

Eighteenth-Century Wellsprings of Spirituality

Michael A. G. Haykin reviews *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, by David Lyle Jeffrey*

In a letter which the Welsh evangelist Howel Harris wrote to George Whitefield in 1743, Harris gives his friend what can well be regarded as a classic description of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival:¹

The outpouring of the Blessed Spirit is now so plentiful and common, that I think it was our deliberate observation that not one sent by Him opens his mouth without some remarkable showers. He comes either as a Spirit of wisdom to enlighten the soul, to teach and build up, and set out the works of light and darkness, or else a Spirit of tenderness and love, sweetly melting the souls like the dew, and watering the graces; or as the Spirit of hot burning zeal, setting their hearts in a flame, so that their eyes sparkle with fire, love, and joy; or also such a Spirit of uncommon power that the heavens seem to be rent, and hell to tremble.

Without a doubt the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival is one of the greatest demonstrations of the Spirit's sovereign power in the history of the Church. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has been well served by numerous historical and biographical studies, as well as a number of reprintings of many of the writings from that period of refreshing. But what does occasion some surprise is that there have been relatively few collections of representative works. This recent edition by David Lyle Jeffrey, therefore, comes as a welcome addition to the literature on the revival. As a judicious selection of tracts, letters, sermons and hymns from such writers as Isaac Watts, John Wesley and his brother Charles, John Fletcher and John Newton, it provides a fine sampling of the spirituality of the revival. The sterling quality of much of what Jeffrey has included is well illustrated by the following extract from a letter by John Fletcher to a Henry Brooke, written on February 29, 1785:

With respect to the great pentecostal display of the Spirit's glory, I still look for it within and without; to look for it aright is the lesson I am learning. I am now led to be afraid of that in my nature which would choose pomp, show and visible glory. . . . It is not for us to know the times and seasons, the manner and mystical means of God's working, but only to hunger and thirst and lie passive before the great Potter. In short, I begin to be content to be a vessel of clay or of wood, so I may be emptied of self and filled with my God, my all (p. 385, 386).

Recent statements regarding the poverty stricken nature of evangelical spirituality highlight the need for such a collection as this at the present time. Consider, for instance, the reasons presented by the former American evangelical, Thomas Howard, brother-in-law of the martyr Jim Elliot, for his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1985. In an interview with John D. Woodbridge which appeared in *Christianity Today* Howard stated that one of the major reasons for his conversion was the 'poverty of authentic spirituality and meaningful worship' in the Protestant evangelical tradition.² In another article in the same

issue he cited 'the desperate, barren, parched nature of evangelical worship' as a reason for his entrance into the Roman fold.³ And in his book *Evangelical Is Not Enough* Howard urges evangelicals to look beyond the stream that flows out of the Reformation for wells of spirituality.⁴ One suspects that he has Roman Catholic authors of the Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation in mind. Probably very few evangelicals will actually heed Howard's admonition. Yet, there is little doubt that Howard has identified a genuine weakness in evangelicalism, though his solution to the problem is quite inadequate. A profile of contemporary evangelicalism, especially in North America, displays a serious lack of spiritual depth, both in doctrine and piety. Much of what is being digested in Christian circles is 'theological junk food': it tastes great when being consumed but provides no solid nourishment for the spirit! The real solution to this problem lies in regular feeding on the Scriptures and those works which are jam-packed with the meat of the Word. As W. B. Sprague once wrote of the latter:⁵

The world abounds with works that reflect the truths of the Bible in sunbeams, and that bring these truths in direct contact with the conscience and the heart. Such works, judiciously selected, it is desirable that every Christian should avail himself of, in the prosecution of his religious course; and in so doing, while the general tone of his spiritual life will be quickened, he will secure to himself a larger measure of that dependent, grateful, confiding spirit that loves to breathe out its offerings at the throne of the Heavenly grace.

And one of the first examples of such works is the literature which was produced in the crucible of revival in the 1700s and early 1800s. In providing a carefully selected cross-section of this literature, Jeffrey's book is an encouragement to tap into some of the richest and deepest veins of authentic Biblical spirituality.

