

“For fifty years Geoff Thomas has been my mentor and friend. His weekly emails recounting details of encounters and observations are often priceless. If I were forced to list my top five preachers, his name would be there. As a young Christian at Aberystwyth University in Wales, I found that his mentorship and care for me proved definitive. I would not be where I am today without his guiding, supportive hand. He has preached all over the world, met thousands of people and kept extensive diary-like notes of his conversations with them, remained in one church for over a half century, and influenced generations of preachers. That he should write a self-deprecating autobiography is a measure of the heart of this man. His autobiography is a window into the evangelical/Reformed church of the last seventy years and more. I predict that this book will be widely read and talked about for years to come.”

—Derek W. H. Thomas, senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina

“For some time now, Geoffrey Thomas has been in the habit of sending out occasional letters that reflect on God and the gospel, his travels and life, and people and movements in the Christian world. They are gems. Well, reading these autobiographical reflections is like receiving an ‘eleventy’ of these letters at one fell swoop! This volume of reminiscences is enthralling, winsome in its wisdom, and a fabulous window on God’s work in one influential life. Geoffrey Thomas has indeed had a profound influence for good in the Christian world, and especially among those people who are Reformed in their theology and vision of church life. It was Geoff’s recommendation to a Baptist elder in Belfast in 2000 that led to my being involved in Ireland, both the North and Eire, for two decades now—and I thank God for the author of this book and the fruit of Geoffrey Thomas’s ministry and life.”

—Michael A. G. Haykin, professor of church history,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Biographies and autobiographies usually make for fascinating reading. This volume will not disappoint. Yet it is more than the story of one faithful man’s ministry in ‘Aber’ for fifty years. The reader will gain perspective on the twentieth century as Geoff weaves his own story into the religious climate in Wales either side of World War II. The recovery

of historic biblical Christianity is portrayed through his eyes. There are also delightful cameos of his professors at Westminster Seminary, of men who were his friends and had a formative influence on him, and also of some who were converted to Christ under his preaching ministry. The author has been candid and is very aware of his shortcomings but at the same time very conscious of divine mercy and grace that sustained him for those fifty years.”

—Austin Walker, former pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley, UK

“By the time Geoff Thomas began his long ministry in Aberystwyth, the tide had gone out, leaving the churches in Wales high and dry. The higher critical movement had robbed us of the gospel. I arrived in Aberystwyth in 1968, was converted, and was called to preach but lacked any models or mentors. I learned to preach by listening to Geoff and by devouring the books he recommended. And I saw firsthand how the ascended Christ uses a local church for the advancement of His kingdom in the world.

With disarming frankness, Geoff looks back over a lifetime of faithful, fruitful gospel ministry and shares with us the influences that shaped him and the highs and lows of pastoral ministry. He speaks about his own mistakes and failures with refreshing honesty and self-deprecating humor. But at the same time, there is no mistaking the high view he has of the call to full-time ministry. ‘What a marvelously privileged life we lead,’ he says of the gospel minister.

This book is full of so many rich, instructive brief bios of teachers and colleagues in ministry—some relatively unknown, some household names in the evangelical world. Of particular interest are the vivid little cameos of the Westminster faculty. What a privilege to have such teachers. How vital it is for a lifetime of ministry to set yourself up with the best possible theological education. And how blessed are we who came under the influence of this man and his ministry.”

—David N. Jones, Hobart, Tasmania,  
Presbyterian Church of Australia

“I was under the ministry of Geoff Thomas during my doctoral studies at the university in Aberystwyth. His book is a magnificent work of

autobiography. It provides the reader with a fascinating account into the life, upbringing, and influences on this well-loved and respected pastor and preacher who for over fifty years was a minister in Aberystwyth. This autobiography also provides fascinating glimpses into life at Westminster Theological Seminary in the early 1960s and into the church scene in Wales during the twentieth century, as well as the establishment of a couple of confessional Christian churches in Mid Wales in both the Welsh and English languages.”

—Jean-Marc Alter, school teacher and contributor to the  
*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

“You can hear Geoff Thomas as you read this book. There is a generosity of spirit that gushes through the written word as it flows in his preached words—a love for his Lord, for people, for the church, for his Baptist form of Calvinistic Methodism, for Wales, for Aberystwyth, for the people of Alfred Place. The anecdotes about and insights into his esteemed teachers at Westminster Theological Seminary are a treat. His openness about his own perceived failings and the troughs and peaks of his long ministry at Alfred Place, Aberystwyth, are lessons in honesty. We learn about many much-loved people and a multifaceted pastoral ministry. Read it, be challenged, and be refreshed.”

