

Chapter 2

In 1774 Mr. Dwight, while yet a tutor, united himself to the college church. This was an important step, and doubtless he carefully considered the propriety of that step before he took it. How many young men, at his then period of life and with similar powers of mind, become the advocates of infidelity. To the pride of their hearts the doctrines of the Son of God appear too humiliating to be cordially embraced. They love not the humility of the gospel nor the practice of that self-denial which it enjoins.

It may well be supposed that Mr. Dwight himself found it a difficult task to surrender himself to the conviction that he was a lost sinner. He was at a period of life when everything within him was urging him to be gay [carefree], and at an age of the world when everything without forbid him to be serious. The consequences, not to himself but to the world, had he at this time rejected the "great salvation" cannot easily be foretold. With such a mind and such acquisitions he might have filled the world with terror. Had he now fallen into infidelity, he would doubtless have wrought mischief as widespread and perhaps more lasting than even Voltaire or Hume. His subtlety would have equaled theirs, and, by his more commanding eloquence, he might have beguiled multitudes of young men and allured them to his standard.

But, fortunately, he was destined for scenes and services of a widely different character. He was the offspring of prayer. He was the son of many vows. He was a plant "whose living root was watered by the hand of God." He had been, in the morning of his being, instructed in the principles of the Christian religion; and now those principles, through the benign influence of the Spirit of God, began to assert their appropriate influence. His attention was arrested to the "one thing needful."

A dark apprehension hung over him that he might fail of the great "salvation." And he would have failed, and well he knew it and deeply did he feel it, had he not been divinely directed to trust in HIM, who came to ransom the sinner from merited destruction.

To the cross of Christ he was at length enabled to bring all his pride and all his human wisdom; and there did he sacrifice them. He made a complete surrender of himself to his Divine Master, and well did he prove the sincerity of that surrender in his subsequent life. From this time, for the space of more than forty years, his life was exemplary as a disciple of Christ. He was a champion of the cause of Christianity and powerfully exerted his noble mind to advance its interests.

What a lesson is here imparted to the young man! Few can claim more genius than he possessed. His mind was of a lofty and aspiring character. And yet we see him humbling himself and bowing before the cross of Jesus of Nazareth! And what he thus did, others of a similar intellectual character need not be ashamed to do. Never did he repent of his choice. On the contrary, it is believed that all the honors of a worldly character which

were heaped upon him, in consideration of his intellectual attainments, were accounted by him as small in comparison with the honor which he felt he derived from being a disciple of the Son of God.

Previously to his conversion, it was his expectation to pursue the practice of law; and for a time his studies were directed towards that object. But after this event his views were directed to the ministry, and in June, 1777, he was licensed as a preacher.

In the preceding month, College was broken up in consequence of the war with Great Britain, which was at its height. During the summer the students pursued their studies, under their respective tutors, in places less exposed to the sudden incursions of the enemy. The class of Mr. Dwight followed him to Wethersfield, and there remained till September.

At this time his popularity was truly enviable. Undesignedly had he so gained upon the respect and esteem of the students of the college, that as a body they prepared a petition to the Corporation that he might be elected as the successor of President Daggett, who, it was understood, was designing to resign. Through his own interference alone, the petition was not presented.

In September of this year he relinquished the office of tutor and soon after accepted that of chaplain in the continental army. He was stationed at the well known fortress of West Point.

This was a new and untried situation. Solemn and responsible as the office of chaplain is, it being in some respects even more so than that of a parochial minister, it has unfortunately happened that in many instances men have been elected to it [who were] distinguished only for their ignorance and profligacy.

The reverse of this, however, is said to have been the case during the war of the revolution. That was a contest in which the piety of the land was exhibited. The dependence of the American people was upon the righteousness of their cause and upon the aid of heaven. Men of the first reputation for piety and talents were therefore selected as the chaplains of the American army, and they were eminently faithful and exemplary in contrast with the chaplains of the army of Great Britain.

The office of chaplain, which Mr. Dwight now filled, he aimed to sustain with a becoming fidelity; nor were his efforts in vain. He claimed not the privilege of being idle, nor were his instructions and kind offices confined to the sabbath. On that day his sermons were appropriate and solemn; not calculated to flatter but to enlighten and reform, not merely to enjoin the duties or exalt the virtues of patriotism but to bring the soldiers of the country to become soldiers of the cross.

