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Samuel Davies: Apostle of Virginia

by Thomas Talbot Ellis

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Some years ago the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones said to an audience in the United States, ‘You Americans do not know one of your greatest preachers’. He then pronounced a name almost unknown — the name, ‘Samuel Davies’. Unhappily, we Americans still do not know one of our greatest preachers. Graduates of the finest seminaries in our land have not so much as heard of Samuel Davies. This is certainly not universally true, but those who have become acquainted with this man have found reason to agree with Dr Lloyd-Jones. Davies is indeed one of America’s greatest preachers.

The life of Samuel Davies was remarkable in many respects. For one thing, he may be said to have preached his own funeral sermon when he was only thirty-seven. The occasion was a service in the chapel of the College of New Jersey at Princeton on New Year’s Day, 1761, and his text, Jeremiah 28.16, ‘This year thou shalt die’. The sermon was designed to alarm the careless and unconverted among the students. In that sermon Davies said: ‘And it is not only possible, but highly probable, death may meet some of us within the compass of this year. Perhaps I may die this year’. He concluded: ‘It is of little importance to me whether I die this year, or not; but the only important point is, that I make a good use of my future time, whether it be longer or shorter’. The preacher died one month later on February 4th.

Born in Newcastle County, Delaware, 1723, Samuel Davies was of Welsh extraction on both sides of his family. His parents were deeply religious, but especially did his mother exhibit an ardent piety. Years later Davies could say, ‘I am a son of prayer, like my namesake, Samuel the prophet, and my mother called me Samuel, because, she said, I have asked him of the Lord’.

At the age of twelve, young Samuel received convictions of a religious nature that were abiding. In his fifteenth year, having a settled confidence of being justified by faith through grace, he made a public profession of faith, joining the Presbyterian Church. His heart was impressionable; his conscience tender, his feelings lively; and in reviewing his own conduct, he became at this early period a severe and unsparing judge of himself 'in all things pertaining unto godliness', and continued so throughout his life.

When the Rev Samuel Blair opened his famous school at Fagg's Manor, Pennsylvania, Samuel Davies was put under him and there completed his formal education — both classical and theological. Many other men who later became eminent in the church also studied with Blair. These young friends received their education under the preaching and teaching of one who took a leading part in perhaps the greatest religious awakening this country has ever known. The piety, talents, and ministerial usefulness of Samuel Blair were renowned. Years later when Davies revisited the church in which Mr Blair had preached, he says that he could not help crying out, 'Oh, how dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'. When mature, his own estimate of the preaching of Mr Blair was that it was superlative. After returning from an extended tour of England and Scotland he was asked about the preachers he had heard while abroad. He replied 'that there was scarce one of them who exceeded, and most came far short of his old master, the incomparable Mr Blair, both as to the matter of their discourses, and the impression produced by their delivery'.

The slender frame of the young man was very weak when he completed his studies; however, he was licensed to preach by Newcastle Presbytery in 1746. The same year he married, and the following year was ordained an evangelist for the purpose of visiting vacant congregations in Virginia. Due to his inexperience, feeble health, and a fear he would dishonour the ministry, Davies was reluctant to go. In obedience to Presbytery he set out.

Before beginning to preach Davies first visited the Governor of Virginia and was favourably received. He was granted by the court at Williamsburg a licence to preach as a dissenting minister, the first ever granted in that colony. I do not intend to go into the details, but a great and violent controversy raged in Virginia at this time over dissenting churches, The Established Church being the only one allowed in that colony. Those who did not attend the state church were greatly harassed. It was Samuel Davies who, by his prudent behaviour and brilliant reasoning and oratory in the courts of Virginia, won a measure of tolerance for those who were outside the Anglican communion. It was a lifelong

and uphill fight, yet by God's help and his own gracious deportment he was always able to continue the ministry God had given him.

After this initial missionary journey into Virginia the young evangelist returned home. Soon after his return great tragedy struck. His wife and son died in a sudden and afflicting manner. The brief notice in his own Bible beside the wife's name says, 'Sept. 15, 1747, separated by death, and bereaved of an abortive son'.

Grief broke his already weakened constitution, and his physical condition gave his friends great concern. One of them wrote of him: 'Finding himself upon the borders of the grave, and without any hopes of a recovery, he determined to spend the little remains of an almost exhausted life, as he apprehended it, in endeavouring to advance his Master's glory in the good of souls; and as he told me — he preached in the day, and had his hectic by night and to such a degree as to be sometimes delirious'.

