
“Doctor Ripley’s Church”:
Congregational Life in Concord, Massachusetts, 1778-1841

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Ralph Waldo Emerson famously memorialized his step-grandfather as a New England icon. On September 21, 1841 the Reverend Ezra Ripley died at age 90 after presiding for nearly 63 years over the Congregational pulpit in Concord, Massachusetts, the longest-serving incumbent in the Bay State. It was a historic moment, as Emerson saw it, and although he had terminated his connection with the ministry a year and a half earlier, this scion of clergymen dating back to the founding of New England could not resist the opportunity to pay tribute to his kinsman and reflect on the significance of his passing.

Emerson’s notice appeared anonymously in Concord’s Whig newspaper, the *Republican*, ten days later, the first of several assessments of Ripley’s ministry in print. The parson’s death understandably attracted attention, if only for his longevity in office. The last man in Concord to wear the distinctive dress of the eighteenth century – knee-breeches, stockings, waistcoat, and long coat reaching down to his calves – he evoked the world of the Revolutionary fathers, and in his last years he was heralded as “one of the remaining few of that reverend race of men who, with an inviolable attachment to the cause of liberty, by his instructions, counsels, and prayers, animated and encouraged the People through the dark period of suffering and tremendous conflict.” For his iconoclastic grandson, Ripley’s career carried a different meaning closely bound up with the fate of the ancestral faith Concord’s shepherd had spent a lifetime upholding. It offered a vigorous model of the ministry

once vital to the times but now fading rapidly into the past. With Ezra Ripley's departure an epoch of New England religion had come to an end.¹

Born to a farming family in northeastern Connecticut, raised there and in central Massachusetts, and educated in Cambridge (Harvard Class of 1776), Ezra Ripley entered the ministry under the Standing Order of Massachusetts, when local Congregational churches were supported by law, and ended his tenure in an age of religious diversity and voluntary choice. In 1778 he assumed the helm of a church and parish still fractured by divisions originating in the Great Awakening, restored consensus, and kept his flock together for almost a half-century until Concord fell victim, along with most other towns in Massachusetts, to the widening orthodox-liberal rift. Early on he united the contending factions by a well-calculated marriage to Phebe Bliss Emerson, daughter of Daniel Bliss, the New Light minister who had dominated the Concord pulpit from 1738 to 1764, and relict of William Emerson, the Patriot preacher whose early death as a military chaplain in the Revolution had opened the way for the newcomer, and in succeeding decades he guided the church on an ever-more liberal course. Through that union Ripley also became the patriarch of the Emerson clan.²

None of these conditions – not the institutional arrangements, not the political challenges, not the family ties – figured in the grandson's assessment. Emerson focused, instead, on the character of the clergyman, notably, his personal piety and native eloquence. In Emerson's expansive vision, the highest office of the minister was to preach – that is, "to convert life into truth" and animate souls, as he had charged the graduates of Harvard Divinity School three years earlier. By that standard, Ezra Ripley had fallen far short; "he was never distinguished in the pulpit as a writer of sermons." Even so, he accomplished his exalted mission in the everyday circumstances of country life. The parson was intimately engaged with the rural parishioners whose small-town existence he shared. He was no scholar in the closet (though Harvard granted him a doctorate of divinity in 1816) nor devotee of the parlor. Ripley spent his days as a man among men, out in the fields with the farmers and in tune with everyday events – "birth, marriage, sickness, death, burial, the common temptations, the common ambitions." From that direct observation of nature and varied experience of human affairs came

the practical wisdom the parson freely dispensed to anyone in need, rich and poor alike, whether they requested it or not. "An eminent skill he had in saying difficult and unspeakable things; in delivering to a man or a woman that which all their other friends had abstained from saying," and he did so with a blunt eloquence and clear conscience. "He believed, and therefore he spoke." To be sure, his social perspective was conservative; Ripley, his grandson acknowledged, "was eminently loyal in his nature, and not fond of adventure or innovation." As Concord's pastor, he kept up the traditions and practices of the church, "though in its mildest forms." Still, his was a simple and sincere faith, growing out of an authentic life, that invigorated the ministry. It resonated the best of the New England way.

But that world was no more. Ripley belonged to "the rear-guard of the great camp and army of the Puritans," upholding "platforms and customs" no longer commanding "the affections of men." His passing thus served as a sign of the times: "It was fit that he should depart" at this moment of change, "fit that, in the fall of laws, a loyal man should die."³

For all the filial devotion, this obituary was not just a tribute to a family patriarch. It was also a salvo in the bitter war of words Emerson had provoked with his Divinity School address, owing to its ferocious assault on the "formalist" faith and soulless preaching he deemed characteristic of Unitarian churches. The polemical thrust was readily apparent to the editors of the *Christian Register*, the official organ of the Unitarian establishment. Reprinting the *Republican* notice of the "venerable minister" in its October 9 issue, the *Register* judged the piece inadequate in its account of Ripley's "character and services," and it excised "two brief sentences," as it informed readers, "because we do not like them." The sentences in question, concluding the obituary, consigned not only Ripley but the old-time religion he embodied to the grave.⁴

The *Register's* objection was well-taken and not just because Emerson had pronounced a death sentence for Ripley's version of Christian faith. In the Transcendentalist's telling, Ripley had succeeded in the ministry because of down-to-earth qualities—hospitality, charity, honesty, public-spiritedness—connecting him with parishioners and conveying his earnest belief. The parson's homespun personality held sway, at the expense of a wider context. From a grandson's perspec-

tive, Ripley had been the same man in the pulpit from beginning to end: a faithful servant of his God and his people. But there was much Emerson did not or would not see. Far from steering a constant course in the ministry, Concord's shepherd had evolved over the decades in his convictions and in his guidance of the flock.

No one knew that better than Rev. Barzillai Frost, the assistant and then successor to Ripley at Concord's First Church. Born in 1804, a year after Emerson, and raised in a rural New Hampshire home beset with poverty, Frost struggled to obtain an education, graduating from Harvard College at the advanced age of 26 and from the Divinity School at 31. By the time he entered the ministry, Emerson was abandoning it; from 1837 to 1841, Frost labored assiduously by the octogenarian Ripley's side. In these formative years he made an unhappy impression on at least one parishioner, his contemporary and townsman Emerson, who listened with growing impatience to the young preacher's dry sermons full of empty words. No matter that Frost proved as dedicated to the parish as his role model Ripley, as assiduous in visiting homes, praying with the sick, consoling the bereaved, and as committed to the improvement of the town. To the critical Emerson, still wrestling with his decision to give up the pulpit for the lecture-hall, the inexperienced Frost represented everything wrong with the Unitarian ministry. Let his example be a warning to the graduates of Harvard Divinity School, lest they, too, come across as having "lived in vain." And yet, in his short stint as Ripley's aide, Frost had gained deeper insight than Emerson would ever appreciate into the changing contours of the aged parson's career and the secrets of his success.⁵

Ripley's personal virtues shone brightly in the sermon Frost preached at the funeral. Distinguished by a "profound moral and religious sensibility" from early on, young Ripley entered the ministry determined to "do good," and to that end he embarked on a lifelong course of "self-improvement." He possessed "a true thirst for knowledge," which he put to use in sermons at once "practical" and "rational," expounding the fundamental principles of Christianity to the minds and hearts of his people. His words were every bit as "pointed" and "searching" as Emerson had discerned, and they radiated his character. In every setting he spoke "the language of the heart and of the occasion." Thanks to these enduring qualities, Ripley retained the support of the

people in adapting to changing times. His theological beliefs altered over the years, "as fast and as far as the light broke into his mind." Raised a Calvinist, he no longer accepted the "five points" of that scheme by the time he ascended the pulpit, but saw no reason to repudiate the ancestral religion altogether. "He did not utterly reject a doctrine as soon as he felt there was something wrong in it. He waited until he clearly saw where the error was, and then he rejected the error and retained the truth. In this way there has been a steady progress in his mind, and no violent changes." So it was with the Concord church covenant, which under Ripley's leadership was liberalized three times, the last the year before his death. Such changes reflected the progressive cast of Ripley's mind. The parson was neither the rigid conservative of Emerson's imagining, with "a blind attachment to tradition," nor an unhinged radical driven by a "reckless spirit of innovation." In his assistant's estimation, Ripley was at bottom a "reformer," devoted to the "progress of society." "His whole life was on the side of reform," and under his influence, Concord was quick to adopt "all the improvements of the age."⁶

Frost had a keen insight into his mentor's mind and methods. But even he underestimated the changes wrought by Ripley in the conduct of the Concord church. So, too, have later historians, swayed by Emerson's picture of the personable parson, overlooked the striking innovations in governance and practice under Ripley's leadership. Well before Emerson and Frost came on the scene, the minister took a church rooted in Calvinist orthodoxy, exposed it to new ideas, and remade it along liberal lines – without ever declaring a change of allegiance. Like many Arminian clergy of his generation, Ripley eschewed theological arguments from the pulpit for the sake of harmony in the pews. But that was a tactic in a larger strategy for change. In keeping with his belief that salvation was available to all through faith in Christ, the parson asserted the power of his sacred office and oversaw a sweeping transformation in the rules by which the Concord church admitted individuals to its privileges, with the eventual goal of embracing every inhabitant.⁷

This essay documents those changes and interprets their significance, as seen by both minister and parishioners. Ripley's reforms were intended to extend the reach of the established church and its pastor over the spiritual and moral life of the town. In the process, they redefined the character of church membership and the nature of

the Christian community. Once an exclusive body of visible saints, the Puritan church of Peter Bulkeley and Daniel Bliss would ideally, under Ripley's guidance, approximate a country parish in which all the inhabitants gathered together to ask the Lord's blessings as naturally as they were born, married, and died. Such was the essential meaning of unity to the parson and his followers, and through these practical policies and practices, they made their church "Unitarian."

In 1778, when Ripley became the shepherd of the Concord flock, most Congregational churches still followed the model of organization laid down by the founding fathers of New England. Consistent with the Puritans' version of Calvinist theology, these churches set themselves off from the corrupt mass of humankind, doomed to sin and perdition, and aspired to be assemblies of the elect, their holiness evident to all. Only the godly need apply for membership and access to the privileges of baptism and communion. But a problem arose: who belonged among the saints? To identify that holy band, Puritans assessed the moral conduct and Christian knowledge of candidates and then dared to scrutinize their inner lives. Aspirants to church membership were obliged to provide "spiritual relations" of God's working in their souls. Such statements might be conventional formulas, tracing progress to grace in terms learned from the pulpit. At other times, as during the enthusiasm of the Great Awakening, they might soar into an inspired vernacular. Whatever the rhetoric, these accounts put the religious experience of a candidate on public view, to be judged by those already within the "visible church." In principle, no aspect of an applicant's life, outer or inner, was exempt from the prying eyes of neighbors.

