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1986 Congregational Studies Conference Papers

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Congregational Studies Conference Papers 1986

Derek Swann,
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and
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The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual each contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his paper.

An Earnest Ministry—The Want of the Times by John Angell James

Derek Swann

First published in 1847, the book is an enlargement of a sermon preached at the Anniversary of Cheshunt College, Cambridge on Thursday, 2 July and printed on Monday, 6 July in the twice weekly newspaper *The Patriot*. The preacher, though pressed at the time to turn the sermon into a book, declined as 'it was given to the world pretty fully in *The Patriot*'.[1] However, under pressure from the principal of Cheshunt, Dr Harris, he set to work revising his manuscript for publication and found 'that it admitted of more expansion and amplification that at first struck him, and he resolved, as soon as he could find time for it, to prepare a small treatise which should have a better chance of living than an ephemeral pamphlet. The subject grew under his hand and has at length swelled to this volume'[2]—some 350 pages.

'John Henderson Esq. of Park, distributed about two thousand copies among the members of different denominations in Scotland, and about four thousand more have been sold in England.'[3] The preface of the first edition is dated April 1847 and 3 October of the same year. The reviewer in *The British Quarterly Review* writes—

> We wish we knew how to speak of this book in terms sufficiently appropriate to secure for it the attention it deserves … we say that we hardly know a better service that any man may render to the Christian pastor than by presenting him with a copy of it. To the lukewarm in the good work it will be truly a word in season, and the most earnest will be sure to be among the most grateful for such a present.[4]

In an extended review in Vol. VII of the *British Quarterly Review* 1848, the reviewer writes, 'We congratulate the author on having given it existence; the good likely to result from it is beyond calculation'. The same reviewer goes on to say, 'We confess, however, that we have been prompted, in great part, to the writing of this paper by a fear lest, while the responsibilities of the pulpit are discussed, those of the pew should be forgotten; for assuredly, while an earnest ministry may conduce to an earnest church, it is only as we possess both that we shall possess an earnest and powerful Christianity'.[5] In 1848, John Angell James produced *The Church in Earnest,* and in the preface comments on the reviewer's remarks—

> To the wisdom, truth, and importance of this momentous paragraph, I most heartily subscribe, and in the hope of promoting the union and harmony

> which it recommends, have addressed this volume to the occupant of the pew, as I did the former to the occupant of the pulpit. Earnestness is equally the duty of both, and so close is the sympathy between them, that it is almost impossible for the one to be, or to continue long, in a state of full devotedness, if the other be not in a similar condition.[6]

Our present concern, however, is not with *An Earnest Church* but *An Earnest Ministry*.

The reviewer in the *Evangelical Magazine* 1847 declared, 'We have felt reproved and humbled as we have read many parts of Mr James's work; but we recommend it to our brethren with all earnestness and affection which we can commend. We can compare it with no other work extant except Baxter's *Reformed Pastor;* and we scruple not to say that it is far more adapted to our times and to our ministry than even that immortal production.'[7] That is high praise indeed.

The book is a *practical* work. Writing in the preface of *The Church in Earnest* he states:

> Last year I ventured to publish a little work entitled *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times*. Most of the reviews which did me the honour of criticising it, characterised and recommended it as a practical work. Whether this were intended in the way of depreciation or information, it most aptly describes the production, which contains no profound disquisition—no new views—no development of abstract principles, and which pretends to nothing more than a humble effort, made in love, to stir up the pure minds of my brethren, by way of remembrance, and to furnish a few practical directions for beginners in the ministry.[8]

It was written to answer the question 'Has the modern pulpit lost, and is it still losing, any of its power?' He writes,

> In settling this question it is necessary to define what is meant by the loss of the power of the pulpit. If, by this, it is intended only to ask whether evangelical ministrations have lost their attractiveness in drawing the people together to hear them, it may be unhesitatingly affirmed that they have not; for perhaps there never were such numbers found listening to the glad tidings of salvation as at the present time. The true intent of the inquiry then is this, has the modern pulpit lost any of its efficiency as regards the great end for which the gospel is preached; that is, the conversion of sinners and the spiritual advancement of believers?[9]

He refuses to compare the mid 19th century with the 'golden' period of Baxter, Howe and Owen, or of Wesley and Whitefield. Instead he confines himself to,

> the last quarter of a century and to state the matter thus:—does the preaching of the gospel now, taking all evangelical denominations into the investigation,

> appear to be followed with the same saving and sanctifying results as it was then; and if not, does there appear to be a progressive diminution of effect still going on?[10]

He concludes that the pulpit *has* lost and is losing something of its power, in the way of converting sinners and carrying forward the spiritual life of believers. He refuses to put the decline down to Divine sovereignty, or the increased power of the press and of the school, the solution is nearer home, the pulpit.

> The pulpit, notwithstanding the wondrous power of the press, must still remain the main lever of the moral world; how much, therefore, does it become all those who are concerned for the spiritual interests of the community to endeavour to augment the force of this momentous engine. The friends of evangelical doctrine, and the advocates of a pure orthodoxy, have the following objects to keep ever in view in this age—they must take care of their Bibles that they be not mutilated or curtailed by a lawless criticism—they must take care of their theology, that it be not perverted by a false philosophy—and they must take care of their pulpits, that they be not occupied by heretical, unspiritual or incompetent ministers.[11]

Outline of the book

Chapter 1: The Apostolic Ministry. This is a straightforward exposition of the text 2 Corinthians 5:20. 'Now then we are ambassadors for Christ; as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead by ye reconciled to God.'

The *theme* of the Christian ministry is, God reconciling the world to himself; the *design* is actually to bring sinful men into actual reconciliation with God; and the *method* to be used is earnest persuasion, the theme of the rest of the book.

While learning ('God forbid we should ever be afflicted by so great an evil as an unlearned one') and education and piety we acknowledge as desirable and necessary, the one thing he sees as missing from the modern pulpit is enthusiasm, intense devotedness. He quotes with approval from an article in the *British Quarterly Review*—

> No ministry will be really effective, whatever may be its intelligence, which is not a ministry of strong faith, true spirituality, and deep earnestness. … I wish this golden sentence could be inscribed in characters of light over every professor's chair, over every student's desk, and over every preacher's pulpit.[12]

Chapters 2–6 are taken up with this one theme.

> Sympathy is a law of our mental economy which has never been sufficiently taken into account in estimating the influences which God employs for the

> salvation of men. There is a silent and almost unconscious process of thought and sympathy often going on in the mind of those who are listening to the sermons of a preacher really labouring for the conversion of souls. Is he so earnest about my salvation and shall I care nothing about the matter? Is my eternal happiness so much in his account, and shall it be nothing in mine? I can meet cold logic with counter arguments; or at any rate, I can raise up objections against evidence. I can smile at the artifices of rhetoric, and be merely pleased with the displays of eloquence. I can sit unmoved under sermons which seem intended by the preacher to raise my estimate of himself, but I cannot stand this earnestness about me. The man is evidently intent upon saving my soul. I feel the grasp of his hand laying hold of my arm, as if he would pluck me out of the fire. He has not only made me think, but he has made me feel. His earnestness has subdued me.[13]

What is Meant by an Earnest Ministry

1. The selection of some one object of special pursuit, and a vivid perception of its value and importance. The earnest man is committed to one thing, the salvation of souls.

2. Earnestness implies that the subject has not only been selected, but that it has taken full possession of the mind and has kindled towards it an intense desire of the heart.

3. Earnestness implies studious invention and diligent use of all appropriate means to accomplish the selected object.

> Shall we never institute the inquiry, 'Why have I not succeeded better in my ministry?' How is it that my congregation is not larger, and my church more rapidly increasing? In what way can I account for it that the truth as it is in Jesus, which I believe I preach, is not more influential, and the doctrine of the cross is not, as it was intended to be, the power of God unto the salvation of souls? Why do I not more frequently hear addressed to me, by those who are constantly under my ministry, the anxious inquiry, 'What shall I do to be saved?' I am not wanting, as far as I know, in the regular discharge of my ordinary duties, and yet I gather little fruit of my labours, and have to utter continually the prophet's complaint, 'Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?' Do we indeed indulge in such complaints! Have we earnestness enough to pour forth such lamentations? Or is it of little consequence to us, provided we get our stipend, keep up the congregation to its usual size, and maintain the tranquillity of the church, whether the ends of the ministry are accomplished or not? Are we often seen by God's omniscient eye pacing our study in deep thoughtfulness, solemn meditation, and rigorous self-inquisition; and after an impartial survey of our doings, and a sorrowful lamentation that we are doing no more, questioning ourselves thus? 'Is there no new method to be tried, no new scheme to be

> devised, to increase the efficiency of my ministerial and pastoral labours? Is there nothing I can improve, correct, or add? Is there anything particularly wanting in the matter, manner, or method of my preaching, or in my course of pastoral attentions?' Surely it might be supposed that such inquiries would be often instituted into the results of so momentous a ministry as ours; that seasons would be not unfrequently set apart, especially at the close or beginning of every year, for such a purpose. The result could not fail to be beneficial.[14]

4. Earnestness implies a purpose and power of subordinating everything it meets with, selects, or engages in, to the accomplishment of its one great object. All learning and general knowledge of all kinds must be used to the one great end. Personal religion must be cultivated.

> We are weak in the pulpit because we are weak in the closet.[15]

> We are feeble as preachers, because we are feeble as Christians.[16]

> A Revived Ministry is the only hope of a Revived Church even as a Revived Church is the only hope of the dead world.[17]

> If we enquire for the sources of energy, the springs of activity, in the most successful ministers of Christ, we shall find that these lay in the ardour of their devotion. They were men of prayer and of faith. They dwelt upon the mount of communion with God, from whence they came down like Moses to the people, radiant with the glory on which they had themselves been intently gazing. They stationed themselves where they could look at things unseen and eternal, and came with the stupendous vision, fresh in their view, and spoke of them under the impression of what they had just seen and heard. They drew their thoughts and made their sermons from their minds and from their books, but they breathed life and power into them from their hearts, and in their closets. Trace either Whitefield or Wesley in their career, and you will see how beaten was the road between the pulpit and the closet; the grass was not allowed to grow in that path. This was in great part the secret of their power. They were mighty in public, because in their retirement they had clothed themselves, so to speak, with Omnipotence. They reflected the lustre they had caught in the Divine presence; and its attraction was irresistible. The same might be said of all others who have attained to eminence as successful preachers of the gospel. If then we would see a revival of the power of the pulpit, we must first of all see a revival in the piety of those who occupy it: and when this is the case, then, 'He that is feeble among us shall be as David, and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them'.[18]

5. Earnestness will manifest itself by energetic and untiring action in the use of those means by which its object is accomplished.

