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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 1 • WINTER 1998

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No history ought to receive so much of our attention as the past and present history of the church of Christ. The rise and fall of worldly empires are events of comparatively small importance in the sight of God.

—J. C. RYLE

We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus' claims are true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians.

—FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

## A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*Jim Eliff*

### *GREAT PREACHERS OF WALES*

Owen Jones

Clonmel, Ireland: Tentmaker Publications (1885, reprint 1995).

540 pages, cloth, \$30.00.

(Available from Reformation & Revival Ministries for \$30.00, U.S. funds only, by calling, toll free within the United States, 1-888-276-1044. Canada and others call (630) 893-6404.)

I found this reprint by Tentmaker Publications on a recent trip to Wales, along with several other quality books from this publisher. I contacted the Tentmakers' director and learned that several more books can be expected in the future. Other reprints by Tentmaker include Alex Auld's *Life of John Kennedy* and Hugh Hughes' *Life of Howell Harris*. (These volumes can be purchased from Reformation & Revival Ministries in the United States.) Tentmaker Publications profits help Irish ministers since most evangelical churches in Ireland are small and cannot fully support their ministers.

Unfortunately, the publisher has not included any biographical information about the author. Owen Jones' intention was to write an additional book on other Welsh preachers of note. I was unable to find any other book written by Jones on the subject of revival, and assume that his

intention was never fulfilled. I also assume from the author's name and the Welsh language source material that the author is Welsh by birth.

Jones surveys seven of Wales' most prominent preachers, all of whom were instruments of God during seasons of revival. Daniel Rowlands, Robert Roberts, Christmas Evans, John Elias, William Williams (Wern), Henry Rees, and John Jones are well-known and their ministries much admired. These men are recognized for their spirituality and for their immensely successful preaching; it is this preaching that the author notes and analyzes.

Jones traces the origin of convictional Welsh preaching to eighteenth-century revivals. Both Howell Harris and Daniel Rowlands were born in 1735, the same year that George Whitefield joined the Oxford Holy Club, and a precursor revival to the American awakening broke out in Jonathan Edwards' Northampton, Massachusetts, church. Proper signification is given to the underlying prayer and conviction of these men. But there was something different in view also—the Welsh fire. That imagination and dramatic power found in the Welsh temperament was used by God to stir the province of Wales time and time again. It was Dr. Lyman Beecher who first called preaching "logic on fire." He could not have described the best of Welsh preaching in any more accurate terms.

This emotive and doctrinal sermonizing changed Wales, but it was not mere ability that induced those changes.

When we see a man falling down dead, and hear a shot, and see the mark of the bullet, we have no difficulty in finding the cause of death. So when we see this vast and mighty change in the Welsh people, and find that the only element of difference between what is now and what was before, is the great fact that the Bible is taught and the Gospel

preached, the logic of the human breast soon finds the cause.<sup>1</sup>

Only the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit on these preachers could make such a difference.

The first revival character, Daniel Rowlands, is in my estimation the most notable of the figures addressed. Born in 1713, his father was the unconverted parson of Llangeitho. Rowlands eventually became the curate to his unregenerate brother, John, in the same church. He began, for effect, to imitate the law preaching of a popular neighboring pastor he envied, but was unconverted until he heard the educator and gospeler Griffith Jones.

The preaching of Rowlands continued with even more feeling on the themes of the terrors of God, but with a difference. Soon everyone knew of the changes in the preacher. "The great bursts of feeling to which the preacher was now subject told intensely upon the hearers."<sup>2</sup> By 1737 Rowlands was preaching outside his own parish. Gradually the tone of his preaching changed. "His preaching became now as marked for its sweetness and attractiveness as it was before for its severity and awfulness . . . A great revival followed."<sup>3</sup>

It was while Rowlands was publicly reading the phrase, "By Thine agony and bloody sweat," that the Spirit came. Scores fell under the power of the Word. Rowland was eventually expelled from the Church of England. He was instrumental in the beginnings of the Calvinistic Methodist denomination. Jones recounts interesting information on the Society meetings and the formation of that denomination. Revivals came several times to Llangeitho where Rowlands ministered for fifty years. Jones notes that "the whole of that time it was accompanied with the special influences of the Spirit of God."<sup>4</sup> Once a year he made a tour throughout the entire country. "His words did fly like darts."<sup>5</sup>

Christmas Evans, born on Christmas Day, 1766, provides one of the most interesting of studies by the author. This one-eyed preacher came out of a wicked past to serve God in a magnificent way from his home base of Anglesey. He embraced Sandemanianism during his ministry, but later rejected it, which was the only serious blight on his useful life. He articulated his views of limited atonement through the written page in two books titled *Redemption Within the Circle of Election* and *Particular Redemption*. After a period of spiritual failure, Evans wrote out his "Solemn Covenant" and initialed each part, which became a model of self disciplinary action. Some of Evans' sermons are included, the most famous of which was his "Graveyard Sermon," a message often requested in his travels. "His 'face is language, his intonation music, and his action passion'." Jones notes his strong reasoning powers and his force of logic, coupled with the unction of the Holy Spirit, and great imaginative expression as the major attributes of his preaching.

