

The Role of the Byfield Parish Church in Forming the American Mind

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The Declaration of Independence is known by all, but who ever heard of the Essex Result? John Adams is a well known American name, but who has heard of Theophilus Parsons? School children learn of the Declaration of Independence, the names of the presidents, and are taught the wisdom of balancing the powers of government. The Constitution of the United States was designed to prevent tyranny. Behind the U.S. Constitution lies the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In 1780, Massachusetts adopted a constitution in which the executive, legislative, and judicial powers separated each other's control. Credit for the framework of the Massachusetts Constitution goes in large measure to John Adams. Almost unknown is the fact that two years before the adoption of the Massachusetts Constitution, the Essex Result showed the way to balance the branches of government. Theophilus Parsons, the author of the Essex Result, is America's forgotten founding father. Who was Theophilus Parsons and how was the hand of God manifest in his life?

Theophilus Parsons was born on February 24, 1750, the third child and third son of the then pastor of the Byfield Parish Church, Reverend Moses Parsons and his wife Susan. A neighbor lady said of Theophilus that, "...he was always playing harder or studying harder than any other boy; and which of these two he did the hardest, I do not know."¹ Books were important in the Byfield parsonage. The boy began his formal education under famed Master Moody at newly created Governor Dummer Academy. In 1765, at the age of 15, Theophilus entered Harvard College. After graduation, in 1770, Parsons opened a school at Falmouth, which later became Portland, Maine. He taught school and studied law, until British Admiral Graves nearly destroyed the town in October of 1775. Distressed, Theophilus returned to Byfield only to discover that God in his providence worked for his good in the British attack. That good was in the person of the most learned lawyer in New England, Judge Edmund Trowbridge. Perhaps one of the reasons Judge Trowbridge sought asylum in Byfield was that the Byfield pastor had

¹ Theophilus Parsons, *Memoir of Theophilus Parsons*, (Boston: Ticknor and Fields 1859), p.20

publicly warned the king of England that his policies could cost him his American colony. In 1772, Rev. Moses Parsons was invited to deliver the election sermon to Governor Thomas Hutchinson and the Massachusetts General Court. His text was Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns him wherever he will.” (Prov. 21:1) Whatever his reasons, Trowbridge, who was considered to be the “Oracle of Common Law in New England,” sought safety for himself and his extensive law library in the home of the Byfield pastor. Thus it was that when Theophilus fled Falmouth, he found living in his own home the man with the finest legal mind in America. For the next two years, Trowbridge tutored Theophilus in law.

On April 19, 1775, a shot fired at the Concord Bridge began the war that parted Great Britain from her American colonists. In a memoir written by the son of Theophilus Parsons we learn that Americans needed minds capable of creating a government structure strong enough to rule a free people. He wrote, “So far as I have been able to learn, the whole country had been so busy with the labor and the conflict (the Revolutionary War) which had won the possibility of republicanism, that few minds of sufficient capacity had been turned to the practical question, when this becomes possible, how shall the foundations be laid, how shall the structure be built?”² Theophilus possessed the brilliance needed to adapt the philosophical ideas about political equilibrium into a government composed of checks and balances.

The ink was barely dry on the Declaration of Independence when the former colonists set their minds to constitution making. In 1778, the Massachusetts General Court submitted a constitution to the towns for their approval. The proposed constitution met with overwhelming disapproval. Four out of every five towns in the State rejected the attempt of the legislature. It was then that Essex County called for a constitutional convention. Those in the know said that 28-year-old Theophilus Parsons called for the caucus. The meeting began in Newburyport but quickly adjourned to Ipswich where the delegates published a document that exposed the

