

Samuel Williams (1808-82)

by Adrian King

The thirty-two year old student from Penywaun in Brecon must have wondered how he had allowed himself to get into this situation. He had only come to Cripplestyle to preach on probation, having spent a year with the Reverend Thomas Evans from Shaftesbury to 'familiarize' himself with the English language. It was June 1840, and Samuel Williams had recently travelled the twenty-five miles over The Chase to this isolated community on the edge of the Dorset Heathland. The congregation could not be faulted; they were poor by the world's standards but rich in God's love. They had built their chapel from mud and thatch with their own hands thirty-three years previously, and called it Ebenezer, 'hitherto hath the Lord helped us' – such was their love for Bible truths. Their pastor, William Bailey, had been dead two years.



Mr. Williams came for three months and did not originally intend 'prolonging his residence in that isolated spot' for longer than he could help, yet he remained as pastor there for forty-two years. He was ordained in 1842 by Dr. Condor from Poole.

Not long after he took up the pastorate he married Sarah Fry (1826-1912), a local girl, and they had eleven children: Thomas (1843), Elizabeth (1845), Henry (1847), John (1850), Susannah (1852), Morgan (1857), Ann (1859), Jane (1861), Arthur (1865), Mary (1868) and Sophie (1871).

Due to their circumstances, the people were not able to support the pastor fully but the Home Missionary Society and the County Association gave substantial help.

Samuel Williams had a social ministry; his love was for his flock, ensuring that they were fed and educated, both physically and spiritually.

In 1844, a schoolroom was built in which there was a day school and another room was added to this in 1861. Samuel collected financial support for a teacher right up to the time of his death. A story is told that whilst collecting support he was riding through a sunken track on the heath and he got stuck whilst his horse went from under him, leaving him suspended. In 1858, he held classes in Cranborne; the notice announced that 'a certain proportion of time will be devoted to the Holy Scriptures'.

He also had an itinerant preaching ministry; walking seventeen miles to Salisbury to preach and returning that same day was a regular occurrence. He also had calls to other churches that were able to pay a greater stipend than he was receiving, but accepting them never seemed right.

He never quite settled with his second language. There was a time at college when he found that there were not enough words in that "dreadful English language" (as he called it); he had been struggling with the sermon from the start, but 'could contain himself no longer, bursting forth with poetic eloquence and feeling in his native tongue, concluding in vigorous and stirring Welsh the sermon which he had so anxiously begun in English.'

In the early years of his ministry, he conducted an evening service at Cranborne but this was discontinued when a chapel was purchased at Damerham. He went there twice a week to conduct a Bible class and service and also ensured that the pulpit was supplied on a Sunday.

The "established church" never got on well with the non-conformists in the area. On one occasion a meeting was arranged for the Dissenters of the district. The local vicar, fearing trouble, arranged for two constables to be present. Samuel had been asked to pray and he confined his prayer 'to asking God's blessing on the vicar and upon his spiritual needs as he went in and out among his parishioners.'

Rev. Williams announced his retirement in 1881, but died on March 26th 1882, too early to be able to take up residence in the small cottage that the Marquis of Salisbury (the Prime Minister) had built for him in the grounds of the manse. A new chapel and manse were built in 1888 and named in memory of Samuel Williams.

How do you evaluate forty-two years of service? I can certainly give thanks for the life of Samuel Williams and the legacy that he has left us.

I was brought up at Cripplestyle where my “aunties” and “uncles” could still remember the younger children of Samuel and Sarah Williams.

Times change, people move on; in 2000 with an aging congregation and only a few members, the Williams Memorial Chapel at Cripplestyle closed its doors and joined with the Chapel at Alderholt.



2007 was the bicentenary of the building of Ebenezer.

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William Roby (1766-1830)

by Peter Robinson

According to his biographer, W. G. Robinson (no relation), “more than to any minister of his day, was due the extension of Independency in Lancashire at the beginning of the 19th century. From him and from his church went out waves of expansion, which covered the county and the northwest.”

