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# Christmas Evans

by Robert Oliver

[This article is taken from Reformation Today Magazine, no. 29, Jan-Feb 1976]

**C**hristmas Evans is an example of a preacher who, having experienced extraordinary power and revival in his ministry, went right off course in doctrine and, inevitably in practice. Robert Oliver brings out many lessons in this biography but the dramatic and sudden recovery of Evans from the crippling error of Sandemanianism is unforgettable. How great is the power of God!

In the early 1790s (we cannot be certain of the year) a great congregation gathered near Llanelli, in Wales, for a Baptist Association meeting. No meeting-house would hold the vast numbers. Gatherings took place in the fields and a platform was erected from which the ministers could preach. Outstanding ministers were to speak and there was an air of expectancy. But alas, when the time came for the beginning of the meetings the great men had not arrived. Some delay had taken place. The local pastor, who was responsible for the arrangements, was in despair. What should he do?

In his anxiety, he approached Rev. Timothy Thomas, a local minister and an acceptable preacher and begged him to stand in. Thomas refused, but pointed out a young man standing on the edge of the crowd. This individual was tall, haggard, poorly-dressed and had only one eye. A scar marked the place where the other eye had once been. The pastor went up to him and begged him to take the place on the platform and begin to address the people. Members of the congregation were amazed to see the minister beseeching a young, unknown man in this way. Some started to drift away. Others hoped that if the stranger did speak he would have the good sense to keep it short! Despite the doubts, this unlikely character mounted the platform and turned to his Bible, at Colossians, chapter one, verses twenty-one and twenty-two. This he read and began to preach, at first awkwardly and slowly. As he began to open up his text, however, he warmed to the theme of reconciliation. There was such power in his preaching, the Holy Spirit of God being so evidently with him, that the congregation was broken down

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in worship and in praise to God. When he came to the end of his sermon the people united in a great doxology in which weeping and praising blended in worship. The preachers who were present confessed that God had raised a great man among them. Questions began to be asked by the crowd. Who is he? Where has he come from? How is it we have never heard of him? As they returned home that which was uppermost in all minds was the preaching by the one-eyed minister, Christmas Evans.

### **Early background and conversion**

To answer the questions of the congregation we go back to Christmas day 1766, when a son was born to Samuel and Joanna Evans, who lived in Cardiganshire. He was named Christmas. Samuel was a poor shoemaker who died when Christmas was only eight years old. The boy then passed into the care of his uncle, James Lewis, who was a drunkard, without concern for morality, far less for spiritual things. Christmas was utterly neglected, receiving no education. He had worked at various occupations but had no understanding of reading.

Life with his uncle became unbearable, and at seventeen he left home to take a job on a farm. It is from this point that we begin to see a definite work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He told his friends later that he had been in constant fear of death from his ninth year. Some time after leaving his uncle in 1782 or '83, he began to associate with a Presbyterian church, under the pastorate of David Davies. David Davies, an eminent minister and an outstanding bard, seems to have been a man of standing in Wales at this time. But he was an Arminian and an Arian. He denied that Christ is co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father. Not surprisingly, this Presbyterian church later became a Unitarian church. The process of degeneration had already begun.

Yet, strangely, revival seems to have broken out among the people of the church. Little is known about the source of this awakening, but one of the converts was Christmas Evans. He later wrote: 'What became of the majority of these converts I have never known, but I hope God's grace followed them as it did me, the meanest of the whole.' Later, Evans began to prove that the preaching to which he was listening was decidedly defective. He felt that the whole tenor of David Davies' ministry was to build up the congregation in self-righteousness. At the same time, however, he himself was experiencing a deepening sense of his own wretchedness, corruption and guilt in the sight of a holy God. This made the preaching he was hearing even more unsuitable and useless. He was, however, greatly helped by the preaching of some itinerant Calvinistic Methodists who

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came into the district, and he began to hear the gospel preached as he had never heard it preached by his own pastor.

One of the immediate results of Christmas Evans's conversion was a deep desire to be able to read and study for himself. With a group of friends, he took steps to this end. He wrote: 'We bought Bibles and candles, and were accustomed to meet together in the evening in the barn of Penyrallttawr and thus in about one month I was able to read the Bible in my mother tongue.' What zeal conversion imparts to a man when he wants to read! 'I was vastly delighted with so much learning. This, however, did not satisfy me, but I borrowed books and learned a little English. Mr. Davies, my pastor, understood that I thirsted for knowledge and took me to his school where I stayed for six months. There I went through the Latin grammar. But so low were my circumstances that I could stay there no longer.'