Two means are *Preaching* and the *Pastorate*.

The ministry of reconciliation must be the major theme of preaching.

> 'Preaching the gospel.' Many by the use of this phrase aim to exclude from the pulpit almost every topic but a perpetual and almost unvarying exhibition of the death of our Lord, and consider this specifically, and this only, as preaching Christ. But it is strangely forgotten by the preachers of this school, that as the scheme of mediation by the Saviour is founded on the eternal obligation and immutable nature of the law of God, and was intended, not to subvert, but to uphold its authority, the moral law must be explained and enforced, in all its purity, spirituality, and extent. Repentance towards God is no less included in the apostolic ministry, than faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and how can a sinner repent of his transgressions against the law, if he know not the law he has violated: for 'sin is the transgression of the law'; and 'by the law is the knowledge of sin'. So that no man can know sin without knowing the Law: and herein appears to me one of the prevailing defects of modern preaching: I mean the neglect of holding up this perfect mirror, in which the sinner shall see reflected his own moral image. It is true that some are melted down at once into a sense of wickedness, and brought to the exercise of both repentance and faith, by an exhibition of divine love in the death of Christ; but this is not so usual a method of conversion as the first awakening of the sinner by an exposition and application of the perfect law.[19]

> Law without gospel will harden, as gospel without law will only lead to carelessness and presumption: it is the union of both that will possess the sinner with a loathing of himself, and love to God.[20]

Regarding preaching style, it should be simple, opposed to the artificial and rhetorical.

In Chapter 5 he deals with the 'Nature of Earnestness illustrated by specimens from various authors'. Here is an extract from Whitefield—

> Beseeching Sinners. 'O my brethren, my heart is enlarged towards you. I trust I feel something of that hidden but powerful presence of Christ, whilst I am preaching to you. Indeed, it is sweet, it is exceedingly comfortable. All the harm I wish you, who without cause are my enemies, is, that you felt the like. Believe me, though it would be hell to my soul to return to a natural state again, yet I would willingly change states with you for a little while, that you might know what it is to have Christ dwelling in your heart by faith. Do not turn your backs; don't let the devil hurry you away, be not afraid of convictions, do not think worse of the doctrine because preached without the church ways. Our Lord, in the days of his flesh, preached on a mount, in a ship, and in a field. And I am persuaded many have felt his gracious presence here. Indeed, we speak what we know. Do not reject the kingdom of God against yourselves; be so wise as to receive our witness. I cannot, I will not, let you go; stay a little, let us reason together. However lightly you may esteem your souls, I know our Lord has set an unspeakable value on them. He

> thought them worthy of his most precious blood. I beseech you therefore, O sinners, be ye reconciled to God. I hope you do not fear being accepted in the Beloved. Behold, he calleth you; behold, he prevents and follows you with his mercy, and hath sent forth his servants into the highways and hedges, to compel you to come in. Remember then, that at such an hour of such a day, in such a year, in this place, you were all told what you ought to think concerning Jesus Christ. If you now perish, it will not be for lack of knowledge: I am free from the blood of you all. You cannot say I have, like legal preachers, been requiring you to make brick without straw. I have not bidden you to make yourselves saints, and then come to God; but I have offered you salvation on as cheap terms as you can desire. I have offered you Christ's whole wisdom, Christ's whole righteousness, Christ's whole sanctification and eternal redemption, if you will but believe in him. If you say you cannot believe, you say right; for faith, as well as every other blessing, is the gift of God: but then wait upon God, and who knows but he may have mercy on thee? Why do we not entertain more loving thoughts of Christ? Or do you think he will have mercy on others, and not on you? But are you not sinners? And did not Jesus Christ come into the world to save sinners? If you say you are the chief of sinners, I answer, that will be no hindrance to your salvation; indeed it will not, if you lay hold on him by faith. Read the evangelists, and see how kindly he behaved to his disciples, who fled from and denied him: 'Go tell my brethren', says he. He did not say, 'Go tell those traitors'; but 'Go tell my brethren, and Peter'; as though he had said, 'Go tell my brethren, in general, and poor Peter in particular that I am risen'.[21]

Regarding these men, Whitefield, Baxter, Howe, and Edwards, he says of them,

> They preached to their congregations, and not merely before them; they felt that the objects of their addresses were immortal souls in danger of being lost and knew their business in the pulpit was to save those souls from perdition; they preached as if they expected there and then to achieve the great work of conversion and felt as if the eternal destinies of their hearers were suspended on the manner in which they discharged their duties, and as if they were to ascend the next moment after they had finished their sermons to give an account of them at the bar of God.[22]

'Many preachers do not come near enough to their congregations' is his comment.[23]

The 6th chapter continues the theme of Chapter 5. This extract from Whitefield is typical—

> For many years, from one end of Moorfields to the other, booths of all kinds have been erected for mountebanks, players, puppet-shows, and such like. With a heart bleeding with compassion for so many thousands led captive by the devil at his will, on Whit-Monday, at six o'clock in the morning, attended

by a large congregation of praying people, I ventured to lift up a standard amongst them in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps there were about ten thousand in waiting, not for me, but for Satan's instruments to amuse them. Glad was I to find that I had, as it were for once, got the start of the devil. I mounted my field-pulpit; almost all flocked immediately around it. I preached on these words, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so shall the Son of Man be lifted up', etc. They gazed, they listened, they wept; and I believe that many felt themselves stung with deep conviction for their past sins. All was hushed and solemn. Being thus encouraged, I ventured out again at noon; but what a scene! The fields, the whole fields, seemed in a bad sense of the word, all white, ready not for the Redeemer's, but Beelzebub's harvest. All his agents were in full motion, drummers, trumpeters, merry-andrews, masters of puppet-shows, exhibitors of wild beasts, players, etc., etc., all busy in entertaining their respective auditories. I suppose there could not be less than twenty or thirty thousand people. My pulpit was fixed on the opposite side, and immediately to their great mortification, they found the number of their attendants sadly lessened. Judging that like Saint Paul, I should now be called as it were to fight with beasts at Ephesus, I preached from these words: 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians'. You may easily guess that there was some noise among the craftsmen, and that I was honoured with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs, and pieces of dead cats thrown at me, whilst engaged in calling them from their favourite but lying vanities. My soul was indeed among lions; but for the greatest part of my congregation, which was very large, seemed for awhile to be turned into lambs. This encouraged me to give notice that I would preach again at six o'clock in the evening. I came, I saw, but what—thousands and thousands more than before, if possible, still more deeply engaged in their unhappy diversions; but some thousands amongst them waiting as earnestly to hear the gospel.

This Satan could not brook. One of his choicest servants was exhibiting, trumpeting on a large stage; but as soon as the people saw me in my black robes and my pulpit, I think all to a man left him and ran to me. For awhile I was enabled to lift up my voice like a trumpet, and many heard the joyful sound. God's people kept praying, and the enemy's agents made a kind of roaring at some distance from our camp. At length they approached nearer, and the merry-andrew (attended by others, who complained that they had taken many pounds less that day on account of my preaching), got up upon a man's shoulders, and advancing near the pulpit attempted to slash me with a long heavy whip several times, but always with the violence of his motion tumbled down. Soon afterwards they got a recruiting serjeant with his drum, etc., to pass through the congregation. I gave the word of command, and ordered that way might be made for the king's officer. The ranks opened, while all marched quietly through, and then closed again. Finding those efforts to fail, a large body quite on the opposite side assembled together, and having got

> a large pole for their standard, advanced towards us with steady and formidable steps, till they came very near the skirts of our hearing, praying, and almost undaunted congregation. I saw, gave warning, and prayed to the Captain of our salvation for present support and deliverance. He heard and answered; for just as they approached us with looks full of resentment, I know not by what accident, they quarrelled among themselves, threw down their staff, and went their way, leaving, however, many of their company behind, who before we had done, I trust were brought over to join the besieged party. I think I continued in praying, preaching, and singing (for the noise was too great at times to preach), about three hours.
>
> We then retired to the Tabernacle, with my pockets full of notes from persons brought under concern, and read them amidst the praises and spiritual acclamations of thousands, who joined with the holy angels in rejoicing that so many sinners were snatched, in such an unexpected, unlikely place and manner, out of the very jaws of the devil. This was the beginning of the Tabernacle society. Three hundred and fifty awakened souls were received in one day, and I believe the number of notes exceeded a thousand; but I must have done, believing you want to retire to join in mutual praise and thanksgiving to God and the Lamb.[24]

John Angell James's comment is worth noting—'I venture to pronounce this the greatest achievement of elocution which the history of the world presents, next to the splendid triumphs of the apostle Peter's sermon over the murderers of Christ on the day of Pentecost.'[25]

> All men are in earnest when they feel.[26]
>
> By an earnest manner then, is meant, the enunciation that is dictated by a deep and feeling sense of the importance of our message. We are to persuade, to entreat, to beseech, and these modes of speech have an utterance of their own.[27]

Chapter 7 is entitled 'Earnestness manifested in the Pastorate', and James emphasises that while the pulpit is the chief, it is not the only place for earnestness, it must pervade a man's whole ministry.

Chapters 8 and 9 contain further examples of earnestness.

Chapter 10. Means to be used for obtaining an earnest ministry.

> 1. 'It is imperative first of all to have the truth deeply engraven upon all hearts, that the church is the conservator of the Christian ministry, and that it is her business to see that she discharge well her duty in this momentous affair.'[28]
>
> Nothing but a spiritual church can provide a spiritual ministry, and whatever spiritual ministry a worldly church may have, cannot be so much the result of the system itself, as of something extraneous to it.[29]

> Preserve this spiritual condition of the church, and it is what it was intended it should be—an undying torch, which while it is the light of the present age, shall safely light successive ages along the only way which leads to happiness and heaven.

2. Let the subject be thoroughly considered and universally admitted that this is the ministry we want, and must have. In this section he warns about the danger of being seduced by learning to the point where congregations want a learned but not an earnest ministry.

