

Chapter 7

In another particular, the character of Dr. Dwight deserves the attention and imitation of all, and especially of the young. We allude to the uncommon purity of his sentiments and language. It was befitting his station (indeed, essential to that dignity which alone could command the respect of those around him) that he should stand aloof from all that was coarse and indecent. But this is only a small part of what may in truth be said of him. On this subject his biographer justly observes,

In conversation he not only observed the strictest delicacy in his remarks and allusions and anecdotes, but by an influence at once silent and perceptible induced everyone else to do the same. The same is true of his writings. It is believed that in the whole of his voluminous works there cannot be found a single sentence which is not consistent with the most refined purity. Nor after an intimate acquaintance of more than forty years is the instance recollected in which he has been heard to utter an expression or a thought which would have excited the apprehension of innocence or wounded the ear of female sensibility.

Upon the foregoing traits of character we might perhaps have profitably dwelt longer, and to these we might add others; and upon them we might dwell in justice even with enthusiasm. We might speak of his sacred regard to truth on all occasions as well in relation to the passing concerns of life, when slight deviations or at least a little exaggeration is thought admissible, as when discoursing upon its importance in the sanctuary itself.

In a preceding page we have hinted that this regard for truth early characterized him, because it was one of the lessons taught him by his mother, even in the nursery. That lesson he never forgot. On the subject of truth between man and man, and as a moral virtue in the universe of God, we think we have heard him when he exhibited more power and more eloquence than on any other topic. A few sentences extracted from his published sermons will exhibit the strong light in which he regarded this particular subject. "No society can exist without confidence; and no confidence without truth. Truth, therefore, is the basis on which society rests. Even thieves and robbers are obliged to speak the truth to each other in order to maintain their own dreadful society." And in another place most eloquently speaking of the truth of God, does he observe,

If no confidence could be placed in him, none could be placed elsewhere. Every thought, purpose, interest, consolation, and hope would be afloat on the waves of a boundless and perpetually disturbed ocean, where rest and safety never could be found. All beings would distrust all; and the universe, filled as it is with inhabitants, would become a solitude. Suspicion and jealousy would make all beings strangers and enemies to each other. Suspense would fill every mind and hang over every enjoyment; a state always wretched and deplorable, but here

supremely and finally wretched, because the suspense would be endless as well as unceasing. The mind stretching its view through eternity and immensity would discover no pole-star by which it might steer its course, no haven whither it might betake itself for safety and repose. The truth of God hushes this restless and stormy ocean to peace. All his creatures know, or may know, that his purposes, declarations, and promises are eternal and immutable; and that, therefore, he cannot deceive their confidence nor disappoint their reasonable hopes; that he is *the Rock* on which is founded the great building of the universe, the foundation and the building both eternal.

We might also dwell at length, and that we trust without being wearisome, upon that decision of character which was inwrought in the very texture of his mind. But this we must pass by, as well as the delightful subject of his well known disinterestedness, his hospitality, his charity and other interesting traits of character. Nor does it fall within our province to speak of him in the several relations of husband, and father, and brother, more than to say that the manner in which he sustained these relations was such that his departure caused a vacancy in the hearts of a mourning circle of friends which nothing earthly could fill.

We must not forget to mention, in this connection, the declaration of his mother a short time before her death; a declaration which, as an epitaph upon any man in a moral view, would be more desirable than the proudest epitaph ever inscribed on the tomb of the hero, viz. that she did not know the instance in which he ever disobeyed a parental command or failed in the performance of a filial duty. Of what youth, whose eyes glance upon this testimony to filial good conduct, can a mother say, "It is equally true of my son."

We have designedly omitted to speak of President Dwight's religious character until now, the conclusion of these pages. Nor do we design to display it except through the record of some facts respecting the revival of religion in Yale College in the winter and spring of 1807-1808. We adopt this course, because it happens to the writer of these pages to know something of this revival beyond what he remembers to have seen recorded, and some facts which will present the character of the distinguished subject of these pages, as a friend to the souls of men, in an interesting light.

In the month of December, 1807, a revival of religion commenced in the city of New Haven. For a long time previously to that event, the state of the city, according to the testimony of a resident there, was "deplorable and unpromising." During the preceding ten months not a single individual had professed religion from the largest congregation in the city, and but two in the course of a year.

Darkness seemed to cover the church, and gross darkness the people. The means of grace were but little valued, the calls of mercy were but little regarded. The public peace was broken by disorderly and riotous conduct. Our midnight slumbers were disturbed by obscene songs and drunken revels. The laws, those guardians of social

enjoyment and public order, were trampled upon with seeming impunity. The magistrates were defied and abashed. The sabbath was violated palpably and openly. Vain amusements, gaming, chambering, wantonness, and midnight carousing predominated and became preeminently the signs of the times. So hardened, so bold, so daring were the sons of Belial that the most solemn scenes were exhibited in mockery before them. These were deeds which well became the darkness under cover of which they were often perpetrated, and the darkest symptom of all was that the disciples of Jesus were all this while asleep.

