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# D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES AND HIS READING OF CHURCH HISTORY

MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

**O**n a number of occasions D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave personal testimony to the rich benefits he derived from his reading of history, and especially church history. For example, in his book *The Sovereign Spirit* (published in the U.K. as *Prove All Things*) Lloyd-Jones states with regard to Paul's warning to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21):

In addition to Scripture we have exactly the same warning from the history of the Christian church — and you notice that I keep on putting these two things together. We must do so. The church is one. The church is the church of God, and essentially the same throughout the ages. There is an amazing continuity, and the principles taught in Scripture are worked out in the history of the Church. And because we are in the flesh, we are helped by examples and illustrations, hence the great value of history. I know of nothing next to the reading of the Scriptures themselves that has been of greater value to me in my own personal life and ministry than constant reading of the history of the church.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous references in this book, to take but one example, attest

to Lloyd-Jones' broad reading of church history, ranging from the second-century apologists<sup>2</sup> to the French prophets of the eighteenth century,<sup>3</sup> from the post-Nicene Church in the fourth century<sup>4</sup> to Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, however, was no antiquarian, as the points drawn from his many historical allusions indicate. In the above-mentioned book, the majority of Lloyd-Jones' historical references relate to later periods of church history. For instance, he draws heavily on the history of Irvingism, especially utilizing the experiences of Robert Baxter to illustrate what can occur when one fails to heed the biblical injunction to "try the spirits" (I John 4:1).<sup>6</sup> The tendency of the Quakers to divorce the Spirit and the Word provides Lloyd-Jones with examples illustrative of how such a tendency leads to faulty views regarding the Spirit and his work.<sup>7</sup> And closer to home, Lloyd-Jones shares a few incidents from the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, which contain salutary admonitions to Christians of today who are genuinely seeking to be led by the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, this wide reading of church history enabled Lloyd-Jones to draw not only practical inferences from specific historical events, but also to make telling contrasts and comparisons between different epochs. For instance, in the series of the sermons which Lloyd-Jones gave on the Sermon on the Mount he contrasts the spirituality of the nineteenth century with that of the preceding century. He notes that few of the public prayers of those used by God in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century are on record, whereas many of the prayers of the preachers on the following century have been recorded. Lloyd-Jones goes on to comment on what he sees as the major reason for this difference:<sup>9</sup>

I am not at all sure but that it was not just there that the change took place in the life of the Church, which has led to the present lack of spirituality and the present state of the Church in general. The Church became polished and polite and dignified, and the supposed worshippers were unconsciously occupied with themselves and forgetful that they were in communion with the living God.

Corroboration that Lloyd-Jones has correctly identified one of the strongest contrasts between the church in the eighteenth century and

that in the Victorian era is found in an observation made by W.S. Tyler (1810-1897) in the middle of the last century. Tyler was professor of Greek at Amherst College, Massachusetts, from 1836 to 1893, and a Congregational minister, whose sermons from the Amherst College pulpit "were remembered by generations of undergraduates because of their pointed applications and robust fervor."<sup>10</sup> Probably his most famous work was *Prayer for Colleges*, first published in 1854 and later reissued in a second edition in 1877. It is an essay calling for concerted prayer for an outpouring of the Spirit upon the college students of his day. Tyler regarded prayer as the weak point of the church of his day and in this essay he sought to bring his fellow Christians to a higher appreciation of the efficacy of prayer and a more vigorous exercise of it. Near the beginning of the book Tyler has cause to reflect on the spiritual state of the church and he makes the following observation:

The seven deacons of the church of the church of Jerusalem were all "men full of faith and the Holy Ghost." Where now is the church that is blessed with such a deaconry, or even such a ministry? Nay, too many churches now-a-days do not even aspire to the possession of such officers. They do not ask in reference to a minister even, "Is he a man of piety and prayer? Is he full of faith and the Holy Ghost?" but, "Is he a smart man? Is he a good speaker? Has he a fine voice and manner and person? Will he sell the pews,<sup>11</sup> and build up the society?" They cannot be expected to pray, certainly not in public; it is for this very purpose that they hire their minister. If they go to the prayer-meeting, it is only on condition that the minister shall do all the praying as well as all the talking. If they desire to see conversions in the house of God, they expect them to be the results of their pastor's preaching and not of their prayers. How unlike the lay-ministry, "the royal priesthood," that made up the primitive church, who, while permitted to remain at Jerusalem, prayed without ceasing, and when scattered by persecution, went every where preaching the word! Even the missionary concert has degenerated very much into the lecture-room for the communication of missionary intelligence, and the conversion of the world is to be accomplished by machinery, and money and men, rather than by the power of God sent down from heaven in answer to prayer.

Ministers themselves fall in with the current, and wear themselves out in the preparation of polished sermons, with too little prayer for the presence of that Spirit who alone can give power to a sermon, either in the composition or the delivery. Colleges and Theological Seminaries are strongly tempted to meet the popular demand with a corresponding supply, and bend their energies too exclusively to the education of accomplished scholars and eloquent orators for the pulpit, perchance for mere secular employments, while the heart, the seat of all life and power, is comparatively neglected. ...