In such a condition Davies was unwilling to receive a call to any congregation, but travelled from one vacant pulpit to another; his ministrations always being well received. In the spring of the next year, 1748, he began to improve slowly, but thought it only a brief respite before going to his early grave. Among many, earnest calls for his pastoral services, there was one from Hanover County, Virginia, signed by heads of about 150 families and delivered personally by one of their people. Although he might have settled close to home, his heart was moved to accept this call, and to go to what was then the backwoods of Virginia. He went, little expecting to live, only desiring to prepare the way for another who might come after him.

'It is scarcely possible', wrote William Henry Foote, 'for a missionary to have gone to Virginia in circumstances better calculated to make an impression in favour of the gospel which he preached. In his domestic afflictions and bodily weakness, Davies felt the sentence of death gone out and already in execution. His soul burned with the desire of usefulness, and his tongue uttered the earnest persuasions of a spirit that would reconcile man to God, and lay some trophies at the Redeemer's feet before his lips should be locked up in the grave. He longed to carry with him to the heavens some gems for the eternal crown'. He was indeed the living embodiment of Richard Baxter's admonition, 'To preach as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men'.

A wonderful, astonishing work began in Virginia under the ministry of this burning and shining light. He did not die, but lived to see God's work grow and expand under the divine blessing on his labours which were truly apostolic.

At first there were five meeting houses in which he preached, and then seven in six counties, and later as many as fourteen separate meeting places over which Davies had charge. Some of these were more than 30 miles from one another. Like Whitefield and Wesley, he read while riding on horseback from one charge to another, being all alone in that vast wilderness.

The meeting house closest to where Davies lived, was a plain wooden building in Hanover County capable of holding 500 people. In good weather this building was too small for the multitudes who assembled. The open air was then used, and they worshipped sheltered from the sun in the deep shade of the forest. One of the original frame buildings in which Davies preached is still standing in Louisa County. Robert L. Dabney's ancestors were connected to this, the Providence Church, and Dabney himself served this congregation in his first pastoral charge almost 100 years after Davies. In his writings Dr Dabney often mentions Davies and always with the highest praise and in connection with the greatest men, men such as Augustine and Whitefield.

When asked by Dr Bellamy of New England to give an account of the Lord's work in that place, the Christian modesty of Mr Davies dictated that most of that narrative be devoted to his predecessors. Certainly the beginnings of revival in that part of the country were remarkable indeed. When one, Samuel Morris, became very anxious for his soul there was no one to preach. After attaining blessed relief in Christ Morris became zealous for the salvation of his neighbours and used means earnestly to awaken them. In his home he read aloud such authors as had been most useful to himself, such as Luther on Galatians and some of honest Bunyan. When the civil authorities demanded of these people what their religion was, they could not tell; but upon mentioning the writings of Luther it was determined that they should be called Lutherans. It was only after discovering a copy of the Westminster Confession, and finding that it expressed their own convictions as to what the Scriptures taught, that they began to be called Presbyterians.

In 1743 a copy of Whitefield's sermons fell into their hands, and in the absence of a preacher these were read aloud in the building which was called Morris' Reading House. In July of that year the Rev William Robinson who was itinerating in Virginia, came as the first preacher among these poor persecuted folk. Morris writes of Mr Robinson's preaching, ' 'Tis hard for the liveliest imagination to form an image of the condition of the assembly on these glorious days of the Son of Man. Many that came through curiosity were pricked to the heart and but few in the numerous assemblies on these four days appeared unaffected. They returned alarmed with apprehensions of their dangerous

condition, convinced of their former ignorance of religion, and anxiously inquiring what they should do to be saved. There is reason to believe there was as much good done by these four sermons as by all the sermons preached in these parts before or since’.

In his letter to Bellamy, Davies says little of his own ministry, but we know that in the first three years beginning in 1748 over 300 people united with the church and were admitted to the Lord’s Table, while many others would not come even though Davies says there was reason to believe that many more were savingly impressed with the truth.

When travelling so extensively, Davies took every opportunity to be useful to his Master by preaching in the places where he lodged and by giving a lecture to the family and the servants where he stayed. These services were greatly blessed of God. Every visit enlarged his circuit and increased his hearers.

