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Samuel Davies: Characteristics of His Life And Message

by Thomas Talbot Ellis

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Samuel Davies lived in a time and place when God mercifully sent His Spirit in gracious showers of awakening, and convincing, and — bless God! — converting power. Such effusions belong to God either to give or to withhold; with this we have nothing to do. Nevertheless, we may consider the kind of man upon whose ministry God was pleased to pour out His Spirit.

The Man

We are told that Davies was an impressive figure ‘like the ambassador of some great king’. He has been described as ‘tall, well-proportioned, erect, comely; his bearing easy, graceful, and dignified; his dress neat and tasteful, and his manners polished. He was endowed with a voice strong, clear, and musical, a perfect command of strong, ornate, and perspicuous diction; and an animation in delivery which lighted up his features, pervaded every look, gesture, and movement, and seemed to blend the simplicity of nature with the highest culture of art’. Other such men have lived, and some even have graced American pulpits, who nevertheless have not appeared to be eminently useful in the work of Christ’s Kingdom. What was there that made Davies so extraordinarily useful?

Davies was a man whose soul breathed after God and after true holiness. Secular historians cannot but recognize this characteristic in him, and one of them has set him among ‘tine holiest apostles’ of his age. In the diary which Davies kept on his trip to Great Britain, we find such entries as, ‘Oh, that I may retain a consciousness of integrity in the cause of God and universal devotedness to Him!’ And again, ‘It is sin, alas, that intimidates me. To be miserable and to be a sinner is the same thing, and I feel that I can never be happy till I am more holy’. ‘Today’, he laments, ‘so much distressed with a sense of guilt that I have no turn for reading or religious conversation, nor am I anything but a burden to myself’. Jonathan Edwards could say after the comfort of a short interview with Mr Davies, ‘He appears to be a man . . . fervent and zealous in religion.’

For Samuel Davies the absolute essentials in experimental religion are described in his own words as ‘that thorough change of heart, usually denominated regeneration; that distressing conviction of our undone condition by sin, and utter inability to relieve ourselves by virtue of that strength common to mankind in general; that humble acceptance of Christ as our only Saviour and Lord, by a faith of divine operation; that humbling sense of the corruption of human nature, and eager pursuit and practice of universal holiness’. These characteristics were certainly present in his life to a very high degree.

From his youth Davies engaged in the almost lost art of self-examination. He was constantly examining his thoughts and his motives, as well as his words and his actions. He once wrote to a close friend: ‘My advancements in holiness are extremely small. It is an easy thing to make a noise in the world, to flourish and harangue, to dazzle the crowd, and set them all agape. But deeply to imbibe the spirit of Christianity, to maintain a secret walk with God, to be holy as he is holy, this is the labour, this the work’. He longed to be holy, yet he never fell into the mistaken and pernicious idea that he had attained the goal. Understandingly, therefore, he often called his people to examine themselves.

A man of catholic spirit, Davies loved all true Christians, as can be seen from another entry in his diary: ‘Waited on three Lutheran ministers and Mr S., a Calvinist, and was not a little pleased with their candour and simplicity. How pleasing it is to see the religion of Jesus appear undisguised in foreigners! I am so charmed by it, that I forget all national and religious differences and my very heart is intimately united with them’. He deplored a denominational and party spirit. ‘Such a spirit’, he said, ‘hinders the progress of serious practical religion, by turning the attention of men from the great concerns of eternity, and the essentials of Christianity, to vain jangling and contest about circumstances and trifles. Thus the Christian is swallowed up in the partisan, and fundamentals are lost in extra-essentials’. It was not his primary aim, as he put it, to ‘presbyterianize the whole colony’, but to make his dear people true Christians.

Davies was not afraid of study. He never spent less than four days on the preparation of any sermon worthy of the name. He wrote to his brother-in-law in Williamsburg: ‘I have a peaceful study, as a refuge from the hurries and noise of the world around me; the venerable dead are waiting in my library to entertain me, and relieve me from the nonsense of surviving mortals’. He also bought up the time by reading while riding horseback between his numerous and distant charges. After coming to Princeton his habit of reading was greatly increased, but without the benefit of riding and this appeared to contribute to his ill-health.