Jeffrey has also provided a lengthy introduction and individual biographical sketches which set the revival in its historical context and assess its fruit. What is noteworthy is that Jeffrey sympathetically assesses the revival. As he writes:

Part of the encouragement we have in reading them (that is, the authors in the volume) comes in our recognition that the real worker of revival, then as now, is the Holy Spirit (p. x.).

Because the Holy Spirit is the real worker of revival, Jeffrey is not afraid to admit and discuss the weaknesses and failings of the men and women used by God in the revival. For instance, he mentions the 900 page defence by Martin Madan of 'Christian polygamy.' Madan was cautioned by the Countess of Huntingdon not to publish it, but he went ahead. And although Madan had exercised a significant revival ministry, the consequent controversy brought a serious curtailment of that ministry (pp. 16-18). As Jeffrey observes:

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Madan's life and . . . the life of many others who figure in these pages, reminds us that God is ever pouring out his Spirit upon the world by means of human vessels, and it is well that the final judgment of these vessels' worth will not be that of either contemporaries or historians (p. 20).

Understandably with a work this size there are a few problems beyond the odd typographical error. James II is wrongly described as the son of Charles II (p. 3). The hymn 'Come, Thou Almighty King' is attributed to Charles Wesley. While some older hymnals also make this attribution,⁶ recent scholarly opinion does not regard the hymn text to be from Wesley.⁷ Then, the inclusion of an index would have better facilitated the use of Jeffrey's book.

One final reflection stems from what has been an area of personal interest in the last few years, and is in no way intended as a criticism of Jeffrey's book. To a Baptist interested in eighteenth-century Baptist spirituality it is striking that no Baptist authors are included in this book. Although Jeffrey does note that a more complete collection of writings from this period would have to include something by the Calvinistic Baptist Abraham Booth (pp. 15-16). Now, it is true that most of what has been included in Jeffrey's collection is representative of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Baptist spirituality. Evangelical Baptists and paedobaptists of this period definitely shared a common spirituality.⁸ However, it is to be feared that some real gems have been overlooked because they lie hidden in Baptist authors who are now little read and consequently rarely considered when the spirituality of this period is under discussion. To take one example. Samuel Pearce (1766-1799), scarcely known today, was in his day, both within and without Baptist circles, well known for the depth of his spirituality. William Jay, the famous Independent preacher, could say of his preaching:⁹

When I have endeavoured to form an image of our Lord as a preacher, Pearce has oftener presented himself to my mind than any other I have been acquainted with: . . . his delivery was distinguished by mildness and tenderness, and a peculiar unction derived not only from his matter but his mind.

And referring to the last time that he saw Pearce alive, Jay has this comment:¹⁰ 'What a savour does communion with such a man leave upon the spirit!' David Bogue and James Bennett, in their history of the Dissenting interest in England, make similar comments:¹¹

While (Pearce's) benevolent heart burned with unquenchable ardour for the salvation of Britons and Hindoos, he displayed, in an eminent degree, the meekness and gentleness of the Saviour. If he preached, the most careless were attentive, the most prejudiced became favourable, and the coldest felt that, in spite of themselves, they began to kindle; but when he poured out the devotions of his heart in prayer the most devout were so elevated beyond their former heights, that they said, 'We scarcely ever seemed to pray before.'

Pearce had only one pastorate, serving as the pastor of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham from 1789 till his early death in 1799. He was also a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, and, as noted above in the quote from Bogue and Bennett, he proved to be an indefatigable worker on behalf of this mission. After his death, his close friend Andrew Fuller published, in the words of Jay, 'a noble and deserved Memorial of him.' These *Memoirs* contain a number of especially moving texts which well display Pearce's piety, and at the same time challenge today's Church to strive for a closer walk with God. For instance, the following passage comes from a

diary Pearce kept during the months of October and November, 1794. It was written on 31st October 1794.

I am encouraged to enter upon this day (which I set apart for supplicating God) by a recollection of his promises to those who seek him. If the sacred word be true, the servants of God can never seek his face in vain; and as I am conscious of my sincerity and earnest desire only to know his pleasure that I may perform it, I find a degree of confidence that I shall realize the fulfilment of the word on which he causeth me to hope.

