
A table of contents for the *Congregational Studies Conference Papers* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_congregational-studies-conference_01.php

A Wondrous Gospel to proclaim

Congregational Studies Conference 2016

A Wondrous Gospel to proclaim

Michael A. G. Haykin

Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2016

For information on EFCC and previous
Congregational Studies Conference Papers, contact:

The Office Manager,
The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches,
PO Box 34,
Beverley,
East Yorkshire,
England
HU17 0YY

e-mail: efcc@efcc.karoo.co.uk
Visit the web-site: www.efcc.org.uk

Except where stated, the paintings and photographs reproduced with the papers are courtesy of the Evangelical Library. The Library is a source of most of the books referred to in the papers, many available for loan to members. Details are available from The Evangelical Library, 5/6 Gateway Mews, Ringway, Bounds Green, London, N11 2UT, tel: 020 8362 0868.
www.evangelical-library.org.uk

Many old Congregational writings, and biographies of Asahel Nettleton or contemporaneous material about his debate with Finney, can be found on the internet, particularly at www.quintapress.com/PDF_Books.html

Contents

The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual the contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his papers.

Michael A. G. Haykin is the Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A native of Birmingham (and thus a supporter of Aston Villa), his family emigrated to Canada when he was 12. Converted in 1974, he attended Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto from 1974 to 1982, earning a doctorate in patristics. He has held several academic positions before taking up his current appointment in 2007. He has a wide range of interests, not limited to Baptist history, as is clear from the papers at our Conference. He has published numerous books on history and spirituality, and is involved with publishing through Joshua Press. He, his wife Allison and their children Victoria and Nigel live in Dundas, Ontario, and worship at West Highland Baptist Church, Hamilton, Ontario.

Foreword

We are very pleased to have all of our lectures this year delivered by Michael Haykin. Michael has a broad range of interests and is not narrow in his studies or affiliations. In 2014 he organised a conference celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of George Whitefield, with lectures given by Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Anglicans.

The subjects he here deals with are important ones. The theology and methods of evangelism changed dramatically during the life of Asahel Nettleton because of the 'New Measures' introduced by Charles Finney. It has been suggested that regular revivals disappeared as a consequence of Finney's innovations. Perhaps a return to Nettleton's message and method might see God pouring out his Holy Spirit upon us in revival once again.

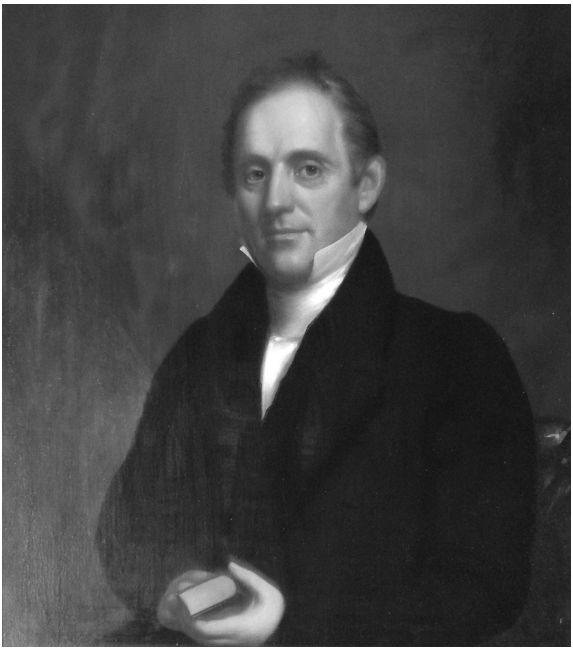
John Owen, the great Congregational theologian of the 17th century, has, perhaps, been too little represented at this conference. This will be only the fourth paper devoted to his teaching in the 35 year history of the Conference. Owen is considered dry and impenetrable by some, but, as Michael shows, there is a warm spirituality to be found in his writings.

Isaac Watts needs little introduction to Congregationalists and those who appreciate good hymnody. We discover here how much the Cross meant to him and how we should appreciate his hymns. It is interesting that there is a recent book on Watts' greatest hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous Cross' (the greatest hymn ever written according to Gordon Booth) written by a minister committed to exclusive psalmody.

God willing we will meet again in March 2017 to consider further practical subjects from the Scriptures and history that we might together grow in godliness and the knowledge of God.

Dr Digby L. James

Quinta Church, Weston Rhyn



Portrait of Nettleton, now once again on display at Hartford Seminary

The gravestones of Asahel Nettleton (foreground) and Bennet Tyler (pillar) in the graveyard behind the Ellsworth School, the site of the seminary founded by Nettleton and Tyler, now moved to Hartford

Asahel Nettleton: Calvinist evangelist in the Second Great Awakening

The Alan Tovey Memorial Lecture

Revival occurs when the Holy Spirit sovereignly moves in the lives of the people of God, restoring and deepening their joy in Christ, their love for one another and their fervency in praying for the salvation of unbelievers. It then manifests itself in the salvation of significant numbers of unbelievers as the Word of God impacts their lives, brings conviction of sin and a recognition that Christ alone is the way of salvation. In the long run, communities, even whole nations, are transformed to the glory of God.

Usually when evangelicals think of revival, their minds go back to the trans-Atlantic revivals in the mid-eighteenth century and its constellation of larger-than-life figures like George Whitefield (1714–1770), the Wesley brothers, and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). In the history of the United States, though, the revivals that swept the nation between the 1790s and 1830s were just as significant, and possibly more so. The Second Great Awakening can be traced to the early 1790s, possibly the year 1792. In New England, this period of revival began uniformly in congregations pastored by New Divinity men, disciples of Jonathan Edwards.[1] And in this second era of revival, which historians call the Second Great Awakening, no name should be more prominent than that of Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844).

Today, though, he is largely forgotten. Illustrative of this neglect is the fact that Nettleton's official portrait, which once hung in a prominent place in the halls of Hartford Theological Seminary (now simply Hartford Seminary), the school that he was instrumental in founding in 1833, was found by his major twentieth-century biographer John Thornbury gathering dust in an attic.[2] In fact, if any preacher's name from his era of revival is remembered it is that of Charles G. Finney (1792–1875), who began to preach towards the close of this

1 Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 416.

2 John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire/Grand Rapids, MI: Evangelical Press, 1977), frontispiece and 229.

time of awakening. This is to be regretted, for as Thornbury has rightly noted, Nettleton 'very well may have been, next to George Whitefield, the most effective evangelist in the history of the United States,'[3] while Finney's theology, as will be seen, was profoundly aberrant.

'The state of religion is gloomy': The impact of Deism

Asahel Nettleton's life span of approximately sixty years from 1783 to 1844 covered an exceedingly eventful period in the history of the United States. In the year that he was born, the American Revolution ended and initiated a period of decline that lasted two decades or so. The war itself had begun this process of decline: it led to ministers having to flee when opposing armies approached their places of ministry. For example, Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) had to flee from British-occupied Newport as did Oliver Hart (1723–1795) from Charleston when it was under British control. A good number of ministers were drawn into army chaplaincies with the Continental army—an example of this was Jonathan Edwards's grandson Timothy Dwight (1752–1817). Moreover, the disruption and occasional devastation wrought by the war left churches disorganized and the minds of their members taken up primarily with questions of a military or political nature.

Into this moral and spiritual vacuum came the philosophical system of Deism. Early proponents of Deism in England, authors like John Toland (1670–1722), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), and Matthew Tindal (1655–1733), were sick of the religious wars and controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They had come to regard the Bible as the major source of these conflicts. They thus sought a religion shorn of its dependence on the Bible, indeed shorn of any dependence on revelation and the miraculous, in which only what could successfully pass the test of being wholly in accord with human reason needed to be affirmed as religious truth. This undue confidence in human reason was in turn linked with the development of scientific investigation associated with the names of scientists like Isaac Newton (1642–1727).

While this philosophical system eventually withered in mid-eighteenth century England under the attack of Evangelicals, it flourished in France through the influence of men of letters like Voltaire, aka François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778). And after the American Revolution, it also flourished in America. France had sided with the American colonies during the Revolution, and had given soldiers to fight on behalf of the Revolution against the British. A good

3 Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 233.

number of the French soldiers were atheists, who despised the idea of God and vehemently denied any life after death. Most American soldiers had never heard the divine origin of the Scriptures questioned, and they had no answers to the simplest of objections. As Timothy Dwight said of these soldiers: 'They perfectly knew how … to put arguments to flight with a sneer, to stifle conscience with a smile, and to overbear investigation by confronting it with the voice and authority of the great world.'[4]

One witness to the impact of Deism after the Revolution was Devereaux Jarratt (1733–1801), the most significant Methodist leader in Virginia. Deeply influenced by the ministry of George Whitefield, Jarratt had had an unusual ministry of vibrant evangelism and zealous preaching such that the churches of his three-point charge became so crowded that he was compelled to hold services outside the church building. Yet by 1794 all of this had changed. At that time Jarratt wrote sadly:

> The present time is marked by peculiar traits of impiety and such an almost universal inattention to the concerns of religion that very few will attend except on Sunday to hear the word of the Lord. … The state of religion is gloomy and distressing; the church of Christ seems to be sunk very low.[5]

'A rebel against God': the early years of Asahel Nettleton

Spiritually the situation in post-revolutionary America thus appeared quite bleak. But God was still sovereign and it was into this spiritually-frigid climate that he sent revival. In what has become known as the Second Great Awakening, it was Asahel Nettleton whom God used to bring many into the kingdom.

Asahel was born in 1783 into a farming family in Connecticut. His early life was uneventful. He received basic religious instruction as he grew up and in the eyes of his parents and neighbours he was a virtuous young man. But he knew nothing of saving grace. Though he was morally upright, he knew in his heart that he had never been 'born again.' He knew that there was such a thing as conversion, and he knew that he had not experienced it.

During his early years, his thoughts often turned toward God and eternity. Thornbury describes how 'one evening while standing alone in a field, he watched the sun go down. The approaching night reminded

4 Cited Keith J. Hardman, *The Spiritual Awakeners: American Revivalists from Solomon Stoddard to D.L. Moody* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 110.
5 Cited Hardman, *Spiritual Awakeners*, 117.

him that his own life would some day fade into the darkness of the world beyond. He suddenly realized that he, like all other people, would die.'[6] This experience was emblazoned on Nettleton's memory, though at the time it did not bring a change of state.

In the autumn of 1800 Nettleton came under powerful conviction of sin. He later wrote: 'I read [the Bible], and prayed, and strove in every possible way to prepare myself to go to God, that I might be saved from His wrath. The more I strove in this selfish way, the more anxious I was.'[7] The use of the means of grace led him to believe 'God [was] obliged to love me, because I had done so much for Him.' This description of his state shows the deep influence of the theology of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), for whom mature spirituality is revealed by a love that primarily loves God for his own sake and not for what he does for us.