Prayer was vital to Davies' life as it is to every Christian. While in England, he and Tennent met George Whitefield. Here is what Davies recorded in his diary after this interview with Whitefield: 'He spoke in the most encouraging manner as to the success of our mission, and in all his conversation discovered so much zeal and candour, that I could not but admire the man as the wonder of the age! When we returned, Mr Tennent's heart was all on fire; and after we had gone to bed, he suggested that we should watch and pray, and we rose and prayed together till about 3 o'clock in the morning'. It was the way of Davies to bathe everything in prayer.

The Ministry

What specifically was it that Davies sought as a minister? In his own words he tells us: 'To preach repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ — to alarm impenitents; to reform the profligate; to undeceive the hypocrite; to raise up the hands that hang down, and to strengthen the feeble knees. These are the doctrines I preach, these are the ends I pursue. 'Tis the conversion and salvation of men I aim to promote. The design of the gospel is to bring perishing sinners to heaven. I cannot help thinking that they who generally entertain their hearers with languid harangues on morality or insipid speculations, omitting or but slightly touching upon the glorious doctrines of the gospel, are not likely to do much good to the souls of men.

It was the expressed conviction of Samuel Davies that a sermon should be delivered 'with a grave and affectionate solemnity', nor was this absent from his own ministry. We are told by one hearer of being impressed by the 'solemnity of his manner, which produced a greater effect on the mind than any sermon'. 'Nothing appears to me a more unnatural incongruity', he once complained of his own preaching, 'than to speak the most solemn truths with a trifling spirit'. There was little unbecoming levity in his conduct, but neither was he morose. He was grave, yet affectionate.

A fellow minister and friend, David Bostwick, says Davies' sermons were 'plain and pungent, peculiarly adapted to pierce the conscience and affect the heart'. W. B. Sprague wrote that 'he spoke with a glowing zeal, combined with exemplary prudence, and an eloquence more impressive and effective than had then ever graced the American pulpit.'

Patrick Henry claimed that he was 'first taught what an orator should be by listening to Davies preach', but certainly oratory was not the aim of Davies. All

was subservient to one thing, namely, the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. He declares: 'For creatures to aim at their own glory, and to set themselves off, and to make it their end to gain applause, is vanity and criminal ambition because they are unworthy of it, and were formed for the glory of another, even the great Lord of all.'

William Jay of Bath in his Autobiography published in 1854 made the following observation on the written sermons of Davies: 'I must confess, no discourses ever appeared to me so adapted to awaken the conscience and impress the heart. In reading them, one seems always to feel that they were written by a man who never looked off from the value of a soul and the importance of eternity, or sought for anything but to' bring his hearers under "the powers of the world to come" '. If it was so in reading, what must these sermons have been in the solemn, animated, affectionate delivery of them by Davies in flesh and blood, and with all the pathos of his Welsh soul?

As was said of M'Cheyne, he seemed almost 'dying to have folks converted'. Such was the character of the ministry of Davies, not only in the pulpit but as he went through the woods from one farm house to another — year in and year out — speaking to the families he met and to their servants.

The Message

Davies knew the importance also of taking heed to doctrine. He sought to 'hold fast the form of sound words . . . in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus'.

After being raised up almost from his grave at one time in his life, he felt anew the vital importance of preaching Christ. 'In my sickness', he wrote to a friend, 'I found the unspeakable importance of a Mediator in a religion for sinners. O! I could have given you the word of a dying man for it that Jesus, that Jesus whom you preach, is indeed a necessary and an all-sufficient Saviour. Indeed he is the only support for a departing soul. *None but Christ, none but Christ!* Had I as many good works as Abraham or Paul, I would not have dared build my hopes on such a quicksand, but only on this firm eternal Rock'. Christ and His imputed righteousness is and always must be kept the centrepiece of all our faith and preaching. No clearer views of the doctrine of justification by faith alone can be found than in Davies' sermon, 'The Nature of Justification'.

It was the expressed desire of Davies to be, not a speculative, but an experimental theologian and preacher. In six letters intended to be printed under the title 'Charity and Truth United', Davies sought to show that Christ's solemn

statement in Matthew 7.14, ‘Narrow is the gate that leadeth unto life and few there be that find it’, means exactly what it says. So important did the subject seem to him that he expended great labour on those six lengthy letters in order to help undeceive those who might have fallen under the influence of that kind of preaching which flatters poor unconverted sinners and makes them believe that all is well with their souls when, in fact, they are on the broad way to utter destruction. How opposite was Davies from those who flatter their hearers!