—Mostyn Roberts, minister at Welwyn Evangelical Church

“A man who has ministered for fifty years in a single congregation and remains as enthusiastic for the ministry as when he first began is a man who needs to write his autobiography. For those who know Geoff, this book will fill you with thankfulness to God for him and for his influence. For those of you who don't know Geoff personally, it will be an introduction to one of the most remarkable ministers I've ever known. I'm delighted he has written his story.”

—Paul Levy, minister at the International  
Presbyterian Church, Ealing, London

“This is a lively and engaging account of the life and ministry of one man, but it also sheds fascinating light on the state of Christianity in Wales and beyond in recent times. It demonstrates the value of faithful biblical preaching in bringing people to Christ, in building up believers

in the faith, and in challenging the widespread godlessness in both the church and society at large.”

—Gwyn Davies, elder in the Aberystwyth  
Welsh Evangelical Church

“This personal account of Pastor Geoff’s life makes for a thoroughly enjoyable read, containing a bright array of personal and historical anecdotes written in a warm and lucid manner. There is openness and honesty, the confession that not all has been as it could have been—a feature so helpful to those of us whose ministries have witnessed relatively little fruit. The brief biographical and irenically written sketches provide flashes of fascinating insight; the tracing of historical associations serves to deepen the understanding of evangelicalism, especially here in Wales. Geoff is eager that Christ be glorified, and especially through good theology. This account of his life as a minister of Christ’s gospel serves to do this. It has been a joy and a privilege to have read this book and it comes with a warm recommendation.”

—Gareth Williams, minister, Bala Evangelical Church,  
and lecturer at Union Seminary

“Geoff Thomas—one of Wales’s best-known preachers during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He pastored a church in Aberystwyth for fifty years, influenced many of us, preached in congregations and conferences around the world, and has written helpful books and many articles. Godly, wise, interesting, funny, and good company! And now his life story is in print. It is everything I was expecting and more. The story is fascinating, and the way it is written, a real page-turner. This deserves a wide audience. Geoff is one of the true servants of the Lord Jesus.”

—Alun Ebenezer, headmaster of  
Fulham Boys School, London

“Geoff is like Boris. He doesn’t need a surname. If a fellow pastor tells me that Geoff is preaching or that he has had a letter from Geoff, I don’t need to ask which Geoff. For countless Reformed Christians and especially pastors, there’s only one Geoff. He has mentored us, encouraged us, inspired us, and befriended us. He has taught us to preach by

preaching to our minds and hearts. He has counseled us through tangles we've gotten ourselves into. He has driven hundreds of miles to speak at our little meetings. We owe him more than I can say. And here it is at last—Geoff Thomas's autobiography. All you ever wanted to know about Geoff's forebears, his upbringing, his conversion and call to the ministry, his heroes, his teachers, his love for the US, that extraordinary half century of ministry in Aberystwyth, and so much more beside. Geoff's memoirs are fascinating, moving, self-deprecating, Christ-honoring, and at times gloriously indiscreet. Thank you, Geoff."

—Stephen Rees, minister at Grace Baptist Church, Stockport

"A year or so after Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones had delivered his Westminster seminary lectures 'Preachers and Preaching,' I asked him for his opinion of Westminster. He paid high tribute to the quality of its scholarship and teaching and to the way in which its professors had upheld the Reformed faith in the face of considerable opposition. But his concern was that 'they are not producing preachers.' I interjected, 'But what about Geoff Thomas?' He replied, 'Yes, he is a preacher, but he comes from a different tradition.' In this fine autobiography we can see the outworking of that tradition and ways in which it has been enriched from other tributaries to produce a Reformed pastor and teacher whose appeal has extended far beyond his native Wales. Geoff was converted in Welsh evangelicalism as a teenager at a time when nonconformity as a whole was suffering from the debilitating effects of liberal theology. More recently, however, a number of congregations were being blessed by the emergence of a generation of younger preachers who, encouraged by the ministry of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, had discovered something of the biblical strength of an older dissent. The university Christian unions were being strengthened at the same time. Geoff's own thinking was undoubtedly sharpened by his years at Westminster Seminary after his graduation from Cardiff. At Westminster he was profoundly influenced by the Scottish Highland theology and piety of Professor John Murray. But he came back to Wales, still a Baptist, and was called to his only pastorate at Aberystwyth in the heart of the principality. There he served, supported by his beloved Iola and their three daughters. Calls to preach came from far and wide, and he was at home among conservative Presbyterians as well as among Reformed Baptists, ever ready to minister to

small groups as well as to large congregations. How we thank God for the help and encouragement that he has given to us. Now in retirement from his pastorate and living in London with Barbara, his second wife, he continues to serve the wider cause with God-given energy.”

