



D. L. Moody was a servant to poor and immigrant communities, an evangelist who traveled the globe, and a champion of Christian education. Quiggle focuses on Moody's social vision and missionary work—triumphs *and* failures—and tells the story of a man whose impact continues to this day.

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# THE JOURNEY TO CHRIST

*His Boyhood and Adolescence*

## THE BOY IN NORTHFIELD

*I think Northfield is just about as near Paradise as we can get on earth.<sup>1</sup>*

—DWIGHT MOODY

Nothing in Dwight Lyman Moody's origins foreshadowed his later prominence.<sup>2</sup> The son of Edwin Moody and Betsy Holton, Dwight was the sixth of nine children, seven boys and two girls. He was born on his mother's birthday, February 5, 1837, in the western Massachusetts town of Northfield. The town straddles the Connecticut River close to the New Hampshire and Vermont borders.<sup>3</sup> Northfield was and remains small. In some ways, it is the stereotypical New England town. The Moodys lived in a small white clapboard-sided house on a hill on the north side of town. Its location provides a commanding view of the river and mountain ridges of nearby Vermont and New Hampshire. If you visit, you will quickly understand Moody's affection for this place.

Moody's father was hardworking but allegedly a drinker and financially irresponsible. Tragically, in 1841, he died suddenly, leaving Betsy with seven children, eight months pregnant with twins, and saddled with debt. The amount of debt Edwin left must have been staggering. By the evening of his death, much of the house had been stripped by debt collectors. Edwin was a brick mason by trade, and the only way the family could retain his tools was by hiding them from the collectors. Unfortunately, while the tools survived, little else did; they even took the family's supply of kindling wood.

However, Betsy was of sturdy stock. Given the lack of firewood, she simply instructed the children to remain in bed to stay warm until they needed to leave for chores or school. She also received help from relatives. Moody later describes the joy the family felt when Uncle Cyrus showed up with a whole load of firewood for their home. "I remember, just as vividly as if it were yesterday, how I heard the sound of chips flying, and I knew someone was chopping wood in our wood-shed, and that we should soon have a fire. I shall never forget Uncle Cyrus coming with what seemed to me the biggest pile of wood I ever saw in my life."<sup>4</sup>

Faced with severe financial straits, Betsy often sent the boys away to live with other families during the winter months. In Dwight's case, this was his lot for seven years after his father's death; he spent many of these years thirteen miles away in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Moody complained to his mother during these years, saying he only received cornmeal porridge and milk. When his mother learned he was fed as much as he could eat three times a day, she sent him back to his hosts.<sup>5</sup>

Betsy was a loving but strict parent. She did not suffer a fool gladly; indeed, Moody talks of running afoul of his mother and facing spankings with a switch. While he eschewed delivering this kind of punishment to his children, he understood and respected his mother's efforts to keep him on the straight and narrow.

In Dwight's case, that was a tall order. It appears Dwight was rambunctious and mischievous by nature. Harkening back to the spanking incidents, Moody's account of these episodes reveals this part of his character. "Mother would send me out for a stick, and I thought I could fool her and get a dead one. But she would snap the stick and then tell me to get another." Another story involves his playing a prank on the whole town. As a schoolchild prank, Moody posted a notice on the schoolhouse door of an upcoming lecture from an out-of-town temperance speaker. Of course, the lecturer never appeared, but the meeting drew a large crowd, much to the delight of young Dwight.

But discipline was not the only way Betsy sought to bring Dwight to heel. She also looked to her faith. We know little about Betsy's religious convictions in the years following her husband's death. But we know she prayed and prayed in a manner that marked her children. For Dwight, this seems to be his first exposure to consistent prayer. It is clear it impressed him. Before his death, Edwin had given a Bible to Betsy. One of Dwight's siblings described how prayer and this Bible came to play a role in her life. She describes hearing Betsy weeping and praying over the Bible. Later the child would look at the Bible and found her mother had marked Jeremiah 49:11, "Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive, and let thy widows trust in me." Betsy anchored her soul on this text and taught her children to pray to God, believing He would care for the orphan and widow. Dwight recalled moments when Betsy became overwhelmed with managing the children. He said she would head off to her room to pray for wisdom and patience, pleading with God to help her keep order in the family. Speaking at her funeral, Moody recalled often awakening and hearing his mother pouring out her burdens to God in prayer.

**RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Betsy Moody also sought to steer the children through religious instruction. William Moody states that the family library consisted of three books: a Bible, a catechism, and a collection of devotional thoughts and prayers. Every morning she read the devotion and prayed with them before they embarked on the day. She also insisted they keep the Sabbath together.

Mrs. Moody required her entire family to attend church. On Saturday night, the older boys who had been out working would return home. On Sunday, they would all head off together for services. Preparations for Sunday included making a lunch to take along, as church was an all-day affair. First, there was a sermon, followed by Sunday school and a second sermon. Moody found these days excruciating. Later in life, he admitted, “On one occasion, the preacher had to send someone into the gallery to wake me up. I thought it was hard to have to work in the field all the week and then be obliged to go to church and hear a sermon I didn’t understand.”

Moody’s church was the local Unitarian church. As a result of their plight, the family had been brought into contact with the local Unitarian church and its pastor, Rev. Oliver Everett. William Moody’s biography of his father describes Everett as visiting “the destitute family and [helping] them both by counsel and material assistance.” Indeed, after the death of Moody’s father, Everett became actively involved in the family’s life.<sup>6</sup> He encouraged Betsy “not to part with the children but keep them together as best she could, to trust God and to bring them up for him.”<sup>7</sup> He helped Betsy keep the family together by giving them food. He also intervened by taking the young Dwight Moody into his home until his transfer to another parish in 1848. Everett introduced the family to a kind, compassionate God who loved people. The death of Edwin Moody made a strong impression on Dwight.<sup>8</sup> It makes sense

that he was equally impressed by the Christian charity of the young minister, who undoubtedly taught the young Moody repeatedly that God loved him. It is hardly coincidental that this early lesson became a dominant theme in Moody's later preaching.<sup>9</sup> Rev. Everett and the First Parish of Northfield, Unitarian, would have a lingering effect on the life of Dwight Moody.<sup>10</sup>

The church traced its religious roots back to early Puritan days. In the early eighteenth century, the town was affected by the revival work of Jonathan Edwards at nearby Northampton, Massachusetts. However, by the early nineteenth century, Congregationalism, the state's established religion, had splintered, and a fledgling Unitarian movement emerged. Northfield's First Parish Church was identified with the Unitarians in 1827.<sup>11</sup>

Oliver Capon Everett came to Northfield at the age of twenty-five, relatively fresh from seminary.<sup>12</sup> He was descended from a prominent Massachusetts family. Everett's uncle Edward served as president of Harvard University, congressman and senator, and governor of Massachusetts. Edward Everett also delivered the less famous of the two speeches at the Gettysburg cemetery's dedication in 1863. Although not nearly as prominent as Edward, Oliver's father, Otis, had made a name for himself by amassing a fortune as a merchant in Boston.<sup>13</sup>

Everett's theological convictions are a bit uncertain. One source described him as "liberal in doctrine and imbued with the teaching of Christ."<sup>14</sup> Later in life, Moody is purported to have called him "*the true shepherd of God.*"<sup>15</sup> What is clear is that Northfield had two different congregations—Unitarian and Trinitarian—indicating Everett's commitment to Unitarianism. Nevertheless, this Unitarianism seems a bit dubious. William Moody's biography asserts that the whole family was baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>16</sup> Dorsett also points out that Moody's friend W. H. Daniels

corroborates the story and supports William Moody's claim that Everett was, in fact, an orthodox Christian. Daniels maintains that at that time, Unitarianism was fluid and not as consistently non-Trinitarian as it was later in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Daniels's assertion is correct. From 1800 to 1835, Unitarianism was in a formative stage. Mainly influenced by English philosophy, it was semi-supernatural, imperfectly rationalistic, and devoted to philanthropy and practical Christianity.