The scrutiny did not stop with admission. Each church had an official creed, and candidates were expected to subscribe to it. In Concord, as elsewhere, the doctrine was the Calvinist scheme summarized in the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, drawn up in England back in 1647 and widely embraced by New England Puritans. That document defined the core beliefs to which each person gave assent. New members also undertook to realize the holiness of saints. In the Congregational tradition, each local church constituted a community in covenant, the members pledging to live together by God's law, in peace, equity, and Christian love. The covenant in use under Bliss and

Emerson bound members to avoid a host of sins, including "all oppression, griping, and hard dealing." In July 1776, as the Continental Congress was drawing up the Declaration of Independence, Concord's church updated its foundational document with new requirements. Amid the turmoil of Revolution, the gathered saints vowed to shun pride and to keep peace. The first promise meant no fancy dress, no false dealings, no vain ambition; the second demanded no "slandering, back[-bit]ing, and reproaching our Neighbor." In the moral community of the church, it was sinful to assert superiority over others. To enforce such behavior, the church extracted one final commitment: submission to moral oversight by fellow members, who watched over one another, disciplining backsliders where necessary and excommunicating those permanently sunk in "raging pollution or spiritual uncleanness" — a sanction that proved necessary only once over the next fifty years.⁸

The problem of baptism complicated these arrangements. The Puritan fathers had reserved the sacraments to the elect. Only godly parents could baptize their children. This policy was acceptable so long as most adults in the Bible Commonwealth felt the power of the spirit and joined the company of saints. Once the first native-born generation of New Englanders came of age, that ceased to be the case. A great many "children of the church" were reluctant to follow in their pious parents' footsteps, for fear that they would not measure up. Burdened by conscientious self-doubt, they did not experience conversion or enter into full communion. Eventually, these "unregenerate" young people married and had children of their own, who, according to the rules, could not be brought to the baptismal font. To ministers like Peter Bulkeley, New England faced the disturbing prospect of rising generations becoming outsiders to the church. Unwilling to tolerate that condition, the clergy pushed for a new policy, which became known in 1662 as the Halfway Covenant. On the presumption that grace, like property, could be transmitted across generations, the children of the elect were considered eventual heirs to their parents' spiritual estate and granted special treatment. If they "owned" the covenant — that is, acknowledged the creed and submitted to discipline — the church would overlook their inability to secure saving grace and allow them the status of near-members, entitled to place their children, through baptism, within the Christian fold. By this ingenious means, family and church were tied together across the

generations. The compromise enraged some old Puritans, but Concord adopted the reform without much trouble. By Ezra Ripley's time, owning the covenant had been the custom "from time immemorial."⁹

Ezra Ripley inherited these policies and initially seemed comfortable with them. A few months after his ordination, the church unanimously adopted a "baptismal covenant" in keeping with the past. To qualify infants for baptism, parents were required to profess faith in a Trinitarian God, accept "the Christian watch and discipline of this church," attend worship regularly, and "train up" the young in Christian faith. By "owning" this covenant, they were welcomed as "members of this visible church," though "not in full communion." Thirteen years later, the halfway covenant was no longer so acceptable. "All children born in a christian land," Ripley told the church in March 1792, "ought to be baptized." This "privilege" was "their birthright," and it "ought not to depend on the good or bad conduct of their parents." Consequently, the church should abandon its century-old practice and baptize every child, whatever its parents' status. The proposal went nowhere; Ripley had evidently failed to prepare the ground. But the parson persevered. Opening up baptism, the ritual introduction of a child into the Christian community, was appropriately the entering-wedge in his campaign to alter the bases of church membership.¹⁰

On December 16, 1794, five couples, all recently wed and three with newborns at home, called on the church to baptize their children. None had ever "owned" the covenant. But that should not matter, they insisted in a statement surely written with Ripley's connivance. For the church's procedure—requiring parents to accept church discipline, in order to qualify their children for baptism—was unwarranted by the Bible. "We find it otherwise," they explained, "for Christ says Suffer little Children to come unto me, and forbids them not[;] for of such is the kingdom of heaven: as little children are not forbidden of Christ, we pray they may not be forbidden of men." The petitioners formed a closely knit group. Several, including the young baker Francis Jarvis, had recently moved to Concord, opened shops in the village, and married into local families. Energetic entrepreneurs, these men aspired to be patriarchs of Christian households but had not yet sunk deep roots in the community, and perhaps for that reason, they were reluctant to bind themselves by covenant to the church. Who knew how long they would

remain in Concord? As it happened, two of the couples would be gone in a few years. The others would eventually join the church, and Jarvis would become an influential deacon. But in 1795, they were certain of only one thing: wherever they resided, their children were entitled to baptism in the local church.¹¹

The petition prompted the church to review all its requirements for membership, not simply those for baptism. Under the minister's deft leadership, a nine-man committee considered the many objections to the procedures that had accumulated over the years. Were the rules based on the Bible? Did they foster harmony in church and town? By these tests, the minister and his associates found the current arrangements wanting. In the name of a purer faith — "the simple methods of the primitive Christians" — the committee, in a report written by Ripley, urged the church to shed the legacy of the Puritan fathers and open wider its doors. The members quickly agreed. On baptism, the petitioners got their wish. The halfway covenant, born of the desire to balance pure religion with family needs and in force for some 130 years, was finally dropped. Parents needed only affirm belief in Christianity and promise to raise their children in the faith. With that profession, they not only secured their children's access to baptism but earned a welcome to the Lord's Supper for themselves. That ceremony, restricted by Puritans to the elect, carried a sacred aura, and many sincere Christians, as Ripley recognized, felt "apprehensions of unpreparedness for that ordinance." To calm their worries, the church invited conscientious souls to be present at the sacrament but refrain from the commemorative feast. Gradually, it was hoped, the hesitant would shed their doubts and take a place at the table.¹²

Easing access to baptism and communion led to larger changes in admissions. The church stopped checking so thoroughly into the credentials and conduct of candidates for membership. Under Ripley's regime, individuals were released from close surveillance. As a sign of the new dispensation, in 1793 the church abandoned the old requirement of "spiritual relations." No longer would its membership lay claim to being "visible saints." Nor would the church faithful be subject to strenuous demands for intellectual and moral conformity. In 1795, under Ripley's prodding, the church embraced its pastor's Arminian stance and dropped the Westminster Catechism from the covenant. Members were now asked only to give broad assent to the Trinity and the Gospel.

Applicants were also freed from the longstanding requirement of making "public confession" of their sins, and although they were still subject to discipline for moral lapses, the church voted to replace the "fearful engagements" of the 1776 covenant with a general pledge to do right. From a lengthy contract, full of details, the covenant was transformed into a limited membership pledge.¹³

This wholesale revision of church policies enacted an Arminian reformation. If, as Ripley believed, Christ atoned for all humanity, then surely the Concord Church of Christ should draw every inhabitant within its embrace. Strict tests of admission, designed to narrow the gate to membership, violated the ideal of an inclusive community, with town and church acting in concert to foster a harmonious way of life. To attain this end, Ripley redrew the boundaries between the individual and the group. Ever since the Great Awakening, orthodox Congregationalists had been trying to stem the rise of Arminianism by inserting creeds and confessions of faith into church covenants; Concord was not alone in demanding adherence to the Westminster Confession. Arminians denounced such creeds as unscriptural and insisted on the right of private judgment. As Ripley made the case in his committee report, Christians may differ on "forms and nonessentials"; so long as the church observed the requirements of the gospel, it could be flexible in its rules. "If any feel very tenacious and rigid in things not essential," they should remember the wisdom of English divine Richard Baxter: "Many a godly man hath here, in his mistaken zeal, been a means to deceive and pervert his brethren . . ." ¹⁴

A new concern for privacy now shaped Ripley's church. No longer were candidates for membership obligated to put their spiritual experiences on public view or to confess their sins before the congregation. No one had the right to intrude into the interior life of the individual. For that very reason, Ezra Ripley refrained from recording intimate details in his journal. On anniversaries of his ordination, the parson would open up the little volume and appraise his performance in office and his relations with "my people." Self-examination, a duty for Christians and ministers, never led to self-revelation. "I have serious objections to the keeping of a Diary to be inspected after death," he observed in a journal now open to inspection by strangers at the library of his *alma mater*, "even if it could be kept with exactness and truth;

and therefore I have not done it." What people needed to know could be derived from his public conduct. "What is bad in me, why should the world know it farther than they daily observe? and if there be any thing good, by the grace of God, will not the daily exhibition of it be the best evidence to the world?" Public character and conduct were the true gauge of individual merit. On that rule, the Concord church now assessed candidates for membership. The inner life was the exclusive concern of the individual and God.¹⁵

Actually, the church as a body had little to do with admissions. After 1795, applicants were interviewed in private by Parson Ripley. Assuming they offered "credible evidence of sincerity" and made a profession of faith, he would "propound" them to the church. No objection being heard, the individuals were in. Once active agents in the admissions process, church members were restricted to tacit consent. Step by step, the solemn act of joining the church lost its public weight and turned into a private affair. Only a single ritual remained. Standing in the broad aisle of the meetinghouse, the new member listened intently as the Reverend Mr. Ripley read aloud the words of the abbreviated covenant from the pulpit. Like the church members who approved each admission, the individual need do no more than say yes.¹⁶

These root-and-branch reforms in the church stirred barely a protest, at least none noted in the official records kept by Ripley. Only one unnamed person dissented from the covenant committee's report. The town was clearly behind the Arminian reforms. Still, the parson was aware of objections and doubts, and he made a calculated effort to address them by positioning himself as the moderate between two extremes. On one side, he argued, were those free-thinkers who "have become more licentious, as they have become more liberal. They have thrown away superstition & bigotry, but have thrown away religion also, at least in degree . . ." On the other were the newly pious, who "have become more unlike Christ as they have become more bigoted & zealous. . . . They would rather increase rites & forms, than omit any that are in use." The indifferent and the intolerant had one thing in common: both substituted their own fallible judgment for the "rules and forms prescribed by Christ and his apostles." In Ripley's view, Christians should "take the bible for our rule of faith & practice." But every aspect of church life is not prescribed in scripture: "It is in itself indifferent

whether we practice this or that mode of worship or form of admission to church privilege" In such instances, each congregation should follow the wishes of the majority, and dissenters should "acquiesce" cheerfully in a spirit of charity. "Peace and harmony," the hallmarks of community, took precedence over the claims of conscience. Ripley held to this position for the next thirty years.¹⁷

For all the rhetoric of community, Ripley's reforms came at the cost of collective life. Throughout the colonial era, the full members of the church, all visible saints, had played a vital role in its corporate affairs, running admissions, enforcing discipline, mediating disputes, and at times fighting with the minister and among themselves. Peter Bulkeley lamented such activism—"too much liberty and power" had gotten "into the hands of the multitude," he complained—but despaired of a solution. "I know not how it can be avoided . . . unless we should make the doors of the church narrower." One hundred and twenty five years later, Ezra Ripley happened upon an answer Bulkeley could not have conceived. By throwing open the doors of the church, the parson succeeded in enhancing his own power.

