
Review Article: Prophet of the Lord or Troubler of Israel? DM Lloyd-Jones and British Evangelicalism

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) and Twentieth Century Evangelicalism by John Brencher (Paternoster Press 2002, 267pp).

Let me begin by articulating some biblical principles upon which all Bible believing Christians are (at least in theory) agreed. First, there is not a perfect man on the earth. 'In many things we all stumble.' Second, while we are to respect all people as God's image bearers and all Christians as brothers and sisters, we are to call no man 'lord' and no man 'father'. In the third place God alone is lord of the conscience and, while we are to give careful thought to the views and counsel of godly leaders, we must, nevertheless, be fully persuaded in our own minds and must neither formulate our beliefs nor frame our behaviour out of fear of men or out of desire to win their favour.

Let me now do what all preachers must do and apply these principles to the matter in hand. It is taken as read that Dr Lloyd-Jones was not perfect nor was he infallible. He would have been the very first to have admitted as much. So his views are to be weighed on the balances of Scripture just the same as the views of anyone else. It is a pity when some of those who highly esteemed him say, 'The Doctor said ...', as if that could settle an issue. It cannot and does not. Such an attitude is a betrayal of biblical principles and is hardly fair to the memory of a man who, more than most, was quite prepared to differ from fellow evangelicals when he believed that Scripture demanded this.

But if Lloyd-Jones has had his acolytes, he also has his detractors. Unhappy with what they regard as the hagiolatry of the official biography by Iain Murray, they mean to give a more critical appraisal of the life of one who was a major influence on twentieth century evangelicalism. This seems to be the approach of Dr Gaius Davies in one of the two new chapters which he has added to his *Genius, Grief and Grace*, and it is also the approach of the volume now under review. Indeed, given the size of Iain Murray's biography, and given the broadly positive, though not entirely uncritical, assessment of Lloyd-Jones in the more 'homely' accounts given by Christopher Catherwood of his grandfather, first in *Five Evangelical Leaders*, then in *A Family Portrait*, there would be little point in more being written unless it approached the subject in a more critical way. So Brencher is not to be faulted for seeking to do what he has set out to do. As a work which began life as a doctoral thesis submitted to the History Department of Sheffield University, one expects the author to evaluate his subject with a critical eye. His work must be judged by ascertaining the extent to which he has achieved his objective.

As a former President of FIEC and as one who first attended Westminster Chapel in the early 1950s, Dr Brencher shares Lloyd-Jones's evangelical beliefs. The treatment of his subject is, therefore, a sympathetic one. As a work which began life as a doctoral thesis for the History Department of Sheffield University, the material is well researched

and fully documented. The bibliography bears witness to the amount of material that has been studied and the nine chapters which form the core of the book cover the main areas of Lloyd-Jones's influence and deal with the key issues with which he was involved. Dr Brencher's sympathies with his subject do not prevent him from assessing some aspects of Lloyd-Jones's life in a negative way. It is a considerable achievement to have compressed so much into 267 pages, and the book is warmly commended on the 'blurb' by evangelical historian David Bebbington and by Derek Tidball.

Although the book began life as a doctoral thesis, there are indeed some surprises in such a work. Amongst the letters listed in the primary sources of the bibliography there are four sources of information referred to in the text as 'Personal Information' 1, 2, 3, 4, whose authors do not wish to be identified. To put it mildly, this is unfortunate in a book of this nature, particularly since some of these references touch somewhat controversial issues. It smacks more of journalese and of journalists protecting their sources than of serious doctoral work and of scholars giving references for others to evaluate. It is obviously right to respect people's desire to remain anonymous. But then their observations ought not to be included in a work of this nature.

One also wonders to what extent an author can adequately deal with *Martyn Lloyd-Jones and twentieth century evangelicalism* when there is very little about the state of evangelicalism when Lloyd-Jones came on the scene and the historical background to that scene. We look in vain for the effects of the Oxford Movement upon nineteenth century Anglicanism and for the reason for the founding of The Evangelical Alliance in 1846. Given the seriousness of the public disagreement between John Stott and Lloyd-Jones in the 1966 meeting organised by The Evangelical Alliance, and the amount of space which Dr Brencher gives to this issue, this is a serious omission indeed. A major change was taking place in the way that evangelicals responded to those whose beliefs were inimical to evangelicalism. But to see that shift in perspective one has to consider the historical background. Moreover, in view of the fact that the parting of the ways between Packer and Lloyd-Jones was occasioned by Packer's co-authoring of *Growing Into Union* with another evangelical and two Anglo-Catholics, Dr Brencher's treatment of this issue, like that of many others who have been fairly critical of Lloyd-Jones's stance, is, to say the least, somewhat myopic.

Again, there is precious little about the impact of liberalism in the nineteenth century nonconformist churches and the effect that this had upon the religious scene in the twentieth century. There is nothing, for example, about Spurgeon's involvement in 'The Down Grade Controversy'. This inevitably leads to the impression that Lloyd-Jones's disagreement with evangelicals who were committed to their denominations owed more to his personality type, or even his nationality, than it did to theological principle. But nothing could be further from the truth. He was heir to a tradition that stretched back through Spurgeon to the puritan forefathers of nonconformity. It was precisely because the nonconformist denominations were moving from the theological convictions with which they had begun, that Lloyd-Jones charged them with denying their origins. But you would not learn that from Dr Brencher's book. There is nothing about Gresham Machen and the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary. In other words, the book suffers from a failure to set the subject in his historical context and, as a consequence, there is a lack of perspective.