3. There be much earnest prayer presented to God for such a blessing.

> We have forgotten to pray for ministers of a right stamp. The subject has never occupied the place in our private, family, and social devotions which its importance demands.[30]

4. A revived state of the Church could produce a ministry such as that which has been described.

> Let us then, both ministers and churches, set about in good earnest the revival of religion. We act and re-act upon each other. We help or hinder each other. We both want more religion; let the ministry seek it for the sake of people, and the people for the sake of the ministry. If the ministers will not lead the people, let the people lead the ministers.[31]

5. We must, as pastors, look out for such earnest men in our congregations without waiting for them to come to us.

> In all the official appointments recorded in the New Testament from an apostle down to a deacon, the people were requested to look out for suitable men, and not to wait till they presented themselves.[32]

6. Ministers must give this matter more thoughtful attention.

7. We must exercise much more care and attention in encouraging young men to enter the ministry. Only the best will do for this work.

8. College Professors must train and mould earnest ministers.

9. Churches must provide the means for the education of those who enter the colleges.

Then he has a final chapter entitled, 'On the necessity of Divine influence for an efficient ministry'.

> While God reserves to himself the right of bestowment, and acts upon his own rules of communication, he warrants and invites the most expansive requests and the largest anticipations. Since he has promised to give the boon in answer to the prayer of faith it would seem to be our own fault that we have it not in more abounding measure.[33]

> The knowledge that preaching, and especially earnest preaching, is the Spirit's instrumentality, would lead men to seek that very instrumentality, in order that they might have the blessing.[34]

James was an example of his own writings, an earnestness pervading his whole ministry.

James Smith, in a tribute to John Angell James preached at Castle Square Chapel, Wisbech, relates this incident:

> It was my last interview with him—he enquired the age of my eldest boy, and taking down from the shelf a copy of his *Christian Father's Present to his children,* he said, 'give this to him when able to read and understand, and tell him a friend of his father, in heaven, where I hope I shall be, gave it to him with a prayer for his conversion', and he wrote therein to the same effect.

Dale, in a funeral sermon at Carrs Lane, Sunday morning, 9 October said,

> Till a short time before his death he took a fair share of general public work; he could avow, when occasion demanded, his political principles; he was ready to give his cordial help to the great philanthropic movements of our times; but he had too definite an aim to be led aside into the numerous bye-paths of ministerial dissipations by which too many of us are diverted from the true object of our calling. 'This one thing I do' was written in letters of light on his history.
>
> The most solemn and affecting illustration of the depth and power of his conviction, that as a minister of Christ he had been made a trustee of the gospel, was his profound and painful solicitude for your salvation. He could never rest, except he saw that the ends of the gospel were being accomplished in you. His public work was the least impressive proof of how earnestly he longed to see every member of the church living a holy life and every unconverted person in the congregation forsaking his sins and devoting himself to Christ; and yet with what pathos, what tenderness, what impassioned zeal were his sermons, his sacramental addresses, his addresses at our church meetings, his classes of enquirers, constantly distinguished. But in private his efforts to fulfil his 'trust' and save your souls were still more touching. At this moment some of you can remember his kind yet stern rebukes of flagrant sins, how, with tears he warned you of certain ruin both in this world and the next, if you did not resolve, and that soon, to abandon your vices, implore God's pardon for all your past wickedness and his help to sin no more. Others of you can recall his more gentle remonstrances on account of your increasing earnestness in business and the decaying zeal of your devotional life and Christian work.
>
> He would sometimes speak with most affecting despondency of some who had heard him preach the gospel for 20 or 30 years and were still 'lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God'. And when he knelt down and prayed for such, his

> earnestness would not unfrequently master his self-control and with a broken voice and many tears he would entreat God to pity them. Ah! my friends, you and I shall have to give account at the judgement bar of Christ, not only of all that we heard him say but of all the prayers for our salvation and holiness which none heard, but God.

Such was John Angell James, an earnest minister of the Gospel.

His humility and his concern are both well expressed in the closing paragraph of the book.

> Baxter concludes his *Reformed Pastor*, with an expression of his confidence in the usefulness of the book he had written, which it would be unwarrantable and ridiculous vanity in me to adopt in reference to mine, at least in any other way than that of hope and prayer; and in this spirit I borrow the language of that great and holy man, and say,
>
> > I have now, brethren, done with my advice, and leave you to the practice. Though the proud receive it with scorn, and the selfish and slothful with distaste, or even with indignation, I doubt not but God will use it, in despite of the opposition of sin and Satan, to the awakening of many of his servants to their duty, and to the promotion of a work of right reformation: and that his blessing will accompany the present undertaking for the saving of many souls, the peace of you that undertake and perform it, the exciting of his servants throughout the nation to second you, and the increase of the purity and unity of his churches. Amen.

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25 Ibid. p. 139.
26 Ibid. p. 152.
27 Ibid. p. 155.
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29 Ibid. p. 290.
30 Ibid. p. 303.
31 Ibid. p. 309.
32 Ibid. p. 312.
33 Ibid. p. 343.
34 Ibid. p. 145.

Jonathan Edwards and the Phenomena of Revival

Peter Beale

The late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who had probably done more than anyone to introduce Jonathan Edwards to contemporary Evangelicals this side of the Atlantic, had this to say about him at the Westminster Conference in 1976:

> I am afraid, and I say it with much regret, that I have to put him ahead even of Daniel Rowlands and George Whitefield. Indeed I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest. He has always seemed to me to be the man most like the Apostle Paul. Of course, Whitefield was a great and mighty preacher, as was Daniel Rowlands; but so was Edwards. Neither of them had the mind, neither of them had the intellect, neither of them had the grasp of theology that Edwards had; neither of them was the philosopher he was. He stands out, it seems to me, quite on his own amongst men!

It is particularly valuable for us to consult Edwards on the subject of the phenomena of revival. Unlike many who would theorise on this matter, he was a man who had experienced revival, and was writing in the midst of the Great Awakening in New England, having witnessed a prelude to it in the revival of 1734/5 at his own parish of Northampton, when he reckoned that some three hundred were converted within the space of six months. Unlike some who have experienced revival, he did not fall into the trap of uncritically accepting all the attendant phenomena, or indeed uncritically rejecting them as spurious. Dr Lloyd-Jones pinpoints the reason for this: 'He was a mighty theologian and a great evangelist at the same time' … 'He seems to be everything and to be perfectly balanced'. He had to fight on two fronts: on the one hand against those who were totally opposed to the revival, and on the other against the 'wild men' who went to extremes. An example of the latter was James Davenport, grandson of the founder of New Haven, who, on hearing of the remarkable events associated with the preaching of Whitefield, gathered his congregation together and harangued them for twenty-four hours straight—and then collapsed! On 18 July 1741 he preached at New London, where the local Justice of the Peace described what went on:

> Divers women were terrified and cried out exceedingly. When Mr Davenport had dismissed the congregation some went out and others stayed; he then went into the broad alley [aisle], which was much crowded, and there he screamed out, 'Come to Christ! Come to Christ! Come away!' Then he went into the third pew on the women's side, and kept there, sometimes singing, sometimes

> praying; he and his companions all taking their turns, and the women fainting and in hysterics. This confusion continued till ten o'clock at night. And then he went off singing through the streets.

I intend to open up this subject by first looking at what Edwards has to say about the phenomena of revival; secondly focusing particularly on what we might describe as the physical manifestations—crying out, fainting and the like; and finally raising some questions about Edwards' treatment of these phenomena.

I. Edwards' Statements about the Phenomena of Revival

These crop up in many places, but are systematically set out in three works in particular: *The Distinguishing Marks* (1741), the Commencement Address given before the faculty and students of Yale College shortly after Davenport had concluded his preaching tour of the colony; *Thoughts on the Revival* (1743), a five-part treatise in which he was led 'to expand the principles of discrimination he had enunciated in the Yale sermon and to address his apologetic to an opposition that had become much more articulate and intransigent'; and what CG Goen, in the introduction to one of the volumes of the Yale University edition of Edwards' works, describes as 'the mature statement of 1746', *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 'wherein he demonstrated that true religion necessarily involves the whole person, and that it can and must be subjected to discriminating judgement'. My scratching of the surface of Edwards' works has not yet penetrated to this last treatise, so in this paper we must content ourselves with looking at *The Distinguishing Marks* and the *Thoughts*.

A. *The Distinguishing Marks*

The full title of which was *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Applied to That Uncommon Operation That Has Lately Appeared on the Mind of Many of the People of This Land: With a Particular Consideration of the Extraordinary Circumstances with which This Work Is Attended.*

1. Negative Signs

Edwards begins by listing a series of 'negative signs'—negative, not in the sense that they are contraindicative of a true work of the Spirit, but in the sense that they are irrelevant to our judgment one way or the other. Thus:—

a. We must beware of concluding that a work is not of the Spirit of God because it is carried on in a way very unusual and extraordinary: to say that 'we've never done it this way before' is no argument against the revival, for 'we ought not to limit God where he has not limited himself'. In the days of the Apostles, 'the great unusualness of the work surprised the Jews; they knew not

what to make of it, but could not believe it to be the work of God: many looked upon the persons that were the subjects of it as bereft of reason; as you may see in Acts 2:13, 26:24, and 1 Corinthians 4:10.'

b. A work 'is not to be judged of by any effects on the bodies of men', and it is at this that we shall be looking in rather more detail.

c. We are not to condemn the work as not of the Spirit of God because 'it occasions a great deal of noise about religion': while true religion, unlike that of the Pharisees, is not ostentatious, yet a great concern for spiritual and eternal things may be expected to move people deeply.

d. Nor are we to dismiss it because many who are affected by it have great impressions made on their imagination, even to the extent of being in 'a kind of ecstasy'.

e. The work is not to be regarded as spurious because 'example is a great means of it', i.e. that many are influenced, not only by what others say to them by way of preaching or personal conversation, but by what they see: 'If a person should see another under extreme bodily torment, he might receive much clearer ideas, and more convincing evidence of what he suffered by his actions in his misery, than he could do only by the words of an unaffected indifferent reader'.

Edwards' next three examples deal with the observable blemishes on the movement:

f. We are not to be put off by the fact that 'many who seem to be the subject of it are guilty of great imprudence and irregularities in their conduct' (Corinth should convince us of this);

g. nor that there are 'many errors of judgement, and some delusions of Satan, intermixed with the work', such as relying on impulses and impressions as if they were immediate revelations from God;

h. nor that 'some, who were thought to be wrought upon, fall away into gross errors, or scandalous practices', for church history since the days of the apostles teaches us that this is to be expected.

i. Finally, the work is not to be condemned on the grounds that there is a strong emphasis by ministers on the terrors of God's holy law: 'If I am in danger of going to hell, I should be glad to know as much as possibly I can of the dreadfulness of it. If I am very prone to neglect due care to avoid it, he does me the best kindness who does most to represent to me the truth of the case, that sets forth my misery and danger in the liveliest manner.'