Began the day with solemn prayer for the assistance of the Holy Spirit in my present exercise, that so I might enjoy the spirit and power of prayer, and have my personal religion improved, as well as my public steps directed

Read the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Felt a kind of placidity, but not much joy. On beginning the concluding prayer I had no strength to wrestle, nor power with God at all. I seemed as one desolate and forsaken. I prayed for myself, the Society, the missionaries, the converted Hindoos, the church in Cannon Street, my family, and ministry; but yet all was dullness, and I feared I had offended the Lord. I felt but little zeal for the mission, and was about to conclude with a lamentation over the hardness of my heart, when on a sudden it pleased God to smite the rock with the rod of his Spirit, and immediately the waters began to flow. Oh what a heavenly, glorious, melting power was it! My eyes, almost closed with weeping, hardly suffer me to write. I feel it over again. Oh what a view of the love of a crucified Redeemer did I enjoy! the attractions of his cross, how powerful! I was as a giant refreshed with new wine, as to my animation: like Mary at the Master's feet, weeping for tenderness of soul; like a little child, for submission to my heavenly Father's will; and like Paul, for a victory over all self-love, and creature love, and fear of man, when these things stand in the way of my duty. The interest that Christ took in the redemption of the heathen, the situation of our brethren in Bengal, the worth of the soul, and the plain command of Jesus Christ, together with an irresistible drawing of soul, which by far exceeded any thing I ever felt before, and is impossible to be described to or conceived of by those who have never experienced it — all compelled me to vow that I would, by his leave, serve him among the heathen. The Bible lying open before me (upon my knees) many passages caught my eye, and confirmed the purposes of my heart. If ever in my life I knew anything of the influence of the Holy Spirit, I did at this time. I was swallowed up in God. Hunger, fulness, cold, heat, friends, and enemies, all seemed nothing before God. I was in a new world. All was delightful; for Christ was all, and in all. Many times I concluded prayer, but, when rising from my knees, communion with God was so desirable that I was sweetly drawn to it again, till my animal strength was almost exhausted. Then I thought it would be pleasure to burn for God!

And now while I write such a heavenly sweetness fills my soul that no exterior circumstances can remove it; and I do uniformly feel that the more I am thus, the more I pant for the service of my blessed Jesus among the heathen. Yes, my dear, my dying Lord, I am thine, thy servant.¹²

The communion with God so evident in this passage would sustain Pearce in his final days. As he wrote to his wife Sarah on 17 May 1799, only a few months before his death:¹³

What shall I say to you of the goodness of my God & Saviour to my wretched heart. O my dear Sarah he has filled it with his love and ever since last Lord's Day in particular has so constantly indulged me with his presence that I have been able to 'glory in tribulation.'

Shortly after Pearce's death, John Newton, whom Jeffrey sees as a good example of the way that eighteenth-century English spirituality impacted its turbulent world (p.35-39), wrote to
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CHRISTIANITY IN WALES

' . . . Home again to Wales': the reflections of a visitor on the religion and culture of Wales 1986-87

Gwyn Walters

Aberystwyth, Wales:

Gwasg Cambria on behalf of the Author, 1987, paperback, ISBN 0 900439 39 4

Professor Walters has given us in popular form a practical assessment of contemporary preaching in Wales. The author is well qualified for the work, being not only knowledgeable about Wales but also Professor of Homiletics at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I contains the background to the project, autobiographical details and an account of the Welsh cultural and religious scene. All the relevant material here could have been contained in the preface. In Part II he gives us an analysis of the preaching of Wales in the eighties. His critical frame of reference for analysing the sermons and preachers is set out and nine sermons (out of a hundred or so) are discussed in detail. Part III deals with activity alongside preaching, describing four church examples. There then follows his conclusions, a questionnaire for the minister and suggestions for renewal under the headings, prayer and action.

With regard to expression, the book is somewhat marred by sentimentality. As a result it lacks the hoped-for objectivity. Surprisingly, considering the author's communicating skills, he has allowed his expatriate sentiment to obscure the main subject matter. Presumably, this style was adopted as an aid to readability and popular appeal. If so, the effect is, unfortunately, opposite to that intended. It seems that the author, who left Wales in 1956, has not fully appreciated the changes undergone since 1962 nor the present cultural realities.

