

When Yale Was A Christian College

BY ROBERT PETERSON

Timothy Dwight—The Reformer

When Timothy Dwight became President of Yale in 1795, the college was a hotbed of infidelity, where not a single member of the senior class professed to be a Christian. Led captive by the heady philosophy of the French Enlightenment which was sweeping through America's colleges, the student body openly ridiculed the idea of divine revelation. Conditions were so bad that when Dwight met with the senior class, he found they had jokingly assumed the names of the leading atheists and deists of the late eighteenth century.

Considering Dwight's reputation for learning and scholarship, the students supposed that he would follow this latest trend from Europe. On the first day of class, the question was raised—in jest—whether or not the Scriptures “are the word of God.” To the student's great surprise, Dwight took the question seriously, and one by one demolished each argument they could muster. One of Dwight's biographers recorded what happened next:

After this, he entered into a direct defense of the divine origin of Christianity, in a strain of powerful argument and animated eloquence which nothing could resist. The effect upon the students was electrical. From that moment infidelity was not only without a stronghold, but without a lurking place. To espouse her cause was now as unpopular as before it had been to profess a belief in Christianity. Unable to endure the exposure of argument, she fled from the retreats of learning, ashamed and disgraced.

From his strategic position at the head of one of early America's foremost universities, Dwight sent wave after wave of his students into the cities and hamlets of the new nation. Historians credit Dwight with sparking the Second Great Awakening, a spiritual revival that strengthened the nation in its infancy and helped ensure the success of the young Constitution.

Timothy Dwight was one of America's brightest and best. Long glossed over by secular historians, Dwight is known to most Christians as the author of the hymn, “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord.” But Dwight was also a Revolutionary War patriot, a pastor, an educator, a poet, a farmer, a legislator, and as one historian put it, “a leading enemy of the more militant infidelity of the [seventeen] nineties.” His achievements in any one of these areas would warrant an honorable mention in history books. He was a true Renaissance man, but without the arrogance that often accompanies such rare men.

The Early Years

Born on May 5, 1752, Dwight was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, who was famous for the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which sparked the First Great Awakening. Dwight grew up in Northampton, Massachusetts, where the effects of his grandfather’s ministry were still being felt. Reared in an atmosphere of hard work, piety, and learning, Dwight soon distinguished himself for scholarship. He learned the alphabet in one lesson, could read at age four, and by six had a firm grasp of Latin. He was admitted to Yale at thirteen. There he gave a brilliant performance in theology, poetry, and music.

After graduating from Yale, Dwight taught for two years in a grammar school in New Haven. Like almost all early American schools, this little academy was distinctively Christian. (The first public school board did not meet until 1833, almost fifty years after the Constitution had been adopted.) Having established a reputation as a fine pedagogue, he was asked to return to his alma mater as a tutor. Dwight consented, and from 1771 to 1777 he remained at Yale developing his Christian philosophy while tutoring undergraduates.

The War Years

This period of Dwight’s life came to an end when he, like many other members of “the Black Regiment,” (as James Otis called the clergymen who fought for the Patriot cause) became the chaplain of General Parson’s brigade. Between preaching on Sundays and before battles, Dwight composed patriotic songs to encourage the American troops. In “Columbia” he praised the young nation:

Perfumes, as of Eden, flowed along,
And a voice, as of angels, enchantingly sung —
Columbia, Columbia, to glory arise,
The queen of the world, and the child of the skies.

For Dwight, America was indeed a child of the skies, having been founded by Pilgrims and Puritans and blessed by the Author of Liberty. Britain’s attempt to install an Anglican bishop in the colonies had only confirmed Dwight’s belief that the war was a religious one, and that the Patriots were on the side of religious freedom. Lyrics like those of “Columbia” must have made the heart of every patriot swell with emotion. Through poetry and song, Dwight gave expression to the feelings of the farmers, tradesmen, and merchants that made up Washington’s army.

