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*The Nature of Christian Experience:
The Great Awakening in Wales*



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From the earliest days of the great revival in Wales in the eighteenth century, comparisons were made with the Great Awakening in New England. Jonathan Edwards' *Narrative of Surprising Conversions* had appeared in England in 1737, and a copy of it was being shared by the Welsh leaders, Daniel Rowland and Howel Harris, in the following year. They were joined in their appreciation of Edwards by their fellow worker, William Williams, who wrote in 1745 of Edwards' *Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, that it was the "best book I have seen to that purpose, it gave me more light in some things."¹ As the revival progressed, Rowland was to be the preacher, Harris the organizer, and Williams the writer, along with many others whom God used at the time. Through their joint labors, under the blessing of God, the work prospered by the careful application of biblical principles with regard to its spread and consolidation. One of their chief concerns was to examine, monitor, and promote the experiences of those who professed faith in Christ. In this respect the work of Edwards assisted them greatly.

Few would deny that a definition of genuine Christian experience, and of the means of its solid nature, is important. In revival, the task becomes even more necessary and urgent, for although its essential nature is always the same, with vast

numbers under religious impressions and the Satanic counterfeit inevitably rampant, such times of extraordinary spiritual activity demand immediate attention and acute biblical proficiency. In our day, too, the matter has priority, since there is much confusion in the midst of contemporary psychological, psychosomatic, and quasi-religious phenomena. While biblical standards allow *variety* in true Christian experience, they do not concede *validity* to all spiritual responses, however Christian the context may be. Consequently, a study of the provision made by the leaders of the Great Awakening in their day may also be salutary and profitable in ours.

In Wales it was William Williams who excelled in the matter of providing spiritual counsel. Let me introduce him to you. He is known chiefly as a hymnwriter, and his hymn, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," is sung all over the world. Born in 1717 and converted at the age of 21 under the open-air preaching of Howel Harris, he was ordained a clergyman in 1740. Three years later his revival activities brought upon him the opposition of the Anglican Church authorities, and he joined the emerging Welsh Calvinistic Methodist movement. From this time until his death in 1791 he was engaged in an itinerant preaching and counseling ministry. He wrote mainly in Welsh, the first collection of hymns, *Alleluja*, appearing in 1744. His other literary efforts began in 1756, and altogether his output totaled some ninety publications. Their excellence lies in a vigorous application of biblical principles, combined with vivid imagery and familiar illustration.

It may be useful, first of all, to outline the sources of Williams' material. His teaching is firmly set within a biblical framework. He worked from the premise that the Bible was "the charter which safeguards all the principles of faith." His theology was in the Reformed tradition of Calvin, and he highly treasured Puritan authors. Toward the end of his life he acknowledged his debt to Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, John Gill, Walter Marshall, James Hervey, and James Ussher. Others, too, influenced him greatly, particularly John Bunyan and John Milton, and among Williams' contemporaries, Jonathan Edwards in America and Ebenezer and Ralph

Erskine in Scotland. At the same time (he was 73 years old), he expressed his conviction:

... that true religion consists of three parts: first, true light respecting the plan of salvation . . . [second], being in intimate fellowship with God in all our dealings with the world, and in all the exercises and ordinances of religion . . . the third part . . . life and conduct, such as would reveal to the ungodly that there is a great difference between us and them.

These sentiments were written in a letter in 1791, just before Williams died, and he was also able to report that "a great revival has taken place in many parts of our country—from 500-600, to my knowledge, have been added to the number of those who profess religion, during the last two years."² Here was another reason why Williams wrote so convincingly about Christian experience: He had himself witnessed several distinct periods of revival. They numbered five at least: 1738, 1742-43, 1762, 1781, and 1790, providing him with vast insight and experience into the ways of God with his people. Careful and constant supervision of the "societies," or "experience meetings," which emerged as a result of these revivals, and which were so characteristic of Methodism, further enriched his discernment and skill.