At the same time that he was a minister devoted to his calling, he was not unmindful of his obligations to his country as a patriot. His patriotism was of an ardent character. No

man loved his country more devoutly, and no one would have led her armies to the field of battle in a righteous cause with more courage and enthusiasm. During the war many pens were employed in writing patriotic songs, which powerfully contributed to excite the ardor of both people and soldiers in the cause of freedom. To this number Mr. Dwight contributed several, one of which--his "Columbia"--will not be forgotten while America lasts. "It opened the eyes of his countrymen," his biographer remarks, "on a prospect new, brilliant, and delightful; and exhibited, in distinct vision, the rising glories of our infant empire."

Mr. Dwight continued in the army a little more than a year, when he resigned his commission in consequence of the death of his father. In the summer of 1776 that gentleman had gone to the Mississippi, in company with two of his sons and several other adventurers, to form a settlement on lands which had been ceded to them from the crown.

They had reached the country in safety, and under prosperous circumstances had commenced the contemplated settlement. But towards the close of the following year the father of Mr. Dwight fell a victim to the disease of the climate.

The subsequent history of his two sons, and of the other adventurers who had accompanied him to the south, is so full of interest that we shall devote a page to its recital.

After the death of Mr. Dwight, the adventurers, abandoning the settlement, attempted to cross from Natchez to the sea coast of Georgia. They were compelled to this sudden flight by intelligence that a Spanish expedition was ascending the river, from which they had everything to fear.

At this time also the American people were at war with Great Britain. From the enemies of their country, particularly from hostile tribes of Indians in the interest of England, they had reason to anticipate danger. A circuitous route to the place of their destination was therefore determined on; and so circuitous did it at length prove, that their wanderings extended to 1,350 miles and occupied 149 days.

It was mid winter when they commenced their journey. The company consisted of men, women, and children, some of the last of whom were infants at the breast.

Although mounted on horseback, it was often nearly impossible to proceed by reason of various obstructions, and much of the journey was performed on foot. Steep and lofty mountains were to be passed and broad and deep rivers to be crossed. Over the latter they swam their horses at the peril of their lives.

Famine too threatened them, and on one occasion they were reduced to their last morsel. Often also did they suffer intensely from thirst. Once the whole company, with their horses, were so nearly overcome with thirst that it was found necessary to encamp and

search the neighborhood for water. A lady belonging to the company herself went abroad, and at a considerable distance discovered indications of water. She scraped away the earth with her hands, when the little hollow she had made, to her joy, filled with water.

Having slacked her thirst she hastened with the welcome news to the party, all of whom, together with the horses, were abundantly refreshed from this little fountain, which, like a cruise of oil in ancient days, seemed inexhaustible. But for this timely discovery their sufferings would have soon reached the height of despair, and might, at least to some--perhaps to all--have proved fatal.

We shall not detain our readers with any further account of this perilous and distressing journey, though we have told but a moiety [portion] of the hardships the party endured. They, at length, reached the place of their destination without having lost a single one of their number.

The intelligence of his father's death, owing to the peculiar circumstances of the country and the distance of the place at which it occurred, did not reach Mr. Dwight until nearly a year from the date of the event.

It was a peculiarly severe stroke to himself and his mother's family. By means of it Mrs. Dwight was deprived of a most worthy counselor and friend, and she had now alone to feel a mother's anxieties for thirteen children, ten of whom were under twenty-one years of age.

Her loss, however, was to be in a great measure supplied by the subject of these observations, who was her eldest son. An opportunity, in the orderings of Providence, was presented to him to exhibit the filial feelings and piety of his heart, and he embraced that opportunity with promptitude and cheerfulness.

To most young men of the age of twenty-six with a rising family of his own (having been married while a tutor of college) and with the prospect of distinction before him, the duty which seemed to devolve upon him would have been one of a most self-denying character.

To him it might have appeared so. Yet his filial and fraternal spirit, mingling with the pious feelings of his heart, left him no room to hesitate. With as little delay as possible, having resigned his commission, he hastened with his family to Northampton to administer consolation to a mother whom he tenderly loved, and to assist her by his counsels and his labors in rearing a dependent family.

"Here," says his biographer,

he was emphatically the staff and stay of the family. The government and education of the children, as well as the daily provision for their wants, depended almost exclusively on his exertions. The elder as well as the younger were

committed to his care, and [they] loved and obeyed him as their father. The filial affection and dutiful respect and obedience which he exhibited towards his mother, and the more than paternal kindness with which he watched over the well-being of his brothers and sisters, deserve the most honorable remembrance. To accomplish this object he postponed his own establishment for life and a provision for his family. To accomplish it, though destitute of property, he relinquished in their favor his own proportion of the family estate, labored constantly for five years with a diligence and alacrity rarely exemplified, and continued his paternal care and exertions and liberality long after his removal from Northampton.

