

Nathanael Emmons¹

Earl Clement Davis

Harvard University or Pittsfield, MA²

No Date

... a student, and like Hopkins seems to have been more studious than social, and paid but little attention to his possible interests outside of his studies.

When he was 12 years old his mother died, and just before he graduated from college his father died, and he was left quite to himself. He says, "Accoringly when I left college I found myself in a state of entire poverty. I had nothing I could call my own except a very few books and very few clothes. My parents being both dead, I was totally destitute of any place which I could call my home."³ For two years he studied divinity with parish ministers and in 1769 he was examined before the South Association in Hartford county, who gave him a license to preach the Gospel. Of his early life he says, "I was never noted for falsehood, profaneness, Sabbath breaking, or a great fondness for vain company."⁴

But he continued to candidate for four years until April 1773, when he was settled over the second church in Wrentham, Massachusetts. This later became the Parish and

¹ Unfortunately this manuscript is missing its first page. The contents, however, make it clear that it focuses on Nathanael Emmons, and the paper is the same as the other biographical sketches that Earl Davis wrote on other 17th and 18th century New England Congregational preachers.

² The manuscripts in this series covering early New England Congregational preachers have no date. They are hand-written, dating them before Earl Davis started typing his manuscripts in 1907. So, they date either from his time at Harvard University, or the first year or two of his ministry in Pittsfield.

³ This quotation can be found in *The Works of Nathanael Emmons, D.D., Third Pastor of the Church in Franklin, Mass. with A Memoir of His Life*, edited by Jacob Ide, Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1861, p. 32.

⁴ *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, p. 35.

town of Franklin. Here he remained until his death in 1840, at the ripe old age of 95.

Emmons life was not one of great ease. He had many sorrows to bear. His first marriage, which was a very happy one while it lasted, was nevertheless one of care and burden. Not long after the birth of the second child, his wife died and soon after both children died. He was so much a man of the study and books that he hardly knew how to carry such a burden. But in two years' time he had married a second time, and of the six children by this marriage, three died before Mr. Emmons himself. The disturbances of the Revolutionary War gave him his burdens, as well as to others, and chiefly through financial embarrassments, which came upon him as a result of war conditions, he had a big burden of a worldly kind to carry. While all these social disturbances were going on about him, he did not seem to enter into them, for his manner of life was studious and ascetic. In his autobiography he speaks of his habits of life in the following manner,

As soon as I entered into the ministry, I resolved to devote my whole time to the sacred work, without encumbering myself with the cares and concerns of the world. I expected, however, that I should need great firmness and vigilance to guard against the solicitations of ease, interest, and seeming necessity, to neglect the proper business of my calling. Upon this consideration, I determined not to begin to do the least manual labor, nor even superintend my secular concerns; but to make my study my home, and my ministerial duties my whole employment. Soon after my ordination, I was invited by one of my parishioners to spend several weeks at his house, upon free cost; I declined the offer for fear my acceptance would obstruct my studies.

...

After I had been settled about a year, I employed some of my friends to purchase me a house and farm. The house needed repair, and I employed certain persons to repair it, and others to superintend the business; so that scarcely a man in the parish had less concern with it than I had.

...

The next year, I entered into a family state in which a great many worldly affairs invited my attention; but I kept my resolution, and confined myself wholly to my study without doing so much as an hour's labor in the garden, or in the field.⁵

Thus we come to see the extreme unnaturalness to which the religious ideas of Calvinism had led. This Hopkinsinian movement was unnatural, and confined to small isolated country parishes, and Emmons remains a very fine example of its strange and clearly worked distinctions between sacred and secular.

He never made pastoral calls, unless in case of sickness, and then only upon invitation. He encouraged his people to call at his house, and if he especially desired to see anyone, he sent for him to come to his home.

But these studious habits, and his great intellectual activity were not without avail. He gives, in a very clear way, his conception of his duties:

When I entered into the ministry, I resolved to discharge all the pastoral services, which are usually and justly expected of a minister, and to pursue such studies as I deemed most intimately connected with my professional usefulness. ... I imagined, that people generally were becoming more fond of *superficial*, than of *doctrinal* preaching, and were imperceptibly falling into a state of gross ignorance of the fundamental doctrines of the gospel. ... This led me to preach doctrinally to my people for a number of years, ...⁶

The fact is that Emmons realized the chaotic state of religious thought, and saw clearly that only clear thinking and sound study would clear up the situation. It is here that he takes his place in the development of New England theology in his emphasis upon the intellectual side of religious life. One can imagine the influence he must have

⁵ *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, pp. 57-8.

⁶ *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, pp. 271.

had upon the 80 or more young men who prepared for the ministry at his home. He was a man of keen mind and his acuteness, and his prophetic insight stands clearly in the following pithy remark which is still of great value: "Associationism leads to Consociationism; Consociationism leads to Presbyterianism; Presbyterianism leads to Episcopacy; Episcopacy leads to Roman Catholicism; and Roman Catholicism is an ultimate fact."⁷ That is the practical substance of two of the important religious books of the last year, and is interesting in connection with the religious tendencies of the present.

But his emphasis upon the intellect is not merely speculative. Man is most active when he is acted upon. The active intellect is most active when God is acting upon it. This is mystical, the direct influence of God upon the soul of man, and it is in this idea that Emmons is regarded as the follower and interpreter of that aspect of Edwards' theology which is called mystical.

But I have left for the last one aspect of his nature, which is more known and real than these other things that we have been speaking of, and leaves a better taste in the mouth, and even gives the others better flavor. He had a keen sense humor, and I quote two of his keen replies to show it. He was once asked what was the best system of rhetoric for a minister to adopt. He replied, "These two rules make the best system: 1st have something to say. 2nd say it."⁸

On another occasion his sermon on the perdition of Judas was reviewed by a Universalist minister, and both the review and Emmons' sermon were published under the same cover. This question was put to him, "What do you think of sending out together, before the world two such things as your sermon and a Universalist's reply? It is against the law," was his sudden answer, "for it is said in Deuteronomy (22:10) 'Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together.'"⁹

⁷ *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, pp. 168.

⁸ A slightly modified version of this quotation can be found in *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, pp. 328.

⁹ *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, pp. 453.