We say these things in sorrow, not in anger, nor in the spirit of censoriousness. Croaking, like birds of evil omen, is our utter abhorrence. But we are painfully convinced of the truth and necessity of what we have said, therefore have we spoken. The house of God, the prayer-meeting, the closets, and the consciences of Christians, do they not all bear witness to a sad dereliction of duty in this respect? We need more money and more men, we need more activity and more benevolence, we need better teachers and better preachers; but we need nothing so much as a revival of the primitive spirit of faith and prayer in the churches. ... Unless Christians can be stirred up, and that speedily, to more earnest, constant and believing prayer for the church, the country and the world, and especially for our colleges; in which, as we shall now endeavor to show, the hopes of the church, the country and the world, all centre; worldliness and ungodliness will continue to come in like a flood, sweeping away the dearest interests of men for this life, and their brightest hopes for the next, till at length, in answer to the supplications of a more prayerful and believing age, the Spirit of God shall lift up a standard against them.<sup>12</sup>

This is quite a different picture from that which prevailed in the previous century, as a reading of the writings of such figures as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, John Newton and Samuel Pearce amply shows. Lloyd-Jones' contrast of these two eras, seemingly an off-the-cuff comment, was culled from an intensive reading of the period covered by both these eras.

Of course, there are some aspects of Lloyd-Jones' reading of church

history with which one might beg to differ. In *The Sovereign Spirit* Lloyd-Jones declares that the movement in the early church known as Montanism has been wrongly judged on many occasions. The Doctor is of the opinion that while Montanism did err in a number of areas, it roused opposition from the church because “the official church was tending to become institutional and the Montanists were concerned about life and power.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, another reading of such second and third century authors as Irenaeus (c.130-c.200), Hippolytus (c.170-c.236) or the anonymous author who penned *The Odes of Solomon* (c.120-150), none of whom were Montanists, could yield a more qualified judgement. For instance, the author who wrote *The Odes of Solomon*, an early Syriac Christian hymnbook, can testify to the effects of the Holy Spirit’s activity in his life:

*As the wings of doves over their nestlings,  
And the mouths of their nestlings towards their mouths,  
So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.*

*My heart continually refreshes itself and leaps for joy,  
Like the babe who leaps for joy in his mother’s womb.*

*I trusted, consequently I was at rest;  
Because trustful is He in whom I trusted.*<sup>14</sup>

Or one might consider Irenaeus’ powerful commentary on the Pauline description of the Spirit as a “down payment” or “earnest” (Ephesians 1:14):

If, therefore, at the present time, having the earnest, we cry, “Abba, Father,” what shall it be when, on rising again, we behold Him face to face; when all the members (of the Body of Christ) shall burst out into a continuous hymn of triumph, glorifying Him who raised them from the dead, and gave them the gift of eternal life? For if the earnest ... even now causes men to cry, “Abba, Father,” what shall the complete grace of the Spirit effect, which shall be given to men by God? It will render us like Him and (so) accomplish the Father’s will.<sup>15</sup>

One cannot read this text or that from *The Odes of Solomon* and not sense that these texts stem from a rich experience of the Spirit’s life-giving power.

Or consider Lloyd-Jones' references to the experiences of such authors as Thomas Goodwin, John Flavel and Jonathan Edwards as proof that his distinctive understanding of "the sealing of the Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13-14) has historical precedent.<sup>16</sup> While Goodwin's views certainly do agree with those of Lloyd-Jones, a careful reading of Flavel and Edwards in this regard reveals that the Doctor has misread these authors.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, such minor points of difference in historical interpretation should not blind us to the fact that Lloyd-Jones' recognition of the importance of church history and his judicious use of it makes him a good model for all who would find in the events of the past instruction for the church of today. **E**

**DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN** is Principal and Professor of Church History and Reformed Spirituality at Toronto Baptist Seminary and a Senior Fellow with The Andrew Fuller Centre for Reformed Evangelicalism.

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## ENDNOTES

1 *The Sovereign Spirit. Discerning His Gifts* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1985), 60.

2 *Sovereign Spirit*, 49-50.

3 *Sovereign Spirit*, 62.

4 *Sovereign Spirit*, 50.

5 *Sovereign Spirit*, 92-93.

6 *Sovereign Spirit*, 62-64, 78, 81-82, 88, 89, 96, 115-116.

7 *Sovereign Spirit*, 78-79, 92, 96, 109-110.

8 *Sovereign Spirit*, 83-86, 95.

9 *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co./Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971), 2:27.

10 George F. Whicher, "Tyler, William Seymour", *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), XIX, 99.

11 In the nineteenth century many churches required parishioners to pay pew-rents.

12 *Prayer for Colleges* (2ND ed.; Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1877), 54-57, *passim*.

13 *Sovereign Spirit*, 61.

14 *Ode 28.1-3* [trans. James Hamilton Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 108-109].

15 *Against Heresies* 5.8.1 [trans. Alexander Roberts and W.H. Rambaut in A. Cleveland Coxe, arr., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 533, alt.].

16 See especially *God's Ultimate Purpose. An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1-23* (1978 ed.; repr.

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Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 274-277.

17 Cf. Iain H. Murray, "Martyn Lloyd-Jones on the Baptism with the Holy Spirit," *The Banner of Truth*, 257 (February 1985), 12, 14-15.