He was also sitting under the preaching of a certain Josiah B. Andrews, who had come to pastor the Congregationalist church in North Killingworth, where Nettleton lived, in the spring of 1801. Andrews' preaching deepened his conviction that he was a sinner who needed salvation.[8] At the time of his conversion, Nettleton saw something of the wickedness of his heart, and clearly realized that 'he should never repent unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace.' Yet, he also saw 'that he had no excuse for continuing another moment a rebel against God' because 'it was his immediate duty to repent'—a very Edwardsean concept. Not long after Andrews came to North Killingworth, there was a revival in the town—by December 1801, there were 32 new converts and by March 1802 'the congregation had been swelled by ninety-one professions.' Among them was Nettleton.

'An itinerant evangelist': the calling and ministry of Nettleton

Immediately after his conversion Nettleton became 'exceedingly interested' in missionary societies, especially the London Missionary Society and the Baptist Missionary Society, and he soon had 'a strong desire to become a missionary to the heathen.'[9] Needing preparation, he studied under Josiah Andrews in the hope that he would eventually be able to go to Yale for further education. This dream was realized in autumn, 1805.

6 Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 27.
7 Bennet Tyler and Andrew A. Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours* (1854 ed.; repr. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 20–21.
8 Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours,* 27–29.
9 Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours,* 34–35.

The President of Yale at the time was Timothy Dwight, one of the many grandsons of Jonathan Edwards. Dwight had come to Yale in 1795. When Dwight assumed the presidency, there were about 110 students. Discipline was notoriously slack; and intemperance, profanity, gambling, licentiousness were all common. Most of the students were infidels and called each other by the names of various French Deists, such as Voltaire, D'Alembert (1717–1783), Diderot (1713–1784), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Dwight soon drew the battle lines between two alternatives, Christianity or infidelity. Lyman Beecher (1775–1763), the future Presbyterian minister, later recalled one impressive incident in Dwight's reforming of Yale:

> [The students at first] thought the Faculty were afraid of free discussion. But when they handed Dr. Dwight a list of subjects for class discussion, to their surprise he selected this: 'Is the Bible the word of God?' and told them to do their best.
>
> He heard all they had to say, answered them, and there was an end. He preached incessantly for six months on the subject, and all infidelity skulked and hid its head. … He was universally revered and loved. [10]

Dwight's attack on Deism lasted seven years. In his chapel messages he carefully explained the dangers to public morals of all departures from revealed truth. A series of sermons that lasted for four years presented an entire system of divinity in which Deism was answered and overthrown. In 1802 there was a revival on campus and some fifty students were converted. Further revivals occurred in 1808, 1813, 1815, and 1820 (Nettleton was instrumental in this last revival). Students took the revival to churches throughout Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island.

It was Dwight who once remarked of Nettleton during the latter's time at Yale: 'He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen.'[11] Nettleton, though, was an average student. He received his B.A. in 1809 and emerged from Yale, with theological convictions largely moulded by the reading of Scripture and the evangelical Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and that of two of his most important disciples, Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790) and Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803)[12]

10 Cited Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792–1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 13.
11 Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours,* 41.
12 Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours,* 47.

After graduation he spent a year with a pastor named Bezaleel Pinneo at Milford, Connecticut from 1810 to May 1811.[13] He was licensed to preach that month. In the following year, in the fall of 1812, he received an invitation to preach in a church in South Salem, New York. On the way there he stopped at a church in South Britain, Connecticut, where his future friend and biographer Bennet Tyler (1783–1858) was the pastor. A revival was taking place in Tyler's congregation and Tyler asked Nettleton to preach. The latter did so with great fervor and several people were converted. As Thornbury notes: 'God had showed Asahel what his life's work was to be. … He was not to be a missionary but an itinerant evangelist.'[14]

Francis Wayland (1796–1865), a very important Baptist in mid-nineteenth-century America, described Nettleton's ministry thus from personal experience:

> He was among the most effective preachers I have ever known … I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions. …He rarely visited a place where a revival did not follow him. [15]

Of his preaching, Wayland said: 'In preaching … his whole aspect was that of a man who had just come from intimate communion with God.'[16] And of his personal character, Wayland noted:

> His manner of life was consistent with his appearance in the pulpit. His residence was generally with the minister of the parish in which he was laboring. The time not employed in preaching or conversation with inquirers, was devoted to secret prayer and the reading of the Scriptures. He was never seen in what is called general society. His whole time seemed devoted to labor for souls. He was unmarried, and, to avoid remark, never rode or walked with a lady alone. …
>
> It was generally admitted that his appearance in a town was the precursor of a revival. This fact aroused all the virulence of men at enmity with God. His mode of conducting meetings was somewhat peculiar, and his

13 Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 42.
14 Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 53.
15 Francis Wayland, Jr. and H.L. Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland, D.D., LL.D.* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1867), I, 108, 109. Recollections based on intimate acquaintance: 'I became intimately acquainted with Mr. Nettleton, and my conversations with him were of great use to me' (111).
16 Wayland and Wayland, *Memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland*, I, 109–110. For his methodology, see R.S. Smith, 'Asahel Nettleton—God's Instrument in Revival,' *The Banner of Truth,* 233 (February 1983), 17–18. For examples of his sermons, see Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours*, 131–135, 147–148, 209–213.

> preaching singularly bold and uncompromising. Thus he greatly excited against him those professors of religion who did not like anything new in the mode of preaching. Hence, at first, good men would frequently turn aside from him, and too readily give heed to the slanders of wicked men. … To such attacks Mr. N. never deigned to make a word of reply, nor did he ever intimate that he knew of their existence. He considered that a man's character is the best defence of his reputation, and he left it to time and to the providence of God to refute the slanders.[17]

Although there is no way of knowing how many were brought to salvation through his preaching, a conservative estimate would be twenty-five thousand or more. On the basis of reports of first-hand witnesses and of pastors who laboured in the communities where his revivals took place up to thirty years later, only a small fraction of these converts were spurious. The population of the United States in 1820 would have been around nine million.[18] Today the US population is 322 million; a comparable impact would result in nearly a million converts!

Understandably, Nettleton was often compared to George Whitefield. Theologically both were convinced and articulate Calvinists; but there were key differences. Whitefield excelled in preaching, was extremely eloquent and sometimes multitudes would profess Christ after hearing but one of his sermons. Nettleton's success lay in the combined effect of preaching and private conversation with individuals. In small groups and individual conversations Nettleton re-applied on a personal level what he had said from the pulpit.[19]

The long-term impact of the revivals in which Nettleton was the key instrument of the Holy Spirit was three-fold:

- Calvinism was re-established as viable theological perspective and was seen as thoroughly evangelical.
- The revivals had a positive impact on society and thus acquired a good name.
- The fruit of these revivals was permanent and there were but few who fell away.[20]

Finney and Finneyism

Of course, Nettleton was not the only evangelist laboring during this era of revival. Near the close of this remarkable period of revival, a

17 Wayland and Wayland, *Memoir*, I, 110–111.
18 Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 233.
19 See John F. Thornbury, 'Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism', *Reformation and Revival*, 8, no.2 (Spring 1999): 106–107.
20 See Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours*, 331–333.

young evangelist by the name of Charles Grandison Finney, described by Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe as the 'father of modern revivalism,'[21] came to the fore in upstate New York.

To understand Finney, it is vital to understand his personality, for in many ways his personality shaped his doctrinal perspective. 'For much of his life,' Keith J. Hardman has noted, 'a fixed determination, rigidity of purpose, and absolute conviction of the rightness of his way seem to dominate his character.'[22] Many found him stern, implacable.[23] At times, he could be almost ruthless.[24] At the height of his career he was described as stern and unbending.[25] In the last years of his life when he was teaching at Oberlin College, though, he mellowed a great deal.[26] But, as Keith J. Hardman, the author of one of the best biographies on Finney, has noted: 'utter self-confidence, and a fierce determination of will were his to the last hour.'[27]

Now, Finney would later argue that right from the beginning of his intellectual career, even before his conversion, he was in strong disagreement with Calvinism. The truth is more probably that he entertained some doubts about Calvinism. Finney's reaction to Calvinism is very similar to what is native to every man who wants to consider himself in control.[28] As Hardman puts it: 'At the heart of Finney's difficulty [with Calvinism] was the crucial idea of human nature, the question of how much power of choice and action was left to the unsaved. It was not only the problem of a free or unfree will, but also whether sin was inherited from Adam's fall, and if original sin had so … [vitiated] human power to obey God that there was no possibility of obedience before salvation.'[29]

Finney came to declare the classical dogma of original sin to be 'anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma.'[30] and plainly denied the notion that human beings possess a sinful nature. As he put it:

> It is a monstrous and blasphemous dogma, that a holy God is angry

21 'Finney, Charles Grandison', *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans and Leiden/Boston/Köln: E.J. Brill, 2001), 2:318.
22 *Charles Grandison Finney*, 41.
23 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 41.
24 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 58.
25 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 71.
26 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 353.
27 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 447.
28 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 45–46.
29 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 47.
30 Charles Hodge, "Finney's Lectures on Theology," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (April 1847), 244–258.

> with any creature for possessing a nature with which he was sent into being without his knowledge or consent. … Original or constitutional sinfulness, physical regeneration, and all their kindred and resulting dogmas, are alike subversive of the gospel, and repulsive to the human intelligence.[31]

It is quite clear from this quote that the 'idea of a fallen will, necessitated and unable to freely choose, was especially repugnant' to Finney. He was convinced that human ability was commensurate with human obligation and duty. God cannot command us to do what we cannot do. In Finney's thinking, man naturally has 'the inalienable power to obey God perfectly.'[32] People, therefore, are not sinners from birth, but from choice. Original sin is a fiction.[33]

Thus, for Finney, sin is always 'a voluntary and responsible choice' and 'a phenomenon of the will.'[34] Sin has to do primarily with our actions, not our nature. Why then didn't men obey God? Simply, Finney argued, because they won't. How can they obey God? They are made willing by the Holy Spirit. But the question is, 'How does the Holy Spirit work in this regard?' Finney's answer is that the Spirit *persuades* men to obey. When the truth is preached, the Spirit uses it to persuade sinners to comply with the gospel summons to believe in Christ.[35] Finney believed that men and women can resist the Spirit's work of persuasion and thus resist God's saving work. In his words: 'It is certain that men are *able* to resist the utmost influence that the truth can exert upon them; and therefore have ability to defeat the wisest, most benevolent, and most powerful exertions which the Holy Spirit can make.'[36] In Finney's theology, the Spirit's ministry is reduced to primarily persuasion and illumination. He does not give men new hearts, but persuades men to renounce sin. As Hardman notes:

> Whenever it was that these ideas matured, Finney prided himself that his own intellect had brought him to question Calvinism, and that few others had discovered the same ideas previously. It was hardly so. These

31 Charles Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (Repr. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), 179.
32 B.B. Warfield, "The Theology of Charles G. Finney" in his *Perfectionism*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1958), 173–174.
33 See Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 390–391.
34 Quoted David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G. Finney* (Metuchen, NJ/London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 165–166.
35 Weddle, *The Law as Gospel,* 171; Warfield, "Theology of Charles G. Finney", 175–176.
36 Cited Warfield, 'Theology of Charles G. Finney', 176.