Often was his mother in later years heard to acknowledge, in language of eloquent affection and gratitude, his kindness and faithfulness and honorable generosity to her and to her children. The respect which she felt and manifested towards him (though perhaps not his inferior in native powers of mind) resembled the affections of a dutiful child towards her father rather than the feelings of a mother for her son. During this period he labored through the week upon the farm and preached on the sabbath to different vacant congregations in the neighboring towns. He also established a school at Northampton for the instruction of youth of both sexes, which was almost immediately resorted to by such a number of pupils that he was under the necessity of employing two assistants.

At the same time, owing to the dispersed condition of the College at New Haven and to his established character as an instructor, a part of one of the classes in that seminary repaired to Northampton and placed themselves under his care as their preceptor. To them he devoted his own immediate attention until they had completed their regular course of collegiate studies. The school was continued during his residence there and uniformly maintained an extensive and distinguished reputation.

At the same time he preached almost without intermission upon the sabbath with increasing popularity. The compensation which he received for preaching, as well as the profits of his school, were all expended in the support of the common family.

An example similar to the above is rarely to be met with in this selfish world. In no period of a long and confessedly useful life did Mr. Dwight appear more exalted than during his filial and paternal labors at Northampton. It was a period upon which he must have reflected in after years with peculiar satisfaction, and it must have been among his riches consolations in a dying hour. And in that brighter and better world, whether mother and son have now gone, what must be their mutual joy, *her's* in having given birth to a son who displayed such benevolence and disinterestedness while on earth, and *his* in having a mother whose prayers of faith were answered in the display of such exalted virtues by himself.

Other events of his life during his residence at Northampton would furnish additional

evidence of the pure and noble principles by which his conduct was governed. A few facts illustrative of this point must suffice.

In the years 1781 and 1782 he was elected to represent the above town in the State Legislature. This was an important, and even critical, period of the country. The war of the Revolution, now about closing, had unsettled most of the institutions of the land. The government and laws were to be remodeled in accommodation to the new relations growing out of a state of independence, and this was to be done in such a manner as to calm the already agitated state of public feeling.

Great practical wisdom and deep political sagacity were obviously necessary in the legislative counsels. Mr. Dwight had not been bred to political life, and therefore it was not to be expected that he should appear like the practiced legislator. Yet no sooner did he appear within the hall of legislation than he was obviously at home. He entered with zeal into the business of the day and was greatly admired and distinguished for his talents and eloquence.

Unlike some men in public life, his object seemed not to display himself but to benefit his constituents and his country. When he spoke, he was indeed eloquent; otherwise he could not well be. But his eloquence and influence were on the side of truth and justice, and rational liberty.

"On one occasion, he was enabled to prove his devotion to the interest of learning. A petition for a grant in favor of Harvard College was before the legislature. At that time such grants were unpopular. This spirit of honorable liberality, which now happily characterizes the legislature and people of that Commonwealth, was then far from being universally operative. During his occasional absence from the house, the petition had been called up; and after finding but few, and those not very warm advocates, had been generally negatived. On taking his seat, Mr Dwight, learning what had occurred, moved a reconsideration of the vote. In a speech of about one hour in length, fraught with wit, with argument, and with eloquence, and received with marked applause on the spot from the members and the spectators, he effectually changed the feelings of the House and procured a nearly unanimous vote in favor of the grant. It gave him high pleasure thus to confer an obligation, which was gratefully acknowledged by its principal officers as well as by many others of its friends."

The manner in which he had acquitted himself on the above occasion--the knowledge and reasoning which he had evinced, the eloquence with which he gave utterance to his sentiments, and the influence which he had obviously acquired--all now created a strong wish on the part of his friends that he should relinquish his profession as a minister of the gospel and engage in political life.

This was a powerful temptation. A worldly ambition would have yielded to the solicitations of such friends as he had, and who stood ready to insure his election to the

continental congress. This office was in the gift of the legislature, and doubtless would have been unanimously conferred upon him.

But his *vows* had been given to the cause of Christ, and his heart was fixed. He was sincerely attached to the clerical profession; and so convinced was he of its superior usefulness, and so completely under the influence of religious feeling, that he could close his eyes to all worldly preferment. Had he been actuated by a political ambition, and had he then accepted the proffers made him, he would probably have risen to offices of the highest distinction in the country. Happy was it for the cause of religion and literature that he preferred to devote himself to the profession which he had already selected.

His decision being thus made, he entered upon the great work of an ambassador of God in earnest. He preached in several churches in Massachusetts with such acceptance as to receive from them invitations to become their pastor. These, however, he thought fit to decline in favor of a call from the church and congregation of Greenfield, a delightful village in the county of Fairfield, Connecticut; and here, at length he was ordained in 1783.