And in his History of Nonconformity in Lancashire, Nightingale writes: “There had been a remarkable and unprecedented expansion of Independency in Lancashire in the period from 1795 to the beginning of 1830. It is not an exaggeration to say that behind this expansion and largely instrumental in it were the initiative, the wisdom, and the unrelenting toil of Roby himself.”

Before coming to Cannon Street Congregational Church in Manchester, the city in which he ministered for 35 years, he had been a minister with the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion and a diligent itinerant preacher in the surrounding areas. This was an activity he never relinquished, no matter how many his other duties.

It was during these years in Manchester that Roby found several avenues of service that proved such a blessing, not only to the North West of England, but ultimately to the whole world.

Firstly, Roby’s “emphasis upon exertion to spread the Gospel at home,” meant that he contributed directly to the foundation of Congregational churches in Leigh, Hulme, Rochdale, Dukinfield, Oldham and Salford.

Robinson writes, “He was not only concerned to send out his people to build up causes, he also had the courage to ‘dismiss’ members by solemn act of the church so that they might be the nucleus of new churches.” The chapel at Patricroft was founded on Monday April 14th 1800, by Roby: “We remark” says the Evangelical Magazine, “that the congregation has been

collected principally by the successful labours of some worthy members of the church in Cannon Street, who have in other places likewise been very useful.”

Yet far from the church at Cannon Street suffering decline due to the activities that took Roby and other active members from them, their experience was to see the congregation grow by over a 1000 in his time there, from around 150 to 1200.

Secondly, Roby’s influence was spread even further when he was instrumental in founding the Lancashire Congregational Union.

When the Union began in 1806, its primary work was to sponsor evangelism and church planting in the county. The first two men sent out by the union were James Morrow, whose area was the Fylde, one of Roby’s students, and so too was George Partington, who was sent to itinerate in Oldham in 1807.

The Union was fortunate through Roby in finding men like these, but soon it was lamenting “the paucity of suitable persons who come forward to itinerate” and then longing for a theological academy. Roby was behind the resolutions adopted at a meeting of the Union held in October 1808, commending the “expediency of establishing an ‘Academical Institution’ for educating young men for the ministry.”

Roby’s recognition of the need for trained men had led him seven years earlier to found his own academy within the auspices of his ministry at Cannon Street.

It trained 17 men in its brief 5 year history and was the precursor of a line of ministerial training that resulted in the establishment of the Lancashire Independent College in Manchester in 1843.

Finally, Roby was a key player in the formation and growth of the London Missionary Society, which formed in 1795. Along with 33 others, Roby signed a covenant declaring their earnest desire to exert themselves “for the work of promoting the great work of introducing the gospel and its ordinances to the heathen and other unenlightened countries.” One of Roby’s best known gifts to the mission was Robert Moffat who had trained at his academy in Manchester before serving with LMS in Africa.

His biographer writes, “when Roby died, after nearly thirty five years ministry in Manchester, an obvious and radical change had taken place. The tone of Independency was different from that of a century or even a third of a century earlier. It was more robust, more concerned to proclaim the gospel everywhere, more numerous in its following, more strong in the number and condition of its churches. In some ways, the years of Roby’s ministry in Independency were the greatest days of the denomination.”

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Thomas Brooks

by John Lodge

Thomas Brooks was born in 1608, and so we commemorate (even if belatedly) the 400 years anniversary of the birth of one of the great Puritan Pastors. The majority of the evangelical ministers of that era were Presbyterian, but it is a fact that some of the finest preachers and theologians, e.g. John Owen, Thomas Goodwin and our subject, Thomas Brooks, were Independents (Congregationalists). Brooks was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, which was strongly Puritan, and was ordained in 1640.



Today, “Puritans” are often despised and grossly misrepresented by the media, but their leaders were godly men with a heart for the gospel and a pastoral concern for their people. They are sometimes associated with detailed, systematic exposition of books of the Bible, but actually much of their ministry dealt with important themes, and we can still benefit from their writings. C.H. Spurgeon considered Brooks to be one of the most readable (perhaps along with John Bunyan and Thomas Watson).