In October 1778, news of his father’s death reached him and he was forced to resign his office. Ever mindful of his duty to “provide for his own,” Dwight returned home to care for his mother and brother and sister, as well as his own wife and children.

The Teacher, Preacher, Legislator

From 1778 to 1795 he devoted most of his efforts to supporting his family. On weekdays, Dwight worked on his farm, while on Sundays he could be found filling the pulpit of some local church.

When the farm could no longer support his growing family, Dwight set up his own private school. In order to reach more students, Dwight used the Lancastrian method in which older children help to teach the younger. Dwight also served in the state legislature, and was involved in the adoption of the Massachusetts State Constitution. In 1795, he was appointed President of Yale.

Despite his prodigious learning and encyclopedic knowledge, Dwight was no bookworm. Not afraid to get his hands dirty, he could grow corn or raise a barn as well as he could deliver a lecture on British literature. His hands were as calloused from hard physical work as his eyes were weary from study. On one occasion, several workmen were digging a well for him when they reached an impasse that held up their work. Dwight discovered the problem and resolved it. On another occasion, while on one of his travels, he was entertained in the home of a friend. Neighbors—mostly farmers—had been invited to hear his talk of “higher themes of church and state, and college, on literature, on philosophy.” Instead, he was quite content to spend the evening talking about cultivating potatoes and raising sheep. Dwight was interested in everything; all knowledge was his province. One of his students later described him in these words: “I never knew the man who took so deep an interest in everything—the best mode of cultivating a cabbage, as well as the phenomena of the heavens, or the employment of angels. He was as pleased to talk with lowly people as with lofty ones—his kitchen servant, the college janitor, blacksmiths, hostlers, boatmen, ploughmen; he drew from them what they best knew, and well paid them in kind for what they gave.”

Passion for Christian Education

His studies in the Scriptures, confirmed by experience, convinced him of the necessity of Christian education. Dwight saw the dangers of state-controlled, atheistic—“Infidel” as he often called it—education. The movement toward statist education was already taking place in Europe, particularly in France and Prussia. Speaking of the Enlightenment philosophers who advocated such a system, Dwight (1860) observed:

They are sagacious enough to discern that all persons are best fitted to receive religious impressions in childhood; and that if they are suffered to grow up without them, they will never receive them, or receive them with excessive difficulty. By prescribing and urging this mode of education, they expect to see children habituated to Irreligion, and confirmed, without argument or conviction, in infidelity. In this manner. . . they have labored with immense industry and art to possess themselves of the education of children throughout France, Germany, and other countries of Europe.

In order to combat this trend in America, Dwight (1860) stressed the importance of a Christian education:

Education ought everywhere to be Religious Education. The master is as truly bound to educate his apprentice, or his servant in religion, and the schoolmaster his pupil, as the parent his child. In the degree of obligation, and of sin in violating it, there is none. The command is, Train up a child in the way he should go; directing all, who are entrusted with the care of children, to educate them in this manner.

At the same time, parents are further bound to employ no Instructors, who will not educate their children religiously. To commit our children to the care of irreligious persons, is to commit lambs to the superintendency of wolves. No sober man can lay his hand on his breast, when he has placed his child under the guidance of an irreligious teacher, and say, that he has done his duty; or felt himself innocent of the blood of his child. No man will be able, without confusion of facts, to recount this part of his conduct before the bar of the final Judge.

According to Dwight (1860), Christian education should begin with the Christian family, superintended by a godly father:

The world, perhaps, does not furnish a single prospect so beautiful, so lovely, to the eye of virtuous contemplation, as a Family, thus assembled in the morning for their affectionate devotions; combining the two most charming among all the exercises of the human heart, piety to God, their common parent, and tenderness to each other; and living through the day in that cause of Evangelical conduct, which is pre-eminently suited to so delightful a beginning. No priest, no minister, is so venerable, as a father; no congregation so dear and tenderly beloved, as a wife and children; and no oblations are offered with the same union, interest, and delight as those of a pious and affectionate household.

