satisfaction, that I could not doubt of the safety of my state. This was a time (1741) of the outpouring of the Spirit in the land, and eminently so at Lyme, when many I believe were savingly converted."

From this period, Mr. Parsons' ministry gathered an unwonted degree of earnestness, and he became identified with the party who were technically known as the "New-Lights" of the day. Whitefield was then traversing the land, and preaching everywhere with an effect that was supposed by many to forebode the speedy ushering in of the millennial day. Gilbert Tennent also was, about that time, making his famous "preaching tour" through New England, and operating upon immense masses of people with scarcely less power than Whitefield himself. Both these illustrious itinerants (for such Tennent for a season became) repeatedly visited Lyme, and they were always Mr. Parsons' guests; and while they laboured abundantly in his parish, he joined them in their visits to several of the neighbouring congregations. In September, 1742, Mr. Parsons made a visit to Boston, and accepted an invitation from the Rev. Mr. Foxcroft to preach the Thursday Lecture. Entering fully, as he did, into the views and feelings of those who favoured Whitefield and the revival, and being deeply impressed with the conviction that a considerable portion of the ministers in that neighbourhood, as well as in New England generally, were opposed to what he believed were the genuine operations of the Holy Spirit, he availed himself of that occasion to bear a decisive testimony in respect to the state of both the ministry and the churches. The sermon was published shortly after, and occasioned considerable excitement, and some controversy. The author in a preface of no moderate length, recognises the fact of its bearing somewhat of a controversial aspect, and urges several considerations in justification of the uncompromising stand which he had felt himself called upon

to take. It does not, by any means, justify the gross irregularities and excesses which the ultraists of the day (such as Davenport and his coadjutors) had introduced; but it denounces, in no measured terms, the substitution of a more lax system of doctrine for the faith of the Puritan fathers, and finds in this the reason of the prevailing opposition to the revival. It breathes a spirit of glowing zeal for the Redeemer's cause and honour, but, along with this, it must be acknowledged, somewhat less of the meekness and gentleness of the Gospel than could be desired.

The change in Mr. Parsons' character, and the corresponding change in his preaching, as might be expected, occasioned no small degree of speculation, and even agitation, among his people. Though many of them, as he had reason to believe, had been born into the kingdom under his ministry, and were bound to him by the strongest spiritual ties, yet there were not a few whom the earnestness and pungency of his rebukes, not less than his zealous co-operation with Whitefield and others of the same school, threw into an attitude of intense hostility. As he was himself naturally of an irritable spirit, he was but ill fitted to arrest an incipient contention; the consequence of which was, that, after having, for some time, struggled ineffectually against the current, he was dismissed from his charge by a council called at his own request, in October, 1745.

He was then invited, at the suggestion of Mr. Whitefield, to visit Newbury, (the part that is now Newburyport,) Mass., with reference to taking charge of a new congregation in that place. He accepted the invitation, and reached Newbury early in the month of November. But, when he became acquainted with a portion of the materials of which the new congregation was to be composed, he seems to have regarded it, as far at least as his own comfort was concerned, as no very promising enterprise. "I found" (says he in his journal) "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, &c., and some, that were the greatest Christians in their own esteem, appeared to be worldly and covetous." Still he was led to believe, in view of all the circumstances of the case, that it was his duty to remain there; and, accordingly, in March following, he formally took charge of the congregation. The persons originally composing his church, consisted of a secession from the Rev. Mr. Lowell's and the Rev. Mr. Tucker's; and, as it was considered, at that time, a decided infringement of ecclesiastical decorum to form a new church within the territorial limits of one of the same denomination, they determined to take, and actually did take, the Presbyterian form. But it was not merely in its form of government that the new church differed from those out of which it had chiefly grown, but in the more strongly marked character of its orthodoxy, and in a more cordial sympathy with the great religious movements of that period.

Mr. Parsons' ministry was blessed to the gathering of one of the largest churches and congregations in New England. Not less than two hundred were supposed to have been converted here through his instrumentality. He laboured in season and out of season: but he laboured in comparative quiet,—enjoying in a high degree the affection of his people, and the

respect and confidence even of those whose religious views were not in accordance with his own.

Some years before Mr. Parsons' decease, the Rev. John Murray* was invited to become colleague pastor with him; but for several reasons, among which was the fact that his reputation was suffering from injurious reports, he declined the application. He, however, ultimately became Mr. Parsons' successor.