It was at this time that Christmas Evans lost his eye. Because of his conversion, he began to part company with his old friends. Inevitably tensions arose. His drinking companions were furious at the rebuke to themselves in Evans' changed life. So they decided to way-lay him one evening. He was returning to his lodgings one night when six of them set on him in the dark and beat him with sticks. A blow across one eye deprived it of its sight. Thus when he emerged as a minister he was known as the one-eyed Welsh Baptist minister.

### **Preaching efforts and Baptist convictions**

Evans soon became aware of a concern to preach. Probably he was not yet enjoying the full liberty of the gospel but he was burdened to spread abroad what he knew. The Presbyterian church, of which he was a member, would not allow anyone to preach except those who had received an academic training. Despite this, he began to speak at cottage meetings and among the Independents.

About this time, one of his fellow Presbyterian members became a Baptist and joined the Baptist church at Aberdare. He began to talk to Christmas Evans of the reason for his change. Evans resisted the whole idea of believers' baptism and argued strongly against it. He said: 'I went home and I therefore fully examined the Scriptures to mark down every passage that mentioned infant baptism, for I believed there were hundreds of such there. But after careful perusal I was terribly disappointed to find none of that character there. I met with about forty passages, all giving their suffrages in favour of baptism on a profession of repentance and faith.' The consequence of this was that Christmas Evans himself applied to the

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Baptist Church in which his friend, Amos, was now a member and was baptised by Timothy Thomas (the minister referred to earlier), in 1787, at the age of twenty. It appears that this was a time of revival in this Baptist Church. He says that ‘scores were added to the church and there was much excitement in the public services’. Christmas Evans found the meetings a great contrast to the staid Presbyterian worship which he had known earlier.

During the night after the loss of his eye, he was deeply impressed by a dream of the judgment day. This awakened in him a great sense of urgency to preach the word of God. His first attempt at a cottage meeting was not particularly successful. He was guilty of plagiarism. The sermon he recited was unfortunately recognised by one of his hearers! This hearer pointed out afterwards what had been done, but said he thought there was hope for the young man—he enjoyed his prayer. Christmas Evans had to confess that it too was borrowed! It was taken from a volume of prayers by Bishop Beveridge. After this timely warning, Evans continued his labours, though with very little success in the early stages. He preached under a great sense of discouragement, with much heaviness of spirit, but felt he must press on.

### **Call to North Wales**

In 1790, Christmas Evans attended a Baptist Association meeting in Brecknock. At this meeting there was a group of ministers from North Wales who pleaded for men to come to that area. They described the terrible destitution and barrenness which existed in the northerly parts where there was a great shortage of gospel ministers. After some persuasion, Evans agreed to go north to work in Caernarvonshire. He was ordained as a missionary to labour in a very remote hamlet, a place called Llen. His going there seems to have been the occasion of a wonderful change in his ministry. He enjoyed much confidence in prayer and preaching now proved to be a delight to him. He says: ‘I felt the three great things of the kingdom of heaven—righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost ’

While in this hamlet, he knew many conversions. The church was established and built up. He married Catherine Jones, a member of the church there. She proved to be an excellent help-meet to him. It was not long, however, before Christmas Evans began to feel the burden and pressure of his pastoral responsibilities together with a very heavy programme of preaching in the areas round about. Friends began to fear he was developing consumption [tuberculosis], the scourge of the day. Therefore, he decided to take a holiday and visit the south. He was too poor to own a horse, and so he walked, preaching as he went. This

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seems to have been a most remarkable tour down into Pembrokeshire. We are told that often the congregations would follow him from one village to the next, some being in this way able to hear fifteen or twenty sermons. He wrote himself, 'I frequently preached out of doors until nightfall, and the praising and singing would continue until daybreak.' Churches received large additions as a result.

After the tour, Evans returned, refreshed, to his work in Caernarvonshire and threw himself into it again. Sometimes he was preaching five times on the Lord's Day, and walking twenty miles to do so. Yet the success of the first year did not continue. Many who were converted joined the Calvinistic Methodists rather than the Baptists. Christmas Evans suggested that there were three reasons for God's displeasure. He was convinced that God was not displeased with his doctrine of baptism. It was scriptural. But the Spirit of God, he maintained, was grieved at the dogmatic, angry and unevangelical manner in which the Baptists defended their distinctive principles. It is not clear whether he believed he was guilty of this himself or whether the fault lay with the church as a whole. The second reason for God's displeasure was the lack of practical godliness in some preachers. Thirdly, he mentioned the defects of character in some of the leading members.