—Robert W. Oliver, pastor emeritus at the Baptist church,  
Bradford on Avon, and church history lecturer  
at the London Seminary

**IN THE SHADOW  
OF THE ROCK**



# IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROCK

*An Autobiography*

Geoffrey Thomas



**Reformation Heritage Books**

Grand Rapids, Michigan

*In the Shadow of the Rock*

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orders@heritagebooks.org

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In thanksgiving to God,  
and in the sweetest memory of  
my first wife, my dearest Iola,  
and as a joyful dedication to  
my lovely present wife, my Barbara.

“The Shepherd leads the flock in the shadow of the Rock.”

—*Frances Ridley Havergal*



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## Preface

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Why did Augustine of Hippo in Roman North Africa write his autobiographical work, *Confessions*? What was the reason John Bunyan, while serving a twelve-year prison sentence in jail in Bedford, England, penned his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*? Why did George Whitefield choose, at age twenty-six, to publish his *Journals*, other than “for the Benefit of the Orphan-house in Georgia.”<sup>1</sup> For what purpose did John Wesley publish his vast *Journal*? Why did C. H. Spurgeon tell his own life story? What provoked Elisabeth Elliot to publish the diary of her first husband, Jim Elliot? And why did Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones cooperate fully with Iain H. Murray in the writing of two volumes of his life?

Surely none of them did it for 100 percent completely spiritual reasons; we are too corrupted by sin to hit that target in anything. But they believed that their personal dealings with God and the impact of their lives on the people around them could be helpful for readers. How right they were.

Certainly none of them made that choice for purely carnal and self-promoting reasons, but as in everything they did—and that we do—there’s a mixture of the flesh *and* the Spirit. “Vanity of vanities...all is vanity” (Eccl. 12:8). Even the holiest things we have done have some pollution of sin.

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1. *George Whitefield’s Journals* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 33.

It was Spurgeon who made the best defense of the reason for writing about himself: “Whether this arises from egotism or not, each reader shall decide according to the sweetness or acidity of his own disposition. A father is excused when he tells his sons his own life-story, and finds it the readiest way to enforce his maxims; the old soldier is forgiven when he ‘shoulders his crutch, and shows how fields were won.’ I beg that the license which tolerates these may, on this occasion, be extended to me.”<sup>2</sup>

I wrote these chapters as an extension of my ministry and my vocation to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that I might further the end of the calling I believe I had received from God to explain the message of Christianity and to make known the whole counsel of God. And in this, as in all else, there is some success and some failure. These are bigger illustrations and smaller statements of important truths that I have believed all my Christian life.

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2. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1875), v–vi.

## Dad

I wanted that word *Dad* to be the very first because increasingly over the years I have felt that I never honored Dad as I should have. Harry Eastaway Thomas was the finest and most loving father to me, his only child. He took his first breath at a most significant time for Christians in Wales. Dad and his twin brother, Bryn, were born in Dowlais in South Wales on Sunday, October 30, 1904.



*Harry and Bryn Thomas, before  
Christmas 1904*

### **The Significance of the Year 1904 for Wales**

Dad once told me that someone had revealed to him that was the day the 1904 Welsh revival started. When Dr. J. Gresham Machen came to Wales to speak for R. B. Jones in Tabernacle Baptist Church in Porth in the Rhondda Valley in 1927, Machen was struck by the conversation of the preachers he met there. He noted that they saw the past as bifurcated by the 1904 revival—what the condition was before that event and then after. So it was with this person, whoever he was, who upon hearing the birthdate of my father, immediately

linked it to the revival that exploded to worldwide attention during that year. It was an international hope in the churches that a revival in the “Land of Revivals” would be a harbinger of a new global work of God.

### **The Welsh Revival**

No single spiritual starting pistol can be fired to begin a true awakening. However, a series of gatherings and the activities of certain personalities throughout a period of growing spiritual intensity can signify an unusual work of God. Meetings that impact the listening world and begin to draw genuine fascination are held in the cities and in the countryside. The year my father was born, in the dawn of the twentieth century, was a time of worldwide anticipation that the future was to be a mightily productive period of growth and influence for each nation and for their churches. Such confidence was certainly true in Wales, where church membership grew until the year 1907 (though after that time, in every subsequent year until today, the numbers of those attending church were to continually decrease).