More serious matters may be raised concerning the content of the book. For instance, the author's attitude towards the nonconformist denominations is an aspect which can befuddle the situation for the reader. Thus he deals with the evangelical churches and the denominational as if there were only a difference in degree; whereas there is sadly too often a difference in kind. This confusion has caused one Welsh reviewer to conclude that we are all evangelical now.

It is on this issue that one detects the lack of a clear, objective theological stance; and the author's seeming failure to address himself to the questions: what is a Church? what is a Christian? When one considers the author's criticism of the denominational situation, for example the lack of the gift of public prayer, the unwillingness to bear testimony to God's renewing grace, the deadening traditionalism, the lack of any significant giving, one fears that the glory has departed from many congregations, yet Dr Walters never seems to consider this possibility. Neither does he mention the enormous denominational decline over recent decades. While other factors obtrude, there can be no doubt that the cause of this decline bears a relation to the weaknesses delineated above and amounts to a massive departure from biblically based Christianity.

Which brings one to the, alas, valid criticism of evangelical preachers and churches. Here he found the sermons too long and the delivery wooden, without appeal to the whole man. He also discerned a stifling conservatism abetted by paralysing negativism. More ominously, he perceived a tendency to burden and grieve the people with the law, thereby curtailing the preaching of grace in its fulness. We would do well to take some extensive stock-taking on these points, especially in the light of our difficulty in communicating the Gospel to this needy generation.

The book in some aspects represents a missed opportunity, but it has nevertheless a wealth of material which is commendable and practical. Had the author confined himself to his research into the contemporary preaching and had he presented his evidence in a systematically balanced way, with a fuller analysis of the sermons and a pointed use of examples under each of the divisions of his helpful analytical framework, then it would have been a less amorphous and a more satisfactory work. However, one suspects that Gwyn Walters has not shared all his findings with us. We look forward to a more detailed treatment in the future. For now he deserves our gratitude and respect for confronting us with our task.

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Pearce's widow. Newton had never met Sarah Pearce, but his deep admiration of her husband constrained him to write and seek to console her. Near the end of his letter he reflects on what has happened to her husband. He has 'exchanged Earth for Heaven, and a bed of languishing for a seat near the Throne.'¹⁴ The spirituality of this Baptist pastor, and other Baptist authors like him, needs to be recovered, for it is indeed a good tonic for our superficial times.

Notes

1. Cited Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, p. 243.
2. 'Is Evangelical Faith Enough?', *Christianity Today*, 29, No. 8, May 17, 1985, 58.
3. 'Why Did Thomas Howard Become a Roman Catholic?', *Christianity Today*, 29, No 8, May 17, 1985, 50.
4. *Evangelical Is Not Enough*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, pp. 58-59. On pp. 10-11 Howard mentions that he was nourished as a young Christian on the missionary spirituality of men such as William Carey, Henry Martyn and Hudson Taylor.
5. 'Introductory Essay on Devotion' in D. A. Harsha, selected and ed., *The Christian's Present for all Seasons: containing Devotional Thoughts of Eminent Divines, from Joseph Hall to William Jay*, American Tract Society, (1867), p. xiii.
6. See, for instance, *The Canadian Baptist Hymnal*, Baptist Book and Tract Society, 1896, p. 55. The recent hymnal entitled *Grace Hymns*, Grace Publications Trust (n. d.), assigns this hymn to Martin Madan.
7. See the discussion by Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, Kregel Publications, 1982, p. 49-50.
8. See the illuminating article by Paul Helm on this fact, 'The Differences Between Us', *The Banner of Truth*, 94-95, July-August 1971, 33-37.
9. *The Autobiography of the Rev William Jay*, George Redford and John Angell James (eds), 2nd. ed.; Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1855, p. 374.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
11. *The History of the Dissenters*, 2nd. ed.; Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1833, II, 653.
12. *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce, M.A. (The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller)*, revised Joseph Belcher, American Baptist Publication Society, 1845, III, 390-391.
13. Samuel Pearce, Letter to Sarah Pearce, 17 May 1799 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).
14. John Newton, Letter to Sarah Pearce, 4 November 1799 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).