It is true that later Moody distanced himself from Unitarianism. However, some of this resulted from later developments within the denomination. Further, Moody did not derive his doctrine primarily from theological texts; he got it from the Bible and his life experience. Primarily because of Everett, his mother remained Unitarian after Dwight left Northfield. Moody admired his mother. His wife, Emma, acknowledged this in a letter she wrote to Mrs. Moody in the early 1860s.

I thought also that you might have thought that because Mr. Moody was of a different denomination to what I had been trained in youth that his love and respect for his mother had abated, but I know such is not the case. Besides some of Mr. Moody's warmest friends are Unitarian.<sup>18</sup>

As Moody matured in his faith and distanced himself from the family's Unitarian roots, there would be times of tension, as the above letter implies. Nevertheless, while Moody came to reject much later Unitarian doctrine, it seems difficult to believe the practical example of Everett was so quickly jettisoned.<sup>19</sup> By taking Moody into his own home and securing what education he could for the lad, Everett functioned as more than merely a minister to young Dwight. In fact, Everett and the First Church became defining religious influences for the boy and the family. Again, Moody's son William's biography reinforces this point. He writes,



Shortly after the father's death, this good man visited the destitute family and helped them. . . . No sooner had the attendance of the Moody children been secured than they were commissioned to bring in other scholars. In a sense, therefore, Mr. Moody's Sunday-school mission work began at an earlier date than is commonly supposed, for as a child, he and his brother George frequently acted as aggressive home missionaries in securing recruits for the village Sunday school. . . . It was not till after he left home that his actual personal conversion occurred, but it was to a tender conscience and an open heart that the gospel invitation was given, and a soul already trained to love and honor God readily accepted His offer of salvation. The Christian training of his mother and the faithfulness of her good pastor were a sacred remembrance in all his after experiences, and he ever spoke appreciatively of the debt he owed to the ministry of Mr. Everett.<sup>20</sup>

Given the family's financial situation, education was a luxury.<sup>21</sup> Dwight Moody is known to have received four years of education from the local school between ages six and ten. In addition, the 1853 Northfield Institute catalog lists Dwight Moody as a student (he would have been sixteen). The same catalog lists Oliver Everett as a "reference," indicating he likely paid the tuition.<sup>22</sup>

These early years provided a lesson on God's love. They illustrated to Moody a response to poverty that linked the notion of a loving God with a charitable response to the needs of others. This made a powerful impact on the young Dwight Moody, and it was influential in his family's case. While Moody may not have fully processed the theological import of these acts of charity, the fact that he recalled and referenced them indicates their critical role in his life.

THE CONVERT AND THE BOSTON DAYS

*I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever.*<sup>23</sup>

—DWIGHT MOODY

The early years at Northfield served as Moody's introduction to organized religion and as a demonstration of Christian charity. Boston, New England's urban center, would be the place of his continued theological formation. Northfield could not hold the fancy of the energetic young Moody; he reportedly remarked, "I am tired of this! I am not going to stay around here any longer. I am going to the city."<sup>24</sup> So, as a seventeen-year-old, he migrated to Boston, seeking new opportunities and financial gain.<sup>25</sup> Although Moody's time in Boston was relatively brief, it would provide two critical pieces in the formation of his theology. First, Boston provided Moody's first look at the new urban face of America. Second, Moody was converted to evangelical Christianity during his time there.

By 1854, when Moody arrived, Boston was a growing, bustling, diverse city of about 150,000. Before arriving in Boston, Moody probably had never even seen anyone who was not Anglo-American. Upon arriving he would have been exposed to Asians, African Americans, Jews, and various Eastern Europeans. The combination of the city's sights, sounds, and smells must have been both exhilarating and frightening to the young man from Northfield.