His reforms left church members with little to do. They played a minimal part in admissions, which became the exclusive concern of the pastor and the candidate behind closed doors. The power of disciplining wayward members slipped away, too. Not a single infraction came before the church from 1784 to around 1812, when 38-year-old Ephraim Wheeler, who had recently entered the fold, was accused of "unchristian words and conduct." Instead of conciliating the aggrieved neighbor, a man in his late 70s, Wheeler displayed an "unrelenting, obstinate disposition" and refused to withdraw from communion until the matter was resolved. For his recalcitrance, the church formally "admonished" Wheeler and urged him to be "more watchful and circumspect in your future life and conversation." None of these details, which appear in a stray document among papers from the parson's tenure, were inscribed by Ripley in the official church record book. So, too, did he proceed with utmost circumspection in dealing with another dispute between church members in 1816. With his sensitivity to privacy, Ripley declined to name the offending party in bringing the case before the members. The whole matter was assigned to a committee of the pastor and deacons. After a month's labors, the committee reported that "they had gained so much

satisfaction as to induce the following opinion, viz.: — 'It is not expedient to name the case to the church, nor for them, or the church, at present, to adopt any farther measures relative to it.'" The same confidential procedure was followed a decade later in treating with two "delinquent brethren" who had violated the Sabbath. With little business to transact, the church met infrequently. A few times a year, the brothers and sisters would convene after public worship and handle such chores as electing deacons, appointing delegates to councils and ordinations in other towns, and contributing money to the parson's favorite causes. The minister called the members together, and he kept the records of their occasional actions. With good reason, the Church of Christ in Concord came to be known as "Doctor Ripley's church."¹⁸

Outside the meetinghouse, church members would find much to do in the numerous voluntary associations Ripley sponsored to promote religion and moral reform. But as a corporate body, the life of the church contracted into a few activities, all presided over by the pastor: Sunday worship, communion, baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Every Sabbath, the meetinghouse bell rang at 10:20 a.m., signaling the beginning of "religious exercises" ten minutes later. The bell sounded again at 10:25 a.m., rested for two minutes, then tolled continuously until the parson, regular as that bell, ascended the stairs of the high pulpit precisely at 10:30 a.m. The service consisted of prayers, hymns, announcements, and the sermon, in an order of worship that probably varied little from week to week. Ripley was a stickler for ceremony who insisted that every infant's birth be reported to the congregation before its baptism could be performed and that no marriage be solemnized before the banns were read. The latter responsibility fell to Squire Abiel Heywood, a veteran bachelor who in 1822, at the ripe age of 62, astonished the parishioners one Sabbath morning by rising in his pew, adjusting his spectacles, and crying his own banns "with the same unction that he performed the service for others." As with family events, so with official holidays. Thanksgiving could not be thanksgiving until the Governor's proclamation of the day was read aloud.

Ripley drove the service forward step by step. His spirited prayers won wider admiration than his sermons. To the parson, spontaneous speech was as untrustworthy in religion as free-flowing emotion, and so he organized his written discourse tightly, using formal language

that was clear and direct but rarely inspired. Ripley stinted on metaphor; he preferred a well-ordered statement, in which abstract nouns ruled like impersonal magistrates, defining and prescribing laws for rational minds. Occasionally, his attacks on sin hit their mark. After one sermon on "the character and condition of the intemperate man," a parishioner headed in a huff for the manse. "On being asked if any of his family were sick or dead, [the man] replied, No, but he was going to talk with Dr. Ripley for pointing him out, and holding him up before the congregation." More often, the congregation received the sermon quietly, with the deference due its solemn message. The 3,000-word discourse lasted about half an hour, allowing the congregation to recess for dinner at noon. Precisely at 1:05 p.m. in fall and winter and 1:35 p.m. in spring and summer, the sound of the meetinghouse bell would once more ring out through the town, announcing the impending resumption of public worship. Usually, fewer people heeded that alarm than in the morning.¹⁹

Even when they came together for Sunday meeting, the parishioners no longer shared the same common space. Through the colonial period, every adult had an assigned seat in the meetinghouse, determined by a town committee on the basis of age, status, and wealth. Men and women took their places on wooden benches in separate sections, with the old and rich in front and the young and poor in the rear and the upper galleries. In 1792, Concord undertook an extensive renovation of the meetinghouse, the first since its construction in 1712. A plain, barn-like structure, the original building was long and narrow (60' by 50' by 28'), with a broad aisle extending from the entrance to the pulpit at the opposite end. The renovation enlarged the house of worship and gave it a more fashionable and "churchly" look. The meetinghouse, painted bright yellow, acquired a clock and bell-tower, marking the passage of time in this world. A ninety-foot spire, soaring above the belfry, pointed all eyes to heaven.

To finance the repairs and pay the upkeep, the town eliminated the benches and installed box pews, which were auctioned off to parishioners; those nearest the pulpit commanded the highest prices. No longer did neighbors obtain public recognition, however humble, in the house of worship. Instead, families gathered together in separate pews, which were bought and sold like other pieces of real estate and locked against trespassers. A few free pews were available for those without the means

for their own. But common seating was limited, since the renovation had allowed only one gallery, part of which was reserved for the choir. In all likelihood, the meetinghouse was less adequate to the town's needs than before the change. No more than half the adult population could be seated at any time, despite the state law requiring attendance at Sunday meeting. Even Ripley acknowledged the old house of worship was "more spacious and distinguished, than this for the present times." But thanks to the alterations, it was also "more convenient and elegant, than we have hitherto enjoyed." Like the new taste for privacy, the latest fashion in architecture retained the old frame of community but gutted its life from within.²⁰

If anybody objected to the transformation of the church, there was not much a person could do. As a Congregational minister of the Standing Order, Ripley held tenure for life, at a guaranteed salary pegged to the cost of living, and every taxpayer was obligated by law to contribute to that sum. Dissenters could win exemption by going before Squire Heywood and showing that they attended services elsewhere. With no alternatives in Concord, that meant taking the trouble to find an acceptable church out of town. Only a handful of non-conformists ever bothered to "sign off" the parish. Still, ministers were subject to public opinion. People could stay away from Sunday meeting, take their time in paying the parish rate, or find other ways to express dissatisfaction. In the spring of 1804, the minister, feeling the pinch of inflation on his fixed income and with two sons at Harvard, petitioned the town for aid in "his present embarrassed circumstances." The outcome put the parson in his place. After postponing action for a month, the town meeting took up a proposal to grant a \$500 supplement to the minister's salary. When it was put to a vote, moderator Jonas Lee called for the "ayes" and "nays" and decided the measure passed, but his decision was "scrupled," and the voters were formally polled. This time, the measure lost. During a period of intense partisanship in state and national politics, with Concord solidly in the Republican camp, a majority of voters declined to pay extra for Federalist preaching. The parson had to depend on a voluntary collection among his supporters. In an attempt to save face, Ripley publicly thanked his benefactors, though he added that "it would be much more pleasing to me, could I with consistency express my obligations to the Town as such," and he pretended that the division

in town meeting concerned the best way to help him out – whether by taxation or by gift – and not on whether he deserved the extra money. "Whether the most eligible and effectual method was adopted, is not for me to decide. Be this as it may I cannot entertain the thought that this great and growing people wish me, or any man, to serve them in the gospel without a comfortable support." In fact, the fund drive fell far short of the \$500 he had requested. It generated only \$272, donated overwhelmingly by Federalists. Ripley's duty to give thanks must have grated on his often irritable temper.²¹

The congregation's power of the purse diminished somewhat in the next decade. Among the perquisites of his office, Ripley was entitled to thirty cords of firewood a year, which the townspeople "combined gratuitously" to cut from the town wood lot and cart to the parsonage. Unfortunately, this work was often done "injudiciously," with young and old growth removed indiscriminately. In 1811, the town decided to end "the Ministerial Wood Bee" for the sake of efficiency. It cleared the lot, sold off the wood, and used the proceeds to create an investment fund, the interest of which went to defray the minister's salary. (The town also built and sold a few more pews in the meetinghouse and added that revenue to the fund.) By 1825, the ministerial fund, controlled by trustees chartered by the state, was worth \$7,810, chiefly in loans to local farmers and shopkeepers; its subsidy at once lessened the burden of parish rates and increased Ripley's independence from the inhabitants. In the financial interest of church and town, yet another collective activity had disappeared. Short of demanding his dismissal – still an unusual action in the Standing Order – the people of Concord were stuck with Ripley, dry sermons, unvarnished opinions, and all.²²

Mary Merrick had no objections to the parson. In the early 1820s, the teenager was keeping house for her widowed father, the morose merchant and Federalist politician Tilly Merrick, and cultivating her interests in books, friends, and beaux. Her mother had died in 1816, when Mary was nearly fifteen, and the family had been struggling ever since. Tilly Merrick, a Harvard College graduate (Class of 1773), had seen the wider world during the Revolutionary War, serving as a diplomat and merchant in Amsterdam and then, with the coming of peace, settling in Charleston, South Carolina, where he had engaged in trade and

invested in a plantation and slaves. But he had extended himself well beyond his means and gone bust. In 1798, Merrick returned in near-ruin to his native Concord and started over with a small country store that he tended "with ill grace" and modest profit. Marrying his cousin Sally Minot at age 42, he persevered until her death, after which his business steadily decayed. Still, with his education and cosmopolitanism, Tilly Merrick graced the elite, and his daughter Mary enjoyed access to the most polite circles. She was an intimate of Sarah Ripley, the minister's daughter, went to parties at Squire Hoar's, and delighted in visits to "the good old parson's house."