### **Experiences in Anglesey**

Evans became very depressed at this stage, and accepted a call from the churches in the island of Anglesey to serve them for seventeen pounds per year, not a noble sum, even then. Crossing the Menai Straits on Christmas Day 1792, his birthday, he made his home on a corner of the island where there was a cottage and a chapel, on a bleak, exposed piece of land. There were ten Baptist communities altogether which he was to serve. The cottage was exceedingly dilapidated. There was a stable for the pony under the same roof, the door was rotten, the ceiling too low to allow Evans to stand up, and the broken-down bed was supported by stone slabs.

The churches themselves presented a dismal picture. Baptists had been established on the island only a few years, but were sadly divided. A previous minister had fallen into open disgrace and the reputation of the communities had suffered terribly. In view of this situation, Christmas Evans called a day of fasting and prayer, and he noted: 'Then it pleased the Lord to bless us.' Having waited upon God in this way, he divided the island into four districts. By visiting three places each Sabbath he found that he could give each group a service once a month. In the week he held church meetings and carried out his pastoral activities.

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As the work prospered, so new chapels had to be built. In two years the ten congregations increased to twenty. Six hundred converts were added to the church. Other preachers emerged, but Evans himself was the pastor and the other preachers functioned under his supervision.

Each year of his stay in Anglesey he made two visits south. The first, in the late spring, would be for the Association meetings and in the winter to plead for funds for the chapel debts. He would go off on a preaching tour to collect money. At that time this was not an uncommon practice when new chapels were being built in England and in Wales. On one occasion he went to a district where there had been sheep-stealers and said he hoped none of these would put ill-gotten money in the offering. It was said that people borrowed money to give! At times his tours were criticised but he said the wealthier south must help the poorer north. His own income was meagre and he wrote pamphlets to eke out his stipend, continuing to live in his poor cottage.

One is impressed at this period with Christmas Evans' serious study. He acquired a fair knowledge of Hebrew and became proficient in Greek. His theology was that of John Owen, whose works he loved, and his commentary was John Gill. Part of this he translated into Welsh. But his preaching was entirely his own. He has been described as the Welsh Bunyan, because he developed a remarkable pictorial method. Like Bunyan, he was unique. I take one example from a sermon in which he refers to Saul of Tarsus before his conversion:

Saul of Tarsus was once a thriving merchant and an extensive ship owner. He had seven vessels of his own, the names of which were, (1) circumcised the eighth day. (2) of the stock of Israel. (3) of the tribe of Benjamin. (4) a Hebrew of the Hebrews. (5) as touching the law, a Pharisee. (6) concerning zeal, persecuting the church. The seventh was a man of war, with which he once set out from the port of Jerusalem, well supplied with ammunition from the arsenal of the chief priests, with a view to destroy a small port at Damascus. He was wonderfully confident, and breathed out threatenings and slaughter. But he had not got far from port before the Gospel Ship, with Jesus himself as commander on board, hove in sight, and threw such a shell among the merchant fleet that all his ships were instantly on fire. The commotion was tremendous and there was such a volume of smoke that Paul could not see the sun at noon. While the ships were fast sinking, the Gospel commander gave orders that the merchant should be taken on board. 'Saul, Saul, what has become of all thy ships?' 'They are all on fire.' 'What will you do now?' 'Oh, that I may be found in him, not having mine own righteousness which is of the law, but through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

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It should be remembered that Evans was preaching against the background of the Napoleonic wars. You will agree that the method is unique.

### **In and out of Sandemanianism**

While Christmas Evans was on Anglesey, he became involved in Sandemanianism. This heresy had developed in Scotland in the earlier eighteenth century. It originated in the Church of Scotland but took hold upon the Scottish Baptists. According to this teaching faith is simply intellectual credence. 'Faith is no more than a belief of the Word of God as true.' There is no idea of trust in this. There was also a concern among the Sandemanians to return to apostolic simplicity. They believed in weekly communion, footwashing, the kiss of peace, and the love-feast. But these things became for them the terms of fellowship and the effect was a bitter exclusiveness. These views spread to Wales in the late eighteenth century. John Richard Jones, of Ramoth, read the works of men like M'Lean and accepted the Sandemanian position. Jones was the ablest Baptist theologian in the north of Wales, but he now denounced his fellow Baptist ministers as being of Babylon, and separated himself from the Welsh Baptists. Through his influence, Christmas Evans accepted these teachings by November 1796. The effect was disastrous. This is what he later said:

The Sandemanian heresy affected me so far as to quench the spirit of prayer for the conversion of sinners, and it induced in my mind a greater regard for the smaller things of the kingdom of heaven than for the greater. I lost the strength which clothed my mind with zeal, confidence and earnestness in the pulpit for the conversion of souls to Christ. My heart retrograded in a manner and I could not realise the testimony of a good conscience. On Sabbath nights after having been in the day exposing and vilifying with all bitterness the errors that prevailed, my conscience felt displeased and reproached me that I had lost nearness to, and walking with God. It had disastrous results among the churches. I lost in Anglesey nearly all my old hearers and we thus almost entirely took down what had taken fifteen years to raise.