As Whitefield had been his intimate friend in the early part of his ministry, and had no doubt exerted more influence than any other person in deciding its character, so their intimacy continued, without interruption, till it was invaded by death. Whitefield had reached Newbury, on his return from a short journey to the East, and had stopped at Mr. Parsons' house with the expectation of supplying his pulpit on the succeeding Sabbath; but, scarcely had the Sabbath dawned, before that wonderful man was summoned to join in the service of the eternal temple; and Mr. Parsons preached, on that day, to an immense congregation from Phil. i. 21—"To die is gain."

Mr. Parsons survived Whitefield but a few years. His constitution gradually gave way; and, after a protracted and distressing illness, which he endured with the utmost resignation, he fell asleep in great peace, on the 19th of July, 1776, aged seventy-one years. His Funeral Sermon was preached by the Rev. Jonathan Searle† of Salisbury, N. H., and was published. His remains were deposited in the vault beneath his pulpit, which had previously received those of Whitefield; and there they continue to slumber together till this day.

Mr. Parsons was an excellent classical scholar, and was thoroughly versed in History. He was also, to some extent, a proficient in medicine, and occasionally practised it. He had a ready command of his pen; and no one was

* JOHN MURRAY was born in Ireland, May 22, 1742, and was educated at the University of Edinburgh. He came to this country when he was hardly twenty-one years of age, and shortly after was settled as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. But having been guilty of a serious misdemeanor in regard to the signatures to his credentials, he was obliged, in consequence of the fact being discovered, to leave the city; and his next settlement was at Boothbay, Me., where a Presbytery was formed, called "the Presbytery of the Eastward," of which he became the most prominent member. Though the Presbytery of Boston refused fellowship with him, Mr. Parsons, after having thoroughly investigated the unfavourable reports, became satisfied that the faults committed, taken in connection with his own humble acknowledgments, ought not to be considered as disqualifying him for the exercise of the ministry. He was installed as Mr. Parsons' successor at Newburyport, on the 4th of June, 1781, and died on the 13th of March, 1793, aged fifty-one. He was regarded as one of the most eloquent preachers of his day. A full account of the unhappy affair that did so much to mar both his reputation and his usefulness may be found in the Rev. A. G. Vernilys admirable Historical Discourse. Mr. Murray published *An Appeal to the impartial public in behalf of the oppressed*, 1768; *The last solemn scene: A Sermon, preached at Boston, 1768; A Fast Sermon, at Newburyport, 1779; Bathkol: A voice from the wilderness, 1783; Jerubbaal or Tyranny's Grove destroyed, and the altar of liberty finished: A Thanksgiving Sermon, preached at Newburyport, 1783; The origin of evil traced in a Sermon, preached at Newburyport, 1784; Happy voyage completed, and the sure anchor cast: A Sermon preached at Newburyport on the death of Captain Jonathan Parsons, who died at sea, 1784; Grace and glory, or Heaven given only to saints: A Sermon preached at Newburyport, on the Death of Ralph Cross, 1788; Justification of believers by imputed righteousness: Three Sermons preached at Newburyport, 1788; The diligent Servant excited: A Sermon preached at Newburyport on the death of the Rev. Joseph Prince, [who was born at Boston, April 12, 1723; became totally blind and hopefully pious at the age of fourteen; commenced preaching at nineteen; preached three years at Durham, N. H.; five at Madbury, N. H.; sixteen at Barrington, N. H.; thirteen at Pownalboro' Me.; seven at Candia, N. H.; and more or less in various other places, until the 15th of January, 1791, when he died at Newburyport, and was buried by the side of Whitefield and Parsons. He lived and died in total darkness, but was distinguished for fervent piety and impressive eloquence.]*

† JONATHAN SEARLE was a native of Rowley, Mass.; was graduated at Harvard College in 1765; was ordained pastor of the church in Salisbury, November 17, 1773; was dismissed November 8, 1791; and died in 1819, aged seventy-four.

put in requisition for such service more frequently than he, by ecclesiastical bodies. He was a fluent and graceful extemporaneous speaker,—able to communicate his ideas on all occasions with great freedom and ease; and when his mind became excited, his unpremeditated efforts were often characterized by the most stirring eloquence.

He had many natural and acquired advantages for being a popular preacher. With a good person, a commanding and strongly marked face, great readiness of utterance, and freedom of gesture, and a command of the selectest language, he could scarcely fail to hold the attention of a congregation, independently of the truths which he delivered. At the commencement of his ministry, he bestowed great labour upon the composition of his sermons; and, though he afterwards became less careful for the graces of style, yet, having once acquired them, they remained with him, and formed a leading characteristic of the productions of his pen as long as he lived. When the change in his religious character occurred,—which he supposed was the great change from a sinful to a holy state, so thoroughly convinced was he that he had never preached the Gospel in all its richness and glory, that he actually burnt every sermon he had previously written. From that period, whatever his ministrations may have lost in refinement, they are said to have gained in unction and impressiveness. His devotional exercises, as might be expected from such a mind and heart, were distinguished for a graceful flow of appropriate language, animated by deep and strong feeling. In short, both the matter and manner of his prayers and sermons were such, as to secure the earnest attention, and awaken the devout feelings, of his audience.

