

OPENING PRAYER

Let the words of my mouth,
and the meditation of our hearts,
be acceptable in thy sight,
O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer.Amen

TIMOTHY DWIGHT IV

(All quotations in this sermon come from Timothy Dwight 1752-1817, a Biography by Charles E. Cunningham, published in 1942).

James Russell Lowell hymn (1845)

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side.
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Off'ring each the bloom or blight;
And the choice goes by forever,
'Twi'x't that darkness *and that light*.

In 1629 the first Timothy Dwight was born in Dedham, England. When he was 5 years of age his father migrated to Dedham, Massachusetts (New England). Timothy I had a son, Nathan, who moved west, finally settling in Northampton, MA in 1695 as a successful trader, farmer and surveyor. He, also, served as justice of the peace before an early death at age 45. His son Timothy II (grandson of Timothy I) continued the farm, did surveying but also had a broad civic interest. He served as town selectman, county judge and deputy in the General Court. And he achieved the rank of Colonel in the British military fighting Native Americans with a significant role in the French and Indian War. His son, Timothy III, also served in the British military and achieved the rank of Major. He was the first Dwight to attend Yale College where his father hoped he would study law, but he wanted to farm in Northampton like his forebears. Dwight III was a large man at 6'4" and possessed great physical strength. Cunningham reports, "Major Dwight feared no man."¹ He, like his father, held many civic posts including judge of common pleas (1758-1774), selectman (1760-1764), town recorder (1760-1775), and representative to the Massachusetts legislature. It was his great fortune to marry Mary Edwards, 3rd daughter of Jonathan Edwards, the well known pastor of Northampton Congregational Church in 1750.

Mary was the daughter of New Haven born Sarah Pierpont and Yale valedictorian Jonathan Edwards, the First Great Awakening pastor who created the famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. (Note: Yes, this was a model Evangelical Christian sermon that is still used by some denominations today, but there is more to Edwards than this sermon- consider these two books.)

Jonathan and Sarah Edwards had good parenting skills. All eleven of their children survived to adulthood. Their descendants included the publisher Nelson Doubleday, the writers Robert Lowell and

O. Henry. Based upon a study of their descendants in 1900 they produced 1 U.S. Vice President, 1 Dean of a law school, 1 Dean of a medical school, 3 U.S. senators, 3 governors, 3 mayors, 13 college presidents, 30 judges, 60 doctors, 65 professors, 75 Military officers, 80 public office holders, 100 lawyers, 100 clergymen, and 285 college graduates.²

Mary Edwards married at age 17. Her first child, Timothy IV, was born when she was 18. She went on to have 13 children. When the American Revolution began, Timothy III, was a loyalist who left New England in 1775 when most of his neighbors joined the patriot cause. He joined a British group that attempted to establish a new colony in the region of Mississippi. He died there, the victim of a hostile climate.

Mary was petite and Cunningham says it may be no exaggeration that her husband “could carry his wife around the room, in the palm of one hand, at arm’s length”.³ But she was not short on intellectual and personal stamina. Cunningham says she was “saturated in her father’s doctrines (and) could hold her own with the most abstruse theologians”.⁴ Like her parents she advocated education at the earliest possible age for all her children. Timothy was said to be able to read the Bible before the age of four. Mary instilled in Dwight a love of learning that resulted in his acceptance at Yale College at age thirteen. He graduated as a Valedictorian of his class at 17 and, after two years as rector of Hopkins School in New Haven, was appointed as a tutor at Yale college.

Mary lived to a ripe age, dying at 73 in the winter of 1807. At the time Dwight was President of Yale. He hurried from New Haven to Northampton, and upon returning from the grave remarked to his sister: “All that I am and all that I shall be, I owe to my mother.”⁵

Young Dwight was always a precocious student:

He was naturally sociable, inquisitive, and intelligent- qualities his mother took care to cultivate early. Almost as soon as he could speak, she began his formal course of instruction. Her first concern was to enable him to distinguish between Edwardean right and wrong....he was not merely to avoid sin, but to hate it.⁶

While Mrs. Dwight gave her son a thorough grounding in the ethical application of Edwardean dogma, she did not neglect his progress in other fields.....as the numbers of Timothy’s brothers and sisters increased, the nursery came quite literally to resemble a schoolroom.⁷