Books

Two of his most influential books, which are still relevant to our needs, and available today through the Banner of Truth, are Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices and Heaven on Earth. The first reminds us that we are in a spiritual conflict with the enemy of our souls, the Devil, who tempts in both subtle and intense ways. But the Bible does not leave us in ignorance of his methods and provides the means to deal with his onslaughts. The second treatise is about Assurance. Brooks says, “to be in a state of grace is to be miserable no more, it is to be happy for ever . . . but the seeing, the knowing of oneself in such a state is that which renders life sweet and comfortable.” Such assurance is not essential to salvation and there may be times when we lack it, but God has given all the promises and means whereby we might attain it.

Ejected

In 1662, Thomas Brooks, along with 2,000 other ministers, was ejected from his church through refusing to conform to the unreasonable requirements of the Act of Uniformity. Thus the majority of evangelical pastors were removed from the Church of England. He used the occasion to great effect in his farewell sermon to his sorrowing congregation, reminding his flock that opposition to the gospel will surely come, and encouraging them with a summary of their privileges and responsibilities as believers.

Brooks continued to have opportunities to preach in London, and when many leaders of the established church fled the capital during the Great Plague of 1665, he remained with many other Puritan ministers to care for his congregation. The next year he was still to be found comforting his people when the Great Fire destroyed much of the city. Thus we see a true shepherd willing to follow his Master, the “Good Shepherd,” in a willingness to lay down his life, if necessary, for the sheep.

Uncompromising

In church matters, he was quite uncompromising and refused to administer Baptism and the Lord’s Supper indiscriminately. He believed that true religion should be inward and experimental. His last pastorate was at Lime Street Congregational Church in 1672. There his first wife, Martha, whom he greatly treasured, sadly died. He described how she would pour out her soul before God for the Church and the Nation. Brooks later remarried and was looked after by another spiritual wife, Patience, in his closing years till his death in 1680. We should take time to learn from his writings and seek to follow his godly example.

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The godly Dr. Doddridge (1702-1751)

by Ian Densham

Philip Doddridge has had bad press over the years. Even C. H. Spurgeon, who heartily recommended his *Family Expositor*, did not consider that Doddridge was as bold and orthodox as he should have been. Consequently, he has been under a cloud in the minds of many evangelicals. His name has been associated with error, while his years of faithful work have been ignored. He was a child of his times, yet he reacted and responded to events in his lifetime with a spirituality and zeal that would put many of us to shame. The Zondervan *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*



says of him (p 306), “. . . his alleged heresies are probably due to lack of necessary mental equipment to articulate his thoughts clearly.” This is grossly unfair. He was a multi-talented, multi-competent man, whose exploits and achievements leave me breathless – and I have been accused of being a workaholic! He has suffered additionally in recent years from some who have tried to redefine his theology and his orthodoxy. However I believe that he should be regarded as one of the great intellectual Congregational worthies; not on the same level as John Owen, but certainly up among the historically great Congregationalists.

Orthodox

Although he has been much criticised, the facts of his life and the evidence of his writings reveal one who was far more orthodox than many would credit. He was a man of many skills and interests. He had a world view which was unusual for his day. He was a tireless worker and a godly pastor and principal. He was involved in scientific research and wrote and gave papers to the Royal Society. He experimented and even tried a new smallpox drug on himself to further research. He was so concerned about the march south of Bonnie Prince Charlie in November 1745, with his 6,000 claymore-swinging Jacobites, that he organised troops to exercise in Northampton to protect the crown. On hearing that two thousand troops were ready at Northampton, the Young Pretender, who had already reached Derby, turned tail and fled back to Scotland! Doddridge knew that if the House of Hanover was defeated, England would be ruled by the Roman Catholics again.

Northampton Pastorate

Doddridge was minister of Castle Street Congregational Church, Northampton, from 1729 to his early death in 1751. While he was there he was also the Principal of the Doddridge Academy which trained more than 200 men for the ministry. This grew out of John Jennings' Academy at Kibworth in Leicestershire. While Jennings was a godly man, he was not as careful in his theological understanding as Doddridge. Doddridge refined and improved the teaching methods of Jennings and many profited from his wise theological instruction.