More space is given to Henry Rees than any of the other figures. The depth of spirituality of all of these leaders is noteworthy. One contemporary said of Rees:

In one thing he transcended every one I have been acquainted with—that is, as far as I have had opportunities of observing—in the persistent absorption of his mind by things spiritual and eternal. Like Enoch, he "walked with God." Religion had taken full possession of his soul; and he seemed to live at all times not only under its influence, but also in actual and immediate communion with its realities.<sup>7</sup>

A deacon's wife who watched over Rees during a ten-year period said that she never entered his room without seeing the print of elbows on the bed where he had been praying. A certain pew in the church was said to be often

found wet with tears from Rees' prayer times.

Rees had been greatly affected by Puritan John Owen's *The Mortification of Sin* and *The Indwelling of Sin in Believers*. This understanding aided him in searching the human heart in his preaching. Rev. Dr. Hughes of Liverpool said, "If we are not mistaken, it was under his ministry we saw the greatest flow of tears, and such tears!"<sup>8</sup> His close and searching preaching, if not as animated as others, produced great effects on the people. The entourage at his funeral testifies to just how beloved he was.

... there were eight medical men, sixty-five ministers and preachers, three abreast; seventy deacons, four abreast; two hundred singers, six abreast; six thousand men and women, six abreast, trending slowly on the road from Talsarn to Llanllyfni, singing on the way some of the old Welsh tunes . . . .

The book is a pleasing presentation of several great Welsh preachers. It reads not as a scholarly, critical account of seven preachers, but as an adoring and unblushing survey. However, I find Welsh preaching so appealing that I can sympathize with Jones' raving. These were great men in the history of the church. As a source for some of the best stories of Welsh preaching, either for inspiration or for illustrative material, the book is quite useful.

I am not one who generally enjoys reading sermons, especially sketches of sermons (with the exception of those by puritans). There are some of those in the book. They should be there, because it is a book on great preachers, but most of them are the kind you want to breeze through. I find it difficult getting into the spirit of them.

What does stand out? I found the following thoughts invigorating, even if already in my arsenal of ideas. First, God blesses preaching. He told us He would; here we see that He does. These men were consumed with preaching.

They passionately, untiringly spent themselves for the gospel. This is true of everyone presented in the book. In fact, this abandonment to the Savior and the task is the hallmark of all revival preachers of note. I am personally challenged by that. The commitment to the responsibility of preaching was not only their obsession for a lifetime, but was their focus in the immediate. Long walks through the hills of Wales and nights in travailing prayer before preaching were characteristics of their preparation. Preaching was life to them; it was worth whatever price was necessary.

Second, I was struck again with the accessibility of the preachers to the public through the quarterly Association meetings of the Welsh Calvinistic Church. Several churches from a region gathered for these days, though it was not unusual for treks of many miles to be made by interested people. These meetings, principally set up for preaching, were often the scene of revival. They also provided the context for ministers to meet together for discussion, decisions, and prayer. When large crowds were involved and the weather permitted, the preaching was done outside. When the rains pelted and the cold winds blew, preachers were assigned, usually two per location, according to the various church buildings in the town. This thought captured my attention: We must arrange such times for extensive and concentrated preaching of the Word. The accumulative effect of this arrangement is potentially powerful, even if not in a season of revival. Richard Owen Roberts makes the point that revivals of the Old Testament often happened when the people were gathered for the purpose of hearing God and repenting of sin. I believe that such a setting is useful in our day. I know that there are such meetings, of a sort. But there are not many whose focus is just preaching and simple, unadorned hymn singing with sincere prayer. Most of such gatherings in our day are glued by entertain-

ment and what could hardly be called biblical and searching preaching of the Word. I think this impression of the need for extended times of preaching will shape some of my thoughts about conferences in the future.

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. Owen Jones, *Great Preachers of Wales* (Clonmel, Ireland: Tentmakers, 1885, reprint 1995), 18.
2. *Ibid.*, 31.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 70, from Morgan's *Ministerial Records: Daniel Rowlands*, p. 120.
6. *Ibid.*, 186 as quoted from *Memoirs of Christmas Evans* (London: 1847), 166.
7. *Ibid.*, 365. See Cofiant J. Jones, p. 927.
8. *Ibid.*, 423.
9. *Ibid.*, 482.