Christian education should begin as early as possible, stated Dwight (1860), at home and then at a Christian school. A child should first be taught “words and facts,” then “plain doctrines and precepts,” and finally, more complicated doctrines. The best method for the teacher to use is to move from the simple to the complex: “Children, more than any other persons, need line upon line, and precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little.” Bible stories were especially “eminently entertaining to children” and could be “understood even by very young minds.” Then, “after he has been instructed in Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, which are indispensable to the advantageous prosecution of every kind of business, he should be required to do the very business in which he is to be educated.” Such an apprenticeship system, coupled

with his early home training, would help the young Christian to live a life of “well-directed industry.” Throughout this process, stated Dwight (1860), the teacher or parent should model himself after Christ, the master teacher:

Christ . . . has left Instructors a perfect example. Although his disciples were dull of hearing . . . his patience never lessened. He taught them in the gradual manner, which I have recommended; as, in his own language, they were able to bear. He taught them also, without weariness, without fretfulness, without discouragement, without reproaches, and without intermission. . . . In this manner should parents teach their children; should be patient with their ignorance, their backwardness to receive instruction, their mistakes . . . the necessity of teaching them again and again . . .

As an educator, Dwight would have disagreed with today’s progressive educators who “debunk the heroes” and “Infidels” in their place. When he arrived at Yale, for example, one of his first actions was to remove the portrait of Joel Barlow, one of the “Connecticut Wits” whose writings undermined the Christian faith. Instead, he held before his students men like George Washington. Of Washington, Dwight (1860) wrote: “The things which he has done are too great, too interesting, ever to be forgotten. Every object which we see, every employment in which we are engaged, every comfort which we enjoy, we owe to Washington.”

The majority of Dwight’s poems were devoted to building up the Church. One catches a glimpse of life in turn-of-the century New England (19th century) in his poem about an orthodox pastor. Contrast “The Smooth Divine” with “The New England Pastor”:

The place, with east and western sides,
A wide and verdant street divides:
And here the houses faced the day,
And there the lawns in beauty lay.
There, turret-crowned, and central, stood
A neat and solemn house of God.
Across the way, beneath the shade
Two elms with sober silence spread,
The preacher lived. O’er all the place
His mansion cast a Sunday grace;
Dumb stillness sate the fields around;
His garden seemed a hallowed ground;
Swains ceased to laugh aloud, when near,
And schoolboys never sported there.
In the same mild and temperate zone,
Twice twenty years, his course had run,
His locks of flowing silver spread
A crown of glory o’er his head;
His face, the image of his mind,
With grave and furrowed wisdom shined;
Not cold; but slowing still, and bright;

Yet glowing with October light:
As evening blends, with beauteous ray,
Approaching night with shining day.
His Cure his thoughts engrossed alone:
For them his painful course was run:
To bless, to save, his only care;
To chill the guilty soul with fear;
To point the way to the skies,
And teach, and urge, and aid, to rise;
Where strait, and difficult to keep,
It climbs, and climbs, o'er Virtue's steep.

What a contrast to today, when the media constantly attacks and criticizes godly pastors. Today, a corrupt intelligentsia ignores Christian poets and honors only those avant-garde poets who helped pave the way for our permissive society by rejecting God's moral standards. Thus, Walt Whitman—whose *Leaves of Grass* was cast into the fire by poet John Greenleaf Whittier—is regarded as America's greatest poet. Nineteenth century Americans, however, honored Longfellow as their greatest poet, who, unlike Whitman, accepted traditional Biblical morality. If America has a spiritual revival, we might well see a revival of interest in Dwight's poems. In the meantime, there is nothing to stop Christian educators from researching, reprinting, and teaching the literary works of men like Dwight.

Dwight also wrote poems to be set to music. The best example of such works is "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord," the oldest hymn in America in continuous use. But "I Love Thy Kingdom" was only one of the many Psalms that Dwight had rewritten. Dwight felt that Isaac Watts had gone too far—making King David speak like a patriotic Englishman—so he went through Watt's hymns, internationalizing them. The result was a little book of hymns called *Dwight's Watts*.

