

Parker, Joseph ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1994

d. 1791 or 1792

Joseph Parker, general Baptist ^[2] (now Free Will Baptist) clergyman, founded churches in Halifax ^[3], Pitt ^[4], Greene, and Lenoir counties. According to tradition, he was a member and probable pastor of the General Baptist church in Chowan County ^[5] in 1727, founded and pastored a church in Hertford County ^[6] about 1735, pastored the church called Lower Fishing Creek in Edgecombe (now Halifax) County from 1748 to 1756, and then moved to the south of Tar River ^[7]. George W. Paschal ^[8] suggested that Parker was the son of a man of the same forename and that he married the daughter (Sarah Welch) of another member of the 1727 Chowan church. Some elements of this tradition have been accepted for more than a century and a half, and one is very reluctant to offer an exposition of Parker's life contrary to it.

Nevertheless, Joseph Parker was the son of a prosperous planter named Francis Parker and his wife Elizabeth who came with other families from Surry, Nansemond, and Isle of Wight counties, Va., through Bertie County ^[9] into the Roanoke and Tar river valleys in North Carolina during the 1720s. The numerous Parkers who were members of the 1727 Chowan County General Baptist church might or might not have been related, but there appears to be no reason in fact to connect either Joseph Parker or his father Francis directly with that church or with the ministry of Paul Palmer ^[10]. On the other hand, this family of Parkers had by 1727 settled on Deep Creek on the south of Roanoke River ^[11] below Kehukee Swamp, which brought them within the sphere of influence of William Surginer and other General Baptist families who had come from Isle of Wight County, Va., into the Roanoke River valley. Sometime before 1735 the family had moved farther south to the lower, or southeastern, portion of Fishing Creek on Tar River, at which time young Joseph Parker held the office of constable of the district.

It is not known under whose influence he was converted to Baptist doctrine or who immersed him in baptism. Such education as he had, he got as an adult, learning to read and write sometime between 1735 and 1740, so his conversion was presumably through hearing rather than reading. Since Parker purchased a New Testament in 1741 from the estate of Henry West, one assumes that he had leanings towards a religious life by that date. In the spring of 1742, the Lower Fishing Creek community was visited by Constant Devotion, a Rhode Island Baptist who had been with Paul Palmer in 1734 and had joined William Surginer at Kehukee Swamp in the late 1730s. While at Lower Fishing Creek in May 1742, Devotion witnessed two deeds made by Parker's father, Francis Parker, so he is known to have had contact with the family of Joseph Parker. Little is known of Devotion other than that he was active in Baptist circles in Rhode Island and North Carolina, but whether as an exhorter or as a preacher is unclear. Whatever his role had been in establishing General Baptist congregations in colonial Edgecombe County ^[12], it came to an end when he was killed by a fall from his mare at Fishing Creek on 8 June 1742. One supposes Devotion played a role in the conversion of Parker.

Parker presumably attended meetings at the General Baptist church established at Kehukee Swamp by William Surginer ^[13] about 1742. Parker was at Kehukee in November 1745, for he witnessed a deed from Surginer to William Andrews at this time. One supposes, too, that Parker had been baptized by Surginer at Kehukee, and that he was licensed by the church there to preach prior to his actual ordination. Further, Parker seems to have attended the yearly meetings of the General Baptist churches for he learned something of Paul Palmer's work in the eastern counties. In 1747 Parker was joined at Lower Fishing Creek by Palmer's disciple and successor, Josiah Hart. In 1748 the General Baptist church called Lower Fishing Creek (in contradistinction to the church called Fishing Creek upstream in Bute County ^[14]) was constituted, and Parker was ordained its pastor. There can be little doubt that either Surginer or Hart was officiating elder for both the constitution of the church and the ordination of Parker. In 1748 Hart went north to Roanoke River to join Surginer at Kehukee, but he continued to return to Tar River and Lower Fishing Creek to assist Parker at intervals. In the spring of 1749, for example, Hart was back at Lower Fishing Creek where he baptized Charles Daniel, and he returned in August 1753 to ordain Daniel as assistant to Joseph Parker.

