

Revivalist Propaganda & The Cause of Truth in Wales by

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The article in the last issue of this magazine on “Wales - Land of Revivals” revealed that the “Revival” propaganda of the last two hundred years or so has turned the Church of Christ in Wales from being as thoroughly scriptural and reformed as she should be. Indeed it can be said that she has been led to hope and trust in nothing less than a myth for her future health. The article showed that these so-called religious revivals have had a devastating effect upon the spiritual life of Wales. In particular it showed that this waiting for revival does nothing but detract from the glorious means of grace and mercy that God gives to his dear children in the here and now.

The purpose of this article is to show that the religious propaganda of the recent past is not only confined to the subject of revival. So much of what has been and is taught even in evangelical circles has given to the Welsh people a crazy mixed-up idea of what exactly is the faith that was once delivered to the saints. This in turn has led to the general apathy with regard to spiritual matters.

We begin by looking at the situation at the turn of this present century when the chapels and churches were, by and large, hives of activity. There is no doubt that religion was playing an important part in the life of Wales at that time, but a little scratching below the surface will soon show that the religion of the day was not as orthodox and biblical a religion as many evangelicals today would have us believe.

Denominational Pride.

Some of the chapels that abound in the land have tablets stating in what year they were built, and that in later years they had to be extended to accommodate a growth in membership. But there are other massive buildings in very small villages which

could accommodate two, three, or more times the local population. One such chapel building can be found in the village of Trefriw in the Conwy Valley in North Wales. The Congregationalist cause in the village had a problem with rising damp and dry rot in their building, so they opted for a new chapel to be built. A fine edifice which was completed in 1896. This created a problem for the Calvinistic Methodists, it made their chapel look second rate by comparison. So they put plans into operation to have their own new chapel, which was of course to be much bigger and better than that of the Congregationalists, with a nice tower to boot. The whole project led to financial difficulties which meant that the tower was not actually built. The construction was completed in 1904 with huge debts which led to the Calvinistic Methodists (also known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales), in 1910, making it a rule that no church could spend large sums of money on their buildings independently of the church courts.

These two massive chapels still stand today in the village of Trefriw as a testimony to the folly that was wrought in Wales in the name of religion. That this clear example of denominational pride was not only a local affair can be seen from the denominational literature of those days. Dr R. Tudur Jones¹ cites articles from the various denominational magazines which verify that this awful religious pride was abounding in those days.

The Baptists in their magazine, "*Greal*", in 1903 could boast: "It is a great joy to us as a denomination that the three most important men in the town of Cardiff today are Dr William Edwards B.A., D.D., Mr. E. Thomas and Sir Alfred Thomas M.P..... "There is no denomination in the town which can come close to us in power and influence."

The Calvinistic Methodist magazine, "*Y Drysorfa*", in 1898, could say with great humility no doubt (!):

"The Methodists have the honour of bringing into being almost every idea that has deepened the religious influences on the nation, and the other denominations have shown great prowess in imitating them and following in our footsteps."

The Congregationalists were equally as humble (!) when "*The Celt*" in 1896 stated:

"There is no denomination that has done as much - yes as much, remember - to ensure our political and religious freedom as the Congregationalists."

We ask in all seriousness how could any denomination allow such drivel to appear in their official journals if they knew anything of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. For this material to appear in print suggests that there was a lack of discernment and knowledge amongst the membership if they could so easily be brainwashed by its leaders, and questions must be asked with regard to the type of leadership prevalent in the churches of those days.

How then did the nonconformist denominations in Wales come to have such car-

¹R. Tudur Jones, "*Ffydd ac Argyfwng Cenedl: Hanes Crefydd yng Nghymru 1890-1914*," (Faith & Crisis: History of Religion in Wales 1890 - 1914.) Vol. 1, (Ty John Penry, Swansea, 1981) pp.65-66.