But another vital religious movement was pouring into Wales and affecting all of Europe in the early years of the century. Its fulcrum was Germany, and it displayed a very different rationalist approach to Christianity, a cerebral movement that would capture every major seminary in Wales without exception. It influenced every denomination in the principality, its denominational papers, its city-center prestigious congregations, and most of its countryside pulpits. The movement demeaned theological truths of the confessions of faith and shrank Christianity to a message of the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man with Jesus Christ set forth as merely the special exemplary man. What “hair shirts” three of my uncles—who all became ministers—were to wear from taking on board those teachings, declension, and indifference.

The excesses of the 1904 revival in Wales as well as its enthusiasms assisted this new religious ideology that was to take heavenly life out of the religion in Wales, leaving churches that were an ever-shrinking moralistic rump. The humanistic voice was saying that Wales was (as

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was every nation in the world) being presented with just two stark choices for the future. There was the theology and methodology of Charles Grandison Finney and his manufactured religious excitements: “Get up from your pew now and confess your sins before us all and be filled with the Spirit!” Or there was the bleak alternative that the majority chose of submitting to the cerebral moralistic teaching, in the name of “education,” of the new and increasingly popular rationalistic religion, a powerful movement that called itself Christianity. Of course, a third way—unrecognized by the media or by cultural and religious establishments but vitally important—was the unostentatious holy alternative still manifest in hundreds of village Bethels and city congregations where the great hymns are sung, fervent prayer is made, holy lives are lived, and men called by God are preaching the whole counsel of God, doing what our Lord did in Galilee when He sat to preach in a synagogue: He opened the Book and found the place and spoke in the power of the Spirit.

From such gatherings, blessed by awakening ministries of the Word of God, many true converts were begat from above. And in the years before and after 1904, many of the King’s champions were preaching not in word only but by power and the Holy Spirit and with much assurance. I am referring to those hundreds of pulpits where the historical biblical Christianity of the 1823 Confession of the Calvinistic Methodists or the faith once given by the apostles and summarized in the 1689 Confession of the Baptists or so beautifully set forth in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England was being believed and proclaimed. Where these truths were being preached, the seed of that Word created fruit, and those “children of the revival” (the many truly converted in 1904 and 1905) were choice Christians whom it was a privilege to meet. They kept experiential religion alive in the chapels for the next decades. The men taught the young people, prayed in the prayer meetings, gave sacrificially to support the cause, became the deacons and elders in their churches, rejoiced whenever they heard messages that exalted Jesus Christ, and urged men and women and children to repent and believe on Him.

An example of this ministry happened on the day of my father's birth, Sunday, October 30, 1904, in a west Wales village called Newcastle Emlyn, Carmarthenshire, in Bethel Calvinistic Methodist Church. A sermon was preached by seventy-five-year-old Evan Phillips, who had been the minister for forty-four years in that church, the only congregation he was ever to pastor. In Newcastle Emlyn, a preparatory school was also connected with that church, which had been set up by the Calvinist Methodist denomination so that young men who left the pits, farms, shops, steel mills, and tinplate works to prepare for the ministry could improve their education (most of them having left school at thirteen years of age). This would provide twelve months' adjustment to the later years of lectures at the Trefeca Theological College or the Calvinistic Methodist Theological College in Aberystwyth. One of the men just beginning his training at this school was twenty-six-year-old Evan Roberts, who six months earlier had been working as a colliery blacksmith.

Evan Phillips, the old preacher there in Newcastle Emlyn, had a son who became a prominent ophthalmologist in London and an elder in the Charing Cross Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. He led the adult Sunday school class where the lively theological discussions stimulated the understanding of the gospel in a medical student named Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Dr. Phillips had two sons, who were close friends with Martyn, and one beautiful daughter, Bethan. The family claims Bethan received twenty-seven proposals of marriage—the first and the twenty-seventh both from Martyn Lloyd-Jones! They were married in 1927.

Evan Phillips was alleged to be one of the great preachers of the Victorian period; his entire ministry was through the Welsh language. He lived through two conspicuous Welsh awakenings, one in 1859 and then the 1904 revival. His sermons were said to be “fresh and sparkling” by some who heard him often. He did not preach long sermons, and on the Sunday that Dad was born, Phillips was preaching in Bethel. His text was John 12:23, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified,” to a congregation that heard him with gripping attention.