At the beginning of 1753, Parker, who had purchased and sold tracts of land in Edgecombe from as early as 1742, commenced negotiations with the agents of Lord Granville's land office for the purchase of a square mile of land in the area of his church on Lower Fishing Creek, but the acquisition of Daniel as his assistant in August of that year freed Parker to visit some of the churches to the southward that had resulted from Palmer's ministry in the late 1730s. At Stony Creek in present Wayne County ^[15], northeast of the town of Goldsboro ^[16], he found a General Baptist church pastored by George Graham, who had been ordained by Palmer about 1739, and to the east at Swift Creek in northwestern Craven County ^[17] he found another pastored by Joseph Willis, who had been ordained by Graham and William Fulsher. (Fulsher, like Graham, had been ordained by Palmer at the close of the 1730s.) It was in the area between these two General Baptist centers, present northern Lenoir and southern Greene counties, that Parker was to devote most of his ministry. His initial reception there was warm and the field promising. As a result, on Christmas Day, 1756, Parker purchased one hundred acres in the area where he gathered his first church in Greene County ^[18], Little Creek, lying between Great and Little Contentnea creeks.

While Parker was busy at Neuse River ^[19] establishing a new ministry, forces greater than he were at work among the General Baptist churches he had left on the Roanoke and Tar rivers. On the heels of William Surginer's death in February 1750, a pair of Surginer's recently ordained preachers at the upper Fishing Creek church (subsequently called Reedy Creek, Warren County ^[20]) embraced the Calvinist doctrine of divine election of particular individuals to eternal salvation to the exclusion of the remainder of humanity. This doctrine was antithetical to the General Baptist doctrine of general provision that held the death of Jesus to have been efficacious for the salvation of any of mankind who believed in him and repented of their sins. By 1751 at least one member of Surginer's original church, Kehukee, had fallen under the influence of the newly imported doctrine. These ministers, or others, appealed to the Philadelphia Association of Baptists ^[21] to send clergy south to strengthen their hands. That association had been a voluntary coming together of Baptists, both Arminian and Calvinist, for common benefit. In 1742, however, the organization adopted a Calvinist creed as the standard of orthodoxy, and the particular form of Calvinism that developed among its constituent churches was greatly heightened by the Great Awakening. Like Whitfield, they believed themselves justified in going uninvited into other ministers' churches, and they followed Whitfield's example of denouncing as unregenerated, hypocrites, or wolves in sheep's clothing those clergy who were opposed to their practices and theology. The Philadelphia Association sent the Reverend John Gano ^[22] to look into conditions in the Carolinas in 1754. Gano stopped in the Roanoke River valley long enough to examine General Baptist clergy and laity alike, and to assure many of both that they were neither walking in the paths of grace nor among the elect of God. The following year, having received Gano's report, the Philadelphia Association sent two ministers, Benjamin Miller and Peter Peterson Vanhorn, on a special mission to rescue the southern churches from General Baptist "error." The two Calvinist missionaries arrived on Roanoke River at the very time that the two senior General Baptist ministers of the area were absent: legal affairs had obliged Josiah Hart to return to Tyrrell County ^[23] (where he died prior to the spring of 1758), and Joseph Parker was engaged on his mission to Neuse River.

Miller and Vanhorn astutely began their work of expunging General Baptist "error" by persuading to their views the young clergymen who had not yet turned Calvinist (for example, Surginer's successor at Kehukee was only twenty-two when he was ordained in 1750, as was Parker's assistant when he was ordained in 1753). The newly converted pastors then led a minority of their church members in forming a new church on Calvinist lines, leaving their previous General Baptist congregations to get along as best they could without pastoral care. This meant that those congregations without a pastor to administer communion and preside over the washing of the saints' feet, to baptize and lay on hands, to maintain orderly discipline in the churches, and to ordain successor clergy were doomed to extinction. Even those who held onto their meetinghouses or, as at Toisnot, contested Calvinist occupation of their places of meeting, were unable to survive indefinitely without pastors. At Parker's church, Lower Fishing Creek, his young assistant, Charles Daniel, stopped preaching and walked out in 1756 with six members, formed a new Calvinist church with himself as pastor, and built a new meetinghouse in 1757, calling it thereafter the church at Daniel's Meetinghouse. Having done not quite enough, Daniel then helped the pastor of the General Baptist church at Falls of Tar River constitute a new Calvinist church there, consisting of the pastor and five members, on 3 Dec. 1757.