> were similar to the arguments that had been advanced by Pelagius, [and] attacked by Augustine. … And somewhat parallel notions of free will had been advanced by Erasmus and attacked by Luther in 1524 and 1525.[37]

Finney and the 'New Measures'

Not surprisingly, for Finney, to quote the words of Sydney Ahlstrom: 'revivals came to be understood less as "the mighty acts of God" than as the achievement of preachers who won the consent of sinners.'[38] In order to facilitate the work of the Spirit in revival, Finney adopted a series of what came to be called 'new measures,' which were central in the conflict that erupted between Nettleton and Finney in the 1820s, such things as:[39]

- Having daily services, known as protracted meetings;
- The use of colloquial language in the pulpit;
- Praying for the conversion of people by name in public;
- Employing what was called the anxious seat or bench;
- Allowing immediate church membership for converts.

It is important to understand Finney's rationale regarding the use of these measures or 'means' in conducting a revival. The New Testament, Finney believed, was completely silent regarding forms of evangelism, and the ways and means of evangelizing. While Christ's command is clear in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15, no special directions have been given as to the best way to prosecute this task. Hence, every generation has substantial freedom to introduce new measures to get the task of evangelism done. Let us look more closely at the most controversial of these new measures, the anxious seat.

Finney introduced what became known as 'the anxious seat' during the 1830–1831 revival at Rochester, New York, which appears to have been a genuine work of God.[40] The invitation to come forward to such a 'seat' did not originate with Finney, as he admitted. One of the earliest references to this practice is found in the journal of a Methodist itinerant in 1798. It was then taken up by Baptists in North Carolina. It flourished in camp meetings in Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. But it was Finney whose use of the 'anxious seat' made it popular. What was the reason for Finney introducing it in Rochester? He wanted to bring 'sinners' to a decision. He wanted to emphasize

37 Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 48.
38 Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 420.
39 See Tyler and Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labours*, 308; Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 84.
40 *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 306–308.

that sinners were expected to give their hearts up to Christ fully and without reservation. It was a means by which they would commit themselves publicly and unreservedly to the service of Christ.

From a theological point of view, Finney saw the 'anxious seat' as a replacement for baptism. In Finney's mind, baptism in the New Testament era had functioned as a way of shocking people out of their complacency; the anxious bench was such a means for his day. In time, the response to the invitation of the evangelist to come forward to the anxious seat was equated with actual conversion. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has rightly argued that this 'decisionism' reveals a lack of trust in the work of the Holy Spirit:

> [I]s not this practice based ultimately on a distrust of the Holy Spirit and His power and His work? Does it not imply that the Holy Spirit needs to be helped and aided and supplemented, that the work has to be hastened, that we cannot leave it in the hands of the Spirit?"[41]

It also raises, in connection with this, the question of regeneration: is it wholly the Spirit's work or not? Again Lloyd-Jones is right when he states: 'We must learn to trust the Spirit and to rely upon His infallible work.'[42]

Part of Finney's legacy was that evangelists came to conceive of the rebirth of their hearers as their responsibility. Instead of serving as midwives to the Holy Spirit's sovereign, gracious work of salvation, they now had to convince human wills to turn to God by every means—'new measures'—at their disposal. This led to the use of manipulative techniques: 'multiple repetitions of hymns during lengthy invitations,' and hard-sell salesmanship aimed at immediate decisions.[43]

Conflict with Nettleton was inevitable. Things came to a head at the New Lebanon Convention, as it came to be called, held in New Lebanon, New York, from 18 July–26 July 1827—a week of summer days that were oppressively hot and humid. Nettleton and eight ministers who took his side met with Finney and an equal number of men who supported him. Although Finney was not formally on trial, his new measures were. If the new measures were condemned, Finney's

41 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 276–277.

42 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 282.

43 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life. An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979). 252. The effects were seen even in Finney's day: see Charles G. Finney, *Reflections on Revival,* compiled Donald W. Dayton (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1979), 14–18.

career would suffer irreparable harm. What is noteworthy about the formal meetings that comprised this convention is that for some of them Nettleton was quite ill (he had had malaria a number of years earlier and it returned to plague him from time to time) and he did not attend them. His absence and the consequent lack of strong leadership gave Finney and his followers the opportunity they needed to present a somewhat convincing case for the new measures. Moreover, discussion at the convention never went to the heart of the issue, namely, Finney's aberrant theology. Finney's essentially Pelagian thinking about the human condition and total depravity was never raised. His new measures, albeit problematic, were but an expression of his wrong thinking on more fundamental issues. The failure to condemn the teaching of Finney and his friends, mean that they emerged from this convention as vindicated in their use of the new measures.

The long-range implications of the failure to condemn Finneyism have been well captured by the following quote from Douglas Frank as he writes about the changes that came into the ranks of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism as a long-term result of the thinking of men like Finney:

> The most striking change seems to have been a trivialization of the understanding of 'sin.' This biblical concept, which in the writings of the apostle Paul is laden with deep spiritual meaning and is thick with psychological subtlety, became in evangelicalism a description of certain human acts that … are rooted in nothing much more serious than erroneous reasoning.
>
> The evangelical consensus, by mid-century, seems to have lost the dark vision of human nature that the Reformers had felt and expressed with such shattering force. To the likes of Luther and Calvin, it would have been unthinkable that mere unreasonableness or discrete acts of disobedience separated us from God. They held that radical human unbelief, a spirit of rebellion, distorts all our faculties, bringing even the best use of human reason and the highest of human purposes to their service. Thus, a fallen reason can be trusted only to build a network of lies, to substitute 'agreeable false portraits of God' and of humans for the truth. Christian theology had come quite a distance from John Calvin's view that human beings are held in bondage to their own corrupt natures to Nathaniel Taylor's [and Charles Finney's] confidence that men and women are free agents, attested by nothing more empirical than self-examination. In truth, as one observer puts

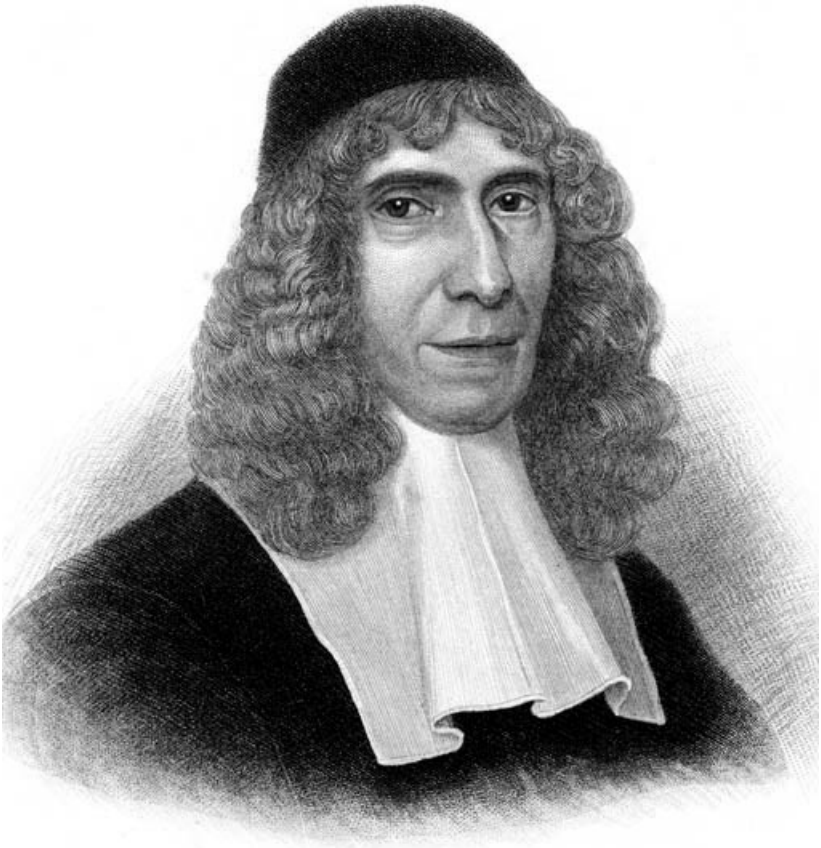
it, the evangelical theological innovators of the nineteenth century had twisted Calvinism 'almost beyond recognition.'[44]

Coda

Nettleton's ministry was a central part of the so-called Second Great Awakening. This work of God helped to erase Deism from the American scene. And of the various Edwardsean evangelists active in this awakening, Nettleton was in the vanguard. The characteristics of the revivals under Nettleton are noteworthy: there tended to be no hysteria or commotion in the audiences who heard him preach; the emphasis in his preaching was on God's absolute sovereignty in salvation, humanity's total depravity, and Christ's atoning love as the only hope and way of salvation; the fruits of these revivals were permanent and characterized by spiritual seriousness; and unbelievers, it was said, were awed into 'respectful silence.'[45] Timothy L. Smith has rightly noted:

> Could Thomas Paine, the free-thinking pamphleteer of the American and French Revolutions, have visited [the United States in the final decade of Nettleton's life], … he would have been amazed to find that the nation conceived in rational liberty was 'in the grip of' the power of evangelical faith. The emancipating glory of the great awakenings had made Christian liberty, Christian equality and Christian fraternity the passion of the land. The treasured gospel … passed into the hands of the baptized many. Common grace, not common sense, was the keynote of the age. … Men [and women] in all walks of life believed that the sovereign Holy Spirit was endowing the nation with resources sufficient to convert and civilize the globe, to purge human society of all its evils, and to usher in Christ's reign on earth. Religious doctrines which Paine, in his book *The Age of Reason*, had discarded as the 'tattered vestment' of the past, became the wedding garment of many.[46]

44 *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 18.
45 Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 417.
46 Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 7.



John Owen & spiritual experience—A tercentennial appreciation

Charles II (r.1660–1685) once asked one of the most learned scholars that he knew why any intelligent person should waste time listening to the sermons of an uneducated tinker and Baptist preacher by the name of John Bunyan (1628–1688). 'Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty,' replied the scholar, 'I would gladly relinquish all my learning.' The name of the scholar was John Owen (1616–1683), and this small story—apparently true and not apocryphal—says a good deal about the man and his Christian character. His love of and concern for the preaching of the Word reveals a man who was Puritan to the core. And the fragrant humility of his reply to the king was a virtue that permeated all of his writings, in which he sought to glorify the triune God and help God's people find that maturity that was theirs in Christ.[47]

In his own day some of Owen's fellow Puritans dubbed him the 'Calvin of England.'[48] More recently, Roger Nicole has described Owen as 'the greatest divine who ever wrote in English' and J. I. Packer says of him that during his career as a Christian theologian he was 'England's foremost bastion and champion of Reformed evangelical orthodoxy.'[49]

'Bred up … under… a nonconformist': Owen's early years[50]

John Owen was born in 1616, the same year that William Shakespeare died. He grew up in a Christian home in a small village now known as

47 For the story, see Andrew Thomson, *Life of Dr. Owen* in *The Works of John Owen* (1850 ed.; repr. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1:xcii; Allen C. Guelzo, 'John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter', *Christianity Today*, 20, no. 17 (May 21, 1976), 14; Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1971), 162. Subsequent references to the works of Owen are cited according to the volumes and page numbers of William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (1850–1853 ed.; repr. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–1968).