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It was an awakening ministry and, thus, not unique. In nearby New Quay, powerful preaching from a minister named Joseph Jenkins resulted in Christians going out from that beautiful seaside village to evangelize in the surrounding churches. In September 1904, meetings took place close by in Blaenannerch, with the notable evangelist Seth Joshua preaching mightily each evening while prayer meetings took place in the mornings. Farms and villages were visited in the afternoons by students from the school in Newcastle Emlyn and church members. The students had abandoned classes to attend all these meetings, and Evan Roberts was so stirred by the events surrounding the ministry of Seth Joshua that he got permission for the following week to leave school and return to his church at Loughor, a village halfway between Swansea and Llanelli, to report there to his family, friends, and congregation of the exciting and encouraging events in Blaenannerch, New Quay, Newcastle Emlyn, and west Wales. Those meetings in Loughor were the catalyst of what was to become identified as the 1904 Revival. Wales was soon to be made aware of the fact that there was a religious stirring taking place within the principality, and the press began to send reporters to cover the meetings led by the young Evan Roberts. A daily column in the *Western Mail* soon appeared reporting on the previous evening's events.

### **Bethania, Dowlais**

My father's parents had met one another in my grandfather's home community of Pontarddlais, a village between Swansea and Llanelli. The Thomas family was a prominent clan in that community. My grandfather, Philip Henry Thomas, was a cousin of the poet Edward Thomas, whose first poems were brought out under the family name, Edward Eastaway. So Dad was named Harry Eastaway Thomas. *Harry* was also the name of Harry Evans, the musician and beloved organist in Bethania, Dowlais. As a boy I was embarrassed at his middle name, "Eastaway," and even the name Harry seemed so old-fashioned in the 1940s. Giving an unusual middle name to all the Joneses and Thomases and Williamses and Evanses that filled

Wales was unexceptional. When I was in junior school one morning, our teacher had to record the full names of all our fathers, and we were instructed to call them out to him one by one. Gales of laughter were heard at the revealing of the outrageous middle names most of them bore. I dreaded my turn, but there was no escape, and red-faced, I was greeted with another explosion of mirth as I called out “Harry Eastaway Thomas!” Why couldn’t he have had a nice Welsh middle name?

Dad’s mother came from Beulah in Breconshire. She was raised in the Welsh-speaking home of a God-fearing man, some of whose notebooks I possess. He sent his daughter to Pontarddulais to a cottage industry where a man taught half a dozen young women to become milliners—that is, hat makers. The daughter and this man married and moved to the steel town of Dowlais and opened a milliners in a shop called Bradford House with Grandpa Thomas working behind the counter as manager. She rather intimidated me.



*Philip Henry Thomas, Geoff's grandfather,  
his wife, and children.*

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They attended Bethania, a Welsh Congregationalist chapel, the largest church building in the town. With a thousand people in the beautiful auditorium on many Sundays, it was one of the largest Congregational churches in the world, certainly in Europe, with six hundred of the congregation being actual church members. It had been four years since the church had had a minister, with many people waiting for one to be appointed before they joined. So, with the call to its pulpit in the summer of 1904 of the eloquent and academically qualified Peter Price, over a hundred men and women joined the church—which Price referred to as a “revival.” Soon in that congregation the two conflicting religious movements emerging in Wales clashed, and both were severely injured by the collision.

As a boy attending that church, I would listen to the old men speaking of the early days of the twentieth century and the personalities in Bethania’s congregation. I remember one man being described as coming straight from the steel furnaces to the midweek prayer meeting still dressed in his leather apron, and there he would stand and pray publicly with heavenly unction. So in the summer of 1904, the congregation at Bethania had its new minister, and soon the little Thomas twins, Bryn and Harry, were taken at the end of the year to be baptized by him.