Unfair Criticism

In recent times, Doddridge has been called a “moderate Calvinist.” This does not do justice to his strongly held theology and has arisen because of a misunderstanding of his methods. I fear that is partly because some have unfairly criticised him for his desire to teach his students to think and not to spoon-feed them. They have assumed that because one or two of his students did not retain their orthodoxy and fell into Arianism that this was Doddridge's fault. But I hope that I am not held accountable on the Great Day for the theology of everyone who sat under my preaching for any length of time! I trust that many have been well-grounded in the faith, but I am realistic enough to know that some have gone back from

the teaching that they once enjoyed. The grounding in the truth that he gave his students was biblical, theological, heartfelt, warm and practical. Geoffrey Nuttall notes that only three of his students lapsed into Arianism. The repeated charge that Doddridge himself had Arian tendencies has been comprehensively and conclusively answered by Dr Alan Clifford.

His influence on a generation of students and pastors during the days leading up to the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was considerable. He was one of the few who kept alight the light of evangelical religion through days of darkness and religious indifference. He never lived to see the full light of the Evangelical Awakening, but he was foresighted enough to realise that George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers were men of God who were destined to be greatly used. His Academy was one that remained true to the gospel in days when many others were already drifting dangerously. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, considered him to be a man of great spirituality and her assessment should not be lightly dismissed.

“Baxterian Calvinist”?

His system of lectures was unusual for the time in which he lived. He began by dealing with the philosophical and intellectual theories of his day. These had been largely shaped by the philosophy of John Locke, and Doddridge goes out of his way to demonstrate that this foundation is false. He spends many lectures dealing with these matters before turning to the Scriptures to state most emphatically a thoroughly orthodox view of man, the triune God and the gospel through the Lord Jesus Christ. Here I would dissent strongly from Dr Clifford’s view that Doddridge was a “Baxterian Calvinist.” Doddridge did not regard Baxter uncritically, as the following comment on Baxter in his Lectures on Preaching reveal: “He is inaccurate, because he had no regular education, and always wrote in haste, as in the views of eternity; but generally judicious, nervous, spiritual and evangelical; though often charged with the contrary.” Also, John Stoughton, one of Doddridge’s biographers doubted whether Baxter was a “Baxterian” in the normal definition that has grown up around him. These are dangers that apply to any man. I have met many so-called Calvinists who would never be owned by John Calvin, just as there are many so-called Wesleyans whom John Wesley would not recognise if he met them!

Secondary Matters

The genius of Doddridge was that although he had a strong grasp of true theology, he was not prepared to separate from good and godly men with whom he disagreed on secondary matters. One of the things that has impressed me so much over the years is that among the EFCC constituency there are many who have a similar strong grasp of theology, yet regard Christian fellowship more important than dotting every “i” and crossing every “t.” If a man truly loves Christ and desires to live a godly life, then he is my brother in Christ. I rejoice to sit down at the Lord’s Table with him. He may be in error about the doctrine of election – but then he probably thinks that I am in error about the doctrine of the second coming! But on gospel truths we are united. Holiness is our joint desire. O for more men and women with that same spirit of Philip Doddridge in these days! What power it would give to our witness before a godless world!

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Richard Davis of Rothwell (1658–1714)

by Peter Beale

A Welshman born in Cardiganshire in 1658, at the age of 22 he moved to London where he became master of a grammar school from 1680 until he was called to Rothwell. It was while in London that God brought him to faith in Christ. One factor leading up to his conversion was a conversation he had with Dr John Owen, who asked him after what manner he thought to go to God. “Through the Mediator” was his response. At this Dr Owen replied: “Young man, that is easily said; but I do assure you that it is another thing to go to God through the Mediator indeed, than perhaps many men who make use of the expression are aware of. I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little if any experimental acquaintance with God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my Spirit, in a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, ‘But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.’ From whence I received special instruction, peace and comfort, in drawing near to God, through the Mediator; and preached thereupon, immediately after my recovery.”