² John Louis Ewell, *The Story of Byfield*, (Boston: George E. Littlefield, 1904), p.1

weakness of the legislative proposal and proposed remedies. The Document was titled, “The Result of the Convention of Delegates holden at Ipswich, in the County of Essex, who were deputed to take into Consideration the Constitution and Form of Government proposed by the Convention of the State of Massachusetts Bay.” This text is known to history as “The Essex Result.” In The Making of the Constitution Mary Newman and Robert Faulkner describe the steps by which the Massachusetts Constitution came into being. “In February of 1778, the General Court submitted its plan to the town meetings; it was met, in town after town, with thorough debate and spirited criticism. The best of the controversy is shown in the ‘Essex Result,’ written by a future chief justice (Theophilus Parsons), explaining the negative vote of twelve towns in Essex County. The ‘Result’ also showed the way the political winds were blowing. The Constitution of 1778 went to oblivion by a five to one margin...”³

Arguably, the Essex Result is the germinal political document behind the constitutional forms governing many the nations today. Since the Essex Result made possible the Massachusetts Constitution and the Massachusetts Constitution served as a model for the United States Constitution, it is something of a grandfather to many constitutions modeled after our own. Although the document was published as the work of the convention, those who convened at Ipswich testified that Theophilus alone wrote the Essex Result. The son writes, “For proof that he wrote this pamphlet, I do not trust to family tradition and evidence, but might refer to the declarations of many who knew it. I now, however, only quote the direct assertion of Chief Justice Isaac Parker. He says, in his address to the Grand Jury, after my father’s death: ‘The Report was undoubtedly his, though he was probably aided by others, at least with their advice. This elaborate Report is called the Essex Result.’”⁴ “That he (Theophilus Parsons) was more instrumental in the formation of the Constitution of Massachusetts than any other citizen, was the opinion of every one who knew him as the author of the famous ‘Essex Result’, which exhibited

³ Mary Newman, Robert Faulkner, *The Making and Growth of the Constitution*, article introducing *The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, (William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth, 2002), p. VIII

⁴ Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 48

the necessary elements of fundamental law for our republic, with as much completeness and precision as human sagacity could ever supply.”⁵

The son continues,

“...I have been led, whether on sufficient evidence others must judge, to regard the Essex Result as a very early encounter with the great question then dawning upon this country and upon the world. It was an earnest endeavor to discover and declare how progress and conservatives, liberty, and order, might be so adjusted in human institutions, that freedom should be secure, and peace and happiness be the children of freedom. I think I find in this document the leading principles by which all-wise efforts to answer this question practically have been and are likely to be guided. It seems to me that a comparison of this document with history gives me evidence enough – aside from the principles herein stated exerted much influence in molding the first Constitution of this State, and others also so far as they have copied this, and in making them the excellent instruments that they were for this great good. And it was a problem which could only be solved by a careful consideration of many facts and principles and probabilities, and by a far-penetrating insight into the laws of human character and action.”⁶

The son wrote his father’s memoirs in 1859, because the contribution of Theophilus Parsons to the founding of the United States had been forgotten. He wrote, “My father died in 1813. If he were wholly forgotten, I should not seek to revive a recollection of him. But his official position, to which circumstances gave a peculiar importance, required of him to give some decisions, which laid the foundations of important law. These must be remembered and sometimes referred to, at least by lawyers. They perhaps are almost the only men of this generation who know much about him. For nearly all others the veil of time has settled over him;

⁵ Ibid. p. 80

⁶ Ibid. p. 53

and if his name be heard or read, it calls up no distinct image.”⁷ The son continues, “As far as I can find he never in his whole life published anything under his own name and as his own production; unless the decisions of the Supreme Court may be so considered. In explanation of this I can only repeat what may seem incredible, that he had a positive dislike for, and disgust at, notoriety.”⁸

1859 was only two years before the outbreak of the American Civil War. The war began to preserve the union, a union whose foundations Theophilus Parsons helped to lay. Did the threat to dissolve the union pressure Parsons’ son to remind the nation that his father was critical in making a Constitutional Republic possible? Except for the memoirs, we probably would not now know that Theophilus, and not the committee that published it, wrote the Essex Result. John Adams rightly receives great praise for the design of the Massachusetts Constitution. Did Adams look to Parsons for help in framing a constitution that would be adopted by the citizens of Massachusetts? Two important facts support the possibility that Parsons was influential in Adams political thinking. First, the Essex Result already did in 1778 what John Adams’ did in 1779; namely, balance of powers of government by separating the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Second, when John Quincy Adams graduated from Harvard in 1787, John Adams sent him to learn law at the feet of Theophilus Parsons.