It is simply not possible to know how Moody processed the urban world of Boston, but it is clear it widened his horizons. His letters home are either reminiscent of home or reflect the wonder of a wide-eyed youth. For example, in an 1854 letter to his brothers, Moody wrote, "A steam hot gas ship come in and sutch a site I never seen before. There was a ship from Liverpool loaded with emergrans. All the Greeks in Boston was there. The sung a song when they come in site of

their friends. Sutch meetings as there was there I never see.”<sup>26</sup> Boston exposed Moody to this new urban world; however, it was not until the Chicago years that he truly grappled with the challenges of the new American city.

During Moody’s time in Boston, the most significant event was his religious conversion. Shortly after arriving in Boston, Moody began attending the Mount Vernon Congregational Church.<sup>27</sup> His uncle Samuel Holton agreed to employ Moody on the condition he attended Sunday school. Thus, Moody ended up at Mount Vernon. At Mount Vernon, Moody was befriended by a middle-aged Sunday school teacher named Edwin Kimball. Kimball, concerned about the soul of the new young man in his class, stopped by the store where Moody worked on April 21, 1855. Years later, Moody would recount this event to fellow evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman:

When I was in Boston I used to attend a Sunday School class, and one day I recollect my teacher came around behind the counter of the shop I was at work in, and put his hand upon my shoulder and talked to me about Christ and my soul. I had not felt that I had a soul till then. I said to myself: “this is a very strange thing. Here is a man who never saw me till lately, and he is weeping over my sins, and I never shed a tear about them.” But I understand it now, and know what it is to have a passion for men’s souls and weep over their sins. I don’t remember what he said, but I can feel the power of that man’s hand on my shoulder tonight. It was not long after that I was brought into the Kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

Although Moody and others portray this event as definitive, it was more important existentially than intellectually. Moody’s newfound Christianity was embryonic, and his conversion was as much a process as an event. Not quite four weeks after his experience with Kimball,

the teenager met with Mount Vernon Congregational Church deacons on a Wednesday evening to seek membership. During the interview, the primitive nature of Moody's faith was apparent, and Moody was told he was not yet ready for membership. Kimball, who attended the meeting, later described it in the following manner,

I remember the chief question and its answer—the longest he gave: “Mr. Moody, what has Christ done for us all—for you—which entitles Him to our love?” “I don't know,” he said, “I think Christ has done a good deal for us; but I don't think of anything in particular as I know of.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite Moody's dreadful performance, the church remained hopeful about the young man. The minutes of the meeting read:

Dwight L. Moody. Boards 43 Court St. Has been baptized. First awakened on April 21. Became anxious about himself . . . saw himself a sinner, and sin now seems hateful and holiness desirable. Thinks he has repented. Has proposed to give up sin and feels dependent on Christ for forgiveness . . . loves the Scriptures . . . prays once a day . . . and desires to be useful . . . religiously educated . . . been in the city a year from Northfield in this state. Is not ashamed to be known as a Christian. 18 years old.<sup>30</sup>

Undaunted, Moody continued to work at his faith and sought a second interview in March 1856. Again, the minutes are telling:

Mr. Moody thinks he has made some progress since he has been here before—at least in knowledge. He has maintained his habits of prayer and reading the Bible. Is fully determined to adhere to the cause of Christ always. Feels that it would be very bad he should join the church and then turn. Must repent and

ask forgiveness, for Christ's sake. Will never give up his hope, or love Christ less, whether admitted to church or not his prevailing intention is to give up his will to God.<sup>31</sup>

Although Moody's theological understanding remained somewhat suspect, the deacons were persuaded by his passion and commitment. So, in May, the Mount Vernon Church added Moody to its membership rolls. Even so, while Moody's faith originated in Boston, it would not be fully mature until his years in Chicago.