Dwight's other major literary works included *Travels in New England and New York*, *The Conquest of Canaan*, and *Theology Explained and Defended*.

By the time Dwight assumed the presidency of Yale he had developed a mature political philosophy based on Christian tenets. Although he never preached a "political sermon" on Sunday in his life, he did believe that it was "unquestionably the right, and in certain cases unquestionably the duty, of every Minister of the Gospel." He believed that the "foundation of all government" was "the will of God." Since the chief purpose of government was to bring happiness to mankind, and happiness comes from obeying the Scriptures, "Every ruler is accordingly bound to remember, that he is raised to the chair of magistracy, solely for the good of those whom he governs." As for those who contended that Christianity should have no influence on government, Dwight said:

To villains in power, or in pursuit of power, office and public plunder, it is undoubtedly a most convenient doctrine; as it will quiet the reproaches of conscience, where conscience has not ceased to reproach; and throw the gate, which opens

to every crime, and selfish gratification, from its hinges. To subjects, to a state, to a nation, it is literally fatal.

Everything that Dwight taught his students in his political philosophy reminded them of their responsibility to carry Christianity into the schoolroom, the courtroom, and the halls of government.

Dwight's testimony as a Christian educator is a reproach to some Christian educators today who begin and end class with prayer, only to leave God out of science, civics, history, and other realms of thought. Dwight went far beyond this superficial kind of "Christian" education. He not only understood the philosophy of Secular Humanism in his day but was able to refute it point by point and present in its place a consistent Christian worldview.

According to Dwight, the atheism he found so rampant at Yale when he became president was due to "philosophical pride, and the love of sinning in security and peace." In order to combat the growth of infidelity, which was being imported from Europe, Christian Americans had to stop halting between two opinions and stand with the Lord. His clarion call to revival came in 1801:

To this end you must coolly, firmly, and irrevocably make your determination, and resolve, that Jehovah is your God, and that you will serve him only. . . . Let me at the same time warn you, that your enemies are numerous, industrious, and daring, full of subtlety, and full of zeal. . . . In this contest you may be left alone. Fear not; "they that be for you will even then be more than they that are against you." Almighty power will protect, Infinite wisdom will guide, and Unchangeable goodness will prosper you. The Christian world rises daily in prayer to heaven for your faithfulness and success; the host of sleeping saints calls to you from the grave, and bids you Godspeed. The spirits of your fathers lean from yonder skies to survey the conflict, and your children of many generations will rise up, and call you blessed.

Dwight's faithful preaching of the Word of God and consistent testimony before his students led to the salvation of many, not just at Yale but throughout the whole nation. In 1802, a revival at Yale saw the conversion of one-third of the student body (75 out of 225 students). As the years passed, more students yielded their lives to Christ and rallied under the banner of the Cross. Thus began the Second Great Awakening, which saw the formation of the American Bible Society in 1816, the American Tract Society in 1825, and the American Home Missionary Society in 1826. Out of Dwight's classrooms came men such as the evangelist Asahel Nettleton and pastors such as Nathaniel Taylor. Other former students included Christian scientists Samuel F. B. Morse and Benjamin Siliman. Of the Second Great Awakening Siliman wrote: "It would delight your heart to see how the trophies of the cross are multiplied in this institution. Yale College is a little temple: prayer and praise seem to be the delight of the greater part of the students." Through the Second Great Awakening, America's Christian foundation was strengthened and reinforced. By 1832 one commentator could write:

“Never before has the Holy Spirit been poured out in so many places at once: Never before has the Lord Jesus gathered so many into his churches, in the space of time, ‘of such as shall be saved!’”

Timothy Dwight died in 1817, while still in service to God, country, and Yale—but his legacy lives on. America today is in need of men such as Timothy Dwight—men who will yield their talents and lives to Christ and earnestly contend for the faith at work, at home, in the halls of civil government, from the pulpit, and in our schools. Under the leadership of such men, perhaps God will be pleased to grant yet another “Great Awakening.”

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