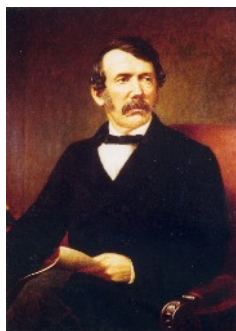


David Livingstone (1813-1873)

by Arthur Fraser

Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC), UK



Dr David Livingstone has had bad press of late. He has been accused of hypocrisy, self-righteousness and ruthlessness in pursuing his own aims; in short, a man with whom it was almost impossible to work. Are these charges justified? And did he, as some claim, abandon true missionary work to become an explorer?

It must be conceded that Livingstone had difficult, even turbulent, relationships with fellow missionaries, not least his in-laws, Dr Robert and Mrs Mary Moffat. In one strongly-worded letter to her son-in-law, Mary signed off “in great perturbation.” When his sending body, the London Missionary Society, would not support his plan to pioneer a new route across Africa, he resigned from it “without a pang.” On his own admission, Livingstone was fiercely independent. Perhaps this trait owed something to his native Highland stock, for although he was reared in the Scottish Lowlands, the family’s ancestral home was the small island of Ulva just off Mull. Whatever the explanation, his independence, coupled with a strong visionary spirit, made him the exceptional man he was.

Finney’s influence

Blantyre, his birthplace, was where he worked from the age of 10 in the local textile factory. Books placed on the spinning-jenny were read through at no longer than a minute at a time, a feat of patience and perseverance which foreshadowed his exploits in later life. Soon after his conversion to Christ at the age of 20, his father Neil, in protest against the patronage system, led the whole family out of the Church of Scotland to join the independent Congregational Chapel at Hamilton. The move was a mixed blessing for Livingstone. Several of the educated members of the chapel, who were in touch with theologians in America, introduced him to the writings of Charles G Finney whose Arminian views coloured his own reformed outlook. In a letter, he once urged a minister friend to read Finney’s works, adding that “ministers... must adapt . . . to save souls, and if sinners are not saved the blame is theirs.” It is salutary to note that he himself could claim only one conversion in the whole of his time in Africa.

Achievements

What then of his achievements? Was he the failure that some have made him out to be? It seems appropriate in this bicentenary year of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to focus first on his crucial role in ending the African slave trade. Nearly 50 years before Livingstone went to Africa (in 1841), William Wilberforce recognised that legitimate commerce would be the most effective way of stamping out slavery in Africa. Thomas Buxton, Wilberforce’s successor, sharpened this conviction in a speech made in London at a meeting which Livingstone himself attended prior to his departure for Africa. The much-criticised and misunderstood remark he made in a speech at Cambridge University, that he was returning to Africa “to make an open path for commerce and Christianity,” has to be read in that light. From his standpoint, it was emphatically not a reversal of his priorities. He was simply stating the accepted thinking of the time. An immediate effect of his explorations was to expose to the world the full horrors of African slavery, especially as practised by the Arab traders. In one terrible massacre at Nyangwe, some 400 people, mostly women and children, were slaughtered. This dreadful event gave him “the impression of being in hell.” His first-

hand accounts made a profound impact on opinion back home, and soon led to the stamping out of this hideous trade on the African continent.

Africa opened to the gospel

But his achievements go very much further. Through his pioneering travels, he truly opened up Africa to the Gospel. Within a decade of his death, mission stations were established in present-day Malawi at Livingstonia and Blantyre. The opening up of Christian work in Uganda, Congo and elsewhere, plus the planting of medical missions, can all be traced directly to his inspiration and influence. On reading the words, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold . . .” engraved on his tomb, Peter Scott was profoundly moved, an experience which proved to be the seed of the African Inland Mission.

Livingstone died a lonely death in an attitude of prayer at his bedside in the heart of the continent he came to love. Figuratively, the seed fell into the ground and died, but it produced much fruit in accordance with the words of Christ. Whatever the failings of this great man – and, yes, he had many – this is how he is to be ultimately judged. When the servant follows his Master, a harvest is sure.

A noble work

This truth was beautifully expressed in a message to Livingstone’s daughter by Lord Polwarth: “His memory will never perish. . . his prayers will be had in everlasting remembrance, and unspeakable blessings will yet flow to that vast continent he opened up at the expense of his life. God called and qualified him for a noble work, which, by grace, he nobly fulfilled, and we can love the honoured servant, and adore the gracious Master.”