The planters and later the founders of the United States believed they were guided in their labors by a divine hand. Edward Johnson, in his Wonder-Working Providence of Zion’s Savior in New England, wrote, “The Lord Christ intends to achieve greater matters by this little handful than the world is aware of.” When Alexis deTocqueville visited America in the 1830’s to see for himself what makes America work, he concluded that it was the pervasiveness of religious belief in every strata of society. The present generation of Americans is being challenged to deny the claim that a God guided the men and women who planted and later founded the United States. Planter was the name the original settlers chose to call themselves. Plantation was the name they

⁷ Ibid. p. 1

⁸ Ibid. p. 76

gave to their towns. They came to plant Christ, not crops. The founding fathers also believed they were recipients of the blessing of God in creating a Constitutional Republic. Presently, a crusade is underway to change the separation of church and state to mean the separation of God and government. This campaign threatens the nation at its core. Godless governments spilled a river of blood during the 20th century. The Nazi's exterminated Jews in preparation for eradicating Christians. Stalin butchered his own peasant population and Mao murdered millions of his own countrymen. Now the United States is pressured to reinterpret the anti-establishment clause of the constitution to remove the mention of the God of the Bible on public property. Since we know what danger a godless U.S.A. will be to the world, it is important to ask if there is evidence of divine activity in the planting and founding of the U.S.A.?

G. K. Chesterton, when asked, "What is America?" answered, "America is a nation with the soul of a church." The first settlers firmly believed that they were guided to North America by a divine hand to plant churches and grow them into a Christian culture. John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, preached the first sermon to the first of the eventual 25,000 English men and women who came to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Harvard Chaplin, Reverend Peter Gomes, called Winthrop's sermon, "a kind of Ur-text of American literature."⁹ In Ur, God made a covenant with Abraham to bless the world through him. Aboard his flagship Arbella, Winthrop proclaimed,

"Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with him for the work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those account, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought him of favour and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall

⁹ Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father*, (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003) p. 174

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neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a [sinful] people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.”¹⁰

The experience of those who first settled Massachusetts convinced them that they were, in fact, in covenant with God. The Puritan’s did indeed come in peace. Masconomet, the Sagamore or chief of the Agawams, paddled his canoe out to the Arbella and spent a Sabbath Day on board. Afterward, the chief ask the English to live among his people. Two years before he died Masconomet petitioned the Great and General Court to be taught to be a Christian. Masconomet’s grandchildren testified that the Puritans lived in his land with their grandfather’s liking and approval. Astounding also is the fact that during the decade during which those nearly 25,000 men, women, and children migrated to America, not a single ship went to the bottom of the North Atlantic. Theophilus Parsons, it can be argued, transposed Winthrop’s covenant into a nation ruled with the consent of the governed.

Another fact concerning the lineage of Theophilus Parsons points to the presence of a sovereign hand at the beginning of this nation. Susan Parsons, Theophilus’ mother, was immensely proud of her ancestry. She was a direct descendant of the Pilgrim’s pastor, John Robinson. Before bidding farewell to the half of his church that sailed to the new world aboard the Mayflower, Robinson preached a sermon. A quarter century later Edward Winslow recounted his pastor’s words. “...we promise and covenant with God and with one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written word: but withal exhorted us to take heed what we received for truth, and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other scriptures of truth, before we received it; for saith he, ‘It is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that full perfection of

¹⁰ Winthrop, John, A Model of Christian Charity. Excerpts from a sermon delivered aboard the ship bound for the New World to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony

knowledge should break forth at once!”¹¹ Robinson promised his pilgrim flock wisdom from God’s word to design their own government in the wilderness of Massachusetts.