48 Guelzo, 'John Owen', 14.

49 Guelzo, 'John Owen', 14; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 191.

50 For a good account of Owen's life, see Toon, *God's Statesman.* For his theology, the best study is undoubtedly Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998). See also Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987); Robert W. Oliver, ed., *John Owen—the man and his theology. Papers read at the Conference of the*

Stadhampton, about five miles south-east of Oxford. His father, Henry Owen, was the minister of the parish church there and a Puritan. The names of three of his brothers have also come down to us: William, who became the Puritan minister at Remenham, just north of Henley-on-Thames; Henry who fought as a major in Oliver Cromwell's (1599–1658) New Model Army; and Philemon, who was killed fighting under Cromwell in Ireland in 1649.[51]

Of Owen's childhood years only one reference has been recorded. 'I was bred up from my infancy,' he remarked in 1657, 'under the care of my father, who was a nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer [that is, diligent worker] in the vineyard of the Lord.'[52] If we take as our cue the way that other Puritans raised their children, we can presume that as a small boy Owen, along with his siblings, would have been taught to pray, to read the Bible and obey its commandments. At least once a day there would have been time set aside for family worship when he would have listened to his father explain a portion of God's Word and pray for their nation, his parishioners and for each of them individually.[53]

At twelve years of age, Owen was sent by his father to Queen's College, the University of Oxford. Here he obtained his B.A. on 11 June 1632, when he was 16. He went on to study for the M.A., which he was awarded on 27 April 1635. Everything seemed to be set for Owen to pursue an academic career. It was not, however, a good time to launch out into world of academe. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud (1573–1645), had set out to suppress the Puritan movement, and to that end had begun a purge of the churches and universities. By 1637 Owen had no alternative but to leave Oxford and to become, along with many other Puritans who refused to conform to the Established Church, a private chaplain. He eventually found employ in the house of Lord Lovelace, a nobleman sympathetic to the Puritan cause. However, when the English Civil War broke out in 1642 and Lord Lovelace decided to support the King, Owen left his service and moved to London.

John Owen Centre for Theological Study September 2000 (Darlington: Evangelical Press/ Phillipsburg, NJ: Evangelical Press, 2002); and Matthew Barrett and Michael A.G. Haykin, Matthew Barrett, *Owen and the Christian Life: Living for the Glory of God in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

51 Toon, *God's Statesman*, 2.

52 *Works*, 13:224.

53 Toon, *God's Statesman*, 2.

A 'clear shining from God'

The move to London was providential in a couple of ways. First of all, it brought him into contact with the some of the leading defenders of the Parliamentary cause, Puritan preachers who viewed the struggle between the King and Parliament in terms of the struggle between Christ and anti-Christian forces. Moreover, it was during these initial days in London that he had an experience he would never forget. By 1642 Owen was convinced that the final source of authority in religion was the Holy Scriptures and moreover, that the doctrines of orthodox Calvinism were biblical Christianity. But he had yet to personally experience the Holy Spirit bearing witness to his spirit and giving him the assurance that he was a child of God.[54]

Owen found this assurance one Sunday when he decided to go with a cousin to hear Edmund Calamy the Elder (1600–1666), a famous Presbyterian preacher, at St Mary's Church, Aldermanbury. On arriving at this church, they were informed that the well-known Presbyterian was not going to preach that morning. Instead a country preacher (whose name Owen never did discover) was going to fill in for the Presbyterian divine. His cousin urged him to go with him to hear Arthur Jackson (*c*.1593–1666), another notable Puritan preacher, at nearby St Michael's. But Owen decided to remain at St Mary's. The preacher took as his text that morning Matthew 8:26: 'Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?' It proved to be a message that Owen needed to hear and embrace. Through the words of a preacher whose identity is unknown, God spoke to Owen and removed once and for all his doubts and fears as to whether he was truly regenerate or not. He now knew himself to be born of the Spirit.[55]

The impact of this spiritual experience cannot be over-estimated. It gave to Owen the deep, inner conviction that he was indeed a child of God and chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that God loved him and had a loving purpose for his life, and that this God was the true and living God. In practical terms, it meant a life-long interest in the work of God the Holy Spirit that would issue thirty years later in his monumental study of the Holy Spirit, *A Discourse*

54 Toon, *God's Statesman*, 12.
55 Toon, *God's Statesman*, 12–13.

Concerning the Holy Spirit.[56] As he later wrote: 'Clear shining from God must be at the bottom of deep labouring with God.'[57]

Pastoral ministry and preaching before Parliament

In 1643 Owen was offered the pastorate in the village of Fordham, six miles or so north-west of Colchester in Essex. Owen was here till 1646 when he became the minister of the church at the market town of Coggeshall, some five miles to the south. Here, as many as two thousand people would crowd into the church each Lord's Day to hear Owen preach.[58] Thus, although Owen would later speak slightingly of his preaching to King Charles II—as seen in the anecdote with which this lecture began—it is evident that he was no mean preacher. It is also noteworthy that this change in pastorates was also accompanied by an ecclesiological shift to Congregationalism. Up until this point Owen had been decidedly Presbyterian in his understanding of church government. His reading of *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* by John Cotton (1584–1652) which had been published in 1644, was decisive in changing his mind in this area of theology. It was also at Coggeshall that he wrote the classic work on particular redemption, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647).[59] The backdrop for these early years of Owen's pastoral ministry was the English Civil War when England knew the horrors of bloody fields of battle, and father was ranged against son and neighbour against neighbour on the battlefield. Well has this period been described as 'the world turned upside down.'

During these tumultuous days Owen clearly identified himself with the Parliamentary cause. He developed a friendship with the rising military figure Oliver Cromwell and was frequently invited to preach before Parliament. By late 1648 some of the Parliamentary army officers had begun to urge that Charles I be brought to trial on charges of treason since he had fought against his own people and Parliament. Charles was accordingly put on trial in January 1649, and by the end of that month a small group of powerful Puritan leaders had found him guilty and sentenced their king to death. On 31 January, the day

56 Toon, *God's Statesman*, 13.

57 Cited Peter Barraclough, *John Owen (1616–1683)* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1961), 6.

58 Robert W. Oliver, 'John Owen (1616–1683)—his life and times' in his ed., *John Owen*, 16.

59 For a study of this work, see Jack N. Macleod, 'John Owen and the Death of Death' in *Out of Bondage* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1983), 70–87.

following the public execution of the king, Owen was asked to preach before Parliament.

Owen used the occasion to urge upon the members of Parliament that for them, now the rulers of England, to obtain God's favour in the future they must remove from the nation all traces of false worship and superstition and wholeheartedly establish a religion based on Scripture alone. Owen based his sermon on Jeremiah 15. He made no direct reference to the events of the previous day nor did he mention, at least in the version of his sermon that has come down to us, the name of the king. Nevertheless, his hearers and later readers would have been easily able to deduce from his use of the Old Testament how he viewed the religious policy and end of Charles. From the story of the wicked king Manasseh that is recorded in 2 Kings 21 and with cross-references to Jeremiah 15, he argued that the leading cause for God's judgements upon the Jewish people had been such abominations as idolatry and superstition, tyranny and cruelty. He then pointed to various similarities between the conditions of ancient Judah and the England of his day. At the heart of the sermon was a call to Parliament to establish a reformed style of worship, to disseminate biblical Christianity, to uphold national righteousness and to avoid oppression. He assured the Puritan leaders who heard him that day that God's promise of protection to Jeremiah was also applicable to all who in every age stood firmly for justice and mercy.[60]

Ireland and Oxford

Later that same year, Owen accompanied Cromwell on his campaign in Ireland, where he stayed from August 1649 to February 1650. Though ill much of this time, he preached frequently to 'a numerous multitude of as thirsting a people after the gospel as ever yet I conversed withal.'[61] When he returned to England the following year, he confessed that 'the tears and cries of the inhabitants of Dublin after the manifestations of Christ are ever in my view.' Accordingly, he sought to convince Parliament of the spiritual need of this land and asked:

> How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a *lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies;* and none to hold him out as a

60 *Righteous Zeal encouraged by Divine Protection* (*Works*, 8:133–162); Toon, *God's Statesman*, 33–34. For help with this reference, I would like to thank Mr Greg McManus of London, Ontario.

61 *Of the Death of Christ* (*Works*, 10:479).

> *lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends?* Is it the sovereignty and interest of England that is alone to be there transacted? For my part, I see no farther into the mystery of these things but that I could heartily rejoice, that, innocent blood being expiated, the Irish might enjoy Ireland so long as the moon endureth, so that Jesus Christ might possess the Irish. … If they were in the dark, and loved to have it so, it might somethow close a door upon the bowels of our compassion; but they cry out of their darkness, and are ready to follow every one whosoever, to have a candle. If their being gospelless move not our hearts, it is hoped their importunate cries will disquiet our rest, and wrest help as a beggar doth an alms.[62]

Although Owen's pleas were heeded and this period saw the establishment of a number of Puritan congregations—both Congregationalist and Baptist—in Ireland, Crawford Gribben has recently shown that the inability of Puritans in Ireland to work together with like-minded brethren for the larger cause of the Kingdom of Christ hindered their witness.[63]

By the early 1650s, Owen had become one of Cromwell's leading advisors, especially in national affairs to do with the church. There is little doubt that Owen was a firm supporter of Cromwell in this period. As Owen told him on one occasion in 1654, for example: 'The series and chain of eminent providences whereby you have been carried on and protected in all the hazardous work of your generation, which your God hath called you unto, is evident to all.'[64] Two years later, though, when Cromwell was urged to become the monarch of England, Owen was among those who opposed this move. As it turned out, Cromwell did not accept the crown. But Owen's friendship with Cromwell had been damaged and the two men were nowhere near as close as they had been.[65] This would have distressed Owen since he had viewed Cromwell with enormous admiration.

Cromwell had appointed Owen to the oversight of Oxford University in 1652 as its Vice-Chancellor. From this position Owen helped to re-assemble the faculty, who had been dispersed by the war, and to put the university back on its feet. He also had numerous opportunities to preach to the students at Oxford. Two important works on holiness came

62 *The Steadfastness of the Promises, and the Sinfulness of Staggering* (*Works*, 8:235–236).
63 Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the reformation of the church* (Darlington, Durham: Evangelical Press, 2003), 91–115.
64 *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (*Works*, 11:5).
65 Oliver, 'John Owen (1616–1683)' in his ed., *John Owen*, 26; Toon, *God's Statesman*, 97–101.

out of his preaching during this period. *Of Temptation*, first published in 1658, is essentially an exposition of Matthew 26:4. It analyzes the way in which believers fall into sin. Central among the remedies to temptation that Owen recommends is prayer. His pithy remark in this regard is typically Puritan: 'If we do not abide in prayer, we shall abide in cursed temptations.'[66]

A second work, *The Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), is in some ways the richest of all of Owen's treatises on this subject. It is based on Romans 8:13 and lays out a strategy for fighting indwelling sin and warding off temptation. Owen emphasizes that in the fight against sin the Holy Spirit employs all of our human powers. In sanctifying us, Owen insists, the Spirit works

> in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free obedience. He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences, and affections, agreeably to their own natures; he works in us and with us, not against us or without us; so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself.[67]

Not without reason does Owen lovingly describe the Spirit in another place as 'the great beautifier of souls.'[68]

Oliver Cromwell died in September of 1658 and the 'rule of the saints,' as some called it, began to fall apart. In the autumn of that year, Owen, now a key leader among the Congregationalists, played a vital role in drawing up what is known as the *Savoy Declaration*, which would give the Congregationalist churches ballast for the difficult days ahead. Only a few days after Cromwell's death, Owen met with around 200 other Congregationalist leaders, including men like Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Philip Nye (*c.*1596–1672), and William Bridge (*c.*1600–1671),[69] in the chapel of the old Savoy Palace in London. One of the outcomes of this synod was a recommendation to revise the *Westminster Confession of Faith* for the Congregationalist

66 *Works*, 6:126.