Though Mr. Parsons' character was marked by no common cluster of excellencies, it was marred, to some extent, by a natural temper of more than ordinary severity. This occasionally abated somewhat from the pleasure of intercourse with him, and possibly it may have modified, in some measure, the complexion of some of his public acts. But to his praise it can be said that he was quite aware of this evil tendency, and was in perpetual conflict with it, so that, towards the close of his life, it existed in greatly diminished strength.

Mr. Parsons was married, on the 14th of December, 1731, to Phebe daughter of John Griswold of Lyme. By this marriage he had thirteen children, six of whom died in infancy; and of those who survived, one was *Samuel Holden*, who was born at Lyme, May 14, 1737; was graduated at Harvard College in 1756; settled as a lawyer in Middletown, Conn.; and was a Major-General in the war of the Revolution. He was subsequently appointed by Washington, Governor of the North Western Territory, and was drowned in Big Beaver Creek, in Ohio, November 12, 1789. Mrs. Parsons died December 26, 1770; and, in the following year, he was married to Mrs. Lydia Clarkson, widow of Andrew Clarkson, of Portsmouth, N. H., who survived him. The late Hon. Simon Greenleaf, an eminent jurist, and, for some time, Professor of Law in Harvard University, and the Rev. Jonathan Greenleaf of Brooklyn, N. Y., are among his descendants of the second generation.

The following is a list of Mr. Parsons' printed works:—Letters in the Christian History, 1741. Wisdom justified of her children: A Sermon preached at the Boston Lecture, 1742. Lectures 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. A Sermon on true Godliness, &c., 1759. Manna gathered in the morning, 1761. Infant Baptism from Heaven: Two Sermons, 1765. A Sermon on the death of the Rev. George Whitefield, 1770. Letters on Baptism addressed to the Rev. Hezekiah Smith, 1770. Freedom from civil and ecclesiastical tyranny, the purchase of Christ: A Sermon, 1774. Sixty Sermons: 2 volumes, octavo, (posthumous,) 1784.

Mr. Parsons is now chiefly known as an author by his two volumes of posthumous Discourses,—most of those published in pamphlet form having been long out of print. They are characterized by very considerable mental vigour, by an imagination prolific of striking imagery, by great copiousness of diction and depth of feeling, and a most uncompromising adherence to that system of faith, to which, during the greater part of his ministry, he was so earnestly devoted.



WILLIAM TENNENT (SECOND).*

1732—1777.

WILLIAM TENNENT (Second) was born in the County of Antrim, Ireland, January 3, 1705. He came to this country at the age of thirteen, with his father, the Rev. William Tennent, who arrived with his family at Philadelphia, in the summer of 1718. He early evinced an uncommon thirst for knowledge, and made rapid progress in the languages, particularly the Latin. Being also, as it was hoped, the subject of an early conversion, he determined to devote himself to the Christian ministry. His elder brother, Gilbert, was already a popular preacher, settled in New Brunswick, N. J.; and William, after having gone through a preparatory course under the instruction of his father, went to New Brunswick to avail himself of the aid of his brother in the prosecution of his theological studies. When he left home, his father, with his parting blessing, gave him a small sum of money, telling him that, if he behaved well, it would be all he would need; and if he did not behave well, it was more than he deserved. When he had nearly completed his theological course, and was preparing for his examination by the Presbytery, he was the subject of the remarkable trance which has perhaps given him his greatest celebrity, and of which a particular and authentic account is given in two of the letters connected with this sketch.

After Mr. Tennent's gradual recovery from the effects of his trance, he still adhered to his purpose to preach the Gospel, and in due time received licensure from the Philadelphia Presbytery. His first efforts in the pulpit gave promise, if his life should be spared, of eminent fidelity and usefulness. His brother John, who had for some time been settled over the Presbyterian Church at Freehold, Monmouth County, N. J., having then recently deceased, application was made to the subject of this sketch, to supply the pulpit which his brother's death had vacated; and, after having served them

* Assemb. Miss. Mag. II.—Boudinot's Narrative.—Hist. Log Coll.—Webster's MSS.