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Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

by Alan Tovey

Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC), UK



Why commemorate the tercentenary* of the birth of Isaac Watts? It may be sufficient to answer that question by saying that through his hymns he still has an influence over very many of us; “he being dead yet speaketh” His hymns are no doubt a tender rebuke to us in our tendency towards superficiality in worship at the present time; and they are most certainly valuable aids to us in our pursuit of God. But equally as important, Isaac Watts is a fine example of a dedicated, fruitful and persevering Christian and minister.

Childhood

He was born at Southampton on 17th July, 1674. At the time of his birth, his father was in prison for his Nonconformist convictions. At the age of six Isaac was sent to the local grammar school; even by this time he had shown great promise. The list of his mastery of languages is impressive: he began to learn Latin at four, Greek at nine, French at ten and Hebrew at thirteen. His natural poetic gifts also came to light at an early age. Before he was six he wrote an acrostic upon his name which shows a fine grasp of biblical truth:–

I am a vile polluted lump of earth,

So I've continu'd ever since my birth;
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me,
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me,
Come, therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.

Wash me in thy blood, O Christ,
And grace divine impart,
Then search and try the corners of my heart,
That I in all things may be fit to do
Service to thee, and sing thy praises too.

But Christian faith is more than intellectual grasp of biblical truth, though it is, of course, based on this. Throughout his childhood and early youth, his parents, therefore, prayed for his conversion. He came to the Lord at the age of fifteen. He writes: "Fell under considerable convictions of sin, 1688. And was taught to trust in Christ I hope, 1689."

Education

Dr John Speed, a Southampton physician, offered to pay Isaac's expenses at Oxford or Cambridge with a view to his entering the ministry of the Church of England. But the offer was graciously refused; Isaac had chosen to throw in his lot with the Dissenters. So, on leaving the grammar school, Isaac entered the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington to prepare for the ministry.

At the academy, Isaac laid the ground for the contribution he was to make in a wide range of disciplines.



The Rev. Thomas Rowe, principal of the academy, was also pastor of the Independent congregation at Girdler's Hall, of which congregation Isaac became a member in 1693. Shortly afterwards he left Stoke Newington and spent the next two and a half years at home, even though he was qualified to enter the ministry. In fact, this period was far from unproductive. Critical of the standard of psalmody in Nonconformity he was stimulated by his father's challenge to produce something better. Hence, he began his great work as a hymn-writer. It was at this time that the bulk of the Hymns and Spiritual Songs was written.

Ministry

The next six years were spent as tutor to the son of the wealthy Puritan Sir John Hartopp back at Stoke Newington. Over these years, Watts gave himself to incessant study; this issued in theological, philosophical, educational, and scientific works. There is no doubt as well that it is to overwork during this period that we are to trace his subsequent ill-health. He was ill quite frequently and sometimes for lengthy periods. But rumours that at the last his mind was affected appear, on the evidence of Watts' biographer, Dr Thomas Gibbons, to be quite unfounded.

It is therefore against a background of ill-health – with visits to the popular spas and to Southampton for the sake of his health – that we are to see his ministry.

He preached his first sermon on his twenty-fourth birthday. A year later, in 1699, he became assistant to Dr Isaac Chauncey, pastor of a London Independent congregation which at that time met at Mark Lane. The congregation had its quota of distinguished members in Watts'

day, including Oliver Cromwell's granddaughter and a number of civic and business leaders in the Capital. Among the latter were Sir John Hartopp and his wife and two other of Watts' patrons, Sir Thomas and Lady Abney. When Sir Thomas became Lord Mayor of London he made Watts his chaplain. On the retirement of Dr Chauncey, Watts was invited to be pastor of the church; he accepted the call on 8th March 1702.

The church, which had declined under Dr Chauncey's ministry, prospered under Watts'. But the work proved too much for his frail constitution and the year after he had undertaken full pastoral duties the congregation appointed an assistant for him. This was Rev. Samuel Price.

Watts' venture into romance was with a Miss Singer; but his hopes were soon dashed for when he proposed, she is supposed to have told him, with reference to his rather unimpressive appearance, "Mr Watts, I only wish I could say that I admire the casket as much as I admire the jewel."

On account of Watts' ill-health, Mr Price was ordained co-pastor in 1713 and a year later Watts visited the country home of Sir Thomas Abney, near Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, for the week-end, and remained as a welcome guest for thirty years. On Sundays, when he was well, he travelled in to his church; when he was ill he sent a pastoral letter to be read to the congregation. All the while he was engaged in writing.

Writings



Watts was intensely interested in the creation and wrote a book on astronomy and geography. He saw that reason, unaided by the Holy Spirit, could not discover divine truth. Unhappily Watts did not follow his own principle sufficiently over the discussion of the Trinity, in which he became entangled. His attempts at explaining the Godhead led him into deep waters; but it is not true, as has sometimes been claimed, that he became a Unitarian.