### **Peter Price**

On January 23, 1905, Evan Roberts himself held a meeting in Bethania, and my grandfather had to come to some conclusion about him and what took place. An air of excited anticipation was present in the chapel; Bethania was full long before the appointed time, with an estimated two thousand people present and overflowing into a packed adjacent Sunday school room. The services of Roberts were not like those mighty meetings of Seth Joshua in Blaenannerch, when a verse from Scripture would be opened up and explained and applied to the congregation, and people urged to repent and trust in Jesus Christ, having heard of His divine nature and saving work. There was by choice no one evidently in charge of these 1904 meetings of Evan Roberts. Various people stood in turn and faced

the congregation and exhorted them. A man in the gallery might rise to his feet and exhort his fellow steelworkers to come out on the right side. "Many have come to Him in Dowlais," someone else announced to a response of shouts of praise. Hymn after hymn was sung. Prayers, experiences, testimonies, appeals, exhortations, solos, duets, or recitations of a verse or a hymn followed in rapid succession from all over the congregation. Men, women, children, and ministers would be on their feet speaking or singing. A group of women always accompanied Roberts to his meetings, and one by one they would exhort people around them to take their stand for Christ, or they would lead the congregation by choosing and singing a hymn or a solo. Roberts said a few words from the pulpit, but then he walked up and down the aisles and spoke personal words of encouragement to various people. He urged and invited people who had accepted Christ to stand up and confess Him there and then. Each one who did so was greeted with cries of "Thanks be to God!" The meeting was held in both Welsh and English.

My grandfather had to judge whether what he was seeing was a remarkable work of the Spirit of God or human manipulation or a mixture of both. His minister, Peter Price, barely six months in Bethania, observed it all, taking it all in, and he was someone who came to his own agitated conclusion, though he lacked the theological and spiritual judgment to do so. He decided to let everyone in Wales know his opinion of the revival, expressing his disquiet in a lengthy letter to the chief Welsh daily paper, the *Western Mail*. It proved to be a long and devastating attack on Evan Roberts and his kind of meetings:

Before Evan Roberts visited Dowlais, we had the holy fire burning brightly—at white heat; and at my own church alone we could count our converts during the last five or six months by the hundreds. But what happened when Evan Roberts visited the place? People came from all parts anxious to see the man, to understand something of the movement, and to get some of the fire to take home with them. I suppose that most of them did see the man; but I doubt whether they understood the

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movement—even the mock movement. They had no chance to understand the true movement, nor had they a chance of catching any of the true fire, for it wasn't there. I will say that with much effort Evan Roberts, together with his co-operators (and, evidently, they understand one another thoroughly, and each knew his or her part well and where to come in), managed, by means of threats, complaints and incantations. They reminded me of the prophets of Baal, to create some of the false fire. But never in my life did I experience such agony—the whole procedure being utterly sacrilegious. I should say that Evan Roberts must have seen and felt that he was a failure at Dowlais; but to cover the circumstance of failure, there appeared in the paper, after he had proved himself so, a prophecy concerning certain misgivings of his as to whether he ought to have undertaken a mission to Dowlais....

Evan Roberts had no controlling or constructive influence over the real Revival,... but was out of touch with it.... This [real] Revival...was the result of spiritual forces that had been quietly at work for years.... Evan Roberts was...the embodiment of the...rubbish...the waves of hysteria...and psychic manifestations...which were looked upon as necessary adjuncts to a successful meeting,... and became at last, in the estimation of the press and the public, *the* characteristic marks of the Revival.<sup>1</sup>

There was certainly some truth in his extreme response, particularly his unhappiness with the absence of preaching from the Scriptures during the Evan Roberts's meetings. Peter Price finally signed the letter thus: "Peter Price (BA Hons), Mental and Moral Sciences Tripos, Cambridge (late of Queens College, Cambridge)."<sup>2</sup>

The next five years in Bethania, as in many other congregations in Wales, were ones of friction and division as the rise of the social gospel and the methods advocated by Finney came into conflict. There was no unity of the Spirit, no bonds of peace. Those

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1. *Western Mail*, January 31, 1905.

2. *Western Mail*, January 31, 1905.

who “entered into the blessing” (as was the popular phrase used), exhorted their fellow church attenders to believe and be saved. They were met with resentment and opposition, and many throughout Wales left to form new evangelical churches or moved to join such congregations. It was the time of the birth of the Apostolic Church, whose headquarters were at Pen-y-groes in Carmarthenshire. This was the first Pentecostal denomination.

At Price’s farewell meeting in Bethania, Dowlais, on October 15, 1910, only two of the twelve deacons made an appearance. A local preacher was asked to preach the next Sunday evening, but just as he was to announce his text, a woman stood up and asked the entire large congregation whether the deacons were going to be allowed to remain sitting in the “big seat.” The service stumbled on, with a suddenly arranged, lengthy, acrimonious members’ meeting following. People even came in from the streets to eavesdrop and watch the bitter arguments. A final vote decided that all the deacons could be permitted to sit in the big seat. Where now were all the claims from all sides that the Spirit was present reviving their particular convictions and labors in Bethania?