The societies deserve special mention. They were times of teaching, fellowship, and discipline for the converts of revival. They met perhaps twice a week, sometimes oftener, for mutual encouragement and edification. One person would lead, usually known as the "steward" or "exhorter," and there was time for biblical exposition, hymn singing, the sharing of experiences, and prayer. Their pattern and guidelines developed gradually, with input from pre-revival sources as well as the leaders themselves, like George Whitefield, Rowland, Harris, and Williams.³ As for scriptural precedent for them, appeal was made to such passages as Malachi 3:16, and Hebrews 3:13 and 10:25. Their purpose, too, was given biblical framework:

... to provoke love and good deeds, Hebrews 10:24; to prevent hardness of heart and backsliding, I Corinthians 3:1-3; to be more aware of Satan's wiles, the heart's deceitfulness, the work and progress of grace in the soul, 2 Corinthians 11:14; 1 Peter 3:8; to enlighten in the Word of God, and build one another up in the faith; to forestall strife and lovelessness, I Timothy 6:4; to watch over and bear one another's burdens, Galatians 6:2; to relate what God has done in our souls, for the glory of God, as David did, Psalm 66:16; to strengthen each other against the flesh, the world, and the devil, with prayer and the sharing of lessons learnt since the last meeting.⁴

The whole exercise was intended to be honest in its heart-searching (2 Corinthians 13:5), prudent in its confession of faults (James 5:16), humble in receiving admonition (Hebrews 13:22), and charitable in excommunication (Matthew 18:15-17). Above all, true believers were encouraged in personal godliness and everyday living worthy of the gospel they professed.

Williams and the other leaders were under no illusion as to the fact that any great work of God is mixed in its outcome. This is particularly true in the initial experience of those who find themselves in a time of revival. The parables of Matthew 13 confirm this: The sower found some soils responsive at first; the enemy sowed tares among the wheat, to be discovered only later; the gospel net draws in bad fish as well as good. Apart from the possibility of counterfeit in the matter of conversion, there may be mixture in genuine Christian experience. Williams puts it like this:

It is no wonder that good and bad, wheat and tares, grace and nature, are mixed in churches where God makes His face to shine, since, (1) Satan does his best to bring an evil report upon the work of God. The devil is a subtle spirit, understanding the passions and emotions of the soul, the connection between flesh and spirit, the workings of grace and corruption, as well as the strongest influences and most appropriate enticements with regard to them. (2) . . . When the breezes of conviction or consolation come like rain upon the truly godly, the noise of wind

comes to hypocrites as well, stirring their natural passions somewhat; and then they are like a ship driven before the wind, without ballast, under full sail, and in danger of being wrecked by rocks, or blown into some irrelevant backwater. (3) Lastly, when the soul's passions have been stirred in the truly godly, the natural passions take too great a part, perhaps, in the work, taking the spiritual man's food from his table, and in this way sometimes making the Lord to depart.⁵

This being granted, the Methodist practice was to introduce converts to the society meeting as probationers, "on trial" for an initial period. Full membership was delayed until there were evidences of changed life and a corresponding growth in knowledge and grace. "All the members have experienced so much of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts," says an exhorter of one society, "that they are persuaded their sins are forgiven and their iniquities covered. I believe their experiences are sound and right, because their lives are answerable thereto." "The Lord has many dear children in this society; their grace may easily be discerned by its effects and fruits," is in the report of another. At other times, the society leader might not have been so satisfied, as the following extract shows: "Some who are under examination are left on trial for some time—I don't see it right to receive any immediately, except their experiences be very clear."⁶

So what did Williams and the Methodists regard as the right criteria by which the integrity of conversion to Christ was to be measured? The answer may be discovered by considering this submission to the leaders from one of the "exhorters":

These two bands [societies] can't give a very full and plain account of their conversion; first, how they were convinced of their lost and damned state by nature in the First Adam, and also how they were justified by grace in the Second; and how all their happiness lies entirely in Him; they find much sweetness in conversing with Jesus in His ordinances; some of them walk in sweet liberty, and are filled with much holy fear; but there are

some much questioned by the brethren; two of them say they believe, but can give no account how or which way they came to believe, or what effect their faith works upon their souls, or what fruits it brings forth. One or two more in much darkness; may the Lord deliver us from the proud, selfish spirits that will neither be reprov'd nor directed.⁷

Such statements presuppose two things. First, a competence in the leader to examine and assess Christian experience; and second, the ability in the convert to articulate it. The Methodists regularly provided guidance to the first, and patient encouragement toward the second. Even so, for the "exhorters" it was a solemn responsibility, as one of them, newly appointed to the task, confessed:

... how could I presume to stand as a scale to weigh souls, an infant in experience [myself]? If something happened amiss in expounding [the Scriptures], it would not (I thought) be so much a detriment to a soul, as to discern falsely between flesh and spirit, and miss to distinguish aright between true self love.⁸