At age nineteen, Mary Merrick was considered "the fairest of the fair" among the village belles and eagerly pursued by young men, despite the dwindling dowry at her disposal. She enjoyed the compliments and occasionally boasted of "conquests," though she was exasperated by all the gossip about her affairs. "I frequently think that the Concord folks want very much to marry me [off,]" she grumbled. Courtship did not dominate her life. Her days were spent running the household for her father and two brothers. Amid the domestic duties she found time to read the latest books, including the novels of Walter Scott as they came out, participate in the singing school, go star-gazing to learn astronomy, savor moonlight walks on summer evenings ("I can hardly suppose a person has a soul who does not love it. . . . Nature . . . is my favorite theme"), and maintain a daily journal of her thoughts and feelings, which she sent in letters to her cousin. Like many teenagers, then and now, Mary had her emotional ups and downs, one moment laughing at awkward suitors, the next dolefully predicting she would never leave her father for a husband. She was easily wounded and prone to feel sorry for herself, "confined" as she was to the home "as much as any old tame housewife of sixty." Fortunately, she had a ready source of consolation: "the moment any thing troubles me, that moment I begin to think of eternity."²³

The young woman had learned her lessons well from the Concord pulpit. Under the weight of her mother's early death and her father's sad decline, she saw life as a trial and steeled herself against adversity. "The dearest friends," she knew, "may in an instant be snatched from us by death and we left to mourn the loss which can never be repaired." Why, then, chase after passing pleasures in a world of "sorrow and suffering, and sin"? "If I seek happiness here, I shall be most egregiously mistaken."

The wisest course was to practice "self-denial," improve "fleeting time," and pursue "piety to God and usefulness to man." Such "moralizing," the stuff of sermons heard week after week, runs through the correspondence of this lively teenager, along with her witticisms and talk about books. She had made the parson's discourse her own. "Who that studies their own heart attentively will deny the depravity of human nature?" Not Merrick, who struggled with "vanity" and "egotism" and was startled by how easily "evil passion should find its way into my heart." Despite her aspiration to "prepare for Heaven" and her recognition of the "comparative nothingness of all terrestrial objects," she was as earth-bound as anyone else. "I sometimes despair and think it impossible for me to be a Christian."²⁴

Three and a half years later, on June 6, 1824, Mary Merrick sought out Parson Ripley, professed her faith in Christ and repentance for sin, and earned admission to the Concord church. That decision, culminating a long quest to "make peace with God" and feel "dependance on that Being on whom [is] our life, and our breath, and all our comforts," is hardly surprising. But why *then*? What prompted this earnest woman, who had long appreciated "the importance of religion," finally to enlist in the visible church? The answer lies in her changing domestic situation. In July 1823, Merrick found a way out of her father's home. At age twenty-two, she wed a widower of her own, the middle-aged lawyer Nathan Brooks, fifteen years her senior, and assumed responsibility for his three-year-old daughter Caroline. The union was anticipated by the ever-watchful neighbors; in September 1821, word had spread that Brooks was "paying attention" to Miss Merrick, as one curious observer, Maria Thoreau, gossiped to a friend. Not long after the marriage, the new bride was pregnant. In her seventh month, she stood in the broad aisle of the meetinghouse and assented to the stripped-down covenant of the Concord church. Mary Merrick Brooks was following her mother's example. A quarter-century before, in January 1800, Sally Minot Merrick had joined the Concord church one month after the birth of her first child. For both mother and daughter, the object was the same: creating a Christian home for their young. Fittingly, they brought their infants promptly to the baptismal font. Faith and family went together.²⁵

Merrick *mère* and *filie* did more than they had to. Under Ripley's new regime, no one was obliged to join the church in order to baptize

an infant; a simple profession of faith sufficed. The sacrament had been available under the Halfway Covenant, and it became even more accessible with the parson's reforms. In the two decades after 1795, 228 people seized this route, including 68 couples and 73 women on their own—nearly twice as many as had "owned" the covenant during the opening years of Ripley's ministry (1778-94). Liberalization proved popular. Yet, the Merrick women went beyond the minimal requirements and claimed church membership. They were in good company. More women embraced full communion than settled for baptism privileges.

In fact, Concord's church membership consisted overwhelmingly of women. Decade by decade, over the long course of Ripley's pastorate, three out of every four new members were "sisters in Christ." When men did join the church, it was typically alongside their wives, and if the men held back, the women did not hesitate to act on their own. (Tilly Merrick joined the church in 1807, seven years after Sally; Nathan Brooks never did.) In a society whose custom and law dictated that women be subordinate to men, where a woman's social standing derived from her father or husband, and where wives had no independent relation to the state, the church offered an appealing alternative. A woman made her own decision, as an individual, to enter the fold. Her status as a member hinged on her personal piety, not her husband's wealth. As Parson Ripley saw it, like "the famed daughters of Israel," New England's women were naturally pious. Their minds were "peculiarly formed for the exercise of friendship and generosity, and sweetly vibrating to the impressions of religion." This testimonial, not surprisingly, stressed the social services of women. It was only part of the story. In joining the church, a mother like Mary Merrick Brooks could simultaneously take responsibility for her own spiritual welfare and care for her child's soul.²⁶

"Prepare for Heaven": that was the traditional Puritan counsel, which teenage Mary Merrick took to heart. The sincere Christian should always be ready to "quit these earthly scenes" and "be received to a world of happiness, there to join those friends who are gone before us never more to be separated." No moment in a woman's life raised that prospect more vividly than childbirth, as Merrick knew well. Nathan Brooks's first wife had died only seventeen days after giving birth to her daughter, Caroline. Confronting mortality, many mothers-to-be felt new urgency about the state of their souls. Would they die in the faith,

assured of Christ's blessings for themselves and the little ones they left behind? "God's covenant with his people . . . has always embraced the children with the parents," Parson Ripley told the congregation; it was thus the duty of parents "to dedicate their children in baptism." Surely, they would not leave a vulnerable infant outside God's special care. Despite the injunction, some were derelict in the responsibility. Bereft of a mother attached to the church, little Caroline Brooks went without baptism for four and a half years, until her father found a new wife in Mary Merrick. The girl eventually underwent the ritual in tandem with her infant half-brother, only three days old. In anticipation of that event, lawyer Brooks professed Christian faith, though he never took the final step of joining the church. Like most men, he deferred to his wife's initiative in religious matters. In the Concord church, as elsewhere, women looked out for their own and their loved ones' souls. Thanks to them, baptism was nearly universal for Concord children for two decades (1795-1814).²⁷

Even in administering the rite of baptism, Ripley displayed the new solicitude for privacy. For various reasons, parishioners asked the parson to conduct the ordinance for parents and close relatives alone. Sometimes an infant was ill, and it was too risky to take the baby to the meetinghouse, as happened with Martha Ann Hunt, whose mother died only a day after the birth; the precaution proved unavailing, and Martha Ann was dead two months later. On other occasions, the mother was suffering from ailments, such as Mary Balcom's "lameness," that confined her to home. Health emergencies were not the only occasion for private ceremonies. Some parents did not get around to baptizing their young for years; then, in one swoop, all the children were rounded up for the ritual at home. That is what Ephraim and Lovina Farrar did in August 1803 with their eight children, ranging from fifteen-year-old James down to three-month-old Elisha Jones. Perhaps, the parents were so embarrassed by their dilatory habits that they wished to avoid a public spectacle of baptism *en masse*. But there is no hint of an explanation in other instances, when Ripley discreetly noted that a baptism was held in private "for adequate reasons" or "by reason of particular circumstances." Like the seats in the meetinghouse, the ancient ritual was adapting to the ethos of the new, privatized family.²⁸

No one cared more about privacy in religion than the aspiring young doctor Edward Jarvis, who pushed Arminian reform farther than the parson ever anticipated. Born in 1803, he was the son of Francis Jarvis, onetime owner of the village bakeshop, who had helped to set the transformation of the Concord church in motion back in 1795 by calling for the baptism of every Christian child, whatever the affiliation of its parents. Francis and Meliscent Jarvis got their wish, and they were among the very first in the parish to use the new procedure for baptizing their children. Serious about religion, the couple did not stop with a profession of faith. Over the succeeding years, Francis Jarvis gave up the bakery for a general store and speculation in real estate and rose into the economic elite. He and Meliscent won esteem for their prosperous household, with six active children, and eventually, it became time for them to assume formal membership in the church. The core of the congregation consisted of married couples like themselves, immersed in the responsibilities of maturity: educating the young, tending households, farms, and shops, assuming public office, burying aged parents, worrying about their own and their children's futures. Typically, husbands entered the covenant about age 45, wives from 37 to 40. In January 1810, when the Jarvises took the step, both Francis and Meliscent were forty-one. Such decisions were not just a personal affair between individuals and God but a significant social statement, announcing the arrival of a new generation, taking up its appointed role in church and state. Appropriately, Francis Jarvis emerged as a pillar of the First Church: trustee of the ministerial fund in 1811, deacon the next year. "Thus one generation is pressing close upon the heels of another," as Ripley once remarked, "while the foremost is fast falling into the grave and eternity."²⁹

There was never any question that Edward Jarvis, "seed" of his parents' covenant, would ripen in faith and bear fruit within the church. Every Sabbath, Deacon Jarvis and family went to meeting "as a matter of course, as if nothing else was desirable or possible, as we went to our meals or to our beds." Parson Ripley's dignified presence in the pulpit evoked the youth's awe; Edward longed to don the minister's black robe and shepherd a flock of his own. With this goal in mind, he took the usual Concord path and made his way to Harvard. But when the young man announced his ambition to enter the ministry, his family

and friends were aghast. He would never succeed, they insisted, owing both to a speech impediment (he salivated excessively when he talked, and his voice was so "shrill and remarkable" that one casual acquaintance immediately recognized it with a shudder decades later) and to his rigid character. No congregation would stand him. Jarvis resigned himself to the disappointment and despite a good many qualms, opted to pursue medicine. After graduating from college in 1826, he returned to Concord, where he kept the center school for a year, with nine-year-old Henry David Thoreau among his pupils. In 1827-1828, he embarked on his medical education, taking courses in Boston and training under Concord's popular physician, Dr. Josiah Bartlett. At that moment of transition, he made the decision to enter the Concord church. At age 25, Jarvis belonged to a rare breed: young, unmarried men joining the fold as they were starting out in the world. The timing was unusual, but as it happened, Jarvis was not acting alone. Over the deacon's objections, the medical student had gotten engaged to Almira Hunt, a local farmer's daughter, and the two geared themselves up for a long wait while Edward prepared for his profession. With the wedding far off, the young couple apparently decided to seal their mutual commitment by entering the church right away.³⁰