2. Positive Signs

In his second section, Edwards turns to *positive* distinguishing signs of a genuine work of the Spirit. We may assume that a work is genuine if its effect is

a. to raise a person's esteem of Jesus 'born of a Virgin and crucified without the gates';

b. to operate against the interests of Satan's kingdom;

c. to cause a greater regard to the Holy Scriptures, and establish them more in their truth and divinity; and

d. if we observe that the spirit at work operates as a spirit of truth, e.g. making people more sensible than before that there is a God to whom they must give account, and as a spirit of love to God and man.

These are decisive indications that a work is of God, because they are all things that Satan either cannot or will not do.

3. Practical Inferences

The concluding section consists of 'practical inferences' from the previous arguments. On the basis of these, Edwards maintains that the work then taking place is 'undoubtedly, in the general, from the Spirit of God'. Therefore all need to be warned 'by no means to oppose, or do anything in the least to clog or hinder the work; but, on the contrary, do our utmost to promote it'. At the same time those who have been sympathetically involved are 'to give diligent heed to themselves to avoid all errors and misconduct—and to give no occasion to those who stand ready to reproach it'.

B. *Thoughts on the Revival*

This work, the title in full being *Some Thoughts Concerning the present Revival of Religion in New England, and the Way in which it ought to be acknowledged and promoted*, appeared in the spring of 1743. In the preface, having referred to the war with Spain then going on, Edwards states:

> We in New England are at this day engaged in a more important war: and I'm sure, if we consider the sad jangling and confusion that has attended it, we shall confess that it is highly requisite that somebody should speak his mind concerning the way in which it ought to be managed: and that not only a few of the many particulars, that are the matter of strife in the land, should be debated on the one side and the other, in pamphlets (as has of late been done, with heat and fierceness enough); which don't tend to bring the contention in general to an end, but rather to inflame it, and increase the uproar: but that something should be published, to bring the affair in general, and the many things that attend it, that are the subjects of debate, under a particular consideration. And certainly it is high time that this was done.

Edwards' *Treatise* is divided into five parts: I, 'Shewing that the Work that has of late been going on in this Land, is a glorious Work of God'; II, 'Shewing the Obligations that all are under, to acknowledge, rejoice in and promote this Work, and the great Danger of the contrary'; III, 'Shewing in many Instances, wherein the Subjects, or zealous Promoters, of this Work have been injuriously blamed'; IV, 'Shewing what Things are to be corrected or avoided, in promoting this Work, or in our Behaviour under it'; and V, 'Shewing positively what ought to be done to promote this work'. It is the fourth part, dealing with what is to be corrected or avoided, which is most relevant to us, and Edwards considers this subject under three main heads: spiritual pride, wrong principles, and ignorance of Satan's advantages and devices.

1. Spiritual Pride

Spiritual pride is declared to be 'the main door, by which the Devil comes into the hearts of those that are zealous for the advancement of religion'. And it can affect those on both sides of the argument about the revival. On the one hand,

> When any person appears, in any respect, remarkably distinguished in religion from others, if he professes those spiritual comforts and joys that are greater than ordinary—ten to one but it will immediately awaken the jealousy of those that are about him; and they will suspect (whether they have cause or no) that he is very proud of his goodness, and that he affects to have it thought that nobody is as good as he …

On the other hand,

> those that are zealous Christians should take heed that this injuriousness of those that are cold in religion, don't prove a snare to them, and the Devil don't take advantage from it, to blind their eyes from beholding what there is indeed of this nature in their hearts …

2. Wrong Principles

Edwards then goes on to point out some wrong principles which have led to errors in conduct.

a. The first and most important of these is the 'notion that 'tis God's manner now in these days to guide his saints, at least some that are more eminent, by inspiration, or immediate revelation'. Once I had a visit from a young man, a professing Spirit-filled Christian, who had recently moved into the village. Although out of work and extremely hard up, he continued to drive over twenty miles each way every Sunday to worship at a church where 'slayings in the Spirit' and the like were the order of the day, because 'God had told him to do so.' When I suggested that it was strange that we saw no evidence in the New Testament of God telling Christians in one place to by-pass their own local Gospel church and pop off each Sunday somewhere else,

he told me he was rebuking me in the name of Christ because I was quenching the Spirit. Edwards puts his finger on such a position most accurately:

> This error will defend and support all errors. As long as a person has a notion that he is guided by immediate direction from heaven, it makes him incorrigible and impregnable in all his misconduct: for what signifies it for poor blind worms of the dust to go to argue with a man, and endeavour to convince him and correct him, that is guided by the immediate counsels and commands of the great Jehovah?

b. A second erroneous principle discerned by Edwards is that 'persons ought always to do whatsoever the Spirit of God (though but indirectly) inclines them do'. Thus, for instance,

> the Spirit of God may cause a person to have a dear love to another …: this disposition in general is good, and ought to be followed; but yet … it may be ill directed, and have a bad determination, as to particular acts; and the person indirectly, through that real love that he has to his neighbour, may kill him with kindness; he may do that out of sincere good will to him that may tend to ruin him.

Or (and here is something very relevant to current debate in some sections of the church)

> through the influence of the Spirit of God, together with want of discretion and some remaining corruption, women and children might feel themselves inclined to break forth and scream aloud to great congregations, warning and exhorting the whole multitude, and to go forth and halloo and scream in the streets, or to leave the families they belong to, and go from house to house, earnestly exhorting others; but yet it would by no means follow that it was their duty to do these things, or that they would not have a tendency to do ten times as much hurt as good.

c. Thirdly, Edwards warns of the erroneous assumption that 'whatsoever is found to be of present and immediate benefit, may and ought to be practised without looking forward to future consequences'—rather, in things that are not already determined by absolute rules of Scripture, where we must leave the consequences with God, 'we are to be governed by discretion, and must not only look at the present good, but our view must be extensive, and we must look at the consequence of things'. An understanding of this principle would surely have prevented the folly of referring 'Mission England' enquirers to non-evangelical churches just on the basis that those churches had opted to become involved.

d. The controversy over 'Mission England' is also relevant to the fourth error Edwards indicates: that of looking 'upon the success that God gives to some persons, in making them the instruments of doing much good, as a

testimony of God's approbation of those persons and all the courses they take'. God may well in his sovereignty give success to ventures and methods of which he certainly does not approve, as for instance with Jacob and his trickery. Nor is it any argument to claim the special comforts of God's Spirit in support of the rightness of one's conduct:

> David had very much of the presence of God while he lived in polygamy: and Solomon had some very high favours and peculiar smiles of heaven, and particularly at the dedication of the temple, while he greatly multiplied wives to himself, and horses, and silver and gold; all contrary to the most express command of God to the king, in the law of Moses, Deuteronomy 17:16–17.

e. Fifthly, it is an erroneous principle to suppose 'that external order in matters of religion and use of the means of grace is but little to be regarded';

f. and finally, that

> ministers, because they speak as Christ's ambassadors, may assume the same style and speak as with the same authority that the prophets of old did, yea, that Jesus Christ himself did in the 23rd of Matthew, 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, &c.'…; and that not only when they are speaking to the people, but also to their brethren in the ministry.

3. Ignorance of Satan's Devices

The third section in Edwards' treatment of what is to be avoided or corrected covers the problems caused by ignorance of Satan's advantages and devices, with respect both to the inward experiences of Christians themselves, and to the external effects of those experiences.

a. As to the *experiences of Christians,* Satan is able to take advantage of those off their guard in three ways.

i. The first lies in the fact that there is in the experiences of true Christians often, one might say always, a mixture, 'of that which is natural, and that which is corrupt, with that which is divine'.

ii. Secondly, the Devil takes advantage of 'the unheeded defects there sometimes are in the experiences of true Christians' which maim and deform those experiences, as where there is a lack of balanced understanding of the character of God:

> a defect on the one hand, viz. having much of a discovery of his love and grace, without a proportionable discovery of his awful majesty and his holy and searching purity, would tend to spiritual pride …; and a defect on the other hand, viz. having much of a discovery of his holy majesty, without a proportionable discovery of his grace, tends to unbelief, a sinful fearfulness and spirit of bondage.

iii. Thirdly, there is advantage to be had by the Devil in the inevitable degenerating of experiences as time goes on, whereby 'the spiritual part decreases, and the other useless and hurtful parts greatly increase'—for example 'love to the brethren may by degrees come to little else but fondness and zeal for a party; yea, through a mixture of a natural love to the opposite sex, may degenerate more and more, till it issues in that which is criminal and gross.'

b. As to the *external effects* or outward manifestations, Edwards sees Satan as claiming an advantage by the influence of custom, or what we would call 'following the crowd'. As we have seen, he is far from ascribing all outward manifestations to this, but he observes that there are notable differences between what happens in different places and under different ministries:

> If some person is among them to conduct them, that much countenances and encourages such kind of outward manifestations of great affections, they naturally and insensibly prevail, and grow by degrees unavoidable; but when afterwards they come under another kind of conduct, the manner of external appearances will strangely alter. And yet it seems to be without any proper design or contrivance of those in whom there is this alteration; 'tis not properly affected by them, but the influence of example and custom is secret and insensible to the persons themselves.

Therefore he believes that

> they greatly err who think that these things should be wholly unlimited, and that all should be encouraged in going in these things to the utmost length that they feel themselves inclined to: the consequence of this will be very bad. There ought to be a gentle restraint held upon these things … otherwise, … persons will find themselves under a kind of necessity of making a great ado, with less affection of soul, till at length almost any slight emotion will set them going … These things experience proves.

His conclusion to Part IV of his Treatise is that

> The Devil has driven the pendulum far beyond its proper point of rest; and when he has carried it to the utmost length that he can, and it begins by its own weight to swing back, he will probably set in, and drive it with the utmost fury the other way; and so give us no rest; and if possible prevent our settling in a proper medium … We are foolish sheep in the midst of subtle serpents and cruel wolves, and don't know it. Oh, how unfit are we to be left to ourselves! And how much do we stand in need of the wisdom, the power, the condescension, patience, forgiveness and gentleness of our good Shepherd!