At age six Dwight was sent to the local grammar school. Other students there were older and Dwight’s insatiable appetite for knowledge led him to steal their books when they were distracted by games. “It was his only recorded, willful breach of parental authority.”⁸

He began to teach himself Latin. His father did not approve and tried to put an end to it. However, over time Dwight wore down his father’s resolve and at seven he was allowed to join a single older student who was learning Latin for the Yale College entrance exam, being taught by a recent graduate. At age eight Dwight had surpassed the older student in the language and took Yale’s Latin entrance exam and passed it. His studies in classics were then cut short when the Yale tutor left town.

Dwight’s education at home was furthered by his father who was a student of history and had a reasonably sized library. At age eleven Dwight was sent to live with a Middletown, CT pastor, Rev.

Enoch Huntington for a year, who not only influenced Dwight's views on current events like the Stamp Act, but who also worked with him on most of the texts required for his first two years at Yale.

Age thirteen was very young to start his college career, but he was rather over prepared. Bored in the first two years by repeating the same work he had already done, he fell into card playing and socializing rather than studying and missed enough classes that his enrollment was in jeopardy. He was saved by a tutor, a brilliant young graduate named Stephen Mitchell, who would one day become chief justice of the CT Supreme Court. Mitchell firmly counseled Dwight that he was wasting an important opportunity and set Dwight back on an academic path that his family had begun for him. In his junior year Dwight began a regimen that would correct his iniquities but result in a severe affliction. Students' days began at 4:30am with required chapel attendance. Dwight rose an hour earlier and, reading by candlelight, would translate 100 lines of Homer from the Greek each day. (It is reported he still knew Homer well forty years later.) But studying by candlelight was destructive to his eyesight. Hence he is often pictured wearing eyeglasses. At midlife he required an amanuensis, someone to read to him.

Upon graduation from Yale in 1769 he first found work at Hopkins School to earn money while he pursued graduate studies at Yale. Cunningham says at graduation from college Dwight was "bristling with Calvinistic armament."⁹ In addition, having inherited something of the physicality of his father, he stood a full six feet and was large in body, and presented himself as a teacher who spoke with firmness and authority. He allotted six hours to his pupils and then eight hours to his own studies. That left 10 hours for meals, exercise and sleep. After two years (1772) he left Hopkins to tutor full time at Yale. His torrid work schedule accelerated. On the good side he and a fellow tutor, John Trumbull, a future Hartford wit, initiated a lecture series on writing style and composition, something never before done at Yale (students formerly considered that poetry and rhetoric were fields "that sniffed a perfume of femininity"). He also read Isaac Newton's Principia three times, as well as mastering Algebra, a new science at the time. To save more time for studies he reduced his sleep per night to four hours and his meals to a strict 12 mouthfuls only twice a day. At age 22 "eyesight, appetite and health oddly failed him all at once".¹⁰ His breakdown was complete and his father was called to bring him home. "He seemed to be going home only to die".¹¹

After 2 months he was still suffering intensely. A doctor prescribed various medications including treatments of Hull's Colic Powder and a bottle of Madeira wine daily for three months. In addition he was instructed to walk six miles daily as well as horse riding of over eight miles. As time progressed he was given new medications recommended by the eminent Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia. And he increased his daily walking to 11 miles daily with an additional 11 miles on horseback as well. With these efforts, after 14 months "his health returned. He had good reason to believe that benign Providence had watched over him".¹²

This was a near death experience for Dwight and he knew it:

It was apparently in January, 1774 after his self-imposed regimen had nearly completed its work of devastation that he joined the college church. This meant that he had become a "Christian," the most profound religious experience which he could have in this mortal world..... Divine mercy had bestowed upon a depraved sinner a "new heart" which gave him the ability, sincerely and devoutly, to love God....

To Dwight it was the most serious, the most important event in his life, almost the answer to death itself."¹³

In April, 1775 shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, MA. The approaching war was deeply felt everywhere, including on the Yale campus. Dwight returned in the Fall as a tutor. He could only read or write two hours a day, however, he could teach.