What the Methodists looked for in the converts was not so much fluent expression as openness and willingness to be examined. Williams was particularly fond of the word "simple" for such an attitude. To be sure, the converts were naive and immature, that was to be expected. But the "simplicity" which Williams talks about conveys a spiritual quality, that of honesty, sincerity, and humility in dealing with God and one another. Thus, phrases like these abound in the reports concerning them: "simple, tender, honest, easy to deal with"; "they grow in several graces, especially in simplicity, humility, and longings for the Lord"; "here are others that are not gone so far in their progress, but are under some doubts and fears, yet very simple and willing to be taught."⁹ One of Williams' scriptural, if fictional, characters in *The Three Men From Sodom and Egypt*, "the most exact portrait that I know of a Christian after the fashion of the New Testament," epitomizes that

simplicity, because "he was the same within as without," without duplicity or deceit.¹⁰ Such were the features of a genuine convert. Clearer definition, however, needed to follow.

Perhaps the starting issues to be settled for most was the place of feelings in Christian experience and the nature of faith. Powerful impressions and great excitement are prominent features of every revival, but while the transforming, sanctifying effects of revival remain, the heightened emotional activity usually subsides. All too often, the ravages of mass hysteria and nervous emotionalism, due to an exploitation by Satan of human frailty and gullibility, leave people in a disillusioned and dangerous state. Nevertheless, the alternative to emotionalism and hysteria is not no emotion at all, but sanctified emotion, emotion under the control of the Holy Spirit, soberly enlightened by the mind, and practically translated into action by the will. After all, this is the way God made us. How necessary, then, to have its place rightly acknowledged and defined.

Williams has a remarkable and highly significant passage in one of his works dealing with revival, where he describes the experience of a young woman on hearing the gospel preached with power:

At such time my memory is more alert, and innumerable Scriptures flood my mind, all of this one strain-praising God for His free grace. My senses are sharpened; I understand the things of God in clearer light; my reason and emotions are so disciplined, that I am careful not to say or do anything which would cause my brethren to stumble, or the ungodly to blaspheme.¹¹

From another of Williams' works we are told how the opposite happened to Eve in the Garden of Eden, when sin entered the world:

Her understanding was darkened, her memory deadened, her conscience fell asleep, all her emotions changed their place; new objects filled her mind, and the faculties of her soul became altogether unruly, so that not one kept its proper place;

the last became first; the most feeble and tender became dominant . . . understanding, reason, and conscience were enslaved in a dark dungeon without any light. Fear replaced confidence, flesh replaced spirit, and love for the creature replaced love for the Creator.¹²

The reinstatement of the soul's faculties, then, is the primary and prominent result of regeneration. From this stems progress in the Christian life, as the understanding, will, and emotions are restored to their rightful place. It was for this reason that Williams' first collection of hymns was written, as he affirms in a Preface to its second edition:

When you consider the devil's diligence and subtlety to entice and lead your thoughts secretly away from God and eternal things, to earthly and perishable things; and you know that not only is fervent prayer to God an excellent remedy for this, but also among many other things it is necessary to fix in your memory and thoughts the Scriptures (which are in God's hands the Sword of the Spirit against the wiles of the devil); to help you in this, I have written for you some hymns, composed as near as possible to the sound and language of the Scriptures, so that in song they might come more easily to mind, and be more effective in working on your affections.

Truly, regeneration is a new beginning, but it is only a beginning. The society leaders complained from time to time about young Christians relying on their feelings:

They are but young in grace, and so had rather have a little feelings and fine frames, most commonly, than feed by faith on the great things of God. . . . Because their faith is weak, they lose, in part, the exercise of it, etc. when they lose their feelings and frames.¹³

Believing souls had to be weaned from dependence on feelings to the exercise of faith.

From the commencement of their attendance at a society,

converts were made aware that Christian faith resided in the heart. As such it affected the whole personality, as Williams insisted on more than one occasion:

With the heart man believes to salvation. Although a man has some body of divinity, unless those principles which he has believed in his head have taken root in his heart so that he loves God's Son, rejoices in His salvation, denies himself, takes up his cross, follows the Lamb through all manner of reproach, his knowledge only makes him boast. He is blind and cannot see far. He has never felt the authority of God's grace within, and how can such a person love the Savior of the world?¹⁴

Faith, then, is a vital, active, dynamic, and God-given gift, working from within, capable of growth, and at work in the believer's everyday life. Here is Williams again, this time in rhyme, in one of his long poems in Welsh, "Theomemphus":