II. Consideration of the Physical Manifestations

By this we mean what Edwards describes in his *Distinguishing Marks* as 'effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength'. It seems that these were already in

evidence in the revival which came to Northampton in 1735, and which he recounts in his *Narrative of Surprising Conversions.* 'Some few instances there have been,' he states, 'of persons who have had such a sense of God's wrath for sin, that they have been overborne; and made to *cry out* under an astonishing sense of their guilt, wondering that God suffers such guilty wretches to live upon earth.' 'It has been very common, that the deep and fixed concern on persons' minds, has had a painful influence on their bodies, and given disturbance to animal nature.'

In 1740 to 1742 there was a renewed work of the Spirit at Northampton, and the visit of George Whitefield brought great blessing. Edwards tells in his account of how in May 1741, when Whitefield was preaching at a private house, 'One or two persons, that were professors, were so greatly affected with a sense of the greatness and glory of divine things, and the infinite importance of the things of eternity, that they were not able to conceal it—the affection of their minds overcoming their strength, and having a very visible effect upon their bodies.'

Following the preaching, the young people met together in an adjacent room, where many were overcome, some with a sense of love, joy and praise, and others with distress about their sinful state, 'so that the whole room was full of nothing but outcries, faintings; and the like'. By the middle of the summer, Edwards records that 'there first began to be cryings out in the meeting-house', and in August and September 1741 'it was a very frequent thing to see a house full of outcries, faintings, convulsions, and such like, both with distress, and also with admiration and joy'.

In the early months of 1742, Samuel Buell, later pastor of Easthampton, Long Island, occupied the pulpit at Northampton while Edwards was away, with 'very extraordinary effects' of his labours; he continued for a few weeks after Edwards' return, and during that time Edwards observed that 'there were some instances of persons lying in a sort of trance, remaining perhaps for a whole twenty-four hours motionless, and with their senses locked up'. Now a note of caution appears, for 'When the people were raised to this height, Satan took the advantage, and his interposition, in many instances, soon became very apparent: and a great deal of caution and pains were found necessary to keep the people, many of them, from running wild'.

Edwards' attitude to these outward manifestations may be summed up under four heads: they are not excluded by Scripture; they are to be expected; they are in themselves neither good nor bad; and they must not be allowed to get out of hand.

A. Not Excluded By Scripture

This is because it is not God's purpose in Scripture to deal with physical manifestations. So in *Thoughts Concerning the Revival* he states:

> Scripture rules respect the state of the mind, and persons' moral conduct, and voluntary behaviour, and not the physical state of the body. The design of the Scripture is to teach us divinity, and not physic and anatomy … Christ knew what instructions and rules his church would stand in need of better than we do; and if he had seen it needful in order to the church's safety, he doubtless would have given ministers rules to judge of bodily effects, and would have told them how the pulse should beat under such and such religious exercises of mind; when men should look pale, and when they should shed tears; when they should tremble, and whether or no they should ever be faint or cry out; or whether the body should ever be put into convulsions.

The important thing, maintains Edwards, is to do our duty with respect to the state of persons' minds and their moral conduct, and 'If things are but kept right in these respects, our fears and suspicions arising from extraordinary bodily effects seem wholly groundless'.

Similarly in the *Distinguishing Marks* he answers the objection (which in fact he does not accept) that 'we have no instances of' such extraordinary manifestations 'recorded in the New Testament, under the extraordinary effusions of the Spirit'. Even if this objection were true, 'Nobody supposes that there is any need of express Scripture for every external, accidental manifestation of the inward motion of the mind'.

B. To Be Expected

Such manifestations are to be expected, because 'there is also reason to think that such great outpouring of the Spirit was not wholly without those more extraordinary effects on persons' bodies'. Thus when Daniel saw the external majesty and glory of Christ there 'remained no strength in him' and 'his comeliness was turned in him into corruption' (Daniel 10:6–8), while John 'fell at his feet as dead' (Revelation 1:17). Habakkuk, speaking of the awful manifestations made by God of his majesty and wrath, says (Habakkuk 3:16): 'When I heard, my belly trembled, my lips quivered at the voice, rottenness entered into my bones, I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble.' Similarly, Edwards states,

> The Psalmist also speaks of very much such an effect as I have often seen on persons under religious affections of late, Psalm 119:131, 'I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for thy commandments.'

Other examples cited by Edwards in *Distinguishing Marks* include the Philippian jailer falling down before Paul and Silas, and the crying out of the

disciples for fear when, as he puts it, 'they saw Christ coming to them in the storm, and took him for some terrible enemy, threatening their destruction in that storm.' 'Why then,' he asks, 'should it be thought strange that persons should cry out for fear, when God appears to them, as a terrible enemy, and they see themselves in great danger of being swallowed up in the bottomless gulf of eternal misery?'

C. Neither Good Nor Bad

These manifestations are not, in themselves, either good or bad, but merely to be ascribed to man's human nature. When people have been in a 'kind of ecstasy'

> I see no need of bringing in the help of the devil into the account that we give of these things, nor yet of supposing them to be of the same nature with the visions of the prophets, or St Paul's rapture into paradise. Human nature, under these exercises and affections, is all that need be brought into the account.

Thus the important thing is the inward working of the Spirit of God in a person's heart, not the outward effect that may accompany such working. This view is in contrast to that of a writer such as Arthur Wallis, who considers such manifestations to be signs which are

> a divine authentication of the truth of the gospel, even as Nicodemus said to Jesus, 'We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these signs that thou doest except God be with him'.

Therefore it is asserted by Wallis

> as a fact beyond dispute to those who accept the testimony of history, that the renewal of such gifts, together with various other signs and wonders, are a prominent feature of revival … If God sends revival which is characterised by elements altogether new to our experience and which we cannot understand, if there are dreams and visions, tongues and interpretations, revelations and trances, prophesyings and healings, tremblings and prostrations, let us remember that God said that signs would accompany the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:17–19), and that it has almost always been so.

Edwards, of course, would have none of this equation of these physical manifestations with the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit associated with the early days of the church: as far as he is concerned, these were revelatory and temporary, and his understanding of 1 Corinthians 13:10 leads him to conclude: 'But since the canon of the Scripture has been completed, and the Christian Church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased'—so the extraordinary phenomena, however we interpret them and whatever we make of them, are certainly not the extraordinary gifts and signs

of Pentecost. They may well accompany a genuine work of God, but 'One cannot argue from the nature of the cause to the nature of the effect'.

D. To Be Kept Under Control

These manifestations must not be allowed to get out of hand, because it is thus that Satan seizes his opportunity: as we have seen, his view is that 'they greatly err who think that these things should be wholly unlimited'. In this he was more cautious, interestingly enough, than the Countess of Huntingdon, who wrote to Whitefield advising him not to remove from his meetings those who cried out or fell down: 'You are making a mistake. Don't be wiser than God. Let them cry out; it will do a great deal more good than your preaching.' But even Edwards' words of caution must be coupled with his comments in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* on the question of the removal of those who have been deeply and visibly affected;

> I can't but think that those that thus object go upon quite wrong notions of things: for though persons ought to take heed that they don't make an ado without necessity, … yet the unavoidable manifestations of strong religious affections tend to an happy influence on the minds of bystanders, and are found by experience to have an excellent and durable effect; and so to contrive and order things, that others may have opportunity and advantage to observe them, has been found to be blessed as a great means to promote the work of God.

Thus Edwards' cautious attitude stops well short of placing an immediate ban on such manifestations.

III. Some Questions about Edwards' Treatment of the Phenomena

A. Is his claim of biblical support for these outward manifestations at a time of revival convincing?

He mentions the disciples in the boat seeing Christ approach them across the water, and the Philippian jailer falling down before Paul and Silas. But both Matthew and Mark indicate that the fear of the disciples was because they thought they saw a ghost; and the jailer had had such a series of shocks, what with the earthquake shaking the prison so that the doors flew open and everybody's chains came loose, that we should not be at all surprised if he 'fell trembling before Paul and Silas' even if there had not been the work of God in his heart prompting him to ask, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And where we should most expect to find such phenomena if they are to be thought of as normal accompaniments of revival, on the Day of Pentecost itself, there are none: Luke, that most meticulous of commentators, records no fainting or

other bodily effects, and even when the people were 'cut to the heart' we are told that they 'said' rather than 'cried out', 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

B. Does he give sufficient weight to the patchy and spasmodic nature of the occurrence of these phenomena?

During both the Great Awakening and other times of revival, the depth of the Spirit's work does not seem to have had any relationship to the presence or absence of these physical manifestations. Thus Thomas Prince of Boston writes of the visit of Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent:

> I do not remember any crying out, or falling down, or fainting, either under Mr Whitefield's or Mr Tennent's ministry, all the while they were here; though many, both women and men, both those who had been vicious, and those who had been moral, yea, some religious and learned, as well as unlearned, were in great concern of soul.

Similarly at Natick in 1743 the pastor, Oliver Peabody, wrote:

> Here, we have never had any crying out in an extraordinary manner, but the Holy Spirit has been pleased to work in a more calm way; but I hope effectually.

Writing fourteen years later about the awakening that took place in the college, Edwards' son-in-law remarks:

> Though I have had considerable opportunity in time past to observe such things, I never observed conviction of sin so rational, solemn, and thorough; nor any, to the same degree, with so little outward noise and show, or attended with better effects.

Nearly a hundred years later, in 1841, a work in Scotland centring round the preaching of William Burns was the occasion of an enquiry by the Presbytery of Aberdeen, in the course of which a questionnaire was sent to a number of ministers. The answers to the question, 'Were there public manifestations of physical excitement, as in audible sobs, groans, cries, screams, &c.?' varied considerably. In Aberdeen, a (probably unsympathetic) reporter likened the noise made by some females in the Bon Accord Church to 'the caterwauling of an enormous quantity of cats', while another felt it was more 'like the noise of pigeons in a very large dovecote', while 'some lay along, extended on their faces, in one of the passages, others seemed to be crouching with their faces on the seats of the pews'. Horatius Bonar at Kelso, however, reported 'no manifestations of physical excitement of any kind, except silent tears and profound solemnity; no unusual postures; no fainting; no illness'. Andrew Bonar stated that on two occasions there were such manifestations, but to no great extent. According to Robert Macdonald of Blairgowrie,

> The only physical excitement manifested was, occasional suppressed sobbing and tears, with the exception of one female, who gave vent to her feelings by cries in the vestry.