nal pride? Nonconformity in Wales owed its origins to people like the Rev. William Wroth, vicar of Llanfaches and Rev. William Erbury, vicar of St. Marys, Cardiff, together with his curate, Rev. Walter Craddock, who refused to read the Book of Sports in 1633. These men were persecuted for refusing to adhere to the religious laws of the day, but they did succeed in gathering groups of people who took note of their teachings. In 1639 the first congregationalist church was established at Llanfaches with Rev. William Wroth as minister. During the Civil War, the majority of the people of Wales were supporters of Charles I, and the persecution of the nonconformists grew in intensity, so much so that its leaders fled to England for safety. On their return to Wales, these leaders were amazed to find a church that had not only held its own but grown steadily in numbers in their absence. From 1649 onwards, the Baptist controversy did much harm to these churches, especially when some of its leaders became convinced that they had to be immersed. In the wake of the Act of Conformity in 1662, about 80 Congregationalist ministers along with 20 of the Baptists were prohibited from preaching. They, in turn, were joined by several of the clergy from the Established church, and it is after this period that convinced Presbyterians began to appear in Wales.

By 1715, the nonconformists in Wales numbered about 10,500, being strongest in the more populous areas of South Wales. Indeed the whole of North Wales could only boast of 10 congregations, seven of which were numerically small, struggling causes. But to their credit, it must be emphasised that these people were concerned for doctrinal purity, had a programme of catechising and would receive no-one into membership unless he or she was doctrinally sound.

It was the Methodist revival of 1735 that changed the religious map of Wales. Men like Howell Harris, Daniel Rowlands, Howell Davies and William Williams (Pantycelyn) began to preach anywhere and everywhere, and took advantage of the good work done by the early nonconformists and the evangelical Anglicans (see B.R.J. no.20 pp.17ff.).

The following statistics show the enormity of the growth of nonconformity in Wales. By 1861 the Congregationalists had 736 chapels, 376 ministers and 86,546 members. The Baptists, in 1874, could boast 590 chapels, 364 ministers and 63,478 members. The Calvinistic Methodists, in 1871, recorded 1,145 chapels and preaching stations, 449 ministers and 93,276 members. In 1873, the Wesleyans had 324 chapels and preaching stations, 99 ministers and 14,414 members. These figures tell us nothing about the spiritual state of the land. Modern evangelical propaganda would have us believe that Wales at this time was not far off from being a veritable heaven on earth. This is far from being the truth.

Nonconformist ministers prior to 1735, together with many of the Anglicans appear to have been spiritual men who were concerned for biblical truth and desired to see things done decently. The outbreak of the revival of 1735 is seen by many evangelicals today as the beginning of a great work of God in the land. We are led to believe that from this time Wales began to become a spiritual nation. The impres-

sion given is that the majority of those who were affected by that and subsequent revivals were true believers. However, the parable of the sower does not give the impression that all who hear the word are truly converted under whatsoever circumstances they hear that word. Amongst those that were attracted to the revivals, there would be those who would have been drawn by the excitement of the meetings, those who liked a good sing, as well as those who turned to nonconformity because of the social conditions in the land.

By the 1770's, the industrial revolution had taken hold, and people were migrating to the industrial centres of south and east Wales, away from the hardship and poverty of the agricultural way of life. The Welsh farmers were nearly all tenants of the landed gentry, of whom some were not averse to forget to show mercy to their tenants when financial difficulty arose. Some of the industrialists were not a whit more sympathetic towards their workers than the gentry were towards their tenants. (We say some, because there were cases of tolerance). Most of these industrialists and landowners were in the main highly respected members of the Established Church of England, the church to which the common people had to pay their tithes out of their poverty. In every part of Wales the population was under the power of men who loved and supported the Church. There were no trade unions, no way for any of the common folk to register a complaint and receive a satisfactory outcome with regard to their grievances. The question that could arise at this point is what has this to do with the growth of nonconformity? The answer is that nonconformity in many parts of Wales became a place of refuge from the oppressive Englishman, his language and his religion. The nonconformist services were held mainly in the Welsh language (very few Welshmen in the late 18th and early 19th centuries could understand any English). This made the chapels very much a no-go area for many of the industrialists and gentry. Here in their chapel, the common people could display their gifts as church officers and Sabbath school teachers, and gradually history tells us that things like eisteddfodau, (Welsh cultural gatherings, where bards and singers etc. display their talents), drama groups, oratorios and concerts became part and parcel of church life. There was in each community for the Welsh speaking labourers in *their chapel* a society that helped them escape from the reality of the hardships they faced day by day.