Watts was decidedly modern in his approach to education, believing that the child's latent abilities should be encouraged; but, unlike many modern educationalists, he also believed that children were fallen creatures and needed the discipline of study; even so, mental exercise, like physical, he said, should be "constant and moderate" – that is, a little and often. He wrote a number of textbooks and acted as an adviser to the academies on matters of textbooks and tutors. But above all he was interested in the education of children. He was a supporter of the Charity School movement and wrote 'An Essay towards the Encouragement of Charity Schools among the Dissenters.'

In the theological field, he wrote 'Questions Proper for Students of Divinity' and 'The Sacrifice of Christ and the Operations of the Spirit.' The latter is a defence of the faith once delivered to the saints. It was written in the light of the fact that many of the Presbyterians had been drawn to Unitarianism and thus had forsaken the great truths of the gospel, abandoning, as David Fountain puts it, "the necessity of a Redeemer to atone, and a Sanctifier to renew."

The Psalms and Hymns

But Watts' most enduring work was his paraphrases of the Psalms and his hymns; these were written in the main during the earlier part of his ministry. In the words of David Fountain, he "was to influence the worship of the nation more than any other single man." One of his paraphrases – "Our God, our help in ages past" – says Dr Rupp, "is more than a hymn, it is an

event in English history, and part of our very national existence.” To understand something of the contribution Watts made, we need to know a little of the background against which he worked. The singing of the Psalms was an important element in the worship of the Reformed churches; but the rendering of the Psalms had been somewhat unimaginative. Watts set himself, first of all, the task of making the Psalms into Christian hymns suitable for the use of every believer. He explained his intention thus:

“When the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies, I have endeavoured to turn the edge of them against our spiritual adversaries, Sin, Satan, Temptation. When the flights of his faith and love are sublime, I have often sunk the expressions within the reach of an ordinary Christian: where the words imply some peculiar wants or distresses, joys or blessings, I have used words of greater latitude and comprehension, suited to the general circumstances of men.

“Where the original runs in the form of prophecy concerning Christ and His salvation, I have given an historical turn to the sense; there is no necessity that we should always sing in the obscure and doubtful style of prediction, when the things foretold are brought into open light by a full accomplishment. Where the writers of the New Testament have cited or alluded to any part of the Psalms, I have often indulged the liberty of paraphrase, according to the words of Christ, or His apostles.”

The result is some paraphrases which have enriched the worship of God’s people for generations; there is, for instance, the moving version of Psalm 118 (“This is the day the Lord hath made”). And what child of God hasn’t felt his spirit lifted in praise as he has sung the paraphrase of Psalm 146 (“I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath”)?

Then there are the hymns – some seven hundred of them in all; each one of them is marked by the understanding and sensitivity of its author; they are thoroughly biblical. There are hymns relating to all the great doctrines of Scripture; hymns which cover almost every conceivable situation. They are all characterised, moreover, by a fine blend of revealed truth and experience; that is, the soul’s experience of God is always related to the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Watts’ hymns are full of praise, but the praise of the hymns never becomes over-familiar with God. Indeed, one of them ends with these words:

God is in heaven, and men below;
Be short our tunes, our words be few;
A sacred reverence checks our songs,
And praise sits silent on our tongues.

Last days

Watts’ final years were spent in great weakness of mind. But he had made his contribution to the spread of the Kingdom. His great desire had been for the preaching of the Gospel – he once said that he would rather have written Richard Baxter’s ‘Call to the Unconverted’ than John Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost.’ He had longed for revival and was privileged to see it towards the end of his days. And, for all his accomplishments, it is as a pastor that he would be remembered: he wrote his own epitaph, which begins: “Isaac Watts, D.D., a Pastor of a church of Christ in London.” He died, on 25th November, 1748, cherishing the Christian hope which is so well expressed in one of his hymns – a hymn which takes on a new meaning when we recall his years of illness:

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign,
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

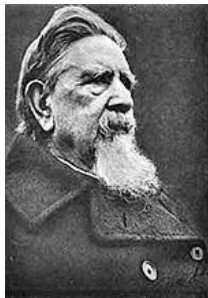
*This article by the late Rev. Alan Tovey first appeared in the Evangelical Magazine of Wales for February-March 1974, and is here abridged and reproduced by kind permission of Mrs Lucy Beale.

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Griffith John (1831-1912)

by Gordon Cooke

Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC), UK



On the dust jacket of his biography* of Griffith John, Noel Gibbard describes his subject as “by any reckoning a spiritual giant,” “a legend in his own lifetime,” “a man of tremendous energy that was sustained by his uncomplicated and powerful faith,” and a man whose “master passion was to spread the Christian message.” Such a man surely deserves the title “Congregational Worthy,” and our careful attention.