Speaking at the Congregational Union in 1858 on 'The Bearing of the American Revival on the Duties and Hopes of British Christians', John Angell James had this to say:

> That it must indeed be a genuine revival is, I think, satisfactorily proved, not only by its origination, extent, and results, but by its character. Produced by no exciting means, no forcing, hot-bed growth, no fervid appeals to passion and imagination; attended by no wild outcries, no physical convulsions, no bodily disorders, no frenzied emotions; all, with few and small exceptions, is deep solemnity and in strictest harmony with the profoundest devotion. It is not the crackling blaze of thorns beneath the pot, obstreperous and transient; but almost noiseless as the tongues of fire which sat upon the brows of Apostles on the day of Pentecost.

C. Does he give sufficient weight to mass hysteria and the incidence of these phenomena outside of revival?

Cryings out, faintings and the like are recorded in all sorts of situations, from the meetings of Kathryn Kuhlman when according to her biographer 'she would simply motion out into the audience, or back into the choir, and entire rows of people would fall over', to the frenzied dances of animistic worshippers or crowds of young girls at some pop concert.

Conclusion

We owe a tremendous debt to Jonathan Edwards for the balanced wisdom of his treatment of the subject of revival and its attendant phenomena. How much we need his wisdom to steer a right course in the confused times in which we live, between that cold dead orthodoxy which dismisses out of hand anything which does not fit in with our preconceived ideas, and that naïve gullibility which accepts without question so-called signs and wonders which may be at best psychological and at worst the confusing intervention of the one who disguises himself as an angel of light and sends those of whom the Lord warns us that they will 'perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible'. Above all, how much we need the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon us in genuine revival.

> We ask no bright shekinah-cloud
> To glorify the place;
> Give, Lord, the substance of that sign
> A plenitude of grace.

No rushing mighty wind we ask,
No tongues of flame desire;
Grant us the Spirit's quickening light,
His purifying fire.

Light up this house with glory, Lord
The glory of that love
Which forms and saves a church below,
And makes a heaven above.

John Harris, 1802–56

Thomas Wilson, 1764–1843

Calvinist, Congregationalist and Chapel Builder

Peter Collins

In Christian biography there is an abundance of books about ministers and missionaries but comparatively few about 'laymen'. The life of Thomas Wilson is an excellent example of a man who did so much for the cause of Christ in his day that it ought to inspire and promote activity in Christian men in our day. A *Memoir* of him was written by his son Joshua Wilson who had been requested by a number of Christian leaders to do so, not least by Dr Sprague of Albany, the author of *A History of Revivals* which has been republished in recent years by the Banner of Truth Trust.

The family tree is always a good place to start and here it is most interesting in its connections with the 18th century. Thomas Wilson's father was born at the family's small freehold farm at Stention about five miles from Derby. He married Miss Remington whose family were Presbyterian and attended the Presbyterian Meeting-house at Derby. When a girl, Miss Remington was publicly catechised concerning her knowledge of the Shorter Catechism. Her father with other leading members of the meeting had, in June 1724, tried to obtain the services of Philip Doddridge but he declined complying with the request of 'those good friends at Coventry, whom I most sincerely value and love'.

Thomas Wilson's parents had many children, and it was his mother's custom to conduct family prayers at seven o'clock each morning. It was also her practise to retire for a while at eight o'clock each evening for private devotions. She acted on Sir Matthew Hale's advice 'Be obstinately constant to your devotions at certain set times'.

Thomas Wilson's parents moved to London for business reasons. One Saturday evening Mrs Wilson, while taking a walk with a woman friend in the direction of Moorfields, passed the Tabernacle, which at that time was separated from the city by open country. Mrs Wilson asked about the building and was informed that it was the place where Mr Whitefield preached. A service was about to begin so the two women went in and heard Mr Kinsman of Plymouth whose text was 'My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy Word'. On returning home she said to her husband 'If I go to hear such preaching I shall certainly become a Methodist'. He replied 'We will both go together and hear Mr Whitefield'. The result is recorded as follows—'They did so several times, particularly on Saturday evenings, and obtained, by

the blessing of God, great spiritual benefit. They became lively and zealous professors of the gospel of the grace of God, invited Mr Whitefield to their house, and became attached both to his person and ministry.' Shortly before Thomas WiIson's mother died in 1816 she said 'I have nothing to trust in myself but I rest on the atoning blood and righteousness of my dear Redeemer'. Such was her glorious confession of faith.

Soon after Thomas Wilson's parents heard Whitefield at the Tabernacle they joined the Independent church meeting at Haberdasher's Hall. This church was originally founded by the Puritan William Strong, and in his day met in no less a place than Westminster Abbey when the membership included members of Parliament. The minister in their day was Dr Gibbons, a friend of Whitefield, and is referred to by him in his letters as 'warm-hearted Dr Gibbons'. The Wilson's joined this church in October 1760, and in April 1766 he was chosen as one of its deacons. They continued to hear Whitefield on Sunday evenings and during the week, and in a letter written to his nephew, Wilson's father concludes—

> There hath been preaching twice a day all this week at Mr Whitefield's and Mr Wesley's chapels, and at Mr Romaine's church every day once.

He ended with this prayer:

> O Lord! succeed the labours of thy servants, and crown the means with thy blessing and abundant success.

This man not only prayed—he worked. Whitefield had been used by God to take this moral religious hardworking couple and make them spiritually alive and concerned for the lost souls around them. Thomas Wilson senior first sought to bring a Gospel witness to his old home town of Derby. How interesting that his thoughts were thus turned when awakened; after much home mission work, undertaken by various preachers, a building was opened in the summer of 1774 by the Rev George Burder who wrote:

> June 5, 1774 , was at Derby to assist in opening a commodious chapel built in great part by the generosity of Thomas Wilson, Esq., of London, who had supported in great measure the expense of preaching at Derby, his native place for some time.

Other places in his beloved county of Derbyshire were assisted in like manner. The old Presbyterian meeting-house in Ashbourn, and Alvaston, were obtained and re-employed for gospel preaching, after having been shut up for a number of years; numerous other places were also helped by Wilson senior in the establishing of a gospel witness.

When the famous Rowland Hill appeared on the London scene, he was one of those who arranged to help pay for the building of the old Surrey

Chapel, and was one of its original trustees. Two other major projects are associated with him: the first was the founding of the Evangelical Society in 1776. Its purpose was home-evangelisation by means of itinerant preaching. This was to be accomplished by ministers with churches being encouraged to extend the field of their work to surrounding towns and villages. To quote—

> This plan was wisely contrived to encourage the more active and energetic pastors to extend their usefulness by penetrating into the dark villages and neglected rural hamlets around them, and to stimulate others to similar efforts.

The success of this work led to the establishment of the second major project in his life, namely, Hoxton Academy. Wilson senior together with a handful of others including two ministers, founded this college to supply men able to take on the new churches coming into being. The two year course consisted of English grammar, theology, and sermon preparation. History records that the revival grew under such men.

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Such were the parents of our subject Thomas Wilson, who was born to them on 11 November 1764 at No 124 Wood Street, off Cheapside, in the City of London. He was baptised by Dr Gibbons on 2 December following. He was their eighth child and not a very healthy one. His mother arranged for the young child to be housed on Hampstead Heights and as a result he grew stronger and eventually was able to rejoin the family. Most of the previous seven children had died in infancy, and when one remembers that the plague of 1664 was only a hundred years before, perhaps the conditions within the old City of London were still not as clean and healthy as they might have been. After schooling he was apprenticed at the age of 14 to the family business, and as the owner's son was trained to take over the firm. He records how he accompanied the firm's traveller into Kent and while at Dover, attended the Presbyterian meeting-house. On the return journey, they breakfasted with Mr Perronet, the Vicar of Shoreham whose son Edward wrote the hymn:

> All hail the power of Jesu's name;
> Let angels prostrate fall;
> Bring forth the royal diadem
> To Crown him Lord of all.

Of young Thomas Wilson's conversion little is known. As with many who are the children of Christian parents, it is difficult for them to pin-point a time and a place when they first knew their sins were forgiven, and that they were a child of God. Referring to his early life he wrote,

> I have great reason to be thankful for kind and pious parents, and especially for a gradual love which I have felt for Divine things.

His son Joshua said of him:

> He acted as one who knew and felt he was not his own, being bought with a price, even the precious blood of Christ.

In 1785 at the age of twenty-one he was made a partner of his father's firm. Part of his apprenticeship had been spent in Coventry learning that side of the business. In that city he attended the West Orchard Street chapel at which his father had been one of the founders. On settling again in London he did not join a church. Dr Gibbons had died that year and the man who succeeded him was not a popular or attractive preacher so that there was no powerful inducement for him regularly to attend his parent's church at Haberdasher's Hall. Instead he more regularly attended services at Whitefield's Tabernacle and eventually became a member of their society. He liked the warm, lively, affectionate manner of the preachers who supplied the pulpit there, and in fact made friends with several of them. It is not surprising that in latter years, when he wrote on the subject of 'Qualifications for the Christian Ministry', he wrote as a warm hearted Methodist, but more of this in due course.

He was as successful in business as his father and made a great deal of money. His attitude toward riches was that of a steward. A text much in his mind at the time was 'Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase'. Some notes left by him are as follows:

> Yesterday I rambled in the morning to Surrey Chapel, to hear Mr Jay. His subject was 'Overcoming the World'. He first showed in what light we should view the world; namely as an enemy: and what it is to overcome it. (i) To use the good things of it and yet not to have it as our ultimate end. (ii) To put everything in its proper place. (iii) A proper management of secular affairs. (iv) a suitable spirit and behaviour amidst every changing scene. (v) A willingness to leave it. He observed, that, by a proper use of it, everything except sin may prove a blessing, and by an improper use of it, everything except grace may prove a curse. In the evening I heard Mr Wilks at the Tabernacle [hear Thomas Wilson's cry]. O that I could but improve more under such great privileges!

That was part of a letter written by him to the girl he would eventually marry. Here is another extract from a letter written to her:

> I suppose you have heard of the death of Mr Wesley [that is John Wesley]. I think we may say a truly great and good man, and an eminent servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely he, together with the ministers connected with him, have been the means of reforming and converting multitudes in various parts. The difference between the various part of his followers and moderate Calvinists is scarcely perceivable. I feel for the loss which the church of God sustains. May the great Head of the Church send forth more labourers! I would value all that love Jesus, without regarding their party.

However, let not this sentiment obscure the fact that Thomas Wilson gave his life and substance to the orthodox Calvinism of Congregationalism.

The young lady who received these letters was Elizabeth Clegg. Her father was a deacon of the Mosley Street Congregational Chapel in Manchester, and they were married there on the 31 March 1791.