Nor were his labours confined to the whites. Large numbers of slaves attended on his ministry. He could number over 300 regular Negro hearers in the Virginia backwoods with over 150 black faces gathered at the Lord’s Table at one particular communion season. Archibald Alexander in the next century could write that he had ‘seen persons born in Africa who were baptized by Mr Davies, and by his care had been taught to read; and have seen in their hands, the books given to them by this eminent preacher’. What these books were, we are told by the Rev John Holt Rice. They were Watson’s *Body of Divinity*, Boston’s *Fourfold State*, Luther on Galatians, Flavel’s *Works*, Alleine’s *Alarm*, Baxter’s *Call* and *Saint’s Everlasting Rest*, as well as Isaac Watts’ *Psalms*. Rice also tells us that ‘Davies’ churches were schools in which the people were taught better things than the ancient sages ever communicated to their disciples.’ Generous friends in England sent most of the books.

A frequent visitor to Hanover at this time observed that ‘when I go amongst Mr Davies’ people, religion seems to flourish; it is like the suburbs of heaven’. His preaching was suited to the poorest slave as well as to the most educated hearer. A significant revival of true religion was going on, although Davies himself little felt his remarkable success. He always feared that he would prove to be a useless and an unprofitable servant at last.

How different from Davies’ estimate of the work among his people was the comment of that cautious and judicious preacher, Jonathan Edwards! Edwards wrote in 1749, ‘I have heard lately a credible account of a remarkable work of conviction and conversion among whites and negroes at Hanover, Virginia, under

the ministry of Mr Davies, who is lately settled there, and has the character of a very ingenious and pious young man’.

So great and steady was the progress of the church in that region that under the leadership of Davies the first presbytery in Virginia was organized in 1755 with five ministers. Hanover became the mother Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the South. Several who now shared the work with Davies had been raised up under his ministry and framed by him to some extent.

When in 1752 the College of New Jersey, today called Princeton, needed financial help it was to Samuel Davies and Gilbert Tennent that the church turned. Consequently, these men spent two years abroad in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland seeking to raise funds for the fledgling college. Their labours met with success far beyond all expectation. Davies especially was not only well received, but enthusiastically welcomed wherever he preached.

Davies’ fame as a preacher was so great in London that news reached King George II that a dissenting minister from the colony of Virginia was attracting notice and drawing very crowded audiences. When the king expressed a strong desire to hear him, his chaplain invited Davies to preach in the royal chapel. He is said to have complied and preached before the royal family and many of the nobility. As Davies was preaching, the king was seen speaking at different times to those around him. While the king was speaking, Mr Davies paused and became silent. He then looked in the direction of the king and is said to have exclaimed, ‘When the lion roars, the beasts of the forest all tremble; and when King Jesus speaks, the princes of the earth should keep silence’. The remark was well taken, and afterwards the king explained that he was so impressed with the solemn manner and true eloquence of the preacher that he was constrained to express his astonishment and approval to those around him. He professed to feel anything but irreverence. Davies ever afterwards had a high regard for the king as may be learned from the sermon he preached on the occasion of the death of George II.

In 1759 the College of New Jersey at Princeton once again looked to Samuel Davies; this time to fill the vacancy left at the death of Jonathan Edwards. He twice refused the offer preferring to preach the gospel among his once destitute people in the forests of Virginia where he had laboured so long and usefully. Upon a third overture from the trustees of the college, Davies committed the matter to the advice of the highest court of the Church. After careful deliberation and earnest appeals to the contrary from the people of Hanover, the Synod of New York decided it would be best for him to accept the vacant post at

the College. Thus the evangelist of Virginia became the President of Princeton, but surely he always will be remembered as the Apostle of Virginia.

At Princeton Davies was eminently useful and popular as President and professor in the college. When he invited guests to preach in the chapel, the students often expressed their disappointment that he did not address them himself.

After only eighteen months at Princeton, Davies was taken from this world, God's work for him having been completed in 37 years. He was survived by his second wife, Jane Holt, of Williamsburg; three sons; two daughters; his mother; and a host of spiritual children who shall rise up in the last day and call him blessed. However, sad to say, it appears that only one of his natural children followed their Father's faith as adults.

By means of his printed sermons the desire of Davies for public usefulness was fulfilled long after his tongue was silent. The writings of few other men enjoyed such popularity and wide circulation on both sides of the Atlantic during the one hundred years following his death. As many as five volumes of his sermons with over twenty-five separate printings were published in Great Britain and America between 1762 and 1867. Since that time, however, not a single volume of his sermons appears to have been reprinted.

(to be continued)

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