

Benjamin Wood's Fornication: From Sin to Confession in 18th-Century Westborough,  
Massachusetts

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Widower Benjamin Wood married Sarah Johnson on November 12, 1767, and their first child was born on June 25, 1768, less than nine months after their marriage. For many individuals whose children were conceived before marriage, the path to confession before the church was relatively straightforward: the timing, the testimony of midwives and their assistants, parental pressure, and their own sense of guilt might lead, without too much complication, to a confession. But in the case of Benjamin and Sarah Wood, the path to confession was complicated by his standing both in the community and in the church: no stripling at age 54, he was a man of considerable substance, a captain in the militia, a veteran of the French and Indian War, and a deacon in the church (albeit elected only five months before his marriage). At every step along the path to confession, he tried to minimize his public exposure (and, presumably, embarrassment or, in the language of the period, humiliation) and to craft the language of his confession that would be, one supposes, general rather than specific with respect to fornication. His written confession, not surprisingly, does not survive, but the church records and the diary of the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman provide ample evidence about Wood's foot-dragging and, one might say, obfuscation.

Wood was an exceptional but not unique case. Fornication was hardly uncommon, but it was not the only sin for which the church sought repentance. In addition to sins of a sexual nature, there were sins of the tongue (swearing, lying, and deceit as well as defamation); sins against church order (failure to baptize children, absence from church and from communion, attendance at separatist meetings). During Parkman's long ministry (1724-1782), there were 62 cases involving 91 individual confessions. Of those, 37 (59.6%) were for sexual transgressions

(37 cases of fornication, one case of adultery, and one case of “acting foolishly and imprudently” with another man’s wife). Not surprisingly, since fornication usually – but not always – brought both a man and a woman to confess, 64 (70.4%) of the 91 individuals who presented confessions were guilty of fornication.

The stories of these confessions, as revealed in Ebenezer Parkman’s diary, allow us to go behind the scenes, so to speak, of sometimes private acts and the public drama of confessions before the church. The drama of Benjamin Wood is a good place to start, with other complicated and revealing cases to follow.

Wood (1714-1799) was born in Framingham and moved to Hopkinton where he married his first wife, Mary Chamberlin in 1737. She and their newborn son John probably died soon after childbirth in 1739, and Benjamin joined the Hopkinton church in 1740. He married Mary Baley (or Bayley) in 1742, and their son, also named John, was born the following year. John survived, but Mary, like her predecessor died, possibly from complications following childbirth (but the date of her death is not extant). Benjamin then married widow Hannah Death in 1744; she, too, died, apparently without additional children. In 1753 Benjamin married yet again, this time widow Vashti (Eager) Newton. Vashti died in 1766, and Benjamin married, as his fifth wife, Sarah Johnson; it was their fornication that led to their joint confession before the Westborough church.

Ebenezer Parkman’s first reference to Benjamin Wood was in 1753 when Wood was still living in Hopkinton (Jan. 31, 1753). Four years later, Wood moved to Westborough, with Parkman’s diary suggesting that he might have lived there previously; Vashti Wood, Parkman wrote, “is come (with her Husband, Capt. Benjamin Wood) to live here nigh us again” (May 18, 1757). Vashti Wood died on September 2, 1766, and thirteen months later Zebulun Rice came to

Parkman, “very full of Disquietment about Deacon’s Wood’s marriage to Mrs. Johnson” (Oct. 23, 1767). Rice’s concern may have reflected the relatively recent death of Sarah Johnson’s husband. Five months earlier, Sarah Johnson told Parkman, “She hears her Husband is dead” (May 14, 1767), language that suggests that she and her husband were not living together. Whatever the basis of Rice’s “Disquietment,” nothing further was said – or at least recorded – and on November 12, Parkman, his wife and daughters Sarah and Suse, the Rev. Samuel Barrett of Hopkinton, the Rev. Peter Whitney of Northborough, and John Cushing, who would later marry Sarah Parkman, attended the marriage of Benjamin Wood and Sarah Johnson. Barrett prayed before the covenant, which Parkman administered, and Whitney prayed afterward. They sang part of Psalm 115. There was “a great Company, and plentifull provisions. May God grant it may be an Abiding Joy!”

Their joy was perhaps shortlived. Shortly after the birth of their son (June 25, 1768), Wood came to Parkman “and talks with me upon his Case, and he desires to take some Time to Consider of what I have said” (June 30, 1768). Two members of the church, Daniel Forbes and Constantine Hardy, visited Parkman two days later “about the case of Deacon Wood (the Birth of his Child),” with Hardy planning to talk with Wood. “I am very Cautious of all I say to him,” wrote Parkman (July 2, 1768).