I want to say something at this point about the history of Whitefield's Tabernacle. When Professor Tudur Jones lectured in this Conference last year, I spoke to him about the lack of information about Whitefield's Tabernacle and the influence that church had on English Congregationalism up to and including the formation of the Congregational Union in 1831. Professor Jones made the promise to suggest this subject as a doctoral thesis to one of his students. Meanwhile, however, may I mention some of the history in outline. Most of us would have read Arnold Dallimore's life of George Whitefield. The events on Moorfields on Whit Monday 1741 would, no doubt, have made a deep impression upon you. Under Whitefield's preaching on that occasion 350 people were saved. A nearby wooden building was used by them as a church, and Whitefield preached there as often as his itinerant ministry allowed. The church grew stronger and soon a project was initiated to build a larger auditorium on the same site. In 1753 a stone and brick building was opened that could seat 4,000 people. When one considers that Westminster Chapel seats 2,500 it gives an idea of the size. In Whitefield's absence, John Cennick ministered, and after he left, Howell Harris was the preacher. Other men often helped the work, for example, Whitefield wrote to Joseph Cownley, 'Is it practicable for you to come to town to assist at the Tabernacle for a month or six weeks, if you have proper notice? My helpers, as well as myself, are invalids. Dear Mr Wesley, I am persuaded, will readily consent. We are upon very good terms.'

The church government of the Tabernacle was most interesting. Within a few years of founding this church in Moorfields, Whitefield founded in 1756 the church known today as the Whitefield Memorial Chapel in Tottenham Court Road. The small modern church is not on the original site. Together the two churches were a connection, and the minister of one was the minister of the other, with supply preachers helping each week. The minister would preach Sunday mornings in Tottenham Court Road Chapel, and in the evenings at Moorfields Tabernacle. This order was observed by John Wesley when, on Whitefield's death at his request, he preached funeral sermons at both churches. The government of the church was in the hands of a board of managers, and it was their duty to select new ministers, and have the final say in major policy issues. In 1775 they chose Matthew Wilkes, whose ministry there lasted 53 years. Wilkes was a great evangelist and pastor. Many men

entered the ministry as a result of his work. The tragedy is that no one has yet written a biography of this 'outstanding' Christian minister. The reason may be because he outlived most men who knew him and who could write about him at first hand. Wilkes and the managers appeared to have had a good working relationship. These managers were, of course, elders in reality. One event during his ministry gave rise to concern when, after many years, the younger element in the congregation grew tired of him and wanted a new voice. The challenge to Wilkes awoke him to new vigour and soon he won them and they became his people, just as their parents had been before them. When he died in 1828, ten thousand people attended his funeral, and no doubt Thomas Wilson was among them. He must have been, because he was now one of the Managers of the Tabernacle.

One last point about the Tabernacle. There was a man born to English Congregationalism who could have raised the work at the Tabernacle to new heights, but he became a Baptist and a new Tabernacle was built for him south of the river Thames. His name was CH Spurgeon, and the ethos of Whitefield's Tabernacle must have been in the minds of the Deacons at New Park Street. They even considered building him a church in north London, but Whitefield's Tabernacle was still there, and so they built the Metropolitan Tabernacle south of the Thames in Newington Butts.

Thomas Wilson was a great reader of Christian books, and in his early years followed the practice of making extracts from the books he read. These included Owen and Charnock. The library he eventually collected became the foundation of the famous Memorial Hall Library here in London, but we will refer to this again later.

He was a man with deep political feelings, although he confined himself to activities within the Christian church. Here are some of his thoughts in this connection.

> The way to make a people hate its present government, would be to inform them that it will not admit of any reform;
>
> As our constitution was anciently founded in liberty, it ought not to be destroyed as if it was the government of despotism;
>
> Where is the danger of restoring to its genuine principles our constitution of King, Lords, and Commons?

and lastly,

> They are the best friends of the King who are for a full and equal representation of the people.

At Christmas time 1758, at the age of 34, Thomas Wilson retired from his business life. The income he was to enjoy henceforth was liberal and constant. What he did with it proves the character and calling of the man. At that time there was on the market the mansion once occupied by Sir Thomas Abney in which Dr Isaac Watts spent thirty-six years of his life. Dr Philips, on furlough from South Africa, was staying with Wilson and they went for a walk to this place and looked over it. 'I am surprised,' said Philips 'that you did not purchase this place and come and live in it.' Wilson's reply was in accordance with his character. 'I might purchase this place, and live in it, but the establishment it would require would consume all my income, and no worldly establishment would be a compensation to me for the pleasure I have in living within my income, that I may serve God with the surplus.'

In 1794, the year his father died, he was chosen to succeed him as Treasurer of the Evangelical Society and also the Evangelical Academy, soon to be called Hoxton Academy. In order to be close at hand for this work he had in March 1797 bought the lease on number 16 Artillery Place, near Finsbury Square, which became the nerve centre of his activity as well as his family residence.

You may wonder if this man was an extrovert. I do not think so and would quote something he wrote about himself in February 1791—

> I have always found a great diffidence in my natural disposition and have not been inclined at any time to put myself very forward. I would wish to be little, unseen, unknown, as it relates to the world, and to remember that there is a crown and a kingdom to be obtained and enjoyed, which are infinitely covetable. Yet I have often found that beyond my expectation I have been enabled to follow the way pointed out by Providence.

His duty was clear and he performed it with diligence. As Treasurer of Hoxton Academy, he sought out subscribers to maintain its finance. He befriended the students, and often paid for their expenses. Out from this college went a new generation of men whose labours were to extend vital Christianity in so many towns and villages of our country. As an old student said of him 'He was, in fact, the head of the institution'. The students had his mark upon them when they went out to preach. To quote:

> He would say with characteristic rubbing of his hands: 'Never forget the three Rs—Ruin, Redemption, and Regeneration. Keep to these and you will never fall. They will always supply you with plenty of matter for the whole course of your ministry.

With another simple piece of alliteration he inculcated the way to preach these truths; namely, with the three As, Animation, Affection, and Application. In our day alliteration in pulpit preparation is in disrepute. No doubt due to a

reaction to it being over employed by that era of preachers who had imbibed the non-supernatural theology of modernism that decimated the work of the 18th Century revival from 1850 onwards. Let us hope that it will find favour again as not a few of our present generation of Evangelical preachers could well employ this method to relieve some of their otherwise heavy sermons. Let me now quote at length what Wilson said and wrote to his students on the subject of their work and calling:

> Prepare your sermons as if all depended upon the means; and when you deliver them, still depend upon the blessed Spirit, as if you had made no preparation. Do not commit to memory more than the leading ideas of the subject. Words will make haste to follow things; the best rule for delivering what you have prepared is to feel it. Never attempt to copy the peculiar manner of other ministers; but speak in a natural, easy, affectionate, and persuasive way. You must speak with *animation,* that the people may perceive you feel the subject, for without *energy* you are not likely to secure their attention. Mankind are sunk into so fatal a degeneracy, and are by nature at such an awful distance from God, that all the earnest zeal of the preacher should be employed to show them their danger and point them to the remedy. Urge what you deliver, as a man would plead for his own life, and as if it were your last sermon. Tell those who would have you spare yourself, that time is short, eternity is at hand, the Judge is before the door. Carry the Gospel into neglected parts of the town and into the adjacent villages, where men are perishing for lack of knowledge … The will of Christ is indisputable—'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring hither the poor, and maimed, and the halt, and the blind. Go out into the highways and hedges, and *compel* them to come in, that my house may be filled'. No other kind of preaching has so immediate a tendency to enlarge the mind, and to excite compassion and zeal. You will thus get acquainted with the habits and thinking and practice peculiar to every class, and learn to speak to every man in his own way. Your private conversation and public discourses, instead of being stiff, uninteresting, and common-place remarks borrowed from books, or excogitated in the cloister, will come directly to the wants, the convictions, the desires, and the prospects of those to whom they are addressed.

What resulted from his oversight of Hoxton Academy is typified by his other great interest, namely, chapel building. Quite often this meant taking over vacant meeting houses and arranging with their trustees to recommence services with students from Hoxton. This happened at Lynn in Norfolk where the old Presbyterian meeting-house was no longer in use. The trustees answered his enquiry in a politic manner and simply put him off, but Wilson was not made like that and once his eye was fixed on an object he was reluctant to let go. So, the following year he applied again and this time succeeded, and

students went up to preach and open up the work. The church so flourished that by 1808 the minister of the chapel was sending three of his young men to Hoxton for training. In the early days the expenses of this cause were borne by Wilson, and this instance could be multiplied many, many times in towns and villages throughout England. Another example is that while travelling through Devon he came to Dartmouth where he attempted to recover the old Presbyterian meeting-house built for the celebrated Puritan John Flavel. One person in the town favoured the placing of a student from Hoxton and a Mr Johnson was sent but, to quote, 'To hinder his entering the chapel the doors were locked, and constables kept inside on the Lord's day'. Some years later the way was opened for a student to go to Dartmouth, and Mr Thomas Stenner was sent. Wilson paid all expenses for one year, but the gospel work so prospered that only part of the money was used, the remainder being returned to the benefactor. Before proceeding with this line of enquiry, let us ask a question as to why these old meeting-houses had declined. Here I am going to quote from Joshua Wilson, the son of our subject, when he says:

> Were I asked to assign the chief cause of this woeful state of spiritual declension, I should without hesitation ascribe it almost entirely to utter forgetfulness, on the part of our churches, of the first and great duty of Christian societies, to circulate the light of evangelical doctrine and to diffuse the vital heat of evangelical love in all directions around, and to the remote regions beyond them. During the first ten or twelve years after the passing of the Toleration Act in 1688, upwards of a thousand meeting-houses were erected by Dissenters of the Presbyterian and Congregational denominations, (between which a union was shortly afterwards formed) in all parts of England. But here the work stopped. They had provided for themselves and for their children, and were satisfied with what they had done. No attempts were made to originate new churches, to erect new chapels, or even to send out evangelists who might gather in converts from the perishing world around. Every separate church too much resembled 'a garden enclosed', and its members manifested no disposition to break forth on the right hand and on the left, in order to reclaim and bring under cultivation a portion of the surrounding wilderness.