*The faith that God has planted, a principle divine,
A witness by its nature which cannot hence decline;
It firmly grasps what's living, believes the Blood
that's shed
Shall never lose its power, is living and not dead.*¹⁵

With this understanding of faith, the Methodists, when true to themselves, had an insatiable thirst for spiritual progress. They rejoiced to learn of some young Christians that, although they were but babes, "yet they are in a growing state." Others again were "very solid and seem to grow in some degree in the Lord; and are coming up out of the world and creatures, unbelief and carnal reason, toward Mount Zion, being made more and more simply daily." Ordinary people they might have been in terms of worldly goods and position, but their spirituality was quite otherwise: "longing for more enjoyment of God"; "longs to walk with Him continually"; "longs to be more holy"; "longs for Christ."¹⁶ Such are the evidences of faith in exercise.

Accounts of the societies sometimes listed the members' names and gave an indication of their spiritual state. The two states most frequently described are "Justified" and "Under the Law," sometimes amplified to "Justified and in liberty" and "under bondage." The distinction was made in order to distinguish those who were still seeking salvation, from those who rejoiced in God's forgiveness and acceptance in Christ. The former were still under a sense of sin in its guilt, power, and penalty as revealed by the Law in all its spirituality and terror, and yet looking to their own efforts to justify them before God. The liberty of the latter stemmed from the imputation of Christ's righteousness by grace and received through faith.¹⁷ Thus, in Williams' classic manual for the societies, *The Experience Meeting*, some of the questions to be asked of new converts were these:

Do you hate, despise and loathe your own works, your vows, your almsgiving, or any other good in yourself, as a means of your justification, craving with all your heart to be made righteous in His righteousness—regarding this righteousness as the only fountain which is able to cleanse you from all uncleanness? Have you seen your need of faith more than of any other grace, knowing that faith is the hand that receives this eternal righteousness . . . and that a faith worked by man will not do, but only that which is the work of the Holy Spirit?¹⁸

This distinction helped to clarify for the converts the difference between their state or standing before God (as acquitted, freed, accepted), and their real condition (because of indwelling sin and corruption) as those in whom God's grace had still much to do. Justification and sanctification are always found together in believers, but they are to be distinguished in their meaning and operation.

It followed, therefore, that the societies were the Methodist training ground for self-knowledge and the pursuit of godliness. "They are but young soldiers as yet," reports an exhorter of one society, "who know but little of themselves and of their spiritual enemies." The state of another society

reflects the labor and skill required to nurture such groups:

They see much of the deceitfulness of their own hearts, and at the same time can (by faith) make an application of the fullness that is in Jesus Christ to their own souls. In whom (though they grieve and mourn at the sight of their own vileness) they rejoice in hope of a speedy deliverance from the body and being of sin and iniquity. In the meantime their whole care and continual cry is to die more and more to themselves, that they may live to God! They are also fully assured through grace that all things work together for good . . . There are others very dead and lukewarm, and one or two, I fear, upon the brink of apostasy, without some speedy help or remedy. O may the Lord hasten and send it out of the treasures of His grace and mercy.¹⁹

The twin guiding principles for society leaders in dealing with “young soldiers” were simple enough: “No one in the person of a seeker, and with a true desire for eternal life, should be shut out, however faint may be the revelations and visitations of God to him,” was one. The other was this: “You must not expect as much of the light of faith and assurance in those newly received into membership as in those already in.” They were based on considerations of compassion as well as of wisdom.²⁰

There was to be growth in knowledge as well as grace. This included an increasingly intimate acquaintance with Christ in his offices as Prophet, Priest, and King. This was familiar territory in terms of Reformed theology, and it is clear that in the societies it was intended as a perpetual reminder to keep the gaze of the believing soul on Christ. “Our Savior is there,” exclaims one exhorter, “getting Himself the victory in many of their hearts, over the world and self and corruption, and is become Prophet and Priest unto some of them; and I trust He will be their King shortly.” Of a young woman another claimed that she “has found Jesus to be her priest and prophet, and longs to find Him as her King to reign in her soul.”²¹ The inference is clear from such reports: for the Methodists, theology was to be translated into personal experience.