Four days later Wood showed up with a proposal: “that is to have the Church meet at his House, for him and his wife to offer what may satisfie them,” but Parkman could not approve. Wood was attempting to make his confession as private as possible, not merely before only the members of the church but at his home rather than at the church and before both church members and the congregation (i.e., everyone who attended). It happened that Aaron Smith, minister of Marlborough, was there, and Wood asked that Parkman seek Smith’s advice. “I consult Mr.

Smith accordingly,” noted Parkman (July 6, 1768). Smith and Nathan Stone, minister of Southborough, sent Parkman a letter, “containing their Judgment of what is expected to be done in his Case.” Parkman showed the letter to Wood, who appeared “humble and willing to Submit to make an Acknowledgment.” Later that day, Parkman consulted Samuel Barrett of Hopkinton about Wood’s “unhappy Case.” Barrett advised Parkman “to take the advice of the Church,” but he thought that “Confession before the Church may Suffice.” Returning home, Parkman rode part of the way with Wood’s brother, Joseph, “who speaks of his Brother and the anguish of his mind about him, Some time agoe” (July 14, 1768).

Two days later Wood brought “an acknowledgment (*and no sufficient Acknowledgment*)” which Parkman could not accept. Parkman proposed that he would stop the church the next day, a Sunday, unless Wood prevented it “by being willing to go according to our Custom with Penitents.” The next day, as Parkman recorded in the church records, the church “was Stopped by reason of Uneasiness among Sundry Brethren concerning Deacon Wood – after some Conference adjourned to the 24<sup>th</sup> <sup>1</sup>. In his diary Parkman noted that the church had conferred “about the Sorrowful Affair” of Deacon Wood and that Wood “offered the Same Paper of Acknowledgment” that he had shown Parkman the day before – “but it was Soon Returned to him.” As Parkman noted, there was need for more time: “We could do nothing to purpose without longer Time,” and so the church was adjourned (July 17, 1768).

All of this clearly upset Parkman. “I was much worried yesterday, and had but a poor night and faint morning.” He visited Nathan Stone who told him that Wood had been there and that Stone “plainly Counsell’d him to make a Public Confession” (July 18, 1768). Several days later Zebulun Rice “secretly met” with Parkman to let him know that “many of the Church were

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<sup>1</sup>Westborough Church Records, 144 (July 17, 1768).

of the Mind that Deacon Wood must make a Public Confession” (July 23, 1768). The next day, a Sunday, Parkman recorded in the church records that Wood and his wife offered a paper in which they acknowledged “their breach of the seventh Commandment.” Some amendments were agreed upon, and the confession was accepted on condition that it be read before the congregation the next Sunday. With that, Benjamin and Sarah Wood “were restord to Charity” (Church Records, July 24, 1768).

Parkman provided greater detail in his diary. The paper that Wood offered contained “a Confession of Incontinence and Unchastity – of Breach of the Seventh Commandment.” Parkman asked Benjamin and then Sarah, “whether we were to understand thereby the Sin of Fornication? and they answered yes.” But the paper required changes as “a number of Expressions” tended to “palliate and Smooth things in an unsafe Manner.” Wood asked Parkman to make the proposed changes, and it was agreed that the confession would be read before the congregation on the next Sunday and that Wood would continue in office as a deacon. The vote was, Parkman believed, unanimous, and members were “desired to Speak if there was any thing to the Contrary: but nothing was offered.” With that and a prayer, Parkman dismissed the meeting. As they were leaving the meeting house, Parkman spoke to Wood about “Peace and Reconcilement” between them. Wood “hesitated somewhat,” but Parkman insisted that they be “in perfect Love and Harmony – then upon such insisting,” Wood gave Parkman his hand (July 24, 1768).

During the following week, Parkman brought the amended draft of the confession to Wood. He talked with both Benjamin and Sarah, discerning that Wood did not seem satisfied with him, whereas, Parkman wrote, “my Fault, I think, lies in too far favouring and Smoothing their Case; and can’t but be sorry for it” (July 28, 1768). On Sunday, July 31, 1768, the Woods’

“address to their Pastor and Church...was read to the Congregation, agreeable to the Vote of the Church.” With that done, their son, Benjamin Buckminster, was baptized.

Parkman made no further mention of the strained relationship with Benjamin Wood, although, aside from Wood’s duties as deacon, there may have been somewhat fewer interactions between the two men in the months following the confession. This impression aside, Parkman noted after one unexpected visit, “I love to see my Friends and Neighbours but the Interruption it gives me in my Studys is a great Trouble and Disappointment” (Apr. 1, 1772). Wood continued as deacon, serving past Parkman’s death in 1782 and finally resigning in 1790 (“considering his age and infirmities”)<sup>2</sup> before moving to Brookfield. He died on March 26, 1799, resting under a gravestone whose inscription reads:

So sleep the saints & cease to groan,  
When sin & death have done their worst,  
Christ hath a glory like his own,  
Which waits to clothe their waking dust

In the face of sin and pride, Benjamin Wood had been held accountable, but at least one other notable figure in Westborough, Captain Edmund Brigham, was not prepared to bow and, in the long run, prevailed. Brigham and his first wife Sarah had owned the covenant in 1763. Widowed in 1769 when Sarah died eight days after giving birth to their seventh child, in early 1780 Brigham sent “an urgent message” to Parkman, “with request to marry him” to Betty Bevel (Jan. 24):

I went, but with great Difficulty, by reason of the deep snow. My sons Breck and Elias drew me on a light sled as far as Mr. Haskill’s, nigh which a number of young men, Brighams accompanied me on foot to the House, where I performed the Solemnity.