At length, however, light appeared to dawn upon the darkness which enveloped the church of God. Some time in October there were indications of some excitement among professors of religion. During November that excitement obviously increased. Religious meetings were more numerously attended and a growing solemnity was visible in the social prayer meeting as well as in the sanctuary. In December it was no longer doubtful what was designed from on high in respect to the church. A deep and solemn religious feeling pervaded the city, and for months there was an unusual pressure into the kingdom of God.

This revival had been in progress in the city for months before any special seriousness was indicated within the walls of college. The exact number of professors of religion belonging to the college church, the writer will not attempt to name, but it was unusually small; and in respect to the freshmen class, was confined to a single individual. And in truth it may be asserted that among the few who claimed to be the disciples of Jesus, religious feeling was exceedingly low. The apathy was appalling, and for a time it seemed as if the cloud which was pouring down its refreshing showers upon the city would pass by without one mercy-drop upon the college.

But a blessing was in store for that school of the Puritan fathers, and soon after the commencement of the second term the time of its descent arrived.

On a Saturday afternoon, four students¹ were accidentally (might we not say providentially?) in a room together conversing on some topic quite foreign from the subject of religion (no one of them at that time being serious) when a fifth student entered. He was in ill health, and the paleness of his countenance attracting the notice of one of the four, he said to the newcomer in a tone of levity, calling him by name, "_____, you look as if you had the *consumption*." The student addressed paused midway in the room as if petrified, but he rallied his spirits sufficiently to join for a moment in the laugh which followed, and then hastily retired.

He afterwards said that had a severe blow been given him by some one of the party, the sensation of pain could not have been more evident than it was when the above words were uttered. An invisible power seemed to convey them with so much force to the

1 It may be interesting to our readers to know that the students here alluded to were subjects of the revival which followed. All became ministers of the gospel; three still live, one has gone to his reward.

conscience of the student as to excite the sensation of having been struck on the breast by something external.

A few minutes after leaving the room, the college bell rung for prayers. The students entered the chapel and the service began. President Dwight officiated, as was his practice at evening. Never will that occasion be forgotten by at least *one*, and long perhaps will it be remembered by several.

It was at the close of the week; the day was ending, the sabbath was beginning. A glorious work was in progress in the city and around the college. Immortal minds were awaking from a death of sin unto a life of righteousness, and were preparing not only for the earthly sabbath which was to follow, but for the eternal sabbath of rest in the kingdom of God.

To this happy state of things in the city, the college presented (as has been remarked) a most melancholy contrast. There indeed stood walls consecrated to religion as well as to science; but unless within a room here and there were found the disciples of Jesus, the whole was obviously claimed by the god of this world. There was read and admired the eloquence of Demosthenes, but the lofty inspirations of Paul were passed unheeded by. There were admired those systems of philosophy which had descended from the ancient cynic or academic, while the simple and pure and sublime truths of the gospel of the Son of God were unnoticed and disregarded.

On the evening alluded to, it seemed as if a sense of these things had settled with overwhelming power on the president. The chapter was read with an altered tone; the hymn was recited with a faltering accent; and as he joined in with the choir, as was his custom, his usually loud and sonorous voice became weak and tremulous. He sung but a single stanza and stopped.

Next came the prayer. President Dwight was always remarkable for humility of manner in prayer. Even when his lofty mind rose amidst the inspirations of a near approach to God and his language became (as it often became on such occasion) sublime, he was humble and abased. But on the evening named it seemed as if the subduing power of the gospel was doubly upon him. There was such an apparent coming down, such an obviously holy prostration of soul, as indicated that the spirit of God was with him. He spoke as if "dust and ashes" were addressing the Eternal on his Throne.

The burden of the prayer was, "An acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God in the dispensations of his grace." And yet he made that solemn truth the foundation of one of the most appropriate arguments ever presented to a throne of mercy for a revival of religion. Never did a minister plead more fervently for a people, never a father more importunately for his children, than he did for his pupils before him. Nor were the wants of the church, nor the influence of a revival in the college upon the interests of the Redeemer's kingdom in the land--in the *world*--forgotten on that occasion.

The morning service on the following day was occupied, as usual, in the delivery of a Theological Lecture. In the afternoon he preached from the story of the "*Young man of Nain*," recorded in Luke 7:11-15, and dwelt particularly upon that touching part of it, "*Young man, I say unto thee arise.*"

That sermon, it is believed, was the immediate instrumental cause of the revival which followed. At least it was the means of fastening conviction on *one*, which issued in a hope which after a lapse of more than twenty years still proves "an anchor to the soul."