67 *Works*, 6:20. See also the comments of J. I. Packer, '"Keswick" and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 27 (1955), 156.

68 *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (*Works*, 6:188). For further discussion of this area of Owen's teaching, see Michael A.G. Haykin, 'The Great Beautifier of Souls', *The Banner of Truth*, 242 (November 1983), 18–22.

69 For biographical sketches of these three men, see William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Influential Puritans at the time when the Westminster Confession of Faith was written* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1996), 69–94, *passim*.

churches. Traditionally Owen has been credited with writing the lengthy preface that came before the *Savoy Declaration*. In it he rightly argued, anticipating an issue that would be central to the rest of his life:

> The Spirit of Christ is in himself too *free*, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any human arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but *gently leads into all truth*, and *persuades* men to *dwell in the tents* of *like precious faith*; which would lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.[70]

The following year Owen preached again before Parliament. But the times they were a-changing, and this proved to be the last of such occasions.

'The church in a storm': Owen's leadership in persecution

In 1660 a number of Cromwell's fellow Puritan leaders, fearful that Britain was slipping into full-fledged anarchy, asked Charles II, then living in exile on the continent, to return to England as her monarch. Those who came to power with Charles were determined that the Puritans would never again hold the reins of political authority. During Charles' reign and that of his brother James II (r.1685–1688), the Puritan cause was thus savagely persecuted. After the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which required all religious worship to be according to the letter of *The Book of Common Prayer*, and various other pieces of legislation enacted during the 1660s, all other forms of worship were illegal.

A number of Owen's close friends, including John Bunyan, suffered fines and imprisonment for not heeding these laws. Although Owen was shielded from actual imprisonment by some powerful friends like Lord Philip Wharton (1613–1696), he led at best a precarious existence till his death. He was once nearly attacked by a mob, which surrounded his carriage.[71] Between 1663 and 1666 he was tempted to accept the offer of a safe haven in America when the Puritan leaders in Massachusetts offered him the presidency of Harvard.[72] Owen, though, recognized where he was needed most and he wrote prodigiously in defense of Nonconformity. This polemical defense, though, took its toll. In 1672,

70 'A Preface' to *the Savoy Declaration* in Philip Schaff, ed. and David S. Schaff, rev., *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), III, 709. For a recent edition of this confession, see *The Savoy Declaration of Faith* (Millers Falls, MA: First Congregational Church, 1998).

71 Barraclough, *John Owen*, 15.

72 Greaves, 'Owen, John (1616–1683),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.).

he told the New England Puritan John Eliot (1604–1690) that 'there is scarce anyone alive in the world that hath more reproaches cast upon him than I have' and that, as he was experiencing 'a dry and barren spirit,' he begged Eliot to pray for him that God would 'water me from above.'[73] Two years later, in a letter to Charles Fleetwood (*c.* 1618–1692), one of Cromwell's sons-in-law, he described himself as a 'poor withering soul' and he expressed his fear that

> we shall die in the wilderness; yet ought we to labour and pray continually that the heavens would drop down from above, and the skies pour down righteousness—that the earth may open and bring forth salvation, and that righteousness may spring up together [see Ps. 85:10–11]. … I beseech you to contend yet more earnestly than ever I have done, with God, with my own heart, with the church, to labour after spiritual revivals.[74]

Owen was not the only Puritan leader urging prayer for revival in the 1670s. Four years after Owen wrote this letter, John Howe (1630–1705) preached a series of sermons based on Ezekiel 39:29 in which he dealt with the subject of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In one of these sermons he told his audience:

> When the Spirit shall be poured forth plentifully I believe you will hear much other kind of sermons, or they will, who shall live to such a time, than you are wont to do now-a-days … It is plain, too sadly plain, there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us; we do not know how to speak living sense [i.e. felt reality] unto souls, how to get within you; our words die in our mouths, or drop and die between you and us. We even faint, when we speak; long experienced unsuccessfulness makes us despond; we speak not as persons that hope to prevail … When such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here signified … [ministers] shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurement, than we now find we can.[75]

---

73 Letter to John Eliot [1672], in *The Correspondence of John Owen*, ed. Peter Toon (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 154.

74 Letter to Charles Fleetwood, July 8 [1674], in *Correspondence of John Owen*, ed. Toon, 159.

75 *The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest Before the End of Time, By a Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit: Sermon IV* in *The Works of the Rev. John Howe, M.A.* (New York: John P. Haven, 1838), I, 575. For the explanation of 'living sense' as 'felt reality,' see J. I. Packer, *God In Our Midst: Seeking and Receiving Ongoing Revival* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1987), 33.

Owen's fears were not unfounded: he would die without seeing any turning of the tide for the Nonconformists, and the spiritual state of England would continue to decline until the revivals of the mid-1730s.

Owen's first wife, Mary, died in 1676. When Owen remarried the following year, his second wife, Dorothy D'Oyley, was the widow of a wealthy Oxfordshire landowner whom Owen would have known from his connections to his home village of Stadhampton.[76] Added to the toil and anxieties of these years were physical challenges, especially asthma and kidney stones. But these years were also ones of prodigious literary fruitfulness. His exhaustive commentary on Hebrews appeared between 1668 and 1684, which he regarded in many ways as his *magnum opus*.[77] *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* came out in 1674 and an influential work on justification, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, in 1677. Owen's *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, which Robert Oliver has rightly termed 'incomparable,'[78] was written under the shadow of death in 1683 and represents Owen's dying testimony to the unsurpassable value and joy of living a life for the glory of Christ.

He fell asleep in Christ on 24 August 1683. His final literary piece was a letter to his close friend, Charles Fleetwood, written two days before his death. 'Dear Sir,' he wrote to his friend,

> I am going to him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love; which is the whole ground of all my consolation. The passage is very irksome and wearysome through strong pains of various sorts which are all issued in an intermitting fever. All things were provided to carry me to London today attending to the advice of my physician, but we were all disappointed by my utter disability to undertake the journey. I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but whilst the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poore under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live and pray and hope and waite patiently and doe not despair; the promise stands invincible that he will never leave thee nor forsake thee.[79]

76 Oliver, 'John Owen (1616–1683),' in his ed., *John Owen*, 35.
77 See John W. Tweeddale, 'John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context' in Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 52, 54–55.
78 Oliver, 'John Owen (1616–1683)' in his ed., *John Owen*, 35.
79 *The Correspondence of John Owen*, ed. Peter Toon (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 174.

He was buried on 4 September in Bunhill Fields, where the bodies of so many of his fellow Puritans were laid to rest until the tremendous day when they—and all the faithful in Christ—shall be raised to glory.

Owen on spiritual experience

It is vital to realize that piety lies at the very core of English Puritanism, of which Owen's theological corpus is a marvellous exemplar.[80] For Owen, spiritual experience is vital to true Christianity. As he maintained near the end of his life:

> By religion we understand the power of it in the hearts and lives of men, and not any outward profession of it only … [T]he sole use of all outward religious order and profession is lost, where they are not applied unto the ingenerating and promoting of holiness, or evangelical obedience in particular persons.[81]

And Owen asserted that ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who gives the believer, whom he indwells, this experience of 'the ingenerating and promoting of holiness, or evangelical obedience.' In his words: 'He gives unto believers a spiritual sense of the power and reality of the things believed, whereby their faith is greatly established.'[82] Similarly, Owen emphasized in a sermon that he preached on 26 May 1670: 'Get an experience of the power of the gospel, and all the ordinances of it, in and upon your own hearts, or all your profession is an expiring thing.'[83] It is these inner experiences that motivate external attendance on the various ordinances of the Christian life. 'Without the internal actings of the life of faith,' Owen wrote, 'external administrations of ordinances of worship are but dead things, nor can any believer obtain real satisfaction in them or refreshment by them without an inward experience of faith and love in them and by them.'[84] Thus, Owen argued:

> [L]et a gracious soul, in simplicity and sincerity of spirit, give up himself to walk with Christ according to his appointment, and he shall quickly find such a taste and relish in the fellowship of the gospel, in the communion of saints, and of Christ amongst them, as that he

80 Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 53–65, especially 60; Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans. An Anthology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), xi–xiv; Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 37–38.
81 Owen, 'To the Reader' in James Durham, *The Law Unsealed, Or, A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (4th ed.; Edinburgh, 1676), xxx, xxxi.
82 Owen, *Holy Spirit* (*Works*, 4:64).
83 *Sermon XVIII* (*Works*, 9:237).
84 Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (*Works*, 7:435).

> shall come up to such riches of assurance in the understanding and acknowledgment of the ways of the Lord, as others by their disputing can never attain unto. What is so high, glorious, and mysterious as the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity? Some wise men have thought meet to keep it vailed from ordinary Christians, and some have delivered it in such terms as that they can understand nothing by them. But take a believer who hath tasted how gracious the Lord is, in the eternal love of the Father, the great undertaking of the Son in the work of mediation and redemption, with the almighty work of the Spirit creating grace and comfort in the soul; and hath had an experience of the love, holiness, and power of God in them all; and he will with more firm confidence adhere to this mysterious truth, being led into it and confirmed in it by some few plain testimonies of the word, than a thousand disputers shall do who only have the notion of it in their minds. Let a real trial come, and this will appear. Few will be found to sacrifice their lives on bare speculations. Experience will give assurance and stability.[85]

Here then is a strong emphasis upon an experiential Christianity, one that is rooted in the Spirit's application of biblical truth to the heart of the believer. It is this sort of spirituality, Owen argued, that provides assurance against doubt and ballast against apostasy.[86]

Some might feel that Owen's recommendations are unduly subjective. To this criticism, Owen would rightly respond:

> I had rather be among them who, in the actings of their love and affection unto Christ, do fall into some irregularities and excesses in the manner of expressing it (provided their worship of him be neither superstitious nor idolatrous), than among those who, professing themselves to be Christians, do almost disavow their having any thoughts of or affection unto the person of Christ.[87]

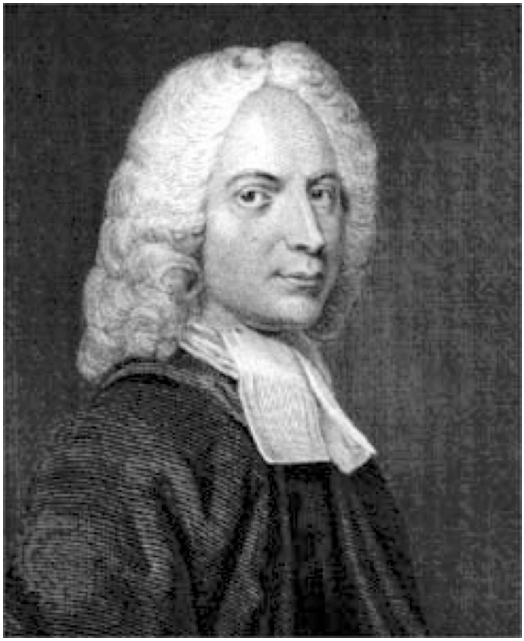
One final text in this regard provides both a powerful indicator of Owen's own spirituality as well as a confirmation of the emphasis on piety among those to whom he preached and for whom he wrote. And it is a fitting conclusion to this brief study of the life and experiential piety of the 'Calvin of England.'