In the interim Miller and Vanhorn progressed southwards towards Neuse River on their mission. At Stony Creek they converted Palmer's disciple, George Graham, who withdrew with some members to form a new Calvinist Baptist church at adjacent Bear Creek; in this case the General Baptist church at Stony Creek survived, owing perhaps to the efforts of the nearby Joseph Parker. The two Calvinist missionaries had similar success with Palmer's church at Swift Creek, Craven County, where they proselyted (the term is the one used by the Calvinist Baptist historian, Morgan Edwards) the pastor, two women of his family, and twelve other General Baptists to form a new Calvinist Baptist church there. The two Philadelphians had no luck at all with Joseph Parker, nor with Palmer's disciple William Fulsher at Pungo in Beaufort County ^[24], Palmer's convert John Winfield in Hyde County ^[25], nor William Harris, also in Hyde County, who had been ordained by Graham and Fulsher just prior to the missionaries' advent.

To the north of Albemarle Sound ^[26], however, Palmer's church in Pasquotank County ^[27] divided doctrinally in 1757 when the pastor (son of the original pastor and Palmer's old friend, William Burgess) led out his son and ten other members and built them a new meetinghouse at his own expense. They were constituted a Calvinist Baptist church on 20 Jan. 1758 by Joseph Parker's former assistant at Lower Fishing Creek, Charles Daniel. This state of affairs was discovered by Parker in the summer of 1758 when he visited the General Baptist church in Pasquotank and baptized Henry Abbot ^[28] (who, too, embraced Calvinist views in the following decade). What Parker probably did not know is that the General Baptist churches in the northern colonies, toured by Palmer in 1730, had experienced a similar onslaught after 1742 with the result that many of them were "dissolved" while Calvinist churches were constituted in their stead. What Parker must have known, on the other hand, is that Calvinist doctrine had been introduced into the church in Isle of Wight County and that the ministers there wrote to the Philadelphia Association at the end of 1756 requesting a delegation be sent to examine their foundations and settle their doctrine in conformity with the orthodoxy of Philadelphia. If there was a yearly meeting of the Virginia and North Carolina General Baptist churches held in 1758, it was the last in Parker's lifetime. Thereafter, the yearly meetings would have included only Joseph Parker's churches in Greene, Pitt, and Lenoir counties, Palmer's churches in the Albemarle-Pamlico peninsula pastored by William Fulsher, William Harris, and John Winfield, and, presumably, the church at Meherrin in Hertford County pastored by William Parker.

Parker, unable to counter the effects of Calvinism in the Roanoke-Tar river area or to impede its progress among the clergy, but able to stem its spread into his newly evangelized territory at Neuse River, sold in 1758 his interest in the square mile of land on Fishing Creek for which he had made an entry in Lord Granville's land office in 1753. He then moved permanently to the Neuse River area and purchased more land there. (It is unlikely that the deaths of Parker's father in 1757 and brother Simon—whose will was witnessed by Charles Daniel—in 1758 had anything to do with his permanent move to Neuse River.)

Parker's initial work in the Neuse River basin carried him from his center at Little Contentnea Creek to Swift Creek in Pitt and Craven counties, where he regained some ground from the Calvinists. Immediately to his northeast, on the headwaters of Swift Creek, he gathered a congregation at Gum Swamp (southwest of Winterville). From here he traveled in 1762 north of Tar River and preached the doctrine of general provision to the Conetoe settlements and to families living in the area of Flat Swamp (where the counties of Pitt, Edgecombe, and [Martin](#) ^[29] share a common boundary). The ground here was contested by ministers from the Calvinist Baptist church at Toisnot Swamp who commenced preaching at Flat Swamp in 1766. Parker seems to have found a disciple at Flat Swamp, however, for when the Calvinist Baptist church was constituted in 1776, two ordinands offered themselves, and one of them, John Stancill, was discovered to hold Arminian views. He was rejected for ordination. Parker is said to have preached here perhaps a couple of times a year during the latter part of his life, and it is entirely possible that he ordained Stancill when the Calvinists refused to do so. Stancill has been described by the Calvinist Baptist historians as a "tolerably arch, cunning, and insinuating" man. By his preaching in the neighborhood, Stancill carried away many members from the Calvinists "with his craft." Parker's successor, James Roach, reaped in this field sown by Parker and Stancill by gathering a General Baptist church at Conetoe in 1798. Similarly, Parker's ministry near the mouth of Swift Creek in Craven County is now known to have borne immediate fruit, but the churches at Little Swift Creek, Clayroot, and Kitts Swamp were gathered after Parker's death by his successors.