Advancement into the communion should have gone smoothly for Jarvis. His family had guided him to this moment, his future with Almira was invested in it, and if he still had doubts, the recent deaths of his mother and his brother Charles should have aroused concern for his eternal soul. Three years Edward's senior, Charles was a rising physician whose life was cut short at age 25 by a protracted illness in 1825-1826. Edward took a leave from Harvard to nurse him, but there was no hope, as the patient was the first to admit. Charles was equally detached in diagnosing his spiritual condition: "He said he had reason to hope his God would be merciful. He had revered his Maker and though he had made no open profession of religion . . . , yet he had lived as he thought religiously. . . . He was prepared to die. He did not long for death, but if Heaven so ordered it, he was prepared to submit." Two months after his death in February 1826, Meliscent Hosmer Jarvis, age 58, followed her son to the grave, her health debilitated by consumption and her spirits broken by the loss. As she lay dying, the mother was still watching out for the welfare of her children. She "wished Heaven's best blessing on

me," Edward recorded as her parting words, "to guide me through this world and to prepare me for happiness with her in the next."³¹

Ultimately, neither the proximity of death nor anxiety about salvation led Jarvis into the church. His was a social decision, oriented to this world and not the future beyond. Parson Ripley had been pressing him to join for a year and a half, and in March 1828 he gave in. On hearing this news, one neighbor expressed surprise. "She did not know that I was particularly pious." Jarvis readily agreed. "Very true. I am not. I have no faith nor desire for religion farther than it makes me better. Of itself, it is nothing. Its effects alone are what I think are desirable." Jarvis affirmed a liberal religion, true to the moral teachings of his admired pastor. In his view, theology mattered far less than ethics. "It is of less consequence what a man believes than what he does & from what motives. If these two are good, it is well, if not, woe be unto him." Life called for the sincere performance of moral duty in the public eye, and Jarvis, like Ripley, wished to be known and judged only by that standard. He would keep his personal thoughts and feelings to himself.³²

Although he agreed to join the church, Jarvis was not happy about the public ritual for accepting the covenant. Neither were his fiancée, Almira Hunt, nor their friends Harriet Moore and Sarah E. Hurd, who were also considering membership. All of these young people, none older than twenty-six, felt "diffident as to this publicity." Jarvis was delegated to talk to Ripley about their reservations. Could he arrange a private ceremony? The parson was nonplused: "He said he wished to make our profession as public as possible." In response, the medical student abandoned deference to his elder and became argumentative, and when he went home, he recorded the testy exchange in his diary. "I do not wish to make any public profession nor indeed any profession," Jarvis announced. "It is not commanded. I think it [is] making a pompous show of the increase of the church & I have a strong aversion to it & if you say I desire to make a public profession it will not be true." Ever exact, Ripley proposed to "omit the word public." That was not sufficient. "I still object to the word profession," Jarvis retorted. "I wish to make none. I wish only to come to the sacrament." Ripley offered another concession: "I will then leave out the word profession." Then, in an effort to move the discussion forward, the minister turned to the actual church covenant. But Jarvis could not shut up about his objections, and

the point of his visit — to secure a private ceremony — was seemingly lost. What right, he demanded, did the church have to impose its covenant on those wishing to partake of the Lord's supper? Jarvis was building on his father's precedent. If baptism should be open to every Christian child, as the deacon had successfully advocated three decades earlier, why not communion for every willing adult? There was no justification for "having any church separate from the congregation. I believe all may come to the table as freely as to prayer & man has no right to form a society & fence it about with rules, creeds, and covenants to which the candidate must accede."

Doctor Ripley was hard put to deny this logic, since his feisty interlocutor was simply carrying Arminianism to its limits. But the minister held his ground. It was "proper" for the church to link communion to the covenant, he averred, although that would not be his preference. If Ripley had his way, candidates for church membership would be required only to affirm a single statement: "You believe in God & Christ & the Bible & mean to live according to it." Nonetheless, Jarvis was asking for too much, too fast. "Do one thing at a time," the parson advised. "Too many innovations may disgust & offend the tender." As for the ritual of admission, he proposed a compromise. At the next communion service, Jarvis and friends could stand in their high wooden pews, rather than the broad aisle of the meetinghouse, and accept the covenant. The procedure carved a middle way between "diffidence" and "publicity." It was put into effect the following month, when the little band of friends entered the church together. To his surprise, after all the hard bargaining and despite the companionship of his fiancée, the deacon's son found the event unsatisfying. "I felt none of the glow" that his friend Cyrus Hosmer "said he felt. I felt solemn and grateful to Christ for his instruction, example, & sufferings & prayed that I might follow, obey & imitate him & become better, purer, and more acceptable to God through him." What else should he have expected? Having rejected piety for moralism and denied any mystical basis to faith, Jarvis entered the church with the same sense of social obligation he enacted in joining other voluntary associations. The decision did nothing to exhilarate the soul.³³

Some parishioners did thirst for a more ardent piety, including the parson's own step-daughter Mary Moody Emerson. The fourth child of Concord's fiery patriot minister, she was a daughter of the Revolu-

tion, at once glorying in her father's wartime sacrifice and bewailing the personal costs it entailed. She liked to say that as an infant of eight months, she had been "'in arms' at the Concord fight," as she quipped to Lafayette during his visit to Concord. She was not yet two years old when her father died at Fort Ticonderoga in 1776, leaving widow Phebe Emerson to struggle with the care of five children, none older than eight. Little Mary Moody was shipped off to her grandmother in Malden, some fifteen miles away, and following her death, placed with an economically hard-pressed aunt, in whose bleak household she would endure childhood as a domestic drudge. Even after Phebe Bliss Emerson remarried in 1780 and became Madam Ripley, the girl did not return home for years. She got the call only as a teenager, summoned to assist in the chores at the parsonage. Reunited at long last with her family, she joined the Concord church in 1794, at age twenty, in company with her younger sister Rebecca.³⁴

The decision tokened only a passing interest in community. As a lonely girl suffering a miserable "orphanship" in Malden, Mary Moody Emerson had cultivated a solitary relation with God, whose "electing love for me" she "presumed" as given from birth, and the move to Concord, though it immersed her in family and friendships, did not alter that interior life. "Alive with God is enough—'tis rapture," she declared in her "Almanack," the spiritual diary she began around the time she entered the church and that she kept for the rest of her days. In her mind, the Revolution had cast her into permanent exile, shut out of "the pales of the initiated by birth wealth talents & patronage." She embraced that fate as a cross, spurned marriage and social convention, and in pursuit of holy passion, "danced to the music of my own imajanation" at "the throne of my Master." This religious calling, pursued through wide reading and contemplation of sublime nature, soon propelled her out of Concord and into a peripatetic existence among kinfolk from the Boston area to the backwoods of Maine. Her "spiritual Journey" demanded an unfettered soul. Not surprisingly, step-father Ripley, with his communal ideology and devotion to institutions, could not comprehend that choice. In 1827, the gout-ridden widower, stuck in a nearly empty manse, urged Mary to give up her roving life and return "nearer the place of your nativity and the land of your ancestors," where "all the grand and pleasing varieties of nature" could be found, along with "books and solitude, or society, at your option."

Why then fly into the wilderness, or bury yourself in the desert? Surely, it cannot add to your happiness or improvement to hear the screaming of loons, the hooting of owls, and the howling of wolves. The wildness and simplicity of nature you may see and enjoy without being surrounded by that in her which is savage, terrible, and unsocial.

Mary Moody Emerson resisted such counsel. Intent on being "rapt in another world," she seized "the advantage of loneliness" and cultivated the solitary, spiritual self.³⁵

Few communicants carried the quest for holiness to such radical extremes. In Ripley's parish, piety and community normally went together. Yet, even in Concord, there were, to use the parson's words, "periods of noticeable religious excitement." As an "evangelist" of Christ, Ripley looked forward to times "when the Spirit of God is sent down in plentiful effusions; when the Lord cometh and raineth down righteousness." As it happened, heaven opened up and showered grace upon the town at moments of acute political conflict. From 1799 to 1802, as Federalists and Republicans fought furiously for control of the republic, Concord experienced a small stirring of religion under the pastor's steady hand. For four years in a row, admissions rose to twice the usual level, thanks to the flow of young, single women into full communion. This was a respectable rallying of the faithful from leading Federalist homes. It included the minister's daughter Sarah, Deacon John White's daughter Betsy, Sally Minot Merrick, and the Thoreau sisters, Elizabeth and Jane, whose father Jean had sailed from the Isle of Jersey to Boston on the eve of the Revolution, risen from seaman to merchant through wartime privateering, prospered in the metropolis, and opened a store in Concord center in October 1799, only to die a year and a half later, leaving a huge estate worth \$25,000, one of the richest in town. These families formed a close circle in the village; as they visited together, they imbibed a common sensibility with their tea. In the turbulent years surrounding Jefferson's election, they gave public witness to an orthodoxy forged in both parlor and church.³⁶

But religious sentiment could not always be kept under tight control. Shortly after the New Year in 1810, amid the political tensions leading up to the War of 1812, a new urgency about salvation quickened among the parishioners. On Tuesday, January 9, some fifty persons assembled at the manse for a "religious conference," where they talked for two hours on

the subject, "Wisdom is the principal thing" (Proverbs 4:7). In Ripley's judgment, the gathering was a success: the people "appeared to be serious and to be edified." And they were eager for more such sessions outside the official place and times for public worship. Held on weekday afternoons in private homes, the meetings went forward on a fortnightly basis; among the hosts were Deacon White and the widow Rebecca Thoreau. Usually, the parson presided, leading prayers and hymns, preaching short sermons, reading from the Bible and from contemporary divines. He balanced exhortations to piety with instructions on "the manner of reading and attending to religious exercises, in order to [obtain] spiritual benefit." But he could not always be present, and twice the participants went ahead without him, glad of a rare opportunity to exercise initiative. In other communities, such lay assemblies spread like wildfire, gathering emotional force and, with their minister's encouragement, bursting into full-fledged revivals. Not in Concord. As the meetings progressed, Ripley grew alarmed at their potential for producing "disputations and irregularities." His little memorandum book records the resolution. Because of the threat of disorder, he told the congregation, there would be no more meetings without his advance approval and direct supervision. "If the people are disposed to hear private lectures at convenient times and places, the pastor is ready to hold them, and to regulate them in such manner as shall seem to him best calculated to promote the great interests of religion." Apparently, that was the end of the "excitement" of 1810. If there were protests against his decision, we have no way of knowing. Ripley did not bother to report them in his journal.³⁷