It was with a keen sense of the kingship of Christ that the Methodists faced everyday life. He ruled their standards, values and priorities by his Word, and controlled their circumstances by his reign. It was reflected in the structured nature of their societies: “they are growing into a more strict discipline,” “they are set in the best order,” are familiar phrases. Trials could be inward or outward, “many struggles with sin,” “under many clouds,” but all were interwoven by the Lord to fulfill his purpose of growth in grace and enjoyment of glory. “Some . . . find that in trials and afflictions many disguised corruptions are revealed, graces exercised and proved, and likewise the necessity of receiving fresh supplies from Christ every moment,” reads one report. Here is another:

Here are others beset with many inward and outward trials; but I find their trials accomplished with many blessings; they cause them to examine themselves more earnestly, and try upon what foundation they build; and more eager for assurance of their interest in the Lord Jesus. I doubt not but good work is begun in them all, for I find more of God in some people’s complaints than in others’ praises.²²

Believers were taught to relate to the God of all circumstances, rather than to the circumstances themselves. Consider some of Williams’ hymns:

*Jesus, whose almighty sceptre
Rules creation all around,
In whose bowels, love and mercy,
Grace and pity full are found;
In my spirit rule and conquer,
There set up Thy eternal throne;
Win my heart from every creature,
Thee to love, and Thee alone.
I can suffer every affliction,
And encounter every foe,*

*And the depths of flowing Jordan
Venture also fearless through;
Only let Thy gracious presence
Then my feeble soul assist,
'Tis Thy strength eternal only
That can conquer and resist.*²³

Such aspirations resolved inner conflicts, anxieties about the future, and tensions in the present. In their place, trust in God, a quiet resignation to His sovereign sway, produced harmony with God's world, patience with God's dealings, and an inner peace.

Godliness, for the Methodists, was an all-embracing lifestyle. It affected people in the totality of their experience. While visiting a coastal community, Harris, for example, was "terrible to them . . . as they take the liberty of stealing wrecks, and cheating the king of things excised; of their inhuman behavior toward poor shipwrecked seamen, that men [had] better fall among heathens."²⁴ One of Williams' prose works, with the strange title *The Crocodile of Egypt's River*, is devoted to exposing the ravages of jealousy that invariably produces "a black gang of fiends" that follow it "as smoke follows fire," with devastating effects in the church as well as in the world. Its havoc can be traced from Cain's murder of Abel, through Ahab's connivance to obtain Naboth's vineyard, to the elder brother of the Prodigal Son, and some church members at Corinth.²⁵

Personal issues, too, were to be considered in Christian perspective, and what is more personal than marriage? The issue is occasionally aired in society reports:

The son of . . . is courting a graceless woman of these parts, and in spite of much persuasion to the contrary, there is no indication as yet that he will not go ahead. God's church gains little and loses much in marriages like this among us. . . . One has been turned out for marrying disorderly. . . . Two people here are

considering marriage, and have put the matter before the society, but another one is courting a woman of the world, and he will need either to leave her or leave the society. . . . Here one elderly woman has left the society to find a husband. . . . O pitiful condition!²⁶

Williams wrote with both candor and insight on the matter to counsel the believers of his day in this most intimate of all experiences. He was restrained to write his "Marriage Guide" in 1777 because of the "corruption of this present age with regard to the courtship and marriage of those who profess religion." In it he exposes the bitter consequences of disregarding biblical precept and Christian counsel in the choice of marriage partner. It is in the form of a dialogue between two married Christian women, one of whom lived to regret her marriage to an unbeliever. The other sets out her husband's approach to courtship, and the outcome:

These are the chief things that attracted me to him, first, the genuine evidence of grace in my life which he had observed for some years; secondly, the steadiness of my temper . . . thirdly, the fervent love which he felt toward me, having earnestly prayed to the Lord for a partner pleasing to God . . . and lastly, the liberty and light in the matter felt by the most solemn and substantial members of God's Church. . . . He asked me to pray diligently for the light of Heaven to guide us both clearly in the right paths of life. . . . We did not long remain in this state of courtship, but put the matters to the church, and to our respective parents; and on their favorable response, the door opened. . . .

This is a soul culture far removed from the highly individual view of Christian experience that obtains among us today. The involvement of other Christians in their wisdom and maturity, as having something of the mind of Christ to impart, is undervalued. Such checks and balances to Christian experience provide a measure of security, and without them the believer is often dangerously exposed and impoverished.