And in respect to others who were present at that time and who afterwards were the subjects of the revival, impressions, it is believed, were made which were never effaced. By this it is not intended that at this distance of time they *could trace* distinctly their convictions to the impressions of that day. But the scene was so immensely solemn as to give no doubtful evidence that God was indeed there working in the consciences of the hearers, weakening the strong pillars of Satan's throne, and thus preparing the way for the introduction of the kingdom of righteousness and joy.

From this time a revival commenced, which if less powerful and in respect to *numbers* more limited than some revivals which preceded it, was nevertheless the occasion of equal joy to the friends of the Redeemer, both far and near.

The interest which President Dwight took in that revival (it was apparent to everyone) was deep and affecting. Eloquent before, he was doubly so then. And well remembered is it that during that season he almost entirely abandoned his notes, his excited feelings not permitting him to be thus confined. And in respect to the sermon to which allusion has already been made, and which is published, it is well recollected that, occasionally leaving his notes, he made personal and extemporaneous appeals to the students, even more touching and sublime than the printed sermon contains.

It was his custom to meet such students as were anxious one evening every week, and oftener when occasion required, at one of the tutor's rooms. And on such occasions it was difficult to tell whether he displayed more of the feelings of the Christian or of the parent. Had those who were inquiring the way to eternal salvation been his own children "according to the flesh," he could not apparently have imparted to them instruction with more kindness and affection, or have been more solicitous to see them in the ark of safety.

On a single occasion during that revival, it happens to the writer to know that his tender feelings were put to a severe trial. A student became deeply anxious for his own spiritual welfare; and while others who had been awakened at a *subsequent period* to himself were rejoicing in hope, that student's alarm seemed steadily to increase. The President was made acquainted with his exercises, and imparted from time to time such advice as the word of God and his own experience authorized him to give. Other Christian friends also became deeply interested, and prayers were multiplied, that in respect to that suffering

student "judgment might be sent forth unto victory."

But it seemed all in vain. The terrors of the Almighty gathered in deeper folds about him. Every passing day added only to the awful sense which he had of coming wrath; and the approach of night seemed like the approach of that day of darkness which will never be illumined by even a single ray from the Sun of Righteousness.

The hours of that evening passed slowly and solemnly away. A few Christian friends lingered about the bed of the agonized and despairing sinner, and many were the prayers offered that the balm of Gilead might be applied to his wounded spirit. At length a messenger was dispatched to summon the President, as it seemed to those in attendance that, unless relief were had, death must close the scene.

The hour was late, but he promptly attended the call and came emphatically as one sent of God, as the bearer of good tidings of great joy. For a short time he seemed overwhelmed, so deeply did he share in the agony of the agonized. At length, however, taking a seat by the bedside, he gradually directed the anxious inquirer unto the divine sufficiency, the infinite fullness of the Lord Jesus. {He} recited the invitations of the gospel, and then followed his parental counsel by prayer to God. That prayer, it is believed, was heard; and the words which he spoke were as healing balm from on high. A sweet serenity seemed to steal over the agitated sinner's mind, a serenity which was the harbinger of a "joy" which came in a short time after, and was "unspeakable and fully of glory."

To have been made instrumental of the conversion of one such sinner unto God were to have lived not in vain. Yet how many such will form his diadem and crown of rejoicing in that day when he shall become a partaker of the divine glory!

It is scarcely possible to contemplate the character of such a man as President Dwight--even in the imperfect manner in which we have sketched that character--without a salutary influence upon ourselves. We may not, indeed, hope to make those attainments which he made, nor to exhibit those virtues in the perfection in which they adorned his life, nor yet to accomplish for the cause of virtue and science and religion precisely what he accomplished. Indeed, most must fall short of it. But with the incentive of such an example before them, will not all be induced to greater effort? The standard of the young man especially should always be high; and although he may not attain unto it, he will reach a higher elevation than if that standard were low.

In the life of such a man as President Dwight we learn what the human mind, when sanctified by the spirit of God and when its efforts are consecrated to the great objects of benevolent action, may become. Like others, he was originally "a child of wrath," and but for the grace of God he might have proved a proud philosopher arrayed on the side of skepticism against revealed truth; or an Attila, "the scourge of God," to carry fire and sword among the nations of the earth. But we see him, lofty as his spirit was, humbling

himself to the doctrines of the cross, and laboring through life to exalt a crucified Redeemer and to extend his kingdom over an apostate world.

Indeed, if we may be allowed to judge, "*Christ and him crucified*" was the object which, more than all others, engrossed the affection of his heart. Submission to the cross of Christ he taught, both by example and precept, as eminently and supremely the glory of man. Were we to write his epitaph, we could think of nothing more appropriate--we know of nothing which would express more fully what in his *heart* he felt, notwithstanding his intellectual attainments, and what in his *life* he recommended--than a Latin couplet which we recollect somewhere to have seen.

Si Christum bene scis, nihil est, si caetera nescis;
Si Christum nescia, nihil est, si caetera discis.

"If you are savingly acquainted with Christ, it is of little importance whether you know anything more; if ignorant of him, it is nothing should you know all things else."