Under close pastoral watch, the Concord church experienced a rational, orderly awakening. From 1810 to 1818, admissions surged to new highs of fifteen, sixteen, eighteen a year; there were more young, single members than ever, men as well as women. Where the events of 1810 appeared to Ripley "more a work of man than of God—more the effect of human passions and policy than of divine influence," the conversions of succeeding years were authentic signs of the Holy Spirit. The parson could not help exulting in his success. In November 1818, on his fortieth anniversary in the pulpit, he got out his memorandum book, read over his vows, and took stock. "I see reason to be . . . unfeignedly thankful that God has so far owned and blessed my labours, that so many of my people exhibit substantial evidence of possessing real religion

and are generally so well-united and harmonious, both in religious and civil concerns." No sooner had he inscribed this statement than he had second thoughts. "I have half a mind to erase the preceding, because it seems to savour of self applause." He resisted the temptation. And why not? In age of revivals, he successfully led his flock in a liberal direction, avoided disturbance, and held the congregation together in peace. Every so often, it was true, a dissenter "signed off" the parish and attended worship elsewhere. In the early 1820s, a little band of Methodists briefly caused trouble, when they rented a hall in the unlikely space of the village tavern and conducted services on Sunday evenings. The gatherings drew crowds, not all of whom absorbed Methodist denunciations of demon rum. The innkeeper was given an ultimatum by the selectmen: either close the bar or stop the meetings. Business triumphed. On Sundays, Ezra Ripley monopolized the word. Elsewhere, New Englanders could divide into factions and contend in controversy. In Concord Ezra Ripley continued to argue for an interdependent community, even as he privatized church practices, sloughed off traditional teachings, and diluted the collective life. On the eve of his jubilee, Concord still upheld the communal ideal: one town, one parish, one church.³⁸

The era of good feelings soon passed. In late 1825 a small band of dissenters, still wedded to Calvinist ideas, grew weary of Ripley's liberal preaching and withdrew from the congregation to hold services of their own. As news of the dissatisfaction spread in the Boston area, leaders of the "orthodox party," centered in Park Street Church, intervened with offers of aid. With such moral and financial encouragement, the dissidents quickly formalized their secession and organized a Trinitarian church of their own. By spring 1826, some fifteen percent of the townspeople were worshiping in a new meetinghouse under a minister of their choice. Indeed, the members actively exercised the powers that had been forfeited by Ripley's church and did so with little concern for privacy. All those Puritan practices that had been abandoned by the liberals—spiritual relations, creeds, confessions, moral discipline, and "public propounding" of candidates for membership—were the rule among the Trinitarians. An intense ethos of communalism shaped their church, founded on the equality of the saints. Outside this sacred circle the unregenerate would have to fend for themselves.³⁹

The cracks in Concord's unity multiplied over the last decade and a half of Ripley's ministry. Massachusetts eliminated its religious establishment in 1834, the last of the states to do so, and religious voluntarism became the norm. In Concord, as elsewhere, people seized on the new dispensation and withdrew from their former churches; by 1838, as Emerson correctly stated in the Divinity School Address, "half-parishes were *signing off*." With individuals free to choose any church they liked or none at all, the orthodox-liberal contest waned; both Trinitarians and Unitarians were forced to compete for adherents with other denominations (Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Universalists, and eventually Catholics). The Unitarians had trouble enough dealing with the Transcendentalists in their ranks, as the competing tributes to Ezra Ripley made plain.⁴⁰

In a symbolic appeal to Protestant desires for unity, the Boston publisher James Munroe gathered up the several memorials to Ripley — Emerson's, Frost's, and a third by Convers Francis, the Transcendentalist-inclined minister of Watertown's Unitarian church — and issued them in a separate pamphlet by late October 1841. "We need say nothing to the people of Concord, to induce them to purchase the book," pronounced the *Republican*. "Their veneration for the memory of their departed pastor will lead them to do so." Perhaps so. But the publication also revived old grievances. One inhabitant, after reading Frost's sermon, sent a bitter letter to the *Concord Freeman*, the Democratic newspaper, to protest the notion that in guiding the Concord church away from the faith of the fathers, Ripley had fostered the progress of religion. Not at all, insisted this anonymous angry citizen. If, as Frost maintained, Ripley and his followers had abandoned their original professions in favor of a "different religion," then they had committed an enormous betrayal. Not only had they jettisoned their Puritan heritage; they had also turned against their own parents, who had "solemnly consecrated them to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Worse still, they had perpetrated a "criminal injustice" in misappropriating church funds, established for the support of orthodox religion, "to a use which their donors never dreamed of." If such abuses were Ripley's purpose, then the Reverend Doctor hardly deserved the testimonials. "If it be correct then Dr. Ripley lived quite too long. He should have died twenty-five years ago and it would have been better for him, better for his society and better for the town."⁴¹

It was not long before another inhabitant rallied in defense of Ripley's reputation. The minister's critic, he charged, must be a newcomer to Concord or an inveterate fault-finder, for he is "altogether ignorant of the facts." Everybody knows that Ripley changed his sentiments on doctrinal points — at least everybody who attended his preaching. Where lies the scandal? The truth is that Ripley and his liberal supporters were not alone in changing their religious opinions. So had the partisans of the orthodox party. "All know, or may know, that great changes have taken place in the views and doctrines of that sect, — perhaps greater than that of any other . . ." But what's wrong with that? In the spirit of Ripley, the writer welcomed the ferment: "It is one of the favorable signs of the times that changes are taking place among all denominations. Information and charity will work more and more."⁴²

Yet, this progressive message of tolerance was delivered in a way that only served to reinforce Concord's enduring divisions. The writer styled himself "One of Us" and castigated his antagonist as an outsider. Rather than answer Ripley's critic in a common forum, he sent his communication not to the Democratic *Freeman*, where the original piece appeared, but to the Whig *Republican*. No longer would all citizens share the same space, even in print, as they debated the legacy of the pastor who devoted his entire life to the cause of community. Ironically, the seeds of that disunity were also sown by the changes Doctor Ripley had introduced in his church.

Notes

¹ *Concord Republican*, Oct. 1, 1841; reprinted with minor changes in William B. Sprague, D.D., ed., *Annals of the American Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of the Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Forty Five. With Historical Introductions* (9 vols; New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857-69), VIII: 117-18, 121-25; and expanded and revised in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Riverside ed.; Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1884); "Rev. Mr. Ripley," *Yeoman's Gazette*, May 10, 1828, reprinting from *National Intelligencer*, May 8, 1828.

² A short overview of Ripley's life and ministry will soon be available in Conrad Edick Wright's update of *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, to be published by the Massachusetts Historical Society as volume 19 of that series.

³ *Concord Republican*, Oct. 1, 1841; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838," in Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 85.

⁴ Emerson, "Address," 84; "Rev. Mr. Ripley," *Christian Register*, XX, no. 41 (Oct. 9, 1841): 163. A comparison between the original obituary in the *Republican* and the reprint in the *Christian Register* shows the following closing words dropped: "and appeared a modern Israelite in his attachment to the Hebrew history and faith. Thus he seemed in his constitutional leaning to their religion, one of the rear guard of the great camp and army of the Puritans; and now, when all the old platforms and customs of the Church were losing their hold in the affections of men, it was fit that he should depart, fit that, in the fall of laws, a loyal man should die."

⁵ Emerson, "Address," 85; Conrad Wright, "Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address," in Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 41-61. As Wright carefully delineates, Emerson took his critical observations of Concord's "young preacher" from his journal and generalized them in his indictment of the failure of preaching and "the famine of our churches" (Emerson, "Address," 84).

⁶ Barzillai Frost, *A Sermon Delivered at the Funeral of the Rev. Ezra Ripley, D.D.* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1841), 7-8, 12, 14, 16-17; reprinted in William Ware, ed., *American Unitarian Biography. Memoirs of Individuals Who Have Been Distinguished by Their Writings, Character, and Efforts in the Cause of Liberal Christianity* (2 vols.; Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Co., 1850), I: 119-36.

⁷ Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), 238-39; John Wood Sweet, "The Liberal Dilemma and the Demise of the Town Church: Ezra Ripley's Pastorate in Concord, 1778-1841," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 104 (1992): 73-109.

⁸ Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: From Its Earliest Settlement to 1832 . . .* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Co.; and Concord, Mass.: J. Stacy, 1835), 150-1; Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), 160; "Report of EZRA RIPLEY and BARZILLAI FROST and Deacons Reuben Brown, Nehemiah Ball, and Elisha Tolman, Adopted unanimously Mar. 4, 1841," in John Whittemore Teele, ed., *The Meeting House on the Green: A History of the First Parish in Concord and Its Church: 350th Anniversary, 1635-1985* (Concord, Mass.: The Parish, 1985), 242; Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, 9. The classic account of the Puritan venture in building churches of the elect is Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963). For a more recent interpretation, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 117-65.

⁹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 152-56; Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 14, 25-6; Shattuck, *History of Concord*, 189; David D. Hall, "Religion and Society on a Small Scale: An Experimental History of Church and Town in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the Ministries of Thomas Shepard and Jonathan Mitchell, 1636-1669" (paper given at conference on "Microhistory: Advantages and Limitations for the Study of Early American History," Storrs, Connecticut, Oct. 15-17, 1999), 42-49.

¹⁰ Meetings of Mar. 4, 8, 14, 28, 1779 and Mar. 21, 1792, in First Church Record Book (transcript in CFPL), 164-69; 201-02.

¹¹ Petition from John Richardson and others, Dec. 16, 1794, Papers regarding Ezra Ripley's tenure as minister, BMS AM 1613.1, Houghton Library; Concord First Church Record

Book, 201-2, 206; Edward Jarvis, "Memoir of Francis Jarvis," and Elijah Wood, "Memoir of Stephen Wood" and "Memoir of Nathan Wood," all in *Memoirs of Members of the Social Circle in Concord. Second Series: From 1795 to 1840* (privately printed; Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1888), 28-9, 38-51, 84.