But what of the other Christian woman? What can she do,

locked as she is into an unhappy, intractable situation? Her companion urges prayerful, submissive perseverance to win her husband to Christ, with a reminder of her God-given assets:

Our sex has power, Mirth, especially when we have beauty and purity, and no little subtlety to tempt the wisest, the most discerning, the strongest of men, so that it is hard to escape our nets, unless heaven's grace prevails. Our hearts are nets all the time; and we use all the ability and means at our disposal to make our bodies the same as well. . . . Our hands and arms are a mighty double chain. . . . With this chain we can snuff out wrath and spark off love; we turn bears into babes, and wolves into lambs.²⁷

By applying biblical principles to every aspect of life, Williams provided the believers of his day with a truly Christian mind.

Repeated seasons of revival led the Methodists to seek and expect ever closer dealings with God in terms of the blessing of assurance, and the enjoyment of God. Society reports bristle with such expressions, on the one hand bemoaning lukewarmness, on the other fervently desiring fresh manifestations of God's grace. Some of the questions put to the members clearly indicate the importance that was given to this aspect of their spiritual experience. For young Christians, the key question was this:

Though you have not received the witness of the Spirit, yet you are seeking God with all your heart, and that is a constant disposition of the souls (not in fits or waves of conviction), longing to lay hold on God, wanting nothing else but Him alone, and counting all things loss that you may gain Him, not resting till you possess Him?

As for older members, the leading questions were:

As to the clarity of their witness—how did they first receive their witness? And have they lost any of it since they first received it?

What was the effect wrought in them by this witness? Has this witness been repeated by the Holy Spirit, or have they never received it since? And do they now believe that their sins are forgiven; and that Christ has died for them in particular, that God has loved them with an everlasting love? And does the Holy Spirit bear witness with their spirit that they are the children of God? . . . And, further, when great tempests of unbelief beat upon them, where do they turn—to this old experience, or to Christ Himself, to seek for new light and a new experience, as well as for wisdom and strength?²⁸

Behind the questions lay the conviction that for the believer there is more of God, in himself, his love, his power, and his purity.

"On the stretch for assurance" could almost be taken as a Methodist battle cry. They drew a distinction between faith and the assurance of faith. A person could be a believer and yet lack the certainty of his salvation. Biblical assurance, they taught, did not belong merely to the mind, it was also a matter of experience. Such knowledge, in other words, was experiential. The Holy Spirit confirmed biblical promises to the believer, strengthened the principle of faith to work by love, and bore witness to adoption by God. So much importance was given to the matter that Williams translated Ebenezer Erskine's sermon on Hebrews 10:22, "The Assurance of Faith Opened and Applied," into Welsh in 1759. He regarded this as the best of all books "printed in Welsh for these times," and continued:

. . . when some regard believing as feeling pleasant and happy breezes in God's service, so that when they have lost these, nothing remains but to seek them again or else suffer under the power of unbelief, and others who would assert that faith is a bare belief of the words of the Bible, and make of it a dry, dead, sterile, insipid, impotent thing, differing only slightly, if at all, from the devil's believing.

Erskine's terminology goes further, drawing a distinction

between the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense, but the meaning and intention were the same:

There is a great difference betwixt the assurance of faith, and the assurance of sense, which follows upon faith The assurance of faith hath its object and foundation from without, but that of sense has them within. The object of the assurance of sense is a Christ formed within us by the Holy Spirit. The assurance of faith is the cause, that of sense is the effect; the first is the root, and the other is the fruit. The assurance of faith eyes the promise in its stability, flowing from the veracity of the promiser; the assurance of sense, it eyes the promise in its actual accomplishment. By the assurance of faith, Abraham believed that he should have a son in his old age, because God who cannot lie had promised; but by the assurance of sense, he believed it when he got Isaac in his arms.²⁹

This will help us to understand the Methodists' emphasis on assurance, and explains passages in the society reports like this:

The societies are in a flame in some places, and others are growing gradually in the Lord. Some that have been deadish begin to recover their strength; some are now waiting in thick darkness, but groaning for the Son of Righteousness to arise after a tedious night of desertion. Some few there are endeavoring to reconcile Christ and self, Christ and the world, and not knowing which to choose; but I hope they will choose the better part, and leave all to follow Him; and indeed there are many that can experimentally rejoice in God their Savior, and have no confidence in the flesh, daily thirsting after the full enjoyment of God.³⁰

Or a verse from one of Williams' hymns, like this:

*Tell me Thou art mine, O Savior,
Grant me an assurance clear,
Banish all my dark misgivings,
Still my doubting, calm my fear.*

*O, my soul within me yearneth
Now to hear Thy voice divine;
So shall grief be gone forever,
And despair no more be mine.*

"Thirsting after the full enjoyment of God," "on the stretch," "longing for more": these are the phrases that describe Methodist spirituality. It was a spirituality molded only by careful oversight and deliberate teaching.