Griffith John was born on December 14th, 1831, in Swansea, South Wales. He was brought up a Congregationalist, and at the age of eight was admitted to full membership of his church, Ebenezer Independent Chapel. He was led to apply for membership, having seen his older sister join the church, and consequently questioning himself about his own spiritual condition. Examination by the church deacons followed, and even at such a young age they were convinced of evidence of grace in the young Griffith's heart. That young faith knew many severe tests. Cholera epidemics which were a constant threat in South Wales at that time claimed both his parents, but that same faith was strengthened by his regular learning of Scripture passages. By the age of fourteen he had delivered his first sermon at a prayer meeting, and two years later he was preaching regularly, and marked out as a young man upon whom God was powerfully at work.

Preparing for service

He furthered his studies at Brecon Congregational College, where he began to really feel challenged about serving the Lord in Madagascar, on one occasion being convinced that God was speaking personally to him through the words of Isaiah 6:8, where the prophet hears the question, “Whom shall I send?” He offered himself for service to the London Missionary Society in March, 1853, and to equip himself better for the work there, entered Bedford College in January, 1854. It soon became clear however, that the door to Madagascar was closing, and so the LMS directors suggested China to him. Griffith John accepted, in the belief that it was God's will – “I cannot say I was sorry; I cannot say I was glad.” In April, 1855, he was ordained, and the same month married Margaret Jane Griffiths, the daughter of a former missionary to Madagascar. The next month they sailed for China, arriving four months later, where Griffith John was to serve for over 55 years.

Accomplishments in China

Reading of his accomplishments in China fairly takes our breath away. He immersed himself so completely in the language and culture of the land that he was preaching in the open air within a year, and later was able to debate even with Confucian scholars. From his base, first at Shanghai (1855-61) and then particularly Hankow (1861-1912), he became well known for his extensive missionary journeys into the Chinese interior – journeys that sometimes

stretched to 3,000 miles or more, braving crowds that were often hostile due to the intrusion of the imperial powers in Chinese affairs. Having said that, there were occasions when he only escaped by telling the mob that he was an “Englishman” – a hard thing for a true patriotic Welshman to have to utter! During those journeys, he set up numerous mission stations and truly deserves the title “the apostle to central China.” Like the Apostle Paul before him, he had a burning desire to take the Gospel to places that had never heard its sound before (Romans 15:20).

In many areas of the land he was not only the first Protestant Missionary, but also set up schools, hospitals and training colleges. He was also a fervent anti-opium campaigner. But although he made notable contributions in each of these areas, it was as a preacher of the Gospel that he would want to be remembered. Important as these other matters were, and unlike even some of his contemporaries, he would let nothing get in the way of preaching, convinced, as he was, that it is God’s way. He once said about his work in China: “We are here, not to develop the resources of the country, not for the advancement of civilisation; but to do battle with the power of darkness, to save men from sin, and to conquer China for Christ.”



He was a powerful and eloquent preacher, and crowds of Chinese would gather to hear him. Coupled with this was his desire to put the Scriptures in the hands of the people he preached to, and to this end, he translated the New Testament and a great part of the Old into Mandarin, and the New Testament into Wen-li, as well as authoring popular tracts and pamphlets. He was also notably successful in training and mentoring numerous Chinese evangelists.

Times of trial

But Griffith John was no “plaster saint.” He knew times of great trial, particularly in the loss of infant children, and especially when his soul-mate died after a long period of weakness in 1873. At such a time he wrote: “The truths of the Gospel seemed to be losing their grasp on my heart. My heart was becoming as hard as stone. Whilst logically assenting to the truths which I preach, my heart seemed to repel as fire, the lie to them all.” At such a time, he strengthened himself with the reminder of God’s governance of the world, and that God was not only infinitely wise, but loving to the same degree. We would do well to learn from him.

Summing up, Griffith John was a man of determination which stemmed from human resolution and superhuman faith. He believed in the Gospel, and in the God of the Gospel. He was a man of prayer, but also of determination, a determination that occasionally bordered on stubbornness. In a day marked by so much short-termism in missionary endeavour, it is interesting to note that during a career spanning almost 60 years, John left China only three times, returning finally to England in January of 1912, where he died six months later. The millions of Christians in China today are an eloquent testimony to the quality of the foundations laid by men like Griffith John.

* Griffith John, Apostle to Central China by Noel Gibbard, is published by Bryntirion Press, price £8.95

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