Following his conversion he became a member of Silver Street Congregational Church. Before long his gifts were recognised by the church, and he was encouraged to make public use of them. It was not long before news of him reached the Congregational Church at Rothwell in Northamptonshire, which had been formed in around 1655, and he received a call to the pastorate there.

Controversial

He was a controversial figure, and attracted much criticism: to what extent this was due to his somewhat combative nature it is difficult to estimate at this distance in time: there may just be an element of truth in the claim made by his most ardent detractor that critics were dismissed on the grounds that “they that speak against Mr. Davis speak against the gospel.”

One of the accusations made against him was that he was a hyper-Calvinist, denying the free offer of the gospel. However, Mike Plant in a paper given at the Congregational Studies Conference in 1987, shows convincingly that he continued to uphold the free offer throughout his ministry.

One of the remarkable things about Richard Davis’s ministry at Rothwell, particularly in the early years, was the phenomenal growth in the membership, and undoubtedly the Lord was at work in revival. And the blessing was not restricted to the town of Rothwell, but folk from the surrounding areas were converted in large numbers. During the course of his ministry, six churches were planted from Rothwell.

Lay Preachers

A notable feature of his practice, and one which brought him much criticism particularly from Presbyterians, was his use of what might be called “lay preachers.” Norman Glass writes: “He not only preached himself wherever he was requested, or wherever he thought the people greatly needed the sound of the gospel; but he also sent out members of his own church to minister in far distance places to those whom he had gathered into church fellowship. This in his day was a completely new thing: it was ‘Independentism’ with a vengeance.”

Evangelistic Zeal

Davis describes his fervent evangelistic aims in his ministry at Rothwell writing at a time when ill-health prevented the journeyings of earlier years: “Since it pleased the God of all grace to call me to labour in his vineyard, he thought good to implant in me some bowels for poor souls, which laid me under a necessity to take many journeys formerly, to offer the grace of God in Christ, and to proclaim his name to saints and sinners, under many labours, frowns, and reproaches. Thus I continued when the darkness grew great amongst God’s

children and my labours met with many discouragements, because I thought the Lord's sick family did in a manner want visits of love, and the souls of the disciples stood in the greatest need of confirmation in so gloomy a dispensation."

Davis died on 11 September 1714, in his 56th year. The church book records, "Mr. Richard Davis Pastor, after he had faithfully with hard labour and travel thro' many and great difficulties, slanders, reproaches, and persecutions, for about five and twenty years served the Lord in this house. He was taken to rest. And to receive the crown of glory." Maurice writes: "His mind was stayed upon the Lord, and so was kept in perfect peace. The doctrine of God's everlasting love to his chosen, their covenant-relation to Christ, their justification through grace in the imputed righteousness of Christ, together with all their salvation under the operations of the Spirit, through all grace, unto all glory, his soul to the last delighted in. He rejoiced greatly that he was going to the God of all grace, and desired others might rejoice with him on that account; and having gone through his appointed time fell asleep in Jesus."

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Robert Haldane

By Arthur Fraser

Life is full of surprises, it is often said. That is certainly true of the life story of Robert Haldane. Very few, one imagines, would have been able to claim that the path to their conversion to Christ began with the French Revolution. Yet Robert Haldane made precisely that claim. The momentous event "aroused [him] from the sleep of spiritual death," according to his nephew-biographer. How? Not, perhaps, as we might have expected. For to begin with, he viewed the political convulsion on the continent favourably, believing that it opened the door to the betterment of mankind. His vision for social justice, which took little account of man's native depravity, was deeply stirred by the upheavals across the Channel. But thanks to the influence of discerning evangelical ministers in the area, his ardent political convictions were skilfully re-directed towards higher goals and this process ultimately led to his salvation. Describing the transition, he pithily remarked that, "missing the shadow, I caught the substance." However, it was to take quite some time before he lived down his perceived pro-revolutionary stance, and even his later missionary endeavours at home and abroad were construed as politically subversive in some quarters.