When Peter Price left Bethania, he moved back to North Wales where he pastored a church but spent much of his energy organizing various educational courses and speaking at political meetings. This was the fruit of the social gospel. Price was a pacifist, and he published a couple of booklets on this theme in the Welsh language.

### **F. B. Meyer**

F. B. Meyer, the Baptist preacher and writer, considered himself to be a leader of evangelical Christianity in England and Wales. In early 1905 he was invited to preach in Bethania, Dowlais. He caught a train there to the Dowlais Top station and wandered slowly through the main street of the little community. My grandfather was in the milliner’s shop and saw through the window that F. B. Meyer was looking at the products on display. It was over an hour before the service was due to start, so Grandpa went out, introduced himself, and invited the preacher in to make himself comfortable. F. B.

Meyer entered and sat in the front room, and after a few minutes, baby Harry, in a hidden crib, made a cry. "Oh, you have a baby!" the preacher observed. Three minutes or so later, Uncle Bryn cried from another hidden crib. "Ooh, you have two!" said F. B. Meyer.

When he had returned to his home, he sent to my grandparents a sepia photograph of himself. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was no admirer of Meyer, who, in his judgment, considered himself to have tastes superior to others whom he looked down on. For example, he considered that Lloyd-Jones's congregation in Charing Cross did not sing at a meeting in which he was the invited preacher but rather "shouted" the hymns, and he told them so: "I said 'sing,' not 'shout.'" Can you imagine an Englishman telling a congregation of Welshmen that they were shouting? When I told Dr. Lloyd-Jones that Meyer had sent a photo of himself to my grandparents, Lloyd-Jones shook his head. "Typical!" he commented.

So Meyer came to evaluate firsthand the Welsh revival. He listened to the reports, he preached that evening, and finally he put his seal of approval on Evan Roberts and his meetings.

### **A Sad Children's Talk**

My father passed the scholarship at eleven years of age and went to Cyfarthfa Grammar School, though he never spoke about it. He had to leave at fourteen or fifteen years of age. He had no delight in his education there. He was deaf in one ear, which came about through an art lesson in junior high school. He had been drawing something that was misunderstood by the teacher, who promptly hit him savagely on his ear; it resulted in deafness in that ear for the rest of his life. There was no money to pay for his further education, so he joined the Great Western Railway as a clerk where he remained for the next forty-five years. How the mines, buses, railways, and town halls' civil service profited from these thousands of intelligent, moral, reliable nonconformists. What a workforce they supplied! Dad told me that he would love to have been in a more challenging profession, such as becoming a pharmacist, and he certainly had the ability to do so.



*Harry Eastaway Thomas, Geoff's father, in his office.*

In his twenties Dad became a deacon in Bethania and was the church treasurer for years. I was the only child in the church for Lord's Day evening services, and I would stand near Dad in the big seat as the deacons talked, opened the envelopes, and entered the amount the members gave in a large ledger. The usual amount per person was two shillings (ten pence), though the better off would give half a crown (twelve-and-a-half pence).

Dad was a most moral man. I never heard him utter a swear word. People of his generation could not even say the word *homosexual*—or even knew what it meant.

Dad understood the religion he heard for years from the Bethania pulpit, and he put it into practice. What that religion of his was became neatly illustrated by a rather pathetic and embarrassing providence for me. I would go with my mother to High Street Baptist Church in Merthyr, where she had attended all her life, and

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her parents before her. It was English speaking, as neither Mam nor I spoke a word of Welsh. The new minister, G. H. Williams, like most ministers was expected to give a ten-minute children's address every Sunday morning. We children sat in the front two pews, the boys on one side and the girls on the other. Then Pastor Williams had an idea that he would ask some of the children to give the children's talk, and the first one he asked was me—there really was no other child capable of this task, as I was the only one who returned to church on Sunday evenings. I was fearful of standing in the pulpit and speaking to the whole congregation, but my father told me it would be all right and that he would write a story for me to give. He had, I suppose, heard it in a Sunday sermon in Bethania and approved of it as being the heart of the Christian message. So, this is what I read:

A farmer needed a new laborer to work on his farm. He interviewed three men. He asked each one what they could do. The first man told him that he could cut hedges, and plough, and thatch. The second man told him that he with his dog could be a good shepherd to the sheep, and he could milk the cows and make butter. When he asked the third man what he could do, the man simply said, "I sleep well on windy nights." He was the man who got the job, because he worked hard at whatever he was asked to do and was weary with the toil at the end of the day. The moral of this story is, "If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well."