> The spiritual *intense fixation of the mind,* by contemplation on God

85 Owen, *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX* (*Works*, 6:458–459).
86 See also Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel and the Punishment of Apostates Declared, in An Exposition of Heb. VI.4–6* (*Works*, 7:112–113).
87 *Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (*Works*, 7:346).

> in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight, and being brought unto an utter loss, through the infiniteness of those excellencies which it doth admire and adore, it returns again into its own abasements, out of a sense of its infinite distance from what it would absolutely and eternally embrace, and, withal, the inexpressible rest and satisfaction which the will and affections receive in their approaches unto the eternal Fountain of goodness, are things to be aimed at in prayer, and which, through the riches of divine condescension, are frequently enjoyed. The soul is hereby raised and ravished, not into ecstasies or unaccountable raptures, not acted into motions above the power of its own understanding and will; but in all the faculties and affections of it, through the effectual workings of the Spirit of grace and the lively impressions of divine love, with intimations of the relations and kindness of God, is filled with rest, in 'joy unspeakable and full of glory.'[88]

88 *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (*Works*, 4:329–330).



Isaac Watts & his cross-centred piety

George Thomson (1698–1782) was the Anglican vicar of St Gennys, a windswept village in North Cornwall perched atop cliffs overlooking the Atlantic. Though an ordained minister in the Church of England, Thomson had come to St. Gennys with little interest, if any, in spiritual matters, and was one whose life was characterized by 'debaucheries' of various sorts.

Yet, in 1733 or 1734 Thomson was awakened from his benighted state by a dream, which was repeated three times in one night with ever-increasing terror. In the first instance of the dream, he was told: 'This day month, at six in the afternoon, you must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to give an account of the dreadful abuse of all your talents, and the injuries done the souls committed to your care.' Thomson woke in alarm, but soon shrugged off the dream with the thought, 'Glad I am it was no more than a dream; I am no old woman to mind dreams,' and promptly fell back asleep. The dream was repeated 'with greater circumstances of terror,' and Thomson awoke again, this time deeply shaken. After much tossing and agitation, he was able to go back to sleep once more, only to be awakened after the dream had been repeated yet a third time. Now terrified and convinced that he had but a month to live, Thomson called together his friends and the leading individuals in the parish. He recounted his dream to them, told them to find someone to fill the pulpit, and to return to conduct his funeral in a month.

Thomson then shut himself up in his home and for two weeks was in deep despair, since he was persuaded that it was not consistent with God's honour for him to forgive one who had brought such dishonour upon his holy name. After a fortnight of such distress, however, Thomson was led by the Spirit of God to read Romans 3, where he clearly saw that God could be glorified in his salvation, through the propitiation of Christ's most precious blood. Thomson returned to his pulpit and began to preach those doctrines which in a few years would be the hallmark of the Evangelical Revival: the atoning death of Christ and the imputation of his righteousness, the necessity of the new birth,

and the absolute need of the Holy Spirit's power and presence to begin and carry on a saving change in heart and life.[89]

Soon after his conversion Thomson discovered the hymns of a certain well-known hymnwriter, who, through the medium of his hymns became something of a spiritual mentor to Thomson. The well-known hymnwriter? Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Writing to Watts in 1736, two or three years or so after his conversion, Thomson said:

> Poet, Divine, Saint, the delight, the guide, the wonder of the virtuous world; permit, Reverend Sir, a stranger unknown, and likely to be for ever unknown, to desire one blessing from you in a private way. 'Tis this, that when you approach the Throne of Grace, and lift up holy hands, when you get closest to the Mercy-seat, and wrestle mightily for the peace of Jerusalem, you would breathe one petition for my soul's health. In return I promise you a share for life in my unworthy prayers, who honour you as a father and a brother (though differently ordered) and conclude myself,
>
> Your affectionate humble Servant, George Thomson.

It must have been something of a surprise to Watts to have received this 'gushing' letter of adulation from an Anglican minister. Thomson's remark about his being 'differently ordered' reflects the difference in church communion between writer and recipient: Watts was a Dissenter and Thomson an Anglican. As such, the effusive, and by our standards far too flowery, praise that Thomson lavishes on Watts is particularly noteworthy. Thomson confesses, Watts' hymns were the medium by which God made him a 'father' and 'guide,' that is, mentor, in the Christian life for the Anglican vicar. Down to the present day there have been multitudes from widely different backgrounds who have regarded Watts' hymns in a similar way as Thomson.

Isaac Watts: A sketch of his life[90]

Pick almost any recent hymnal, look in the index that lists the authors of the hymns, and the name 'Isaac Watts' will usually have a long list

89 For the full account of Thomson's conversion, see I. Davidson, 'Some Account of the Rev. George Thomson', *The Evangelical Magazine*, 8 (1800): 221–225. This account consists of a letter written by Davidson in 1772. For a good study of Thomson's ministry, see G. C. B. Davies, *The Early Cornish Evangelicals 1735–1760. A Study of Walker of Truro and Others* (London: S.P.C.K., 1951), 30–34, 37–52.

90 For two excellent studies of Watts' life, see Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (n.p.: n.p., 1943); David G. Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered 1674–1748* (2nd ed.; Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust Ltd., 1978). The sketch

of hymns beside it. During his life, Watts penned over 600 hymns, and through them has powerfully shaped the way English-speaking Evangelicals worship God.

Watts was born to Christian parents in Southampton, England, on July 17, 1674. His father, who was also named Isaac, was a prosperous clothier as well as being a schoolmaster. A deacon in the local Congregationalist church, later known as Above Bar Congregational Church, the elder Watts suffered imprisonment at least twice for refusing to give up worship with this church. From 1660 to 1688 the Congregationalists, along with other groups outside of the Church of England, found themselves in the fierce fire of persecution, when a series of laws were passed which made it illegal to worship in any other setting but that of the Church of England. Of Watts' mother, Sarah Taunton, we know little beyond the fact that she was of French Huguenot descent and after Isaac's birth would nurse him while visiting her husband in prison in 1674. The senior Isaac Watts was also imprisoned in 1678 and 1683—for six months in the latter year.

The younger Watts was converted in 1689. The following year he went to London to spend four years studying in a theological seminary run by a Thomas Rowe, who had a considerable influence upon Watts. After graduation in June of 1694 he went back to live with his parents in Southampton for two years or so. Apparently it was during this time in Southampton that he began to write hymns. Watts preached his first sermon in 1698 and five years later was called to be the pastor of what was the most influential and wealthiest Congregationalist church in London, Mark Lane Congregational Church, which he served for the rest of his life. It is noteworthy that John Owen had been the pastor of this congregation and that many of Oliver Cromwell's descendants were members of the congregation. When Watts was called as the minister of the church, he told the congregation that his theological position was essentially that of Owen.

Watts never married. After a proposal of marriage was turned down by Elizabeth Singer (1674–1737), also an accomplished poet, he never again seriously contemplated the married estate. According to one source, Elizabeth told him that 'though she loved the Jewel she could not admire the casket which contained it,' a not very felicitous reference to Watts' physical appearance.

---

by Isabel Rivers, 'Watts, Isaac (1674–1748)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57:725–730 has also been helpful.

Watts' literary activity up until around 1720 was primarily in the realm of verse and poetry. By way of contrast, during his final twenty-eight years Watts almost exclusively devoted himself to writing prose. According to reliable tradition, his first incentive to write hymns came when he complained to his father of the general poverty of the psalmody in their Southampton church. His father's response was a challenge to his son to do better. As history attests Watts did indeed do better, so much so that he is often called 'the Father of English hymnody.'

In 1707 Watts published his first collection of hymns, entitled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, one of the earliest English hymnals. It was in this collection that such great hymns as 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross' first appeared. *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, a recasting of the psalms in the light of the New Testament for the purpose of public worship, came in 1719. In Watts' words, in this particular book he chose not 'to express the ancient Sense and Meaning of David, but have rather exprest myself as I may suppose David would have done, had he lived in the Days of Christianity.' Good examples of such 'Christian paraphrases' of the Psalms would include 'Our God, our help in ages past,' based on Psalm 90:1–5 (John Wesley changed the first word to O), and 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,' drawn from Psalm 72. Sales of these hymns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were phenomenal.[91]

Watts' spirituality of the cross in his hymns[92]

Now, one of the central spiritual themes in these hymns is the cross. Bernard Manning, in fact, asserts that Watts 'finds the cross the centre of his thought: all things look forward or backward to the Passion.'[93] And not surprisingly, Watts has been labelled 'the poet of the atonement.'[94]

The hymn 'Grace and glory by the death of Christ' testifies to the fact that Christ's work of atonement on the cross both pardons sin (stanza 2) and procures spiritual blessing (stanza 3). Ultimately, everything that flows into the life of a believer flows out of Calvary's flood:

91 Rivers, 'Watts, Isaac,' 730.

92 I have been helped in this section by Dan Brubacher, 'Isaac Watts: His Life, His Hymnody, His Spirituality' (Unpublished paper, for course 'Evangelical Spirituality,' taught at Heritage Theological Seminary, Fall 2002).

93 Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (London: Epworth Press, 1942), 83.

94 E. Paxton Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings, His Homes and Friends* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 108.

2. We see the blood of Jesus shed,
   Whence all our pardons rise;
   The sinner views th' atonement made,
   And loves the sacrifice.

3. Thy cruel thorns, Thy shameful cross
   Procure us heavenly crowns;
   Our highest gain springs from Thy loss,
   Our healing from Thy wounds.

In another hymn, 'Godly sorrow arising from the sufferings of Christ'—better known today by its first line, 'Alas! and did my Saviour bleed'—Watts marvels that Jesus died—in an agonizing manner, no less—for one as completely unworthy as he. Watts' heart is at once overwhelmed with sorrow because of his sin (stanzas 1, 3, and 5) and overflowing with joy because of God's love and grace (stanzas 3, 5, and 6):

1. Alas! and did my Saviour bleed,
   And did my Sovereign die?
   Would He devote that sacred head
   For such a worm as I?