It is easy to see how denominational pride could feed itself in such circumstances. Churches no doubt compared themselves and their activities with other churches in their area. But there were always voices of protest to be heard. For example, in 1875 a writer expressed the desire:

“.....that the raising of a new sect again in Wales which would give itself to following the simple pattern of the New Testament, the book of the law of the church of Christ, would be like the dawning and rising of the sun on every Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic sect in the land, the which we fear care more for officialdom, forms of dress, expensive colleges, wonderful chapels with pinnacles and vain instrumen-

tal music from the ten shilling harmonium to the £300 organ. All of which serve to entertain sinners rather than awakening them to flee from the wrath to come.....²

The claim made by many modern Evangelical leaders of the great spirituality in Wales of yore does take some swallowing. Churches that pride themselves on their achievements, their choir and their drama group have not learned the first principles of the Christian faith. As evidence of the great spirituality of Wales, evangelical leaders speak in glowing terms of how the common cottager would have great spiritual books on their bookshelves. On their bookshelves they indeed did have translations of Gurnall's work, Pilgrim's Progress and others, but it is to be feared that in all too many cases on the shelf they remained, as any buyer of second hand Welsh books will know. They're in such good condition!!

Contemporary preachers did not see the land of their day as being anywhere near as spiritual as we are led to believe by starry-eyed ministers of today. Drunkenness was a problem that preachers of the past "revival-era" had to address. For example, John Elias, was to be found appealing for sobriety and decent behaviour during the meetings in the Holyhead Association in 1824³. John Jones, Talysarn, in a sermon preached in 1832, also speaks of the enormity of the problem that drunkenness posed in Wales amongst the religious and the non-religious. In the same sermon he holds out that adultery, fornication and whoredom were **common**. He states that even the smallest and poorest towns in Wales had the ability to attract whores for their own use. He goes on to state that the number of bastards in the land is numerous:

".....you can count *scores of them* in any small given area....."

He goes on to describe in graphic fashion how thousands of bastards are being killed as soon as they are born, no doubt to ensure that the good name of the families concerned was perpetuated⁴.

Wales of long ago, a Wales to be emulated? That is what is taught from many a pulpit today where "revivalism" is preached, and the past "revival-eras" are excessively romanticised. Sadly the Welsh nation then, as now, was heavily blighted with carnality, pride, and immorality. The only difference between then and now is that the veneer of religion has to a large extent been removed.

The Leaders of Nonconformity.

We now turn and look at the quality of the leaders of the churches in Wales. Prior to 1735, whatever differences they may have had, there was in practical terms a unity of thought between the conformists and nonconformists that all things should be done decently and in order.

² "Hanes y Brytaniaid A'r Cymry," (History of the Britons and the Welsh) Vol.2, (Bangor, 1874) p.525.

³ Edward Morgan, "John Elias: Life and Letters," (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973) pp.143-144.

⁴ "Pregethau J. Jones, Talysarn," (Sermons of J. Jones, Talysarn), (Thomas Gee, Denbigh, 1869) sermon 23.

The early nonconformists, as we saw, were concerned for doctrinal purity, and to that end they perceived that in order for their members to be well trained in the things of God, their leaders had to be thoroughly prepared for the task that lay before them as ministers of the gospel. The Act of Conformity not only closed the churches to those that refused to conform, but also the established schools and universities. But trying to stop these people from ministering and teaching was as useless as trying to stop an active volcano from erupting. Many of those adversely affected by the act began meetings and opened schools in their own homes, and out of these grew the nonconformist academies, primarily to train their own ministers as well as helping those nonconformists who wished to further their own education. Such was the standard of education that many Anglicans sent their children to these academies rather than to university. During the late seventeenth and right through the eighteenth centuries, it appears that both Oxford and Cambridge only offered an excuse of an education. Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752), who is famed for his "Analogy of Religion," claimed that the education he had at Oriel College, Oxford was worthless compared to that which he received at Samuel Jones's academy at Tewkesbury. People like Swift, Defoe, Gibbon, Johnson, John Wesley and others also complained at the poor standard of education that they received at Oxford and Cambridge⁵.

By comparison, the academies felt they were duty bound to give as high a standard of education as possible.

"A bishop without learning," said Rhys Prydderch, "is amongst those things that are loathsome to God."