It might be thought that these sentiments were expressed at a time of incandescent revival; but no, the report was written in 1744, and the hymn appeared in 1771, dates not usually regarded as revival years. Society members lived in this kind of spiritual atmosphere. There is about their spirituality a different quality from that which normally passes for Christian experience and aspiration today. When did we last come across meetings that could be described in the following way?

The Lord deals very tender[ly] with many souls here. He is often pleased to take them into the banqueting house, whilst His banner over them is love. He dandles them upon His knee, and shows them many tokens of His special kindness. They are often filled with joy and peace in the Holy Ghost. . . . Here the Lord shows much of His wonderful love to several souls. They commonly draw water with much joy out of the wells of salvation; they are often ravished with love and filled with joy in the Holy Ghost.

Is the difference between them and us cultural or linguistic? What could be plainer than this?

There is hardly an opportunity that they meet together in public or in private, that they feel not the power of God and His divine presence, which makes them shout for joy, and often cry out for assistance to praise God and glorify the Lamb for what they

daily experience of His distinguishing love in their souls. They spend whole nights together in rejoicing in God and praising His sacred name.³¹

But it should not be different. Christian experience is essentially the same for believers in every age, and under every condition. Heightened and more vigorous they may be at times, but the means and operations of grace remain available for all Christians. The difference lies in our expectation and appetite. It may be that we have been accustomed so much to the shallows that the depth, the breadth, and length for us have vanished over the horizon. Self-knowledge, heart acquaintance, sorrow for sin, a soaring, longing, spirit, pining for God—to these we have well-nigh become strangers. The absence of God from our lives has become so commonplace that we live at a distance from him.

Williams can still come to our aid. Even in his day, with his finger on the spiritual pulse of each society member, he recognized their ailments. Some of his earlier hymns had been pitched at too high a spiritual level, and he was aware of this:

I acknowledge that there are some of these first hymns, on the assurance of faith, longing to be dissolved, spiritual joy, together with triumph over enemies, which weak Christians cannot easily sing. This happened not so much because the Lord kept my own soul in good spirits at the time, but chiefly because the Spirit had been so plentifully poured out on those godly people for whom they were written.

His next hymn book would be

more profitable and edifying to all degrees of believers, having modified some lessons which were beyond those believers who have only an ordinary measure of faith and feeling, either to a prayer for such grace, or to admire the Lord who gave it; or else to take away the foolish boasting in the lesser part, so that Jesus alone should be exalted.³²

Whether there was "only an ordinary measure of faith and feeling," or, as in revival times when "singing praise to God" covered the land, "like the time of Apostles," like a blessed summer's day," the great concern should be that Christian experience conformed to New Testament pattern. A "genuine work of God" partakes of these characteristics:

It is not only by means of outward manifestations, such as verbal expressions of the tongue or physical movements of the body, shouting, jumping, and laughing, that I conclude that God is in the Church and is visiting His people. Apart from the heavenly inclination on their spirits, inciting their tongues to a lively praising of God, this fire burns in the life and behavior of so many of them. . . . They are zealous, not for secondary matters of faith, but for the essential issues of salvation. Faith and love are the chief graces they cry for. . . . They all acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth is the true God . . . their Prophet, Priest, and King.³³

Experiences must never be an end in themselves; they must serve the glory of God in the believer's life. When God visits the soul, it is to refashion it to the likeness of his Son. And this will be seen in fervent devotion to Christ, and godly living before the world. It was for this that Williams and the Methodists prayed and worked. This is true Christian experience.

Author

Dr. Eifion Evans is the author of several books and published articles on the subject of awakening, including *Revival Comes to Wales: The Story of the 1859 Revival in Wales* (1959), *The Welsh Revival of 1904* (1969), *Revivals: Their Rise, Progress and Achievements* (1961), *Two Welsh Revivalists* (1985), and most recently, *Fire in the Thatch* (1996). His major study of the awakener and pastor Daniel Rowland, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (1985), is an impressive and seminal work on both the man and the movement. He lives near Llanelli, Wales, and continues to study and write extensively on the subject of revival. He has contributed to

