

Book review

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Bread of Heaven: The Life and Work of William Williams, Pantycelyn, Eifion Evans,
Bryntirion Press, 2010, 409pp, £19.99

It is reckoned that a worldwide audience of two billion people tuned in to watch the wedding of Prince William and Katherine Middleton, making the service one of the most watched events in TV history. Of the three hymns sung in the service, two were by Methodists; *Love Divine All Loves Excelling* by Charles Wesley and *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah* by William Williams. Strains of Williams' most famous hymn will often be heard at Welsh international Rugby matches: 'Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more'.

For many, even in Christian circles, all that is known of William Williams is that he penned that hymn. One of the reasons why his life and other achievements have been shrouded in obscurity is that Williams has lacked an up-to-date biography in English. Yet, alongside Daniel Rowland and Howell Harris, the hymn writer was one of the big three leading figures of the Evangelical Revival in 18th century Wales. Howell Harris has been the subject of a recent major study, *Howell Harris: From Conversion to Separation 1735-1750* by Geraint Tudur (University Press of Wales, 2000). Eifion Evans' biography of Daniel Rowland is justly regarded as a spiritual classic: *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1985). Now we can be grateful that with the publication of Evans' volume on William Williams, that the remarkable life and work of the preacher will be more widely known and appreciated.

William Williams was a physician by trade. He was converted in his early twenties in 1738 under the preaching of Howell Harris. Williams was ordained as a Church of England curate, serving first of all in Llanwrtyd and then working alongside Daniel Rowland in Llangeitho. He was a key leader of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist movement.

Williams was a fine preacher and his ministry was much in demand in Wales and beyond. Towards the end of his life he calculated that in over forty years of preaching, he had travelled 111,800 miles, the equivalent of four times around the world. Thomas Charles testified that Williams' 'oratorical gifts were considerable; his preaching was evangelical, experiential and sweet'. He lived to proclaim salvation by the free grace of God on the basis of the finished work of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The first generation of Calvinistic Methodists were loyal members of the Church of England; they had no wish to leave the Established Church unless thrown out by the authorities. But this created a problem: How could new Christians be nurtured in the faith if many Church of England clergymen did not preach the gospel and were not at all sympathetic to Methodism? Societies or groups of believers were set up to operate alongside the parish church system. William Williams helped to organise these societies and the local and national Associations that oversaw them. In the societies believers were encouraged to share their experiences of the Lord and their struggles in the life of faith. It was in these groups that Williams' gifts as a soul-physician really came into play. He wrote a book, *The Experience Meeting* as a manual for society leaders and to commend the value of societies to Methodist converts.

William Williams was the leading writer of the early Calvinistic Methodists. Eifion Evans gives us a flavour of his many and varied prose and poetic works. Williams published an epic poem of 1,360

verses, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, setting out the supremacy of Jesus in creation, providence and redemption. In *The Life and Death of Theomemphus*, the writer used Bunyanesque fictional characters to portray the trials and triumphs of a typical Calvinistic Methodist believer. His most ambitious prose effort was *Pantheologia: A History of All the Religions of the World*, printed in seven parts. It is fair to say that Williams' multi-volume work of comparative religion was not the most popular of his publications. But he wrote with the laudable aim of giving Welsh Calvinistic Methodism more of an intellectual edge.

Welcome attention is also devoted to William Williams the hymn-writer. His hymns give expression to all that was best about the Evangelical Revival in Wales. They are steeped in sound biblical doctrine and allude to Bible themes such as the believer's pilgrimage to glory. But in addition, Williams' compositions are the overflow of the heart of a gifted poet with a deep experience of communion with God. They are also enriched by the author's intimate knowledge of the struggles of the life of faith. Evans offers fresh translations of some of Williams' lesser known Welsh hymns (lesser known at least to English speakers).

