

## Chapter 4

This office in that venerable institution [Yale College] had become vacant in 1795 by the death of Dr. Stiles. In relation to his successor, there seemed to have been little diversity of opinion in the public mind. The eyes of the community were immediately directed towards Dr. Dwight as the man whom Providence had obviously raised up to occupy that important station.

He had now arrived at the forty-third year of his age. "He was," as Professor Silliman eloquently remarks, "in the meridian of life--mature in experience and reputation, and long practiced in the difficult task of instructing and governing youth. To this was added a familiar acquaintance with the courses of academic learning and with the principles of most branches of human knowledge. In his powers of communication he was almost unrivaled; and in his whole character shone forth with a dignity and splendor, which left the corporation of the college no room to hesitate as to the propriety of his election. Indeed, it seemed as if all the dispensations of Providence towards him had been adapted to qualify him for the station in which with the most distinguished reputation and usefulness he was to pass the remainder of his days."

To his church and people, the intelligence of his appointment was a source of extreme regret. They too highly prized him for his talents and worth to consent to his removal, and on account of this [there] never probably was a more painful duty performed by an ecclesiastical council than by that which was assembled to dissolve the ministerial ties which bound him to the people of Greenfield.

The appointment of Dr. Dwight to the presidency of Yale College was an event important not only to himself but also to the interests of religion and literature throughout the country. It was important to him as it furnished an appropriate theater for the peculiar talents of instruction and government with which he was endowed. And it was important to the interests of religion and literature, as those interests were necessarily involved in the character of the man who should preside over that venerable institution. With all his peculiar gifts and acknowledged qualifications, the undertaking was a great one. Much was expected of him.

The college was originally founded by the piety of the land, and had ever been considered as connected with the welfare of the church. Many were the prayers which had been offered up for the welfare of that institution, since it was looked to as the principal fountain whose annual streams were to make glad the city of God.

In any view, therefore, the office was one of great responsibility. But at the time of his accession, several circumstances of peculiar character existed which tended to increase that responsibility, and to render the faithful discharge of his duties more trying and difficult.

The system of discipline, at that time in use, had been modeled after that of the English universities. It was better adapted therefore for other times and for a different state of society. Great insubordination prevailed among the students. It was a peculiarly delicate and difficult task to change a system which had received the sanction of eminent men and been confirmed by the practice of years. But the evils growing out of it were not to be endured. At an early period President Dwight directed his attention to the promotion of a different plan of government, and in the course of a few years, silently but effectually, changed the whole system of administration.

The plan now adopted was to make the government *parental* in every particular, so far as was practical. The students were to be treated with great kindness by the officers of the institution and taught to look upon the President as a patron, as a friend, as a father. Fines were abolished and appeals made to the conscience of the offender. His hopes were to be addressed as well as his fears. He was to be urged, as an affectionate father would urge an offending child, to better conduct by every consideration which in such a case would be proper.

The mild and parental system thus introduced soon produced its anticipated effect. It is comparatively easy to stand out against law and coercion, but who can resist the tender and affectionate advice of a friend? And it was remarkably true that during the period which Dr. Dwight presided over Yale College, the instances were few in which the idle and the vicious were not reclaimed. Punishment was intended to be a strange work; and in its severest forms, was resorted to infrequently, and even then always with pain.

We mean not to convey the impression that his system of discipline was wanting in energy. Few men ever possessed this trait of character in a more perfect degree than President Dwight. No man was more decided, none more inflexible in cases where decision and inflexibility were required by duty. But he well knew how to condescend; and in matters which were not essential, was often known to yield as wisdom and prudence seemed to dictate.

"He encouraged the students," observes his biographer (from the justice of whose remarks few, it is believed will dissent),

especially those of the Senior class, in all their difficulties and troubles to come to him for advice and assistance. In every such case the instructor was forgotten in the friend and father. He entered into their interests and feelings just as if they were his own; and while he yielded the necessary relief, he endeared himself to them permanently by his kindness. The members of the Senior class who wished to engage for a season, after leaving college, in the business of instruction, applied to him regularly to procure them eligible situations. So lively was the interest which he took in their welfare and so willing and active his exertions in their behalf, that few such applications failed of being successful. He remembered the feelings of a

young man just leaving college without a profession, without property, and with no means of support but the blessing of God and his own exertions. Nothing gave him higher pleasure than to encourage the heart of every youth so situated to save him from despondence, and to open to him the road to property, to usefulness, and to honor. The number of his students whom he thus essentially befriended, if stated, would almost exceed belief.

With others, who were in more affluent circumstances, he would enter into a free and confidential conversation on their plan of life, explain to them their peculiar dangers, and lead them to aim at an eminence in their professions and to form for themselves a high standard of moral excellence.

The respect and affection manifested towards him by his pupils after leaving college, whenever they visited New Haven as well as when they met him abroad, was a sufficient reward for all his efforts to serve them, if he had not found a still higher reward in doing good. We will only add that his pupils familiarly spoke of him with reference to this subject by the most honorable appellation, "*The young man's friend.*"

The immediate, and we might add the almost necessary, effect of this wise course was to increase the reputation of the college and greatly to enlarge the number of its students. The number at his accession was 110. In the course of his presidency the number at one time was 313. It will be proper in this place to add that the system of government since his decease has been continued in all its general features, and under the administration of the present officers of that institution is exercising still the same delightful influence. The continuance of that system is in accordance with a wish which he expressed on his deathbed. "I wish," said he, "the system of discipline to be pursued which has been so long pursued." And to this he added: "I am willing to leave the testimony of my opinion in favor of it."