several previous issues of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth), Calvinistic Methodists Archives, Howel Harris Diary No. 35, February 22, 23; November 27, 1738, quoted in Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales*, 1985, 69 (henceforth shortened to DR); Williams' sentiments are expressed in an English letter to Howel Harris, published in Gomer Morgan Roberts, *Y Per Ganiedydd*, vol. 1, 1949, p. 83 (henceforth shortened to WW). For an excellent paper on "Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival," see J.I. Packer, *Among God's Giants*, 1991, chapter 19.
2. D. E. Jenkins, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Charles B.A. of Bala*, 1908, 2:52-54.
3. DR. 174-85. A full account appears as "Adding to the Church—in the Teaching of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists," a paper presented at the Westminster Conference, London, in 1973, and subsequently published under the title *Adding to the Church*. See also Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2 vols. 1970, 1980, index, "Religious Societies."
4. Morris Davies, *Deuddeg Pregeth . . . y Parchedig Daniel Rowlands*, 1876, 318-19.
5. Garfield H. Hughes (ed), *Gweithiau William Williams Pantycelyn [The Works of William Williams, Pantycelyn]*, 1967, 2:14-15. Henceforth shortened to GWP.2.
6. *Journal of the Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church of Wales*, vol. 51. 67; 53, 83; 52, 10. Henceforth shortened to CH, with volume and page number.
7. CH. 52, 87.
8. CH. 53:11
9. WW.1. 92; CH.52, 88.
10. GWP 2, 137
11. GWP 2, 3.
12. GWP 2, 45.
13. CH 53, 23.
14. GWP 2,24-25.
15. Gomer Morgan Roberts, GWP 1, 273.
16. CH 52,17, 86; 51, 82.
17. CH 51,72. The Methodists were greatly helped by Ralph Erskine's four sermons on Galatians 2:19, which had appeared under the title "Law-death, Gospel-life: or the Death of Legal Righteousness, the Life of Gospel Holiness." Their Welsh translation was published in 1743.
18. 1973, p.35. This first appeared in Welsh as *Templum Experientiae aper-tum; Neu, Ddrws y Society Profiad*, published in 1777.

19. CH 52, 26,87.
20. *The Experience Meeting*, 34, 37.
21. CH 52, 86, 24.
22. CH 51, 67, 74; 53. 84; 52. 88.
23. In the second collection of his English hymns issued under the title *Gloria in Excelsis* in 1772. These hymns, seventy-one in number, were written, at the request of the Countess of Huntingdon, for the use of Whitefield's Orphanage in Georgia. The first English collection of 48 hymns had appeared in 1759 with the title *Hosannah to the Son of David*.
24. CH 30, 107.
25. *Crocodil Afon yr Aifft* appeared in 1767.
26. WW 1, 91, 92; CH.53. 84.
27. GWP 2, 257-58, 268. The title of the work is *Ductor Nuptiarum; Neu, Cyfanwyddwr Priodas*. Williams was familiar with similar works of the previous century, such as *A Looking Glasse For Married Folks*, 1610, by R. Snawsel. A Welsh article by Alwyn Prosser in *Llen Cymru*, 5 (1958), 70-85, "Cyfarwyddwr Priodas Williams Pantycelyn," discusses this at length. Williams had broached the subject of worldly, carnal courtship in "Theomemphus," chapters 13 and 14.
28. *The Experience Meeting*, 35, 39-40.
29. "Advertisement" included with the 1764 edition of Williams' collection of Welsh hymns called *Mor o Wydr*; Erskine's sermon is in *The Whole Works of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine*, published in 1826 in two volumes, and appears at vol. 1, 192 ff. For a study of the doctrine of assurance, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, Vol. 89 in Series 7 of American University Studies, 1991. Chapter 8 deals with the Scotsman Alexander Comrie, who was influenced by the Erskine brothers.
30. CH 53, 50-51.
31. CH 53, 88; 54, 60.
32. Preface to *Alleluja*, 1758; Advertisement in *Rhai Emynau a Chaniadau*, 1757.
33. *The Experience Meeting*, .9; GWP 2, 16, 28-29.

When man proceeds to the accomplishment of some mighty enterprise, he puts forth prodigious efforts, as if by the sound of his axes and hammers he would proclaim his own fancied might, and bear down opposing obstacles. He cannot work without sweat, and dust, and noise. When God would do a marvelous work, such as may amaze all heaven and earth, he commands silence all around, sends forth the still small voice, and then sets some feeble instrument to work, and straightway it is done! Man toils and pants, and after all effects but little; the Creator, in the silent majesty of power, noiseless yet resistless, achieves by a word the infinite wonders of omnipotence!

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