Wilson was instrumental in reviving or founding chapels in such places as Epsom, Hastings, Rochford, Dudley, Peterborough, Guildford, Reigate, Harwich, Brentford, Liskeard, Chalfont, Rickmansworth, and in London at Hoxton, Holloway, Marylebone, Paddington, Claremont and Craven. To illustrate his way in this matter let us look at how he began the work at Kentish Town. Joshua Wilson writes:

> My father in the year 1805 was in the habit of riding on horseback into the country, particularly on the north side of London, and frequently passed

> through Kentish Town. He saw new houses rapidly rising up, but no provision being made for the spiritual welfare of their inhabitants, he was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep having no shepherd.

The ground was owned by St Bartholomew's Hospital and when he wrote to the governors making an offer for a piece they refused. Next day Wilson called on the hospital treasurer, Mr Baldwin, to ask if there was any objection to a Dissenting chapel being built on their ground. Mr Baldwin did not openly deny this but Wilson felt this was the case. Six months later he saw a piece of ground near the original plot but this was in the management of a Mr Clare who said 'I have an agreement for land belonging to St Bartholomew's Hospital, upon which three third-rate tenements are to be built, and I am willing to let you build a chapel as such an erection would be a first-rate building, no objection could be made by the committee of the hospital'. However, the hospital committee did find out and made them take down the chapel building which was nearing completion. At this point some ground belonging to Lord Dartmouth became available and the chapel was erected on that site, and opened on 26 June 1807.

Perhaps to us, the most interesting part of Thomas Wilson's chapel building work was his funding Westminster Chapel. Let me quote from Joshua Wilson:

> My father's attention had been directed to Westminster early in 1832, by a gentleman who, having been many years resident there, well knew the awful state of spiritual darkness in which multitudes of its teeming population had been long suffered to remain. No contrast can be more striking than was then presented by the two adjoining, and nearly connected, cities of London and Westminster. The former crowded with parish churches and Nonconformist chapels. The latter, with two or three Episcopal churches and chapel (beside the Abbey), one Independent chapel, and two or three belonging to other denominations, affording altogether provision for about 11,000 out of a population of 54,000. Several attempts to obtain suitable ground for a chapel proved unsuccessful. At length, a most eligible freehold premises being advertised for sale, the committee of the Metropolitan Chapel Fund, encouraged by the promise of £1,000 from Charles Hindley Esq. M.P., and £1,000 from my father, as well as by other liberal subscriptions, purchased them, and commenced the building of a large and handsome chapel, in a very central situation, which was opened on May 6th, 1841. My father felt so deeply the importance of this attempt to supply the urgent wants of a wicked city, where scenes of vice and wretchedness abound in the immediate neighbourhood of the Queen's palace, the courts of law, and the Houses of Parliament, that he gave a second £1,000 and he had the pleasure to witness the settlement of a young minister, the Rev. Samuel Martin, in whom he felt

> much interest, and who has already proved 'a burning and shining light' in that dark place.

In a letter to Rev. W Lothian, dated 7 May 1840, Thomas Wilson says:

> To secure a piece of freehold ground in Westminster I have advanced £2,500. This makes me very poor, and prevents my helping others as I could desire.

I have had the privilege of reading the Trust Deed of Westminster Chapel and found that Wilson's son Joshua was one of its signatories. The document in fact begins 'This Indenture made the 23rd day of December 1842 between Joshua Wilson of Highbury Place', etc. Also, it is interesting that it is committed in the Trust Deed to the 'doctrines held by the Congregational Union of England and Wales'.

In the summer of 1804, Wilson was at Buxton in Derbyshire and staying at the same hotel was James Haldane who was committed to preaching in the nearby village of Chelmerton. Haldane was called away rather suddenly and had to find someone to take his engagement, so he asked his friend Thomas Wilson to preach for him and this being his first attempt he was most reluctant but eventually consented to do so. His text was 1 Timothy 1:15, 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'. To quote:

> After he had commenced his address, however, he soon acquired courage, so as to speak boldly, and when he had advanced toward the close was surprised to find how much time had elapsed. He said within himself, 'I can do this again', and from that day became an occasional preacher.

He did not forget James Haldane and reclaimed the debt by asking him to preach at the opening services of Holloway chapel in September 1804.

There was nothing slow about Thomas Wilson's reaction to a need for an existing work, or a new situation demanding the creation of a new society. For example in 1795, he was deeply impressed by reading the journals of some Moravian missionaries. But although he saw the call to establish a board for foreign missions, it was not until he heard a sermon by his minister, Matthew Wilkes, on Galatians 4:18 ('It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing', the preacher's emphasis being that his church member should take a serious interest in overseas missions) that Wilson's reading preparation was set on fire. His earnest desire was, however, hindered because the ministers organising the London Missionary Society excluded laymen from their first discussion meetings. His son records the situation as follows:

> As the initiatory proceedings were taken at meetings consisting exclusively of ministers, my father could not be one of the very earliest active promoters of

> this good and great cause; but he had the honour to be one of the 'Fathers and Founders' of the society now called the London Missionary Society.

And again:

> He was nominated and chosen to be one of the first twenty-five directors of the society then formed and organised, and his name appears in the earliest list of contributors as having presented a donation of £100.

Every LMS missionary had to subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith.* Arminians were not allowed within its ranks. Proof of this is in the records of those missionaries who sailed in the Duff in 1787, who found during conversation that two of their number were Arminians. They were in consequence, after due discussion, excommunicated from the society on board the Duff. Long discussions followed with the two men, who were led to see that in this case truth was with the majority and on 29 January they were, by open vote of all the brethren, readmitted into 'the Church of Christ on board the Duff'. In my opinion the Calvinistic portion of the Methodist revival was gathered into Congregationalism in England. As Abel Stevens says in his *History of Methodism:* 'The Whitefield Methodists in England have mostly been absorbed by Congregationalism.'

The founding of the LMS stimulated interest in home missionary work, for in 1796 the Evangelical Society, which had been declining for a number of years, took measures to promote its efficiency. New subscribers were recruited and a resolution passed to provide money for County Associations in their gospel outreach work. It was from such County Associations that the Congregational Union was formed.

In 1799, Wilson took an active part in founding the Sabbath School Society, which promoted numerous schools in many places throughout England. It was at this time that the old method of catechising children began to lose its place of honour as a method of instructing the young. There came, where else of course, from America the Bible Class, as a better way than repeating catechisms. Unfortunately, people either fight for one or another method; for myself I would employ both methods. We should let the age, ability and situation of our children govern which method or combination of both be our guide in the matter. At this time came the British Schools movement, whereby Dissenters had their own day schools for children. Only a few years ago when visiting the Isle of Wight, I was interested to find that the (Methodist) Bible Christian Church had in the early nineteenth century founded such schools for their peoples' children. However, all such schools were surrendered to the state on Parliament passing the compulsory education act in the 1870s. The Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church did

not surrender their schools, and in retrospect I believe they were wiser than our Nonconformist forefathers.

Another event in 1799 was the founding of the Religious Tract Society. Its first meeting was held in St Paul's Coffee-house, in St Paul's churchyard, on Tuesday, 9 May 1799. Thomas Wilson was chairman. Over succeeding years they published tracts and books that were instrumental to the conversion of thousands and the blessing of Christians throughout the English speaking world. Wilson did not hold onto office for the sake of it but could resign, as he did, from the RTS when he found it continued strong and well supported. So in 1806 he withdrew from its committee.

The growth of the County Associations into more permanent church bodies took place over the years, so that by 1830 there was a call to bring them into a more identifiable whole. Wilson promised £1,000 if another £10,000 could be raised, so that a building of their own be erected in London. The sum was not raised and Wilson contributed initially £500. Many further contributions were made by him as he saw the importance of the project. A building in Blomfield Street, Finsbury Circus was taken, and an elegant room within intended as a music-hall was fitted up as a library. The building was called the Congregational Library and was opened on 9 May 1831. Even then it was found inadequate to the wants of a numerous and increasing denomination. A new site and building had to be found and this was in Farringdon Street, near Ludgate Circus, on the site of the old Sink Prison in which, during Elizabeth I's reign, were imprisoned Henry Barrows and John Greenwood, two of the early Puritan Independents. They were hanged in 1593 for denying the Queen's supremacy in church affairs. One cannot help wondering whether these two men would have joined a Congregational Union. It could well be that they would have regarded it as a moderate form of Presbyterianism. Some of us well remember the Memorial Hall, as it was named, with its fine library, halls and rooms. It was so named as a memorial to the ejected ministers of 1662. Today that building is gone and in its place stands an office block. The subsequent history of Congregationalism has been sad, as indeed for all other Protestant bodies. Modernism has turned Christianity into a philosophy and in consequence, congregations have dwindled and churches have closed, even as they did in the early 18th century and for the same reason. However, an event took place in April 1967, when delegates from a number of churches met simultaneously in Manchester and London and constituted an Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Later, they affirmed a Basis of Fellowship of which they asserted, 'drawn, as it is from Scripture, [it] is thus fully in line with the truths declared in the Savoy Declaration of 1658, the Declaration of Principles at the

formation of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1833, and with the original trust deeds of the vast majority of Congregational churches'. Without doubt, if Thomas Wilson had been alive today he would have been a prime mover of the new body who alone among the several modern Congregational groups hold to the three Rs of Ruin, Redemption and Regeneration.

What would Thomas Wilson say to us today? He would point us to the man who more than any other influenced his mind and thinking. He would point us to George Whitefield. Remember that as a child he had been taken by his parents to hear Whitefield preach in the Tabernacle.

There are those in this lecture hall (now called the Lloyd-Jones Hall) who can recall how as parents our children heard us over the years talk about Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, because his preaching changed our lives by teaching us the Scriptures. If he recommended a book hundreds bought a copy. So it was in Whitefield's day, perhaps more so. The Wilson family would often hear Whitefield preach during his lifetime. Both then and after he had died, his name and the work associated with him would be the daily conversation of the Wilson household. It was in this atmosphere that Thomas Wilson was raised. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1838 when Robert Philip's biography of George Whitefield was published, he said of the book 'I hope it will stir up our ministers to greater spirituality of mind, and more active exertions to win souls to Christ'.

Thomas Wilson gave much of his wealth for the cause of Christ, but he gave it prudently. He was wise in counsel. He was always active in the Lord's cause. He retired early in life in order to do full-time what otherwise would have been only spare time activities. His desire was to see a gospel church in every town and village in England. But since his day, the lights have gone out and the work of Whitefield and Wilson has been undone. Oh that the God of Thomas Wilson and George Whitefield would arise again in this land of England, that the perishing multitudes within these shires could hear the Gospel tidings of Ruin, Redemption and Regeneration through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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