¹² Concord First Church Record Book, 201-2, 206-12; Ezra Ripley to Church in Concord, Mar. 10, 1795, Letter file 7 R-9, CFPL; and Ezra Ripley, "Sketch of Report" [report of committee to revise the church covenant, 12 Mar. 1795], Letter file 7 R-8, CFPL.

¹³ Meetings of May 19, Jun. 2 and 9, 1793, First Church Record Book, 204-05; "The Form of Church Covenant Accepted by the Church 1795," in Teele, ed., *Meeting House on the Green*, 78-79; "Report of EZRA RIPLEY and BARZILLAI FROST," 240-42.

¹⁴ Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, 229-37; Ezra Ripley to Church in Concord, 10 Mar. 1795, quoting Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, originally published in 1650. The quotation can be found in a reprint of the seventh edition (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson and Goodwin, 1794), 67.

¹⁵ Ripley, Journal and notebook, entry for Nov. 7, 1811.

¹⁶ Shattuck, *History of Concord*, 191; Sweet, "Liberal Dilemma," 83-84.

¹⁷ Ezra Ripley to church in Concord, Mar. 10, 1795, Letter file 9 R-9, and Ripley, Report of the committee to revise the Church Covenant, Letter file 7 R-8, CFPL; Sweet, "Liberal Dilemma," 84-85, quoting Ripley, "Proving our moral character," Nov. 13, 1796, rescript. Feb. 7, 1808; and "A peaceful and edifying disposition and practice recommended," Feb. 28, 1813, bMS Am 1835 (11), Houghton.

¹⁸ Shattuck, *History of Concord*, 156; Admonition to Ephraim Wheeler, 2nd, ca. 1810-1813, Documents relating to Ezra Ripley's tenure as minister of the First Parish in Concord, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Meetings of Nov. 17, and Dec. 8, 1816, Sep. 1, Oct. 9, and Dec. 4, 1825, Concord First Church Record Book, 235-36, 245-47. At Ripley's recommendation, the church made regular donations to the Evangelical Missionary Society, of which he was a founding member, and in 1822 to the Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, "to be applied to the civilization and christianizing the Indians in the Western parts of this country." See meetings of Sep. 27, 1809, Apr. 26, 1813, Oct. 2, 1814, Oct. 1, 1815, Sep. 29, 1816, and Jan. 6, 1822, First Church Record Book, 224-25, 231, 233-35, 242-43. About the same time as the Concord church was steering clear of discipline cases, "genteel" Vermonters in towns along the Connecticut River Valley were resisting moral oversight by their Congregational brothers and sisters. Such "intrusions into the personal lives of members" had become "distasteful." See Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61.

¹⁹ Town meeting, Nov. 7, 1808, Concord Town Meeting Transcripts, vol. 6: 325a-b, 341a, 344, CFPL; Ezra Ripley to Nathaniel Nutting, Nov. 8, 1808, bMS AM 1835 (28), Houghton; Hosmer, 119-20; Francis R. Gourgas, "Memoir of Abiel Heywood," in *Social Circle Memoirs* 2:228-33; Sweet, "Liberal Dilemma," 78-79; Frost, "Ezra Ripley," 127-28. "Do not some feel satisfied with attending half the day, though in health and strength?" Ripley asked the congregation in Nov. 1828. "If such examples were to become general, where would be our afternoon assembly?" Quoted in Denny R. Bowden, "Sermons, Debates, and the Environmental Essay: Conflicting Discourses in Nineteenth Century America and the Emergence of Print Culture in Ezra Ripley, Alexander Campbell, and

Henry David Thoreau" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 119-25, 158-62, 165-66.

²⁰ Gross, *Minutemen*, 73-74, 180; Tucker, "The Meeting Houses of the Parish," 316-7; Shattuck, *History*, 206-8; Sweeney, "Meetinghouses, Town Houses, and Churches," 23-4; Peter Benes, "Sky Colors and Scattered Clouds: The Decorative and Architectural Painting of New England Meeting Houses, 1738-1834," in *New England Meeting House and Church: 1630-1850*, a volume representing the annual proceedings for 1979 of *The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife*, 51-69; Edward Jarvis, "Houses and People in Concord, 1810 to 1820" (1882), 258, 335, CFPL; Ezra Ripley, A.M., *A Sermon Preached on the Completion of a General Repair of the Meeting House in Concord, January 24, 1792* (Boston: B. Edes and Son, 1792), 32-38. Yellow was the most popular color on New England meetinghouses in the period 1760-1822. Benes, "Sky Colors," 59. Christine Leigh Heyrman has argued that the shift from the communal practice of seating the meetinghouse to the apportionment of pews to families for a flat price, which took place in Gloucester, Massachusetts, during the late 1730s, did not represent an embrace of modern, marketplace values in an expanding world of capitalism. Rather, the promoters of the change, the prosperous, established families of Gloucester harbor, sought insulation from the fluctuations of status and prestige inherent in a fluid, commercial society. Once obtained, pews could be passed on within families from generation to generation, ensuring the perpetuation of a local lineage, whatever its wealth. That is a plausible argument: pews were designed to accommodate families, not single individuals, at public worship. But Heyrman's claim is entirely inferential, and it depends upon her larger view of the conservative, lineal orientation of the Gloucester inhabitants' economic and political behavior. No contemporary evidence from participants is available to support her argument. More importantly, pews were regarded as real property, which could be sold out of families as readily as bequeathed within them. By the early nineteenth century, individuals were advertising pews for sale in the newspapers. See Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts 1690-1750* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 143-81. Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 69-71, documents the turn to pew sales as a principal means of financing church construction in such towns as Woburn in eastern Massachusetts, not far from Concord, and Amherst, the seat of orthodox evangelicalism in the western part of the state.

²¹ Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); meetings of Mar. 5, Apr. 2, and May 7, 1804, Concord Town Meeting Transcripts, 6: 241b, 248a, 252a-253b; subscription for a gratuity for the Rev. Ezra Ripley, Apr. 2, 1804, Letter file, R-12, CFPL. Though a few Republicans—Joseph Chandler, John Tuttle, several Barretts—contributed to the "gratuity," the largest share was given by a handful of Federalists, the ever-reliable Joseph Hosmer, Isaac Hurd, Tilly Merrick, Jonas Minot, William Parkman, Ephraim Wood, and John White. The pledges of the seven men totaled \$95, amounting to a third of the contributions.

²² Edward Jarvis, *Traditions and Reminiscences of Concord, Massachusetts, 1779-1878*, ed. Sarah Chapin (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 52-53; John Wood Sweet, "'Churches Gathered Out of Churches': The Divergence of Liberal and Orthodox Congregationalists in Concord, Massachusetts, 1800-1850" (senior honors thesis,

Amherst College, 1988), 71-73; town meetings of Mar. 4 and Apr. 1, 1811, Concord Town Meeting Transcripts, 6: 350a, 353b. The ministerial fund was incorporated in 1813 by the Massachusetts legislature, in response to a petition from John White, Francis Jarvis, and John L. Tuttle, who became the first trustees. Its purpose was "the support of the gospel Ministry of the Congregational denomination." An Act to Incorporate the Trustees of the Congregational Ministerial Fund in Concord, Feb. 27, 1813, chapter 143, 1812 Acts, in *Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Passed at the Several Sessions of the General Court, Holden in Boston, Beginning 26th May, 1812, and Ending on the 2d March, 1815* (Boston: Benjamin Russell, 1812-15), 216-17.

²³ George M. Brooks, "Memoir of Tilly Merrick," *Memoirs of Members of the Social Circle*, 2: 59-62; Maria Thoreau, Concord, to Prudence Ward, Sep. 8, 1821, Henry Huntington Library; San Marino, California; letters from Mary Merrick, Concord, to Maria Parker, Billerica, 1819-1836, Brooks Family Papers, Vault A 45, Brooks Unit 1, CFPL. The specific letters cited in the text are dated Sep. 16, 1819 (star-gazing), Mar. 16, 1820 (moonlight walks), Jun. 1820 ("the Concord folks want very much to marry me" and "tame housewife"), Jul. 10, 1820 ("I shall never be married"), Nov. 1820 ("think of eternity"). The young woman not only attended worship regularly but went to special lectures Ripley gave for young people: "I have heard two fine sermons," she wrote in a letter dated Jan. 1, 1821, "and after meeting went to a schoolhouse where Dr. Ripley delivers lectures to young people every Sunday when he is in town. I think this will be very profitable to me."

²⁴ Merrick to Parker, Sep. 16, 1819 ("vanity"); Mar. 27, 1820 ("egotism," "comparative nothingness"); Jul. 10, 1820 ("dearest friends," "self-denial"); Nov. 22, 1820 ("fleeting time," "piety to God"); Nov. 26, 1820 ("evil passion," "I sometimes despair"); Dec. 15, 1820 ("prepare for Heaven"); Jan. 6, 1821 ("sorrow and suffering," "moralizing," "make our peace"). Interestingly, in a sermon on "The benefit of affliction, and especially to young people," delivered originally Nov. 4, 1792 and repeated on Nov. 25, 1821, Ezra Ripley urged his listeners not to expect "uninterrupted happiness" in this world. This is not . . . the condition or the lot of humanity. We are instructed that in the world we shall have tribulation." bMS Am 1835 (11), Houghton.

²⁵ Merrick to Parker, Mar. 27, 1820 ("how much do we feel") and Jan. 6, 1821 ("importance of religion"); Maria Thoreau to Prudence Ward, Sep. 8, 1821; Concord First Church Record Book, CFPL. Sally Minot Merrick was quick to obtain baptism for her infants, usually by the first or second Sabbath after their births. The following are the available dates of birth and of baptism for her young: Mary Merrick, born Apr. 5, 1801, baptized Apr. 12, 1801; Sarah, born May 17, 1805, baptized May 26, 1805; Augustus, born Nov. 11, 1810, baptized Nov. 18, 1810. There is no record of baptism for Sally Minot Merrick's first child Francis-John, born Dec. 26, 1799, twelve months after the wedding. Given her promptness in baptizing the other children, it is likely that Parson Ripley, less regular than usual, unwittingly omitted the record. As for Mary Merrick Brooks, her first-born George Merrick Brooks was born Jul. 26, 1824 and baptized a month later, Aug. 29, 1824; her second child Charles Augustus was born Apr. 18, 1832 and baptized May 18, 1832; he died before his first year on Mar. 31, 1833. See Concord First Church Record Book, CFPL, and George Tolman, comp., *Concord, Massachusetts Births, Marriages, and Deaths* (Boston: T. Todd, 1895).