Then I hurried out of the pulpit before the smiling faces of the congregation to return to sit with the other boys in the front pew. No other child was ever asked to address the children—nor should they have been.

That story illustrates the kind of religion that now gripped too many of the pulpits of Wales. It was no longer the plight of man in his sin, to be redeemed by the life and sacrifice of the Son of God, to be applied to us sinners by the life-giving and indwelling Holy Spirit in a new birth, and then living a new life each day that showed itself in good works and love for one's neighbor. The new Christian message was that we showed we were Christians by our good lives, and when

we get to heaven, God will let us in because we had behaved decently. Who needs church and preaching and the Bible if doing things well is the key to eternal life? Who needs the righteous life of the incarnate Lord of glory and the atoning death of the Lamb of God if we look at life as a series of jobs to be done as sons and husbands and fathers and workmen, doing what we must do well and sleeping with a good conscience every night, whether we know Christ or not? I cringe with embarrassment today as I think of reading that story to a Baptist congregation.

### **Fond Memories**

Of course, Dad was enormously competent in all he did. He had beautiful handwriting. He always had a spotlessly clean handkerchief in his top pocket. He ate his food like a gentleman, cutting his bread into smaller pieces and putting the butter on it. I never saw anyone else doing it his way, and yet he never taught me even how to hold my knife. I held it like a pen, and think I still do. (The headmaster once, as he wandered around the school dining room, told me off for cutting my meat and vegetables like that.) Dad was able to make anything out of wood—a piano stool, a chicken shed, a cricket bat and wickets.

My father had a pleasant baritone voice and sang in a choir. He also could play the piano. Any hymn tune you set on the piano rack, he could immediately sight-read and play. When I complimented him, he said, “You should have seen my mother. She could play from a tonic sol-fa copy and then immediately transpose the tune higher or lower.” He also played the violin. I heard him once as part of a local orchestra in Ystrad Mynach playing a piece by Mozart, his glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Dad was a good gardener, specializing in kidney beans and dahlias. He also kept chickens until one night he forgot to close the hencoop door and a fox got them.

Then too, my father was a good sport. One evening just before Guy Fawkes Night, the national evening of bonfires and fireworks, we had three fireworks, and Dad decided to light them. He put one

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on the wall outside the kitchen window and lit the blue touch paper, and we watched it through the window. But a gust of wind blew it off the wall, and it failed to light. So Dad decided we would not waste another firework like that. He put it in the grate of a large fireplace, where there was no fire burning at that time, and lit it. He switched off the electric light, and we watched in the darkness as the brief burst of sparkling began, followed by an enormous explosion in the confined space of the kitchen, enough to make one's ears ring. When the light was switched on, we could not see one another for a moment across the kitchen as a thick cloud of soot hung in the air. Then, as silent as a fall of snowflakes, it landed on every surface. A quarter inch of soot was deposited on the floor, table, chairs, shelves, oven, sink, lampshade, towels, bread bin, saucepans, and even the dog's bed. We looked silently at one another. It was time for me to take my book to bed and leave my patient parents to clean it up, later adding it to the stories of family mishaps.

Another similar mini disaster was connected to soot six years later. One half-day off work Dad borrowed a set of chimney-sweep brushes from a fellow workman and determined to sweep the living room chimney. He sent the brush up on the first stick, a brush the size and shape of a cycle wheel. He screwed tightly to that rod another rod, and then another, and after ten had gone up sent my mother out to check if the brush could be seen. She came back saying that the brush was about a couple of feet above the chimney top, and so he pulled the brush down, rod by rod. But when he came to the first rod, to his intense dismay no brush was attached to it. He looked into the darkness and reached up, but nothing was there. What could he do?

He envisaged knocking a hole in the chimney breast and finding the brush that way. A handyman friend, Mr. Knock, lived a hundred yards away, and Dad walked over to explain his dilemma. Mr. Knock listened sympathetically and suggested that Dad attach a walking stick to a rod and send that up the chimney to hook over the brush and pull it down. My father did this carefully, tying the stick very

securely to the rod, sending up ten rods, and then out went Mam to see if the walking stick had reached the top.

My mother returned to say that it was sticking out above the top of the chimney by eighteen inches. But then when he sought to bring it down, the handle hooked over the edge of the chimney pot and became detached from the rods. Dad, now very disconsolate