A later writer could say of the early nonconformist education in Wales:

"They felt that only godliness was to be preferred before learning. They were not afraid that the principles of nonconformity could not stand up to the light of learning, nor were they afraid that placing learning within, would turn nonconformity out of a man. Indeed, they believed the very opposite to be true, the more light there was in the mind, the more godly was the heart, the more firmly would the nonconformist principles grip the nation."⁶

In these academies the educational example of Oxford and Cambridge were followed in that an emphasis was placed on the classics as well as on theology. Charles Owen gives an interesting picture of the life at his elder brother James's academy in Shrewsbury:

"Prayer at 6 a.m. in the summer, and 7 a.m. in the winter. During prayers the word was read and an exposition given out of the Greek New Testament. A psalm was also sung, and the students were expected to recite from memory the contents of the previous Lord's Day's sermon. The lectures began at 9 a.m. and were con-

⁵ H. McLachlan, "English Education Under the Test Acts," (Manchester, 1931) p.17.

⁶ "Y Beirniad" (The Critics, Oct. 1865) cited in: *Hoff Ddysgedig Nyth*, (The Beloved Nest of Learning) by Dewi Eirug Davies page 13. (Publ. Ty John Penry, Swansea 1976).

ducted in Latin, and Latin was also the language of the dinner table. At 6pm the students assembled for prayer and none were allowed to leave the college after that time. Once a week, there would be a public debate between the students in Latin. The main aim of this was to sharpen the mind, help the students to clearly express their opinions, so teaching them to use facts carefully without distorting them, and to know how to present well-reasoned and balanced arguments.”⁷

Samuel Jones, principal of the academy at Brynlllywarch, was referred to by Dr Calamy as a sober, humble man who, in spite of persecution and prison, stood as firm as a rock for his convictions. Calamy also describes him as a great philosopher who was learned in the classics and eastern culture.

The picture we have then of these academies is of centres run by men of learning who were determined that their students would become learned ministers of God’s word. We must not of course get the idea that these academies were thoroughly biblical at all times, they were affected as were other places of learning by Arminianism and other liberal views, but until way past the mid eighteenth century, there were always to be found those who loved the good old doctrines of sovereign grace, and who were ready to stand foursquare on the rock of scripture in spite of powerful winds of doctrine that were seeking to drive them away from the truth.

It is interesting to note that Griffith Jones (see B.R.J. no.20) was the son of non-conformist parents and was educated at the 17th Cent. Presbyterian college in Carmarthen. Other Anglicans were also trained at these academies, and then went out as curates in order to prepare themselves further for the ministry under the supervision of their vicars. This further training would have been on the more practical side of the ministry. In a situation where both vicar and curate were concerned for the glory of God and the good of men’s souls, the system had its obvious strengths. But where these concerns were lacking the lazy, unspiritual types misused the system to suit their own ends and the inevitable destruction of the spiritual lives of the churches entrusted to their care. Notwithstanding there were many in the Established church in Wales who were concerned for decency and order, and had a high regard for biblical orthodoxy⁸.

The advent of the Methodist revival brought about the change in the way men were admitted into the ministry, especially in terms of educational qualifications. Howell Harris, one of the revival leaders, intended to enter the ministry of the Established church, and went up to Oxford in November 1735, but soon gave up his studies to return to his native Breconshire where he kept a school and went from house to house exhorting men to flee from the wrath to come. This “exhorting” soon turned into preaching, and he established a number of religious societies in his own neighbourhood before casting his net further abroad. Here is the beginning of con-

⁷ Charles Owen: *Some Account of the Life and Writings of James Owen.* (1709) Chapt. 12 cited in: Dewi Eirug Davies; Op. Cit. Note 6 above.

⁸ See B.R.J. no. 20, p.18.

fusion in Wales with regards to the office of the minister. Harris was preaching without the necessary training for the most solemn and glorious of employments, and without the required authority and sanction of any church to minister the Word. It is small wonder that he felt the full force of those who were concerned for scriptural principles regarding a learned ministry. The strange thing is that evangelical propaganda tells us that those who were thus concerned were nothing less than opponents of the gospel.