It is clear from the printed sermons of Samuel Davies that his message was God-exalting and man-abasing in all respects. This was true not only in respect to doctrine, but especially in the practical aspect of his preaching. The Evangelist of Virginia did not profess one thing in his theology and practice another in his preaching. His preaching and evangelism were ‘God-centred’, first to last. Sinners were never led to think that salvation was in *their* hands so that they could at will decide for or against Jesus. When Davies — as he so very often did — addressed, and commanded, and entreated the unconverted, the people in the pew were plainly told that their salvation was in the hands of God to give or to withhold. The message to lost sinners was — as it ought to be particularly humbling to human pride and particularly honouring to divine grace.

The following shows Davies dealing responsibly and honestly with his hearers, some of whom were yet unconverted: ‘I well know, and it is fit you should know, that you are not able of yourselves to consent to these terms, but that it is the work of the power of God alone to reconcile you to himself; and that all my persuasions and entreaties will never make you either able or willing. You will then ask me, perhaps, “Why do you then propose terms to us, or use persuasions or entreaties with us?” I answer, because you never will be sensible of your inability till you make an honest trial; and because you never will look and pray for the aid of the blessed Spirit till you are deeply sensible of your own insufficiency; and further, because if the blessed Spirit should ever effectually work upon you, it will be by enlightening your understandings to see the reasonableness of the terms, and the force of the persuasives; and in this way, agreeably to your reasonable natures, sweetly constraining your obstinate wills to yield yourselves to God; therefore the terms must be proposed to you, and persuasives used, if I would be subservient to this divine agent, and furnish him with materials with which to work; and I have some little hope that he will, as it were, catch my feeble words from my lips before they vanish into air, and bear them home to your hearts with a power which you will not be able to resist’. He then continues to beseech sinners to be reconciled to God.

In a sermon on John 3.16, Davies raises and answers one objection: ‘But before I proceed any farther, I would remove one stumbling-block out of your way. You are apt to object, “You teach us that faith is the gift of God, and that we cannot believe of ourselves; why then do you exhort us to it? Or how can we be concerned to endeavour that which it is impossible for us to do?”’

‘In answer to this, I grant the premises are true; and God forbid I should so much as intimate that faith is the spontaneous growth of corrupt nature, or that you can come to Christ without the Father’s drawing you; but the conclusions you draw from these premises are very erroneous. I exhort and persuade you to believe in Jesus Christ, because it is while such means are used with sinners, and by the uses of them, that it pleases God to enable them to comply, or to work faith in them. I would therefore use those means which God is pleased to bless for this end. I exhort you to believe in order to set you upon the trial, for it is putting it to trial, and that only, which can fully convince you of your own inability to believe; and till you are convinced of this, you can never expect strength from God. I exhort you to believe, because, sinful and enfeebled as you are, you are capable of using various preparatives to faith. You may attend upon prayer, hearing, and all the outward means of grace, with natural seriousness; you may endeavour to get acquainted with your own helpless condition, and, as it were, put yourselves in the way of divine mercy; and though all these means cannot of themselves produce faith in you, yet it is only in the use of these means that you are to expect divine grace to work it in you; never was it yet produced in one soul, while lying supine, lazy and inactive.

‘I hope you now see good reasons why I should exhort you to believe, and also my design in it; I therefore renew the proposal to you, that you should this day, as guilty, unworthy, self-despairing sinners, accept of the only begotten Son of God as your Saviour; and fall in with the gospel method of salvation; and I once more demand your answer. I would by no means, if possible, leave the pulpit this day till I have effectually recommended the blessed Jesus, my Lord and Master, to your acceptance.’

Should someone denounce this giving of directions to the unconverted as ‘preparationism’, let Davies deny it in his own words, for he says that ‘the process of preparatory operations is . . . found utterly insufficient’. It is no more than the rolling away of the stone from the tomb of Lazarus (‘The Nature and Process of Spiritual Life’).

Understanding this truth — that sinners, although they are to be entreated to repent and believe, cannot do the first thing in repenting and believing —

preserved Davies from error on the right hand and on the left. It preserved him from the Arminian error of believing or implying that what men are commanded by God to do, they have the ability to do. His understanding of human inability also kept him from thinking that a nation made up of fallen, unregenerate men can be reformed or reconstructed by any external power, be it individual, social or political.