At the time that Parker was preaching in the Conetoe settlements, he did not neglect other areas. Tradition says that he preached occasionally to the Meherrin General Baptist church in Hertford County pastored by William Parker. The pastor at Meherrin has been supposed a cousin to Joseph Parker, but on no very good authority, and Joseph Parker has been suggested as founder of the church on no authority at all. William Parker is known to have been pastor at Meherrin as early as 1773, but how long before that year is unknown. It is possible that Joseph Parker preached a few times at Meherrin during the course of his life, though it is unlikely that actual evidence for the claim will ever appear. The church at Meherrin remained steadfast to General Baptist principles through the life of William Parker, who died in 1794. The church was reported in 1790 as having one hundred members. After William Parker's funeral, [Lemuel Burkitt](#) ^[30], pastor of the Calvinist Baptist church at Kehukee, examined the congregation, pronounced "a small number" to be among the elect of God, and organized those few into a Calvinist Baptist church in 1794. As usual in such cases, the larger General Baptist congregation at Meherrin withered away without pastoral care.

The tradition that Parker journeyed from his church at Little Creek to preach to the church at Pungo from time to time is probably more soundly grounded. The sites of yearly meetings usually moved from church to church, and it is reasonable to suppose that Parker would have attended, and preached at, the yearly meetings held in Beaufort and Hyde counties. It is unlikely, however, that the eastern churches formed part of his ministry.

It is clear that he preached a general invitation to salvation south of Contentnea Creek in the area of present northern [Lenoir County](#) ^[31] during the same period he visited the Conetoe settlements. It is assumed that Parker gathered his congregations at Wheat Swamp and Luzon Swamp, northwest and north of Kinston, prior to the American Revolution, but the total absence of surviving county records and church records alike places this assumption of date beyond either confirmation or denial. His three congregations at Gum Swamp, Wheat Swamp, and Luzon Swamp apparently existed for the duration of Parker's life as branches of Little Creek, as the church on Little Contentnea Creek was called. Since both Morgan Edwards (1772–73) and John Asplund (1790) were unable to gather information on absolutely every Baptist church in North Carolina, the fact that both of them report Parker's only church as "Contantony" or "Quotankney" may or may not suggest that Parker's church was one with three branches within a radius of ten miles. The life Parker lived, passing in turn week after week from one congregation to another, must have paralleled almost precisely the life of the circa 1810 "monthly pastor" with four substantial churches described by David Benedict in the fourth chapter of his *Fifty Years among the Baptists* ^[32]. Though Parker had a grant of land on Little Contentnea Creek and is known to have purchased and sold various tracts there, he is said to have spent his last years in straightened circumstances domiciled at Wheat Swamp, rather than at Little Contentnea Creek. One assumes this move from southern Greene to northern Lenoir County to have taken place towards the end of the Revolutionary War, for by 1785 the Calvinist Baptists from Toisnot had penetrated Greene County and had gathered a church (named Meadow) on the headwaters of Little Contentnea Creek in the extreme northern end of the county. In the spring of 1791 they gathered a second church named Little Contentnea. One takes it, then, that Parker's influence here had waned or that he had departed for Lenoir County by 1785.

Parker is said to have been a broad-faced, square-built man of about five feet, eight inches tall with an animated style of preaching. He had married by 1749, but of his wife, Lucia, her forename alone is known (and that, from a 1749 deed). They are not known to have had any children. Both Joseph Parker and his wife appear to have been living in 1790 when the [Dobbs County](#) ^[33] census was taken. He died in the next year or two and was buried without memorial stone in Robert Witherington's burial ground at Wheat Swamp. Parker's successor, both to his churches and to his spirit, was Elder James Roach.

The Free Will Baptists in North Carolina (as the General Baptists came to be called early in the following century) very nearly owe their continued life to Parker, and through them the Disciples of Christ are indebted to him. In his life Parker merged the General Baptist tradition received in the inner coastal plain from Virginia and the tradition received in the outer coastal plain from Paul Palmer. It is probable that had Parker not, in his long ministry of nearly fifty years, remained faithful to the doctrine he had inherited from the seventeenth century, those teachings would not have survived, as they have, in churches throughout the southern and southwestern states to the end of the twentieth century.

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