Christmas Evans continued in this state for some years and then was confronted with the writings of Andrew Fuller on this subject. Fuller had first written a tract against Sandemanianism entitled *The Great Question*, and later a more detailed exposure of the system, called *Strictures on Sandemanianism*. Then Christmas Evans heard a sermon against it by Thomas Jones, one of the northern ministers who had not been infected with this heresy. After hearing the sermon, Evans had a remarkable experience, travelling home, when he was delivered from the spell of this system. He says:

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I was weary of a cold heart towards Christ and his sacrifice and the work of his Spirit; of a cold heart in the pulpit, in secret and in the study. For fifteen years previously I had felt my heart burning within as if going to Emmaus with Jesus. On a day ever to be remembered by me, as I was going from Dolgellau to Machynlleth, climbing up towards Cader Idris, I considered it to be incumbent upon me to pray, however hard I felt in my heart and however worldly the frame of my spirit was. Having begun in the name of Jesus, I soon felt as it were, the fetters loosening and the old hardness of heart softening, and, as I thought, mountains of frost and snow dissolving and melting within me. This engendered confidence in my soul in the promise of the Holy Ghost. I felt my whole mind relieved from some great bondage. Tears flowed copiously and I was constrained to cry out for the gracious visits of God, by restoring to my soul the joys of his salvation and to visit the churches in Anglesey that were under my care. I embraced in my supplications all the churches of the saints and nearly all the ministries in the principality by their names. This struggle lasted for three hours. It rose again and again, like one wave after another, or a high, flowing tide driven by a strong wind, till my nature became faint by weeping and crying. I resigned myself to Christ, body and soul, gifts and labours, every hour of every day that remained for me and all my cares I committed to Christ. The road was mountainous and lonely and I was wholly alone and suffered no interruption in my wrestling with God.

After this he made a covenant with God pledging himself to renew devotion to his service. The first indication he received of improvement was a new kind of prayer by two of the deacons—a new earnestness for prosperity. Large numbers began to be added to the churches again. In the two succeeding years six hundred persons were added.

### **Move to the South**

In all, Christmas Evans spent nearly thirty-four years as a Baptist minister in Anglesey. In 1823 his wife Catherine died. She had been a faithful and spiritual wife. In the same year serious eye trouble necessitated Evans spending several months at Aberystwyth for treatment. The churches in the island were meanwhile growing and wanted their own pastors. But the other pastors who were appointed were all co-pastors, with Christmas Evans over the whole group. He may have adopted this procedure because he was fascinated with the success of the Calvinistic Methodist system and was reluctant to proceed to complete independency for the churches, even though he did regard that as the ultimate aim. At the same time he was being threatened by legal prosecution for some chapel debts. These difficulties came to a head in 1825. In that year William Morgan was

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settled as pastor of one of the churches at Holyhead. This proved to be satisfactory and the other churches pressed even more to move to the same position of independence. They did not always accept the advice of Christmas Evans over this point and he seems to have felt very hurt about it. At this stage he was also accused of being too free in his invitations of the gospel. He had never been a formal hyper-calvinist, but from the beginning preached man's responsibility together with God's sovereignty, and offered the gospel to every creature. It is difficult to see, therefore, why objections arose at this particular time. A number of false accusations convinced some old ministers that his usefulness in Anglesey was over. So, in 1826, he accepted an invitation from the Baptist church in Caerphilly, South Wales. He remained as pastor there for two years.

The news that the mighty preacher, Christmas Evans, was coming south caused great excitement. He was in his sixtieth year and everybody had believed he was wedded to the north. Caerphilly was a poor little village. The Baptist church there had not had a resident minister for some time. How would Christmas Evans fare as a regular pastor to one congregation? There were doubts expressed at the time, but it is now reckoned that some of his greatest sermons belong to this period. From miles around crowds flocked in to hear him. Many conversions took place, and one hundred and forty new members were added to the Baptist church in the two-year pastorate.