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<sup>2</sup>Westborough Church Records, 273 (May 30, 1790).

Their first child, Pairpoint, was born on September 16, and three months later Brigham came to Parkman “on his Humiliation” (Dec. 22, 1780). Nothing seems to have come from that conversation, for six months later Parkman went to Brigham’s home and “discoursed with him and his Wife of their Guilt etc. Alas! With too little success!” (May 21, 1781). Four months later the Brighams came to Parkman, but with little success from Parkman’s perspective: “there was So much Company till it was late, and they had far to go, that he did not go so far into the Affair as was necessary -- yet he manifested unwillingness to have it before the Congregation” (Sept. 5, 1781). Five days later the Brighams returned, with the Captain asserting “according to Information Deacon Wood and his Wife did not make Confess before the Congregation.” For his part, Parkman responded that the church records stated that the Woods’ confession was read before the congregation. There seemed to be some progress, for Betty Brigham “was examined,” presumably for admission to the church or at least owning the covenant following a confession (Sept. 10, 1781). Brigham returned several weeks later but still refused to make a confession before the congregation. By way of reply, Parkman noted, “I lent him Mr. *Cottons way of Life*, in which is contained *Sins deadly Wound*” (Oct. 5, 1781). Wounded or not, Edmund Brigham did not make a confession, nor did the examination of Betty Brigham lead to owning the covenant or membership – at least not then.

Parkman died a year later, and on April 16, 1786, in the absence of a settled minister, the Rev. Asa Packard of Marlborough baptized the three children of Edmund and Elizabeth Brigham. The Brighams were admitted into the church; there was no mention of fornication or a

confession.<sup>3</sup> And there's more to the story: on August 11, 1790, sixty-five-year-old Edmund Brigham was selected as a deacon in the Westborough Church.<sup>4</sup>

What had changed? Most obviously, Parkman was not there to guide the church in its decisions. It was not as if fornication no longer mattered, for the church continued to exercise its discipline in such matters. Were memories terribly short? There is nothing in the records to suggest that Brigham's case was known, or at least discussed, by anyone other than Parkman. Perhaps, too, Brigham's stature and usefulness in the community (serving, for example, as a selectman in 1779, 1787-1788, 1791-1793)<sup>5</sup> made his admission more difficult to contest – if, indeed, anyone cared.

More telling, however, is the shifting attitude of the church toward the Half-Way Covenant. On October 24, 1784, the church appointed a committee of seven men “to go and talk with those Brethren who are in the half way Relation (so called by Some) for their neglect of Duty in not coming to the Ordenance of the Supper.”<sup>6</sup> Among those whom the committee approached were Joseph Green, Sr., Barnabas Newton, and Nathan Maynard. Green hoped soon to come to the Lord's Supper, but “Sometimes he says he is in the Dark. Sometimes he has Light hopes for greater Evidences of his Union to Christ.” For his part, Newton acknowledged “his deficiency in Duty” and hoped “to have doubts removed from his Mind and by the Grace of God enabled to come to his Duty.” Maynard “could not find those Evidences within him that he thot. requisite and necessary,” and he thanked the committee “for their Care, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Westborough Church Records, 252.

<sup>4</sup>Westborough Church Records, [274]. Brigham's election took place after Jonathan Forbes had declined election.

<sup>5</sup>DeForest and Bates, *History of Westborough*, 467.

<sup>6</sup>Westborough Church Records, 221 (Oct. 21, 1784).

<sup>7</sup>Westborough Church Records, 223-24 (Jan. 9, 1785).



While these three men (and “Others to the like import”) appeared conscience-bound in their reluctance, others pushed back in response to the committee’s intrusion into their spiritual lives. Benjamin How “Spake as tho he thot the Chh had no Business with him, since he was in Regular Standing with them in their Late Revd Pastors Lifetime.” Captain Stephen Maynard was more blunt: not only did he “consider himself in Relation to the Chh” but he went on to state that “the Late alteration” in the church’s practice of admitting individuals to the privilege of baptism was made “to please Mr. Judson – a late Candidate – and Supposed himself that it was wrong.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, Edmund Brigham, already a Half-Way member, could step forward when approached by the committee and become a communicant member.

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<sup>8</sup>Westborough Church Records, 226 (Mar. 14, 1785).