Possibly the most thorough theological presentation of the case for which Lloyd-Jones contended was presented by Klaas Runia in his book *Reformation Today*, to

which Lloyd-Jones wrote the foreword. The book does not get a mention. Written by a Dutch Presbyterian serving in Australia, it gives the lie to the suggestion that it was Lloyd-Jones's Welshness and congregationalism, not to mention his temperament, which made him so critical of the evangelical scene. As for 'guilt by association', Dr Brencher's book, like other critical treatments of Lloyd-Jones's stance on church issues, does not seriously consider the practical implications of passages like Galatians 1:8-9 or 2 John 10-11.

Dr Brencher shows greater understanding of Lloyd-Jones's belief of the work of the Holy Spirit, though even here there is a lack of perspective. He rightly sees Lloyd-Jones's views as essentially those of the eighteenth century. What he fails to communicate is the fact that what had become evangelical orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth century was so far from older emphases. It was this almost breathtaking ignorance of historical theology that led many to regard Lloyd-Jones as unorthodox and, indeed, Pentecostal or charismatic. A quick read of his foreword to his wife's translation of William Williams's classic *The Experience Meeting* would demonstrate that his emphasis was *not* upon spiritual gifts but upon a God centred, Christ honouring, Spirit empowered spirituality. A read of Williams's book would quickly demonstrate that Lloyd-Jones's view of the witness of the Spirit was main-line Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. A trawl through Thomas Brooks's *Heaven Upon Earth* would confirm that there were Puritans who shared this view, while Smeaton on the Holy Spirit, Spurgeon's sermons, and Kenneth Macrae's *Diary* will amply demonstrate that Lloyd-Jones's understanding of Holy Spirit baptism and revival was not the theological eccentricity which some have assumed it was.

Dr Brencher, like Gaius Davies, thinks that Lloyd-Jones, while undoubtedly humble, was of such a personality that he was always convinced that he was right and found disagreement with his views difficult to handle. His dominance in the pulpit at Westminster Chapel was such that his belief in spiritual gifts was inevitably 'theoretical', while the authority with which he spoke and the reverence with which he was treated inevitably meant that his leadership was severely lacking in certain respects. Furthermore, his anti-English feelings limited him somewhat. Are these criticisms fair and well grounded? Not really. Let me explain why.

While Lloyd-Jones was passionately committed to the 'primacy of preaching', throughout his years at Sandfields, Aberavon he held a weekly fellowship meeting (the 'experience meeting' or *seiat* of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism). He also held a weekly men's discussion meeting. At Westminster he introduced a Friday evening discussion meeting. My guess is that these types of meeting were certainly not widely held in evangelical circles in England at that time. The ministers' conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales always has two discussion sessions and it is no secret that Lloyd-Jones had urged the need for such sessions that men might *confer*. Meetings like these, in his view, gave far more expression to the 'body' element of the church than simply having people to lead in prayer or read the Scriptures at a Sunday meeting. Men who cannot tolerate deviation from their views are not normally happy with the kind of free ranging discussion which 'the Doctor' encouraged.

The church and its meetings are greater than the Sunday services. While he did not believe in the cessation of the charismata (though he did believe in the cessation of the offices of apostle and prophet and did believe in the sufficiency of Scripture), this is not

to say that he believed that in every gathering of God's people the charismata should all be in evidence. Nor did he believe that much that was claimed as authentically of God's Spirit was of God.

That men treated him with exaggerated veneration was hardly his fault. It may, rather, be a symptom of the puerility of twentieth century evangelicalism that there is this constant tendency to look for evangelical 'champions'. (Can it be denied that, in a lower key, the same thing has been done with Carson, Clements, and Lucas?) That he had the courage of his convictions, none can deny. Is not this a virtue? Might one of the reasons why he was so often regarded as right was precisely because he could be brilliantly clear in expounding his position and devastatingly effective in demolishing a contrary view? One has to raise the question as to why some have become so critical of his views *after* his death. With respect to his views on gospel unity, one has far more respect for Packer and Stott (for both of whom he continued to have a warm personal admiration), who had the courage of *their* convictions and 'took him on', than one does for those who meekly followed him when alive but have, since his death, become some of his most vocal critics.

I have a fear that in dealing with Lloyd-Jones's Welshness, Dr Brencher is again a bit myopic and fails to see what was patently obvious. Lloyd-Jones had many close links with Englishmen: one thinks especially of his close link with that quintessential Englishman, Douglas Johnson. What he objected to was the attitude epitomised in the words of Richard Cox to John Knox that the church of the exiles at Frankfurt-on-Main was 'to have the face of an English church'. He agreed with Knox's response that it should have the face of Christ's church. Sadly, Cox's views are not a thing of the past. In an age that lauds multiculturalism in society, was not Lloyd-Jones years ahead of his time in contending for the principle of indigeneity for the church both within the UK and throughout the world? That he could be very firm on this kind of issue was essential if he was to break through the colonial type attitudes that persisted even in many missionary societies until not so long ago. Brencher notes Lloyd-Jones's enormous influence on IFES and the strength and vigour of that movement. It is a simple fact that the English public schools and Oxbridge colleges have, over the years, bred a 'For God, Queen, and country' mentality, that, in former years, emphasised activity over against theology, was suspicious of the intellect in theology and the emotions in religion. Would things have changed had Lloyd-Jones and a handful of others (some of them themselves English) not stood against this? I doubt it.

None of this is to deny that, like any other saved sinner, Lloyd-Jones was imperfect. But it is to say that Dr Brencher has mostly targeted the wrong areas for criticism. Lloyd-Jones's influence has been greatest on those who were persuaded of what he taught and, therefore, who shared his convictions because they saw them in Scripture rather than just 'followed my leader'. And that is what Lloyd-Jones most wanted. He really was not interested in his own reputation and what posterity would make of him. Like Whitefield before him, it was Christ's honour with which he was concerned and was content to let the Great Day declare what manner of man he was. Happy shall we be if we do likewise!

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