²⁶ Ezra Ripley, *Half Century Discourse, Delivered November 16, 1828, at Concord, Massachusetts* (Concord, Mass.: Published at the request of the hearers and printed by Herman

Atwill, 1829), 4-5; Ripley, *A Sermon Preached on the Completion of a General Repair of the Meeting House in Concord, January 24, 1792* (Boston: B. Edes and Son, 1792), 43-44. In the period 1796-1815, 139 women joined the church "by confession," 129 professed faith "in order to baptism." Church membership overall grew at a faster pace than did professions: the ratio of admissions to professions was 1.2 for the period 1778-94, 1.3 for 1795-1815, and 1.4 for 1816-25. (These figures are computed for acts of profession, which could involve single individuals or married couples.) From William Emerson's ordination to Ripley's assumption of the pulpit (1764-78), the covenant was owned 92 times; that comes to 5.8 such acts per year. The figure declines to 4.4 in the first phase of Ripley's ministry (1779-95). Following the elimination of the baptismal covenant and the shift to a general "profession of faith in order to baptism," there was a brief surge in this practice; in the decade 1795-1804, professions totaled 100, or 10 per year. The rate then slid to the figure under Emerson, 5.6 per year. See Concord First Church Record Book (original), Houghton Library.

²⁷ Merrick to Parker, Mar. 27, 1820 ("quit these earthly scenes"); Ripley, "Obedience to Christ the best evidence of friendship & love to him," Jun. 25, 1826, bMS AM 1835 (11), Houghton; Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41-68. In the period 1796-1815, only nineteen men made professions of faith for baptism on their own. Of all the males who undertook this step, four-fifths did so in the company of their wives. A ratio of births (recorded in *Concord, Massachusetts Births, Marriages, and Deaths*) to baptisms (recorded in the First Church Record Book at Houghton) suggests that nearly every child born in Concord between 1795 and 1815 was baptized. The figures are as follows: for 1795-1804, 1.02 (378/372); for 1805-14, 0.96 (247/256); and for 1815-24, 0.82 (251/302). Caroline Downes Brooks, born Mar. 12, 1820, was baptized Aug. 29, 1824, along with her infant step-brother George Merrick Brooks, born three days before. Nathan Brooks made the profession of faith for parents wishing to baptize children on Aug. 7, 1824. He would thus join his wife Mary Merrick Brooks in promising to fulfill the duties of a Christian parent.

²⁸ See First Church Record Book (original), entries for Aug. 17, 1803 (Farrars), Jul. 31, 1810 (Hunt), Jun. 9, 1820 (Balcom). Other instances of entire families receiving baptism at once include: Aug. 11, 1812, five children of Mary Prescott, wife of Abel, "baptized in private for reasons;" Apr. 11, 1813, six children of Sally Brown, wife of Zachariah, "baptized in private for adequate reasons;" Apr. 20, 1817, seven children of Abi Butters, wife of Amos Butters, "in private by reason of particular circumstances."

²⁹ Ripley, *Half Century Discourse*, 4-5. Down to the mid-1820s, the majority of new communicants consisted of married men and women. In 1778-1795, the proportion of married men among all male entrants into the church was 89.5%; 1796-1805, 87.5%; 1806-1815, 59.6%; 1816-1825, 60.0%. The comparable rates for women were: 75.9%; 59.2%; 55.0%; 86.2%. Husbands were far more likely to enter the church with their wives than *vice versa*. Over the quarter-century 1795-1820, 36 husbands and 79 wives joined. Half of the former (55.6%) were accompanied by spouses, but only a quarter (25.3%) of the latter. Finally, the following table displays the average age of husbands and wives on entering the church:

	Men	Women
1778-1795	44.6	38.4
1796-1805	45.3	36.9
1806-1815	45.4	38.2
1816-1825	63.7	40.1
1826-1835	46.1	42.1

³⁰ Robert A. Gross, "Preserving Culture: Edward Jarvis and the Memory of Concord," introduction to Jarvis, *Traditions and Reminiscences*, xix-xx, xxxvi-xxxvii; First Church Record Book, May 11, 1828. In the period 1796-1805, only 2 single men joined the church; in 1806-15, 12; in 1816-25, 4; in 1826-35, 8.

³¹ Jarvis, *Diary*, I: 63-67, 71, 74-76, 93-94.

³² Jarvis, *Diary*, I: 210, 216.

³³ Jarvis, *Diary* I: 210, 212-17; Edward Jarvis, *Autobiography*, ed. with introduction by Rosalba Davico (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1992), 35-36; the original manuscript, dated 1883, is at Houghton Library (b MS AM 541); Jarvis, *Traditions and Reminiscences*, 10-12. Jarvis's retrospective account of the discussions with Ripley is far milder than the record in his diary.

³⁴ Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56-99.

³⁵ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 78 ("orphanship"), 84 ("God's electing love"), 98 ("spiritual Journey," "Alive with God"), 99 ("rapt in another world"), 101 (at the throne"), 102 ("danced to the music"); Ezra Ripley, Concord, to "my dear daughter M.M.E.," Augusta, Maine, Dec. 18, 1827, bMS AM 1280.226 (3970), Houghton Library; Phyllis Cole, "The Advantage of Loneliness: Mary Moody Emerson's Almanacks, 1802-1855," in Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press., 1982), 1-32.

³⁶ Ripley, *Sermon . . . on a General Repair of the Meeting House*, 47-48; Edmund Hudson, "The Wide Spreading Jones Family," *Boston Evening Transcript*, Jun. 27, 1917 (C. Pam. 21, Item 19, CFPL); Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 4-5. In 1801, with an assessed estate of \$317, Rebecca Thoreau was the fifth richest taxpayer in town. The Concord church attracted 49 new communicants from 1799 to 1802. Forty per cent were single women, whose average age was 27.7. Besides the persons named in the text, converts in this revival included: Lucy Barrett, spinster daughter of the late Deacon Thomas Barrett; Sally Wheeler, the married daughter of Deacon William Parkman; Mary Wilder, step-daughter of Dr. Isaac Hurd, and her step-sister Sally Hurd; and Persis Wood, daughter of Judge Ephraim Wood. For the friendships among this circle, see Elizabeth Amelia Dwight, *Memorials of Mary Wilder White: A Century Ago in New England*, ed. Mary Wilder Tileston (Boston: Everett Press Co., 1903), 16, 44, 172, 183, 263. Mary Wilder was a close friend of Mary Moody Emerson and a fellow religious seeker. Wilder pondered the writings of Calvin and Arminius, out of which she fashioned a moderate theology in Ripley's vein, holding that individuals could experience grace through ardent prayer and repentance of sin. However, the young widow stretched beyond "her beloved" parson, "who was like a father unto her," and cultivated "divine Sensibility – the enthusiasm of feeling," which "exalts us, nearer than any other [quality] to Divinity." Like the spiritual quest of Mary Moody Emerson, her piety found expression in an intense, inner life. But where her dear friend resented the ties of institutions, Mary Wilder stayed close to the

life and discourse of the Concord church. (Dwight, *Memorials of Mary Wilder White*, 124, 169-70.)

³⁷ Ripley, Memorandum of a religious conference, Jan.-Mar. 1810, in Samuel Ripley sermons, Box 1 of 13, bMS AM 1835 (6), Houghton; Ripley, Journal and notebook; Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post Revolutionary New England Clergy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123-26; John Hay Farnham to Mary B. Farnham, Mar. 29, 1810, Farnham Folder C, Farnham Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁸ Ripley, Memorandum of religious conferences; Ripley, *Half Century Discourse*, 40-1; Ripley, Journal, entry for Nov. 11, 1818; Jarvis, *Traditions and Reminiscences*, 160. From 1810 to 1818, the church attracted eighty-six new members by confession, a quarter of them men. Altogether, 38 per cent of the women were single (n = 23) and 42 per cent of the men (n = 11). The average age of the single women was 22.8, of the men 28.1.

³⁹ Sweet, "Liberal Dilemma."

⁴⁰ Emerson, "Address," 87; Sweet, "Liberal Dilemma."

⁴¹ *Two Sermons on the Death of Rev. Ezra Ripley, D.D.* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1841); *Concord Republican*, Oct. 29, 1841; "Mr. Frost's Sermon," *Concord Freeman*, Nov. 19, 1841.

⁴² "One of Us," *Concord Republican*, Dec. 3, 1841.

Concord, Massachusetts was the first New England community away from tidewater, and First Parish was its first church (1636). The first meetinghouse for the congregation was a small, simple structure on Concord's "Old Hill" across the street from the present First Parish meetinghouse and next to the current Holy Family Roman Catholic church. (The Old Hill is now a historic cemetery.) Between 1667 and 1673 a new, larger meetinghouse was constructed, and in 1711 this was replaced by the third building. Reverend William Emerson, grandfather of Ralph Waldo Emerson, served as minister of First Parish from 1765 to 1776. Gross, Robert A. "Doctor Ripley's Church": Congregational Life in Concord, Massachusetts, 1778-1841 *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* xxxiii 2009 Google Scholar 10. Francis, Convers *The Journals of Convers Francis* *Studies in the American Renaissance* Boston, MA:wayne Publishers 1981 Google Scholar 303. American Unitarian Association *The Organization of Parishes and Churches of the Unitarian Congregational Order* Boston, MA:UA 1920 Google Scholar. The Free Church in a Changing World Boston, MA:UA 1963 Google Scholar 12. Wright, Conrad *Congregational Polity* Boston, MA: Skinner House Books 1997 by Ripley, Ezra, 1751-1841. Publication date 1829. Topics First Parish in Concord (Concord, Mass.) Publisher Concord : Printed by Herman Atwill. 2. A brief account of his ministry...preached to the Church of the Messiah / by Samuel J. May. - - 3. A discourse delivered in the North Church, New Haven / by Samuel Merwin. - - 4. A discourse reviewing a ministry of fifty years / by Rev. William Neill. - - 5. A discourse on the 20th anniversary of his ordination.../ by John T. Gilman Nichols. - - 6. A discourse delivered in Norfield / by John Noyes. - - 7. Historical discourse delivered on the occasion of the 125th anniversary...in Westminster, Mass. / by A. Judson Rich. - - 8. Half century discourse delivered at Concord, Ma