Dwight's conversion experience in 1774 is fundamental to all that followed in his life. His reading now was primarily in theology, a subject he had informally addressed previously with his mother. His uncle, Rev. Jonathan Edwards, Jr, was the pastor of a New Haven church and helped Dwight in his studies. On March 3, 1777 he was wed to New Haven resident Mary Woolsey, daughter of his father's roommate at Yale. In June of 1777 Dwight was granted a license to preach by an association of ministers in Northampton County, MA. He was now Reverend Timothy Dwight.

The war at this time was fully engaged and Dwight immediately enlisted in a Connecticut regiment as a chaplain. Very soon he was recognized for his wide knowledge in all things including history, literature and science. He had begun to write poetry and that story is told in the Professor Robert Imholt lecture that you can find on the GHCC Adult Education webpage.

In 1778 he learned of the death of his father in Mississippi and left the Army to return to Northampton and take charge of the affairs of his family as the oldest surviving male.

In 1758 (when) Major Dwight (Rev Dwight's father) had accepted office as judge of the court of common pleas, he had taken the usual oath, swearing fealty to the British crown.¹⁴

It is a sad story in Cunningham's biography of how Major Dwight stood by his oath and his family suffered increasing criticism as the war approached. How he took two of his sons and attempted to establish a new family home near Natchez along the Mississippi River where disease and hardship ended his life. How the rest of his family remained in Northampton and suffered ostracism from that community because of Major Dwight's loyalty to Britain. Rev Dwight's return to Northampton was salvific for his mother and siblings. As Cunningham states it "Major Dwight was an anomalous paradox, "a Loyalist on Christian principle, and yet thoroughly patriotic in his feelings. The horns of a dilemma could not be sharper."¹⁵

Rev Dwight played many roles in Northampton including founding his first school. It was so successful that

President Ezra Stiles of Yale feared it as a rival. After the British attack upon New Haven (1779), a number of Yale students, including a large part of one whole class, shifted to Northampton, where they placed themselves under Dwight's instruction. ¹⁶

Rev Dwight played many roles in Northampton but eventually took his first and only job as a church pastor in Greenfield Hill, CT in 1782. Professor Imholt's talk on the GHCC web page tells the story of Greenfield Hill Church and Dwight so I am going to skip forward to 1795, the year he accepted the call to the Presidency of Yale College. Suffice it to say,

"Life at Greenfield Hill was much to Dwight's liking. There amid pleasant surroundings and congenial friends, he and his wife made a happy home".¹⁷

Take the offering

"I love thy kingdom, Lord", Dwight's famous hymn first published in 1801 in an Isaac Watts hymnal could be a reflection of the serenity he found while at Greenfield Hill.

- 1 I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of Thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer bought
With His own precious blood.
- 2 I love the Church, O God!
Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye
And graven on Thy hand.
- 3 For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.
- 4 Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise.

Charles Cunningham ends his biography with a chapter called "The Conquest of Infidelity". It describes an important theological change that occurred following Dwight's arrival at Yale as President. The door to the corruption of Congregational orthodoxy was opened during the French and Indian War when colonials encountered British military personnel who displayed disdain for the Congregational Way. Following the Revolution, which was won with the aid of France, the colonists were inundated with the European philosophies produced by the Age of Enlightenment that led to the chaotic and tumultuous French Revolution (1789). Deism and "Egalite, Fraterite, Liberte" were a departure from the Trinitarian Christianity of Connecticut, Yale and Reverend Dwight. A Code of College Laws in 1795 stated:

If any scholar shall deny the Holy Scriptures, or any part thereof, to be of divine authority; or shall assert and endeavor to propagate among the Students any error of heresy subverting the foundations of the Christian religion, and shall persist therein, after admonition, he shall be dismissed.

Yale College in 1795 had only a hundred students. The previous President, Ezra Stiles, was considered by many the finest scholar in America but he was very elderly and his administrative powers were limited. The faculty consisted of one other professor besides himself and two tutors.