Howell Davies, another who was at the forefront of the revival, was curate to the godly Griffith Jones of Llanddowror. The vicar of Llanddowror speaks of having great trouble in making his curate behave in an orderly fashion⁹. Two other notable names, Daniel Rowlands and William Williams, Pantycelyn, remained curates all their ministerial lives, and yet took the lead in preaching and teaching in the church.

As Methodism grew in power, it is easy to see how it could give authority to non-ordained men to preach and to teach. In 1871, the Calvinistic Methodists could boast 449 ordained ministers and 344 preachers who were not ordained. The education received, could scarcely have been adequate for building up the saints in the most holy faith. A cursory glance at the lives of some of these preachers shows that they were allowed to preach after going public in some small meetings, gradually progressing to the pulpits. The standard of learning they received would depend very much upon the desire of the individual to be educated. John Elias was rebuked by the monthly meeting of Caernarfon presbytery for wanting to go to school in Manchester to learn English. The elders reckoned this desire was only due to Elias's pride and ambition to be a great preacher. Elias later came to understand that it was their care for him and for the cause of religion that made them act so towards him!!!!¹⁰ Small wonder confusion reigned. In the end, John Elias was allowed to go to Evan Richardson's school in Caernarfon, where he, amongst other things, received instruction in Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

It was not until 1836 that the Calvinistic Methodists set up their own theological college for the training of men intending for the ministry at Bala. The first principal was Rev. Dr. Lewis Edwards, and he was assisted by David Charles. The college was first advertised as follows:

"Messrs. L. Edwards & D. Charles announce their intention of giving instruction at Bala in the Classics, Mathematics and other branches of a liberal education."

The appearance of the phrase "a liberal education" ought to have set alarm bells ringing in the minds of any convinced Calvinists. It is small wonder as the century progressed that the pulpits of Wales became filled with those of a modernist persuasion, who paved the way for the jettisoning of the Church's Confession of Faith.

J. Vyrnwy Morgan, in "Welsh Religious Leaders in the Victorian Era," quotes

⁹ David Jones, *"Life and Times of Griffith Jones of Llanddowror,"* (Tentmaker Publications, 1995) p.169.

¹⁰ Edward Morgan, *Op.Cit.*, pp.36-37.

one of Lewis Edwards's students:

"It is no exaggeration to say that he created a new era in Wales. All felt that a new light and a new power had entered into our literature. Hundreds of readers had their eyes opened upon a new world and new visions, among which they have lived ever since.....To their surprise they discovered that there was something besides, and even greater than Wales and its bards, the Eisteddfod and the twenty-four metres, the denominational magazines, and the controversies of 'The Five Points'."

It is obvious from this that true Calvinism was something that could easily be cast aside in the name of love. The question that arises here is: How could a man like Lewis Edwards be given the responsibility to train student ministers? One obvious reason is that the religious climate was not as spiritually healthy as the evangelical propagandists would have us believe. Another reason is that Lewis Edwards, in his day, was seen as a man of great piety, a man who had a great experience of the love of God in his soul. From 1735 onwards, the one and only needful qualification for the ministry was perceived to be an experience of God in the heart, rather than the earlier nonconformist idea of the training of the mind to deal in a truthful and reasonable way with the Word of God. Those who did and do advocate an experience of the love of God need to face up to the fact that there is no scriptural reference to such a thing. In the Wales of today there is a persistent plea from the evangelical pulpits that people should seek to have a deep experience of the love of God. A plea which can only be described as advocating something mythical, and therefore unobtainable. We know of many who suffer great anguish because they doubt the authenticity of their apparent spiritual experiences, or bewail the lack of depth of their experience. How can anyone know that their "experience of God" is adequate enough? Justification, it must be remembered, is by faith alone, not by experience. Whilst true living faith is more than merely the mental notions of the Sabellians, and will indeed produce various conscious experiences from time to time, such experiences vary with the individual, and in themselves are not proper resting places for faith. Faith ultimately is manifested by its fruits, not by experiences.

Some of these modern day descendants of the Methodists who follow their forefathers in placing a great emphasis on this "experience of God" also are followers of the Methodists in holding to an unlearned ministry. Novices are allowed to preach, and examples could be cited of men in the evangelical ministry who have had no formal theological training at all. This lack of a consistent high regard for the training of ministers of the Word has down the years done great harm to the cause of Christ in Wales.

To be continued.....