Despite this revival, or perhaps because of it, difficulties arose in the church. Over the years when there had been no pastoral supervision, control had been in the hands of the deacons, who wanted to keep it there. Possibly Christmas Evans was too autocratic in his approach to this problem. He certainly did not have much success in solving the problem, and he came to the conclusion that he should leave. A call was received from the Tabernacle Welsh Baptist church in Cardiff, and this he accepted. Several friends felt this was an unwise move, but the end of 1828 saw Evans in Cardiff, accompanied by his second wife, an old friend from the north whom he had married while in Caerphilly.

### **Last pastorate and death**

Though there was not the same abundance of blessing at Cardiff, eighty converts were received into church membership. He had good fellowship with and encouragement from the English Baptist minister who came to visit him every day. Christmas Evans was by this time nearly blind, but he managed to prepare two hundred sermons for publication. He continued to be pressed with calls from the other churches and appeals to go back to Anglesey. Finally he felt it right to

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move to Caernarvon in 1832. This was his last pastorate. He arrived to find a chapel deeply in debt to the tune of £800, a poor congregation, divided and infected with Sandemanianism. However, his last years here were generally happy ones. Under his ministry the congregations grew, the doctrinal problems seem to have been resolved, good relations were established with Christians of other denominations, particularly the local Independent minister, William Williams. Christmas Evans was also able to visit his old friends in Anglesey, where he was received with great joy, and it was good to see that the differences of opinion had now subsided. This period was also marked by a campaign which he waged against drink and drunkenness. However, he became concerned that the Temperance movement used the testimonies of former drunkards and attempted to give the movement a religious character.

By 1838 he had been able to raise £400 to pay off the chapel debt. In that year he was faced with a demand for £300 and determined to make a final attempt to collect this money in the south. He realised that this would probably be his last trip and he wrote to the Welsh Baptist magazine to that effect. On April 10th Christmas Evans, his wife and a young minister set off in a gig from Caernarvon; not this time on the pony which had been his means of travel over so much of Wales, but in a little more comfort. He came down into the south, preaching his last Association sermon at Argoed, in Monmouthshire, on the subject, 'For by grace are ye saved'. He went on to preach at several towns and cities, arriving in Swansea on Saturday, July 14th, 1838. He preached twice the following day in the Welsh chapel, and Monday in English at Mount Pleasant chapel he preached a vivid sermon, despite being very weak physically. As he left the pulpit he said, 'This is my last sermon'. He was taken ill that night, died the following Thursday and was buried in Swansea.

### **Conclusions**

An account of revival inevitably stirs our hearts as we are reminded again of the scale on which God works. The ministry of Christmas Evans should give us fresh hope and a new earnestness in prayer as we read of vast numbers being converted, old churches being revived and new ones springing up.

There is perhaps some danger of imagining that revival makes work easier for Christians. The story of Christmas Evans shows that in one sense this is not so. He was called to endure deep poverty and many personal hardships for the cause of Christ. His self-sacrificing zeal reminds us of the demands revival may make upon us and also rebukes our tendency to slackness.

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As well as being an indefatigable evangelist, Evans was also an orthodox Calvinist. He was an admirer of Owen and Gill, although he did not follow the latter into Hyper-Calvinism. Writing to a young minister, he urged, 'Preach the gospel of the grace of God, intelligibly, affectionately and without shame—all the contents of the great book from predestination to glorification'.

As a preacher Evans was unique. It would be wrong to imitate his method, although some tried to do so and made themselves look foolish. We can, however, learn from him. We should note his care to make the truth relevant and vital. He used vivid illustrations to fix doctrine in the minds of his hearers. His preaching was always earnest. Eternal issues were too serious for him to waste men's time by seeking to entertain them. He was concerned to be affected by the truth himself before he preached. Warning against the danger of a man allowing his method to become divorced from his message, he wrote, 'The blacksmith . . . does not beat the iron to make it hot.... Equally vain is the hammer of vociferation unless the matter is brought home with warmth into our hearts'.

We must never forget that great men have their faults. Christmas Evans seems to have been unwilling to share authority. His views on church government were probably not fully worked out. The troubles in Anglesey arose, in part, from his reluctance to allow the full development of the separate local churches. Whilst his concern for immature churches is understandable, a proper system of elders would have provided oversight. Later in Caerphilly there were difficulties with deacons. These events remind us that churches should not neglect the Scriptural teaching on church government while they have comparative leisure. The problems that accompany a revival may make that an unsuitable time to consider the work of reformation.

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