Robert Haldane, a wealthy Scottish landowner, was destined to make a profound impact on the Christian world in more ways than one. He himself regarded the greatest achievement of his life as having the Apocrypha removed from Bibles circulated in the Continent. This success came in the late 1820s, only after a long and bitter dispute with the British and Foreign Bible Society which, at the time, was receiving many demands for Apocrypha-containing Bibles, even from Lutheran and Reformed Protestant churches! Surprisingly, Haldane's many opponents in the controversy included several members of the 'Clapham Sect,' such as Charles Simeon, who employed the "becoming all things to all men" argument. An important by-product of Haldane's campaign on the Apocrypha was his publication of a major work on the plenary inspiration of Scripture, which restored the evangelical faith of a significant number of ministers.

Other analysts of Haldane's life might judge, with some justification, that his finest achievements stemmed from his missionary work in Geneva in 1816-17. Burdened by the low spiritual state of Europe generally, his ambition to visit that famous city was finally realised after the Napoleonic wars had ended. Sadly, Calvin would not have recognised the Geneva of that time. The last embers of the Reformation had all but died. The theological academies and churches were thoroughly permeated by pernicious heresies. Ignorance of the Bible was lamentable in professors, pastors and students alike. But, through his masterly exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans (subsequently transcribed into his classic commentary) to a small group of interested students, Haldane was instrumental, in God's hands, in fanning the flame of a fresh revival in Europe. Notable men in this 19th-century second Reformation, men like Frederic Monod, Cesar Malan and Merle D'Aubigné, all owed their conversion to the opening up of the whole counsel of God by this dedicated missionary. Aware no doubt of the nature of his audience, D'Aubigné included this tribute in a speech he gave in Edinburgh in 1845, some 3 years after Haldane's death: ". . . if Geneva gave something to Scotland at the time of the Reformation, . . . Geneva has received something from Scotland in return, in the blessed exertions of Robert Haldane."

A zealous missionary spirit had characterized the life of Robert Haldane ever since his conversion in 1794. Inspired by Carey's work in India, he planned a mission to Bengal, taking with him several hand-picked men. Amongst these was Dr. Bogue of Gosport, to whom he owed much for his conversion after his brief naval career. The whole venture was to be financed by the sale of his large estate at Gleneagles. However, the aim was ultimately thwarted by the opposition of the India Company.

Haldane then turned to mission work in Scotland. Along with his younger brother James, he established the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home (SPGH). Other developments quickly followed. Bibles and religious tracts were printed for public distribution, Bible seminaries were established for the training of men for itinerant preaching, and places of worship, modelled on Whitefield's tabernacles, were built in several major cities. All these projects were financed solely by Haldane from the proceeds of his estate.

Meanwhile, some 12 men, including the Haldane brothers, "resolved to form themselves into a Congregational Church" in 1799. What they termed "impure communion" in the Established church was the key factor in this far-reaching move. Robert subsequently recorded that this had never been the original intention, but came to "rejoice in the Institution." The teaching at his seminaries contributed to the rapid growth of Congregationalism in Scotland at this time. Students came from various Presbyterian backgrounds, but according to one under Dr. Ewing's tuition at Glasgow, "they found [themselves] decided and intelligent Congregationalists" by the end of the course.

The Congregational cause continued to flourish until around 1808 when Robert, followed by his brother, sought to promote forms of worship in the churches which they regarded as most in line with apostolic practice. This included adopting a Baptist position, a move which precipitated a huge upheaval in the new churches, resulting in a permanent rupture between them and the Haldanes. Congregational churches then pursued an independent line, becoming self-supporting financially and continuing to advance the gospel in Scotland through itinerant evangelism.

Despite this sad division, nothing can take away from the pivotal role played by Robert Haldane in promoting the cause of Congregationalism in Scotland. But it does come rather as a shock that a well-motivated decision on his part should have such unhappy fallout. Life is, indeed, full of surprises.

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