The 18th century revival in Wales was not without controversy. Some attacked the revival from the outside. Williams defended the awakening against the charge of 'enthusiasm' or fanaticism. He found Jonathan Edwards' writings such as *The Religions Affections* helpful on this score. The revival was also rocked by controversy from within. Some adopted Sandemanian views that reduced saving faith to an intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions. Others advocated antinomianism and rejected the law of God as a rule of faith for believers. Williams refuted these errors in his writings. He also translated into Welsh works that addressed Sandemanian and antinomian false teachings.

An altogether trickier matter was Howell Harris' adoption of aberrant Moravian views. Harris revelled in the 'blood of God' to such an extent that it seemed he was teaching 'patripassianism', the view that the Father suffered on the cross. Daniel Rowland and William Williams argued for the orthodox Trinitarian teaching that at the cross Jesus the Son offered himself to God the Father through the eternal Spirit. Harris' unorthodox teaching and erratic behaviour in the late 1740s and 50s led to a division in the ranks of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. Although married, Harris took a female companion with him on his preaching tours; he proclaimed Mrs Sidney Griffith a 'prophetess'. The obstinate exhorter would not listen to the reproving voices of Rowland and Williams and so the old friends were forced to part. They were reunited in the 1760s, when Wales experienced a fresh outpouring of the Spirit.

Eifion Evans has produced a most helpful, informative and stimulating biography of William Williams. He has shown that in his multidimensional ministry, Pantycelyn was much more than a hymn writer. However, Evans can sometimes pull his punches when it comes to criticism of his hero. Williams mistakenly took the appearance of the Northern Lights as an indication that the last days were at hand (see chapter 25). He was so keen to defend the revival against detractors that he was too willing to take leaping and dancing in Methodist meetings as an evidence of the presence of the Spirit. Jonathan Edwards was more cautious in his approach, insisting that effects on the body were no certain evidence of the Spirit's work. Sometimes Evans' style can be a little odd; witness this sentence, almost worthy of Yoda, the syntactically-challenged Star Wars character, 'It was in this context that Williams forged for the Methodists this manual' (p. 263).

Anyway, I think we can learn a number of lessons from William Williams and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism.

1. Calvinistic doctrine needs to be wedded to the empowering presence of the Spirit. Evans devotes a couple of chapters to Williams' doctrine. He held to Reformed theology alright, but it was theology

on fire. We have witnessed a welcome recovery of Reformed doctrine in the last fifty years or so, but we have not yet seen a widespread outpouring of the Spirit in revival. Truth must be experienced and its power felt.

2. The need for discernment in times of revival. At the best of times, the devil is at work sowing seeds of doctrinal confusion and goading people to fanaticism. What happened to Howell Harris in the 1740s and 50s is a case in point. A revival must not be dismissed on account of the presence of errors and disorder, but neither should revivals be judged uncritically.

3. There is no contradiction between spiritual life and organisational structures. The Calvinistic Methodists had their local societies and national assembly. Independent Evangelicalism often lacks appropriate structures that enable gospel churches to pool their resources and work together – a task for Affinity, perhaps?

4. The value of believers meeting in small groups. William Williams was a great advocate of societies. Today the equivalent would be house groups. But may our house groups not simply be for the purpose of Bible study and prayer, but also an environment where believers are encouraged to share their spiritual experiences.

5. A new generation of hymn writers has much to learn from Williams' ability to mix biblical truth with heartfelt experience of the grace of God.

6. The Church of England could not contain the new wine of Calvinistic Methodism and so the Presbyterian Church of Wales was founded in 1811. But the revival did start in the Church of England. Should such a movement of the Spirit suddenly begin in today's Church in Wales, or the Church of England, how should those of us who have separated from the mainline denominations react? I trust that we would be generous-minded enough to recognise the work of God for what it was and do all we could to support those involved.

7. Evans' biography is written from an unashamedly Christian standpoint. Unlike the case with some recent works by Christian historians, Evans attributes the Evangelical Revival experienced by William Williams and others to the Holy Spirit rather than to merely human factors. His account is all the better for that. May reading this volume stir us up to lay hold of God for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit in our day.