Did almighty God choose to fulfill Robinson’s promise through his own great-great-great-great-grandson? Theophilus was a sickly infant. The memoirs recount, “When in his cradle, he was very ill with some infantile disease, and his immediate death was apprehended an old crone of the neighborhood, who was thought to be a witch by many persons, but was rather a favorite *pro’tg’ee* of my grandmother’s, bent over him, and, after long and careful observation, lifted herself up and said, ‘You are all wrong. That boy can’t die now. He has got to get well, and grow up, and live to be a judge, and ride in his own coach.’ In 1806, when it was understood in the family that he was solicited to be Chief Justice, and there was some conflict of opinion among us on the subject, good old Violet (the Parsons household slave) said: ‘There is no use in making a fuss about it. A judge he has got to be, and most certainly will be; for it was foretold of him when he lay in his cradle.’”¹²

Theophilus Parsons, the direct descendant of John Robinson, understood how to apply the foundational principle of the kingdom of God, that his people should love his law, into a law abiding civil state. It was this necessity to love the law of God in order to establish the kingdom of God that prompted Jesus to warn Nicodemus that “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” (John 3:3) No one can be happy in the presence of a holy God unless he or she loves the law of holiness. Parson’s son writes, “We alone among the nations do not look upon the law as our enemy.”¹³ Because the United States is so constituted, that it cannot survive the loss of love for what is right, the memoirs state, “So may it be; for when it ceases so to be, we shall have passed across the line which separates political safety from political ruin.”¹⁴

¹¹ Henry Martin Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1880) p. 404

¹² Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 20

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 113

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 114

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This is the story of how one man from Byfield Parish influenced the nation by guiding the development of its governmental structures. This paper has, of necessity, been narrowly focused. Other Byfield people and their contributions to the formation of the American mind might have been studied. For example, we could have traced the influence of Byfield Parish on the anti-slavery movement. Colonial Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, who lived in the section of Newbury that became Byfield, wrote the first anti-slavery tract in America. Benjamin Coleman, one of the most prolific opponents of slavery during the Revolutionary War, was a deacon of the Byfield Parish Church. Elijah Parish Lovejoy, whose murder by pro-slavery forces galvanized the anti-slavery movement in America, was named for the third pastor of the Byfield Parish Church.

Another paper could have been written on the freedom in Byfield to recognize the leadership gifts given to women. Madam Pierpont, the sister of colonial lieutenant governor William Dummer, is believed to have persuaded her brother to will his estate to become the first boy's boarding academy in the country. Mehetable Moody, the sister of Judge Samuel Sewall, is distinguished as being the founder of the Byfield Parish Church. Is it not profound that in colonial New England a woman should establish a church? Her gravestone inscription reads:

“Mehetabel

Dater of Mr. Henry & Jane

Sewall, wife of Mr. William Moodey,

Promoted settling the worship

Of God here, and then went to

Her glorified son William,

Leaueing her son Samuel & four

Daters with their Father, August ye

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8th, 1702, Aetet 38 was the first

interred in this place

Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke College for Women, modeled her college after the Byfield Female Seminary, where she studied in 1821.

A further paper might have been written on the impact of Byfield Parish on American education. Evangelist George Whitefield helped to find Samuel Moody, the first teacher of Governor Dummer Academy. Master Moody taught men like Samuel Webber, the 13th president of Harvard, Benjamin Colman, the founder of the first female seminary in Massachusetts, and Eliphelet Pearson, the founder of Andover Seminary. So seemingly endless was the procession of those taught by Master Moody that the soon to be U.S. Senate Chaplain Edward Everett Hale, speaking at the Byfield bicentennial, began his oration, “It has long since been observed that Newbury, and Newburyport, and West Newbury, and Byfield form a sort of confederacy. It has also been observed that from this confederacy almost every person in the United States known to history has originally sprung...”¹⁵ During the gold rush, Reverend Henry Durant, the 5th pastor of the Byfield Parish Church, moved to California and founded the school that became the University of California at Berkeley.

It would be remiss to close this paper without identifying the common experience shared by these men and women from Byfield, who powerfully shaped American history. They were each influenced by the sermons preached in the pulpit of the Byfield Parish Church. The Bible was the book that refashioned their thoughts and shaped the way of thinking that has come to be called the American mind.

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¹⁵ Ewell, op. cit., p. 283