(And Yale in 1795) was a hotbed of blatant infidelity. Every up-to-date sophomore scoffed at the idea of divine revelation. Any Yale man worth his salt denounced organized religion and priestcraft as loudly as Voltaire had shouted down superstition and the infamous. It may have been contrary to the academic laws, but the foe, boring from within, had gained full possession. His ugly colors were flying high over Calvinism's proudest Connecticut fortress. The recovery of that important citadel was chief of the many tasks before the new President.¹⁸

It was custom at Yale that seniors would meet weekly with the President. They would supply a list of topics for the President to choose from for discussion at such meetings. Mischievous students tried to prank the new president by choosing a question that challenged school rules: "Are the scriptures of the Old and New Testament the Word of God?":

Under the old regime they had never been allowed to suggest this subject. The previous administration had mistaken the notion that silence was best, lest discussion expose those of weaker clay to the prevailing contagion. But repression only persuaded active young minds that Christianity could only be supported by authority, not by argument. The new President, they thought, would act no differently. But he did. To their complete surprise he unhesitatingly selected this very question.¹⁹

Dwight asked the students to write their opinions on the question and if they took the negative side of the question, that they be as detailed as possible in their supporting arguments. When their papers were turned in the next day they had universally taken the negative side. Thus began a six month campaign of the new President with his senior class. He countered their arguments individually but also took to preaching on the subject (twice each Sunday) as well as making it a topic of informal discussion in chance encounters with students. Attracted by the clarity of his thinking, students began to listen.

His bolts had the effect of lightning upon the whole college....He forced the enemy to take the defensive, but it required time and patience to drive him from the last outpost. When the next class entered Yale in the fall of 1796, only one freshman was a professing Christian; the sophomore class contained none; the junior, one; and the senior eight.²⁰

Dwight worked closely with the senior class each year as mentor and guide. He trained them as disciples who would spread his theology throughout the student body.

After long and patient waiting, in the spring of 1802, a momentous religious revival occurred.One-third of Yale's two hundred and thirty students became hopefully converted. Over thirty of these entered the ministry, while others in various ways throughout their lives, spread its influence.

In the words of one of (the) disciples of Dwight, "persuasion and divine truth... changed the college from a sink of moral and spiritual pollution into a residence not only of science and literature, but morality and religion....."²¹

This was a remarkable transformation that would give birth to a major phase of what has been called the 2nd Great Awakening. This 2nd Awakening was shared throughout Protestant America and lasted until 1860 (far longer than the 1st Great Awakening, 1735-1742). Dwight was the major force in

founding the Connecticut Congregational phase of this vast movement. Importantly, we as Congregationalists should appreciate that in our history this great awakening was different and unique. Conversions bore no signs of the emotional reactions seen in the first awakening. During Dwight's Presidency at least a fourth of the students were church members, some years as many as a third and one year over half. By growth of church membership I mean the kind of commitment that Jonathan Edwards required; the kind that resulted in Edwards being forced to leave his pulpit in Northampton and move to the wilderness of Stockbridge, MA. Edwards insisted that for membership in his church an individual was required to make a public profession of faith based on a conversion experience.

While one could argue that Thomas Jefferson put his Deism and embrace of European philosophies to good use with creation of legislation like "separation of church and state", Dwight had achieved his conquest of infidelity:

To espouse the cause of infidelity became as unpopular among the students as it had once been to express a belief in Christianity. No gentleman at Yale now dared openly to doubt the divinity of the gospel, lest his comrades despise him for stupidity, ignorance and depravity.²²

Thank you for your patience and allowing me to deliver this sermon. I am happy to take questions, otherwise we can proceed to the benediction.

BENEDICTION:

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home. Amen.

1. [Timothy Dwight 1752-1817, A Biography](#) by Charles E. Cunningham p. 8
2. Wikipedia, Sarah Edwards (missionary)
3. [Timothy Dwight 1752-1817, A Biography](#) by Charles E. Cunningham p. 8
4. *Ibid.* p. 103
5. *Ibid.* p. 103
6. *Ibid.* p. 11
7. *Ibid.* p. 13
8. *Ibid.* p. 15
9. *Ibid.* p. 32
10. *Ibid.* p. 44
11. *Ibid.* p. 45
12. *Ibid.* p. 46
13. *Ibid.* p.49
14. *Ibid.* p.88
15. *Ibid.* p. 89
16. *Ibid.* p.95
17. *Ibid.* p.131
18. *Ibid.* p.293
19. *Ibid.* p. 300
20. *Ibid.* p. 301
21. *Ibid.* p. 303
22. *Ibid.* p. 304