2. Thy body slain, sweet Jesus, Thine,
   And bathed in its own blood,
   While all exposed to wrath divine
   The glorious sufferer stood?

3. Was it for crimes that I had done
   He groaned upon the tree?
   Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
   And love beyond degree!

4. Well might the sun in darkness hide,
   And shut His glories in,
   When God the mighty maker died
   For man the creature's sin.

5. Thus might I hide my blushing face
   While His dear cross appears,
   Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
   And melt my eyes to tears.

6. But drops of grief can ne'er repay
   The debt of love I owe;
   Here, Lord, I give myself away,
   'Tis all that I can do.

In a third hymn, 'Dead to sin by the cross of Christ,' Watts develops yet another feature of the atonement. He sums up the Apostle Paul's line of reasoning in Romans 6: through Christ's death, the chains of sin have been broken; sin's power has been destroyed (stanzas 2 and 3); as such, to persist in sin is to misappropriate God's grace (stanza 1)—it is, in essence, to re-crucify the Lord (stanza 1).

1. Shall we go on to sin,
   Because Thy grace abounds,
   Or crucify the Lord again,
   And open all His wounds?

2. Forbid it mighty God,
   Not let it e'er be said
   That we whose sins are crucified
   Should raise them from the dead.

3. We will be slaves no more,
   Since Christ has made us free,
   Has nailed our tyrants to His cross,
   And bought our liberty.

'When I survey the wondrous cross'

Let us consider in depth, though, one particular hymn about the cross, Watts' much-loved and much-sung 'When I survey the wondrous cross,' widely acknowledged as one of the finest hymns ever written. Charles Wesley reportedly said he would have given up all his other hymns to have written this one. Erik Routley, a leading hymnologist of the last century, describes it as 'the most penetrating of all hymns, the most demanding, the most imaginative.'[95]

It was originally written by Watts in 1707 as a communion hymn, appearing in the third part of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs,* with the

95 Cited Frank Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 76. Colquhoun's reflection on this hymn has been of immense help in this study.

title 'Crucifixion to the world by the cross of Christ' and a sub-title reference to Galatians 6:14.[96]

Stanza 1

> When I survey the wond'rous Cross
> On which the Prince of Glory dy'd,
> My richest Gain I count but Loss,
> And pour Contempt on all my Pride.

The hymn begins with an unusual word: 'Survey'—not 'behold' nor 'perceive,' but 'survey.' At first glance, it appears a somewhat formal and cold word. But, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'survey' is defined thus: 'To take a broad general, or comprehensive view of; to view or examine in its whole extent—to consider or contemplate as a whole.'[97] In asking us, therefore, to 'survey' the cross Watts is urging us not to be content with a brief and hasty glance at the crucifixion of Christ, but to look at the full extent of the significance of the cross—for rightly viewed, it is a place of wonders.

The second line originally was 'Where the young Prince of Glory dy'd.' Watts changed the original line to the present one when it was pointed out to him that the New Testament puts no particular emphasis on the age of Christ at his death. It is worth remembering that when the hymn was first published Watts himself was a young man of thirty–one. It may have been this that brought home to him the fact that the Prince of glory laid down his life in the bloom and vigour of his manhood.[98] The title 'Prince of Glory' that Watts gives to Christ is drawn from 1 Corinthians 2:8, where Christ is described as the 'Lord of glory' and where the phrase 'of glory' indicates Christ's natural right to glory.[99]

Lines 3–4 are obviously taken from Philippians 3:7–9. In the light of the cross Paul saw that he had to write off as sheer loss his own righteousness. It simply was not good enough for God. Instead he had to humble himself and accept by faith God's gift of righteousness in Christ crucified.[100] A serious, prolonged reflection on the cross

96 For a critical edition of this hymn and the version used in this paper, see Selma L. Bishop, *Isaac Watts, Hymns and Spiritual Songs 1707-1748: A Study in Early Eighteenth Century Language Changes* (London: Faith Press, 1962), 353.
97 Cited Davie, *Eighteenth Century Hymn*, 40.
98 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live*, 78.
99 Benjamin B. Warfield, *Lord of Glory* (1907 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 223–224.
100 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live*, 78–79.

leaves no room for spiritual pride. Properly viewed, the cross leads to a tremendous humbling.

Stanza 2

> Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
> Save in the Death of Christ my God;
> All the vain things that charm me most,
> I sacrifice them to his blood.

This second stanza brings us back to the theme verse that Watts assigned to this hymn: Galatians 6:14. When Paul penned these words, he did so as one whose standards of value had been turned upside down—the world he knew, like Watts' world and our world, boasted in many things, pursued many things, was charmed by many things. In the light of the cross, however, their value is either negated or minimized. 'The cross enables us to sort out our priorities and rethink our scale of values.'[101]

Watts' high Christology in this stanza is especially noteworthy. Who is Christ? He is 'my God.' Watts wrote these words in a day when the intellectual and theological climate increasingly regarded the doctrine of Christ's deity with suspicion and the doctrine of the Trinity was under heavy attack. In this way, the hymn is a means of apologetic response to the intellectual currents of the day and a way of inculcating doctrine in the hearts of the faithful.

But these words also serve to highlight the wonder and amazement that should be ours as we think about the cross. That the sinless Son of God was willing to die in order to break the power of this vain world over the human soul—should this not cause profound wonder and awe at the love of Christ and of the One who sent him into this world to save sinners?

Stanza 3

> See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
> Sorrow and Love flow mingled down;
> Did e're such Love and Sorrow meet,
> Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

As we look at the cross steadily—as we survey it—we see *the* supreme revelation of God's heart of love for sinners. 'See, from his head, his hands, his feet'—it is blood that flowed—but the one who 'surveys' the

101 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live*, 79.

cross properly sees 'sorrow and love.' Sorrow—Christ's sorrow in his death (see Isaiah 53:3); love—his love for us (see Romans 5:8). 'Did e'er such love and sorrow meet?' Watts' rhetorical question clearly expects a 'no' for an answer.

Again, Watts looks at the crown of thorns, and sees not the cruel wreath of thorns but a glittering crown encircling Christ's brow. What is the cross to the one who views it aright but a revelation of the kingship of Christ over sin and the world, over death and the devil.

One might be inclined to argue that the flowing wounds in this third stanza and the robe of crimson in the fourth are not meant to be visualized, that they are conventional Christian images, not intended to startle or to bother the mind's eye. The injunction to 'See' and the vividly pictorial quality of the images indicate otherwise.[102] Yet, Watts' stress does not linger on the visual—the last two lines of stanza 3 pose rhetorical questions that are focused at the heart.[103]

Stanza 4

> His dying crimson, like a Robe,
> Spreads o're his Body on the Tree,
> Then am I dead to all the Globe,
> And all the Globe is dead to me.

Ever since 1757 this fourth stanza has been omitted.[104] One can see why. The picture of Jesus bathed in his blood which, 'like a robe spreads o'er his body on the tree,' is so striking and startling as to be almost revolting. But plainly Watts intends it to be so. He wants to shock and disturb us, to jolt us out of any complacency and make us see in the crucifixion of Jesus the fearful and horrible thing it is.[105]

When Paul wrote Galatians 6:14, crucifixion was considered so horrible, so loathsome that the Latin word *crux* ('cross') was considered unmentionable in polite Roman society. Even when a person was being condemned to death by crucifixion the sentence used an archaic formula which served as a sort of euphemism: *arbori infelici suspendito*, 'hang him on the unlucky tree.' Similarly the Greek word for 'cross,'

102 Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 45.
103 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live,* 45–46. Note Watts' poetic devices or inclinations: his first line well exemplifies his fondness for piling up words or phrases (Manning, *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, 96).
104 Davie, *Eighteenth-Century Hymn,* 40 for the date.
105 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live,* 81.

stauros, inspired comparable dread and disgust.[106] Evidently Watts is seeking to recapture something of that shock with the first two lines of this stanza.

Lines 3–4 are a further reference to the theme verse, Galatians 6:14. The importance of the conjunction 'then' should not be overlooked. If we 'survey' the cross properly, it radically alters our relationship to the world. We who embrace the cross and make it our boast become alienated from the world—its evil and corruption, its empty pomp and show, its false values and standards.[107]

Again, note, as in stanza 3, Watts begins with a vivid picture that he wants us to visualize—the physical violence of the crucifixion—but this is not where he wants us to remain. He wants us to see the horror of the crucifixion—but to go beyond it to its meaning: for the stress in lines 3–4 falls on our death to the world.[108]

Stanza 5

> Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,
> That were a Present far too small;
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.

This stanza well depicts what lies at the heart of Watts' evangelicalism—the cross. But notice, he views the cross against the vastness of this world, surrounded by the vast distances of the universe. Watts regularly gives his hymns a cosmic, background.[109] By the early eighteenth century, the scientific revolution that shattered the mediaeval earth-centred universe was complete—through the work of scientists like Nicolaus Copernicus (1475–1543), Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), and above all, Isaac Newton (1642–1727). The universe was seen to be much vaster than had been hitherto thought. Watts was deeply impressed by this. In his hymns there is a great sense of 'the spaciousness of nature, of the vastness of time.'[110] It is this cosmic outlook that lies behind and informs this first line of the final stanza.[111]

106 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 271.
107 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live,* 81.
108 Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns,* 45–46.
109 Manning, *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, 83.
110 Manning, *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, 83.
111 Manning, *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, 83, 97–98.

This vast universe—were it even Watts' to give—would not be a gift large enough to repay God for what he has given us through the cross. What Watts does have, though, is his soul—what he is—and his life—what he does—and his all—what he has. God's total and amazing love demands his total and awe–filled surrender.[112] The very same point is made in the final stanza of 'Godly sorrow arising from the sufferings of Christ':

> But drops of grief can ne'er repay
> The debt of love I owe:
> Here, Lord, I give my self away
> 'Tis all that I can do.