On a fast day called by the Synod on account of the French and Indian War (1756), Davies said, 'National judgments are inflicted for national sins, and therefore reformation from national sins is the only hopeful way to escape them.'

'But in all my exhortations of this kind, I remember that repentance and reformation is the duty of fallen creatures so depraved and feeble, that they are not able of themselves to apply the remedy. It is the Holy Spirit of God alone that is the author of a thorough repentance and effectual reformation.'

He then concludes, 'And how are we to expect his sacred influences? The answer is, Pray for them: pray frequently; pray fervently, "Lord, thy Spirit! O give thy Spirit!"'

In another sermon which is pregnant with the law and the gospel in their proper connection and mutual subservience to one another, Davies honestly tells sinners, 'I do not prescribe these directions as though these means could effect holiness in you; no, they can no more do it than a pen can write without a hand. It is the Holy Spirit's province alone to sanctify a degenerate sinner, but he is wont to do it while we are waiting upon him in the use of these means, though our best endeavours give us no title to his grace, but he may justly leave us, after all, in that state of condemnation and corruption which we have voluntarily brought on ourselves.'

Lessons For Today

Where is this authentic note in evangelistic preaching today? It is scarcely ever heard, but it has always been heard in revivals of true religion. Where are preachers who so earnestly call sinners to repentance, yet who so honestly tell them that they cannot repent unless God should grant them repentance? It was Davies' love for the souls of men that shines through his solemn words. Do you love the souls of men? Is this note ever heard in your preaching? It will be unwelcomed by people today, for it has never been a welcomed note. I fear this is why it is so seldom struck in preaching.

Could the failure to inculcate this message be one factor why there is not heaven-sent revival in our churches? When we preach the same doctrines as did Davies, God will be glorified. God says He will not give his glory to another. Can we then expect revival until we return to these God-honouring doctrines of grace; and return to them not only in theory and in our minds, but in the most important practical outworking of the truth in our ministries? We do not need dry, academic dissertations on the doctrine of the invincible grace of God, or the doctrine of total depravity and inability. O for the strong, warm voice of a true shepherd of souls dealing responsibly and in loving honesty with the poor, blind, and benighted folk of this generation! You may be sure there is but very little of this authentic note in preaching today. It is hard to be honest.

Samuel Davies exposed the hypocrite with great accuracy, and gave dreadful blasts and warnings in the ears of the impenitent. He commanded the unbelieving to close with Christ or eternally perish. However, he did not forget that there are some true Christians who are 'ready to halt' and of 'little faith'. This can be seen from the titles of such sermons as 'The Compassion of Christ to Weak Believers', and 'Poor and Contrite Spirits the Objects of the Divine Favour'. Most of Davies' sermons contained something which was calculated both to make the ungodly sad and the Christian joyful, as should all true preaching.

Davies entered the following record in his private diary: 'Preached a sermon in the morning from Isaiah 66.1, 2 "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word", and through the great mercy of God my heart was passionately affected with the neglect; and what tended not a little to increase my affection was my observing the venerable Mr Tennent weeping beside me in the pulpit. Spiritual poverty and humility appeared very amiable and pleasing to me.'

Oh, my friend, if you and I today are not to be guilty of simply garnishing the sepulchres of the righteous, as did the Pharisees of Christ's day, then let us hear what God would say to us through his righteous servant who, though dead 200 years, yet speaks. Do you and I breathe after holiness? Do we preach 'as never sure to preach again?' Is there something of a grave but affectionate solemnity in our demeanour? Do we take the pains necessary always to deal honestly with sinners? Or are we casual, hard, and uncaring with our own souls and with the souls of others? Will you go on for ever in this way? How terrible that would be for your hearers and for yourselves! None of us may have the talents and gifts of a Davies, but, oh, my brother, that cannot excuse us from labouring earnestly and honestly in our Master's vineyard, however desolate it may seem.

We have all failed, have we not? But there is forgiveness with God, that He may be feared. In this holy fear of the forgiven we can go on, go on in the Lord's work earnestly and honestly.

Let Davies encourage us in one of his more than 100 poems and hymns:

*Great God of wonders! all thy ways
Are worthy of thyself — divine;
And the bright glories of thy grace
Among thine other wonders shine;
Who is a pard'ning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

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