The Mount Vernon Congregational Church in Boston would also be the context for Moody's first extended exposure to evangelicalism. A group of Bostonians founded the church in 1842, rejecting the "doctrinal exclusiveness" of Park Street Church and the "free-thinking charms" of King's Chapel.<sup>32</sup> They established Mount Vernon within a few yards of both churches and called Rev. Edward N. Kirk as pastor.

Before coming to Mount Vernon, Kirk had earned a reputation in New England as a revivalist and pastor. He had worked with Charles Finney in upstate New York and would later publish a series of lectures on revivals.<sup>33</sup> The church had invited Kirk intending to promote revivalism in Boston, and Kirk became the one to provide Moody with his initial introduction to evangelicalism and revivalism.

Kirk's brand of revivalism was distinctive. He was an urban revivalist, and his style was decidedly different from others of the day. Kirk was sophisticated, and his preaching was fluent and articulate. Moody later claimed Kirk was "one of the most eloquent men I ever heard."<sup>34</sup> Kirk eschewed crude emotionalism and manipulation, preferring to woo his audiences. His brand of revivalism was urbane and respectable.<sup>35</sup>

Further, Kirk espoused views that would later characterize Moody's work. He was a forceful proponent of charity. In 1843, sensing the threat that urban poverty posed to the Protestant faith, he declared, "Our whole system of education, our modes of life, our very standards

of personal piety need great renovation.” Charity, in particular, was Kirk’s solution. However, Kirk had more in mind than random acts of kindness; he believed charity would drive people to understand poverty and address its root causes. On this, he was explicit: “When men love their neighbors as themselves, the causes of poverty will soon be sought out, and the remedy applied as far as possible.” Kirk challenged his Mount Vernon congregation to expose their children to the urban poor, maintaining that “the removal of human wretchedness and elevation of degraded man is the business of life.”<sup>36</sup>

Kirk’s commitment moved beyond rhetoric. Mount Vernon was involved in forming a YMCA, the Mount Vernon Association of Young Men, from which the Boston YMCA would develop. The Mount Vernon group established a twofold goal of helping men grow in their Christian faith and working to improve the welfare of humanity.<sup>37</sup>

Young women were also part of Kirk’s work. Kirk was instrumental in forming the Ladies’ Society for the Promotion of Education at the West. Kirk, along with Edward Beecher, delivered the inaugural address. The Society, founded at Mount Vernon in 1846, was designed to provide education for females and female educators in the western part of the United States.

The Society was also a response to Roman Catholicism. Both Beecher and Kirk pointed out the network of Roman Catholic schools in the West and its admirable inclusion of females as students and teachers. Kirk underscored the perceived threat, “The very fact that Rome is so multiplying her machinery in this country, is an indication that we must change our tactics, and meet her on her ground, and adapt our modes of defense to her attack.”<sup>38</sup> Although Kirk had deep concerns about Romanism, he was measured compared to other Protestants. As Timothy Smith described it, Kirk, like many other revivalists, “believed the church’s task was to save Catholics, not scorn them.”<sup>39</sup>

Kirk's impact on the newly converted Moody is hard to measure. However, Pollock argues that Kirk was instrumental in preparing Moody for his fateful meeting with Kimball.<sup>40</sup> The extent of Kirk's impact on Moody's concept of revivalism and his social vision is even less clear. Moody would later express admiration for Kirk's speaking ability, and his approach to evangelistic preaching would reflect some of Kirk's methods. While not smooth and urbane like Kirk, Moody would reject flamboyance and emotional appeals. Further, Moody's approach to social ills would parallel Kirk's. Kirk emphasized charity, education, and temperance, and focused on converting rather than ridiculing Roman Catholics. In addition, Kirk fully embraced the YMCA, an institution that Moody came to hold dear. Admittedly, Moody was a very raw young man with an immature faith, and Pollock notes Moody often slept through Kirk's sermons. Still, Moody saw the energy at Mount Vernon. He saw its ministries and felt their impact personally. Thus, while not significantly influencing Moody, Kirk cannot be dismissed as unimportant in Moody's development.

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