Finally, we see in this last stanza the keynote of worship: wonder at God's amazing love and desire for intimacy with men and women.[113]

Watt's hymns and revival

Much of Watts' ministry was conducted during a time of spiritual stagnation, even decline, for his fellow Dissenters. He wrote a tract seeking to remedy this situation in 1731 entitled *An Humble Attempt toward the Revival of Practical Religion Among Christians, and particularly the Protestant Dissenters*. In this work Watts suggested a number of ways that the people of God could experience revitalization. Four years later when Watts received a written account of a revival that had taken place on the fringes of the British Empire, in Northampton, Massachusetts, he was thrilled. It was written by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), at the time a relatively unknown American Congregationalist pastor. Watts and John Guyse (1680–1761), a fellow Congregationalist minister in London, agreed to guide the work through the press. They also gave the book its name—*A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1737)—and wrote a preface for the work in which they ardently prayed, 'May a plentiful effusion of the blessed Spirit descend on the British Isles and all their American plantations, to renew the face of religion there.'[114]

It is indeed ironic that when this prayer was answered and revival came to the British Isles through a variety of preachers, nearly all of

112 Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live*, 82.
113 Gordon Rupp, *Six Makers of English Religion 1500–1700* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 118.
114 *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1972), 137.

them Anglicans, Watts had deep problems with the revival being a genuine work of God. When Watts' friend, Philip Doddridge (1702–1751), for instance, developed a friendship with the Anglican evangelist who was pre-eminent among these revival preachers, namely, George Whitefield (1714–1770), and even accepted an invitation to preach at Whitefield's Tabernacle in London in 1743, Watts was horrified. Watts wrote to Doddridge and stated that he had been the recipient of 'many questions' about Doddridge's 'preaching or praying at the Tabernacle, and of sinking the character of a minister…among the dissenters so low thereby.'[115] When Doddridge reciprocated by having Whitefield preach at his church in Northampton in October of the same year, Watts and other Dissenters were profoundly concerned.[116] Central to their concern was the fear that Doddridge's support of the evangelist was simply aiding and abetting that chief of eighteenth-century phobias, 'enthusiasm' or fanaticism.[117]

Despite Watts' concerns about the revival, which were somewhat abated when he actually met Whitefield, Watts did play a key role in the revival through his hymns. In fact, through his hymns he had pioneered a form of worship that would have a deeply transformative effect upon the English-speaking world down to the present day. After the Scriptures, hymns have arguably been the foremost shaper of Christian thought and piety in the past three hundred years.[118] And playing a central role in this regard have been the hymns of Isaac Watts. The hymnwriter was surely right then, when, in a note dated March 3, 1720, Watts gave his opinion that these hymns were 'the greatest work that ever he has publish'd, or ever hopes to do for the use of the Churches.'

115 See Alan C. Cliffford, 'Philip Doddridge and the Oxford Methodists', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 42 (December 1979), 77–78; Malcolm Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton 1702–1751* (Northampton: Northamptonshire Libraries, 1980), 88.

116 See especially the letters of Nathaniel Neal to Doddridge, dated October 11 and 15, 1743: *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge, D.D.*, ed. John Doddridge Humphreys (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), IV, 274–281.

117 Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast. John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 276.

118 Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes, 'Introduction' to their eds., *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

Isaac Watts' statue in Watts Park, Southampton

Isaac Watts' statue in Abney Park (Stephen C Dickson, Wikipedia)

Isaac Watts' grave in Bunhill Fields Photograph by Mark Barker, Wikipedia

Past Congregational Studies Conference Papers

1981

Alan Tovey Robert Browne: The Morning Star of Congregationalism
Derek O. Swann The Church Meeting
Peter Seccombe John Angell James

1982

John Legg Children of the Covenant (available as a booklet)
Alan C. Clifford The Christian Mind of Philip Doddridge
David Boorman The Origins of the London Missionary Society

1983

Hefion Elias PT Forsyth—Prophet of the 20th Century
Michael Boland Oliver Cromwell
Neville Rees Prayer Life of the Local Church

1984

Gordon T. Booth The Hymn Writers of English Congregationalism
E. S. Guest John Robinson (1575–1625)
Geraint Fielder RW Dale and the Non-Conformist Conscience.

1985

R. Tudur Jones Walter Craddock (1606–1659)
R. Tudur Jones John Penry (1563–1593)
Peter Golding Owen on the Mortification of Sin

1986

Peter J. Beale Jonathan Edwards and the Phenomena of Revival
Derek O. Swann An Earnest Ministry
Peter Collins Thomas Wilson

1987

Digby L. James John Cotton's Doctrine of the Church
Michael Plant Richard Davis and God's Day of Grace
Bryan Jones Lionel Fletcher—Evangelist

1988

Gwynne Evans Richard Mather—The True Use of Synods
Alan Tovey That Proud Independency
Gilbert Kirby The Countess of Huntingdon

1989

Gordon T. Booth Josiah Conder—Hymn-writer and Compiler
John Legg The Use and Abuse of Church History
George Hemming Savoy, 1833 and All That

1990

John Semper David Bogue—A Man for All Seasons
Leighton James Griffith John—The Founder of the Hankow Mission
Ian Rees Jonathan Edwards on the Work of the Holy Spirit

1991

A. Kelly What Makes Churches Grow
E. S. Guest Joseph Parker—The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom
Peter Seccombe RW Dale—Standing Firm or Drifting Dangerously

1992

Arthur Fraser When Evolutionary Thought and Congregational Thinkers Meet
David Saunders Living Stones—Our Heritage, Our Future
John Little John Cennick—Conflict and Conciliation in the Evangelical Awakening.

1993 Some Separatists

Alan Tovey A Reforming Pair—Henry Barrow and John Greenwood
R. Tudur Jones John Penry

1994 Perseverance and Assurance

Ian Densham Sherwood, Selina and Salubrious Place
Norman Bonnett John Eliot—Son of Nazeing
Guy Davies Thomas Goodwin and the Quest for Assurance

1995 Ministers and Missionaries

Peter J. Beale The Rise and Development of the London Missionary Society
Derek O. Swann Thomas Haweis 1734–1820
Brian Higham David Jones—The Angel of Llangan

1996 Freedom and Faithfulness

E. S. Guest From CERF to EFCC
Digby L. James Heroes and Villains—The Controversy between John Cotton and Roger Williams
John Semper Edward Parsons—Influence from a Local Church

1997 From Shropshire to Madagascar via Bath

Robert Pickles The Rise and Fall of the Shropshire Congregational Union
Philip Swann William Jay—Pastor and Preacher
Noel Gibbard Madagascar

1998 Eternal Light, Adoption and Livingstone

Gordon T. Booth Thomas Binney, 1798–1874
Gordon Cooke The Doctrine of Adoption & the Preaching of Jeremiah Burroughs
Arthur Fraser David Livingstone

1999 JD Jones, Lloyd-Jones and 1662

Peter Williams J. D. Jones of Bournemouth
John Legg God's Own Testimony: Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' Doctrine of Assurance
Mervyn Neal The Great Ejection of 1662

2000 Origins, Theology and Unity

Ian Harrison John Wycliffe, Father of Congregationalism?
Bryan Jones John Owen's Evangelical Theology
Kenneth Brownell Robert and James Haldane and the Quest for Evangelical Union

2001 Grace 'tis a Charming Sound

Gordon Cooke At One? A History of Congregational Thinking on the Atonement
John Hancock Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: Missionary Visionary
Neil Stewart Baptism in the Congregational Tradition

2002 Lovers of the Truth of God

Michael Plant Congregationalists and Confessions
E. S. Guest The Geneva Bible
John Semper William Huntington

2003 Jonathan Edwards

Robert E. Davis 'What Must I do to Be Saved?' Jonathan Edwards and the Nature of True Conversion
Robert E. Davis A Father of the Modern Mission Movement
Robert E. Davis Jonathan Edwards and Britain: 18th Century Trans-Atlantic Networking

2004 Revival!

Derek Swann Congregationalism and the Welsh Revival 1904–05
Cyril Aston James Montgomery—Sheffield's Sacred Psalmist
Eric Alldritt The Greater Excellence of the New Covenant

2005 Missionaries and Martyrs

Peter Taylor John Williams, Apostle to Polynesia (1796–1839)
Brian Higham David Picton Jones
Neil Richards The faith and courage of the Marian Martyrs

2006 Challenge, Memories and Adventure

Peter Robinson Congregationalism's Boom Years
Peter J. Beale The Doctor—25 Years On
David Gregson The Adventure of the English Bible

2007 Courage, Covenants and the Countess

Peter Seccombe Gilmour of Mongolia
David Legg Bringing up Children for God
Lucy Beale Selina Countess of Huntingdon 1707–1791

2008 Independency in Practice and Theory

Arthur Fraser Congregationalism and Spiritual Renewal in the Scottish Highlands
Joseph Greenald Congregational Independency 1689–1735: Standing Firm in an Age of Decline
John Semper The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658

2009 The Fruit of Faith

Ian Shaw Andrew Reed (1768–1862): Preaching, Pastoral Work, and Social Concern
Gordon Cooke The Cambridge Platform (1649)
Tony Lambert Robert Morrison (1782–1834), first Protestant missionary to China

2010 Growing in Grace

George Speers History of Congregationalism in Ireland
Robert Oliver Cornelius Winter of Marlborough (1741–1808)

2011 Truth, faithfulness and zeal

Michael Plant John Owen on the Attestation and Interpretation of the Bible
Neil Stewart History of Latimer Memorial Congregational Church, Beverley
Digby L. James Thomas Barnes

2012 Faithfulness to the end

Neville Rees The life of Alan Tovey
Garry Williams The Great Ejection of 1662

2013 Revive Thy Work, Oh Lord

Andrew Charles	Revival and revolution in Rotherham
Frank Wroe	The Origin and History of the Unaffiliated Congregational Churches Charity
Bill Dyer	The experience of ministerial training, then and now

2014 The Gospel: Preached and Practised

Digby L. James	George Whitefield and the influence of his preaching on Congregationalism
Mike Plant	Gospel Truth
Jonathan Hunt	Gospel Independence
Bill Calder	Gospel Fellowship

2015 The Gospel: Preached and Practised

Gervase Charmley	Richard Henry Smith: The Gospel, Art and the People
Thomas Brand	Christ's Cry of Dereliction: The Trinity and the Cross
Bob Cotton	A Suffolk Worthy—Cornelius Elven 1797–1873

Recordings of papers from 1989 onwards can be found at www.efcc.co.uk

EFCC publications

Telling Another Generation

This book contains a symposium of papers originally written to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of EFCC, and as a tribute to Stan Guest, who has been closely involved in the work of EFCC ever since its formation, and retired as secretary of the Fellowship in 1989.

Serving as a Deacon by John Legg

'Diaconates might find it useful to supply each member with a copy of this work'—*Evangelicals Now.*

Evangelical & Congregational

A brief survey of Congregational history, church order, confessions of faith, the ministry, worship and sacraments. Includes *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*.

After Conversion—What? by Lionel Fletcher

A reprint of the forthright and biblical advice to new Christians by Lionel Fletcher, one of Congregationalism's foremost pastors and evangelists.

Children of the Covenant by John Legg

The biblical basis for infant baptism.

Signs and Seals of the Covenant by CG Kirkby

A biblical review of the doctrine of Christian baptism.

EFCC also has available these books about Congregational church government

Wandering Pilgrims by ES Guest

A review of the history of Congregationalism from its formative years to the present day. The author was involved in the negotiations between those churches which joined the United Reformed Church in 1972 and those who did not.

Manual of Congregational Principles by RW Dale

The definitive work of Congregational church government.

Christian Fellowship or The Church Member's Guide by John Angell James

A practical manual for church members to learn their duties and responsibilities.

Visible Saints: The Congregational Way by GF Nuttall

An historical study of the growth of Congregationalism in the years 1640–1660 by a highly respected scholar of church history.

All these items are available from the Office Manager. The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, PO Box 34, Beverley, East Yorkshire, HU17 0YY

Typeset by Quinta Press,
Meadow View, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, SY10 7RN
Tel: 01691 778659
E-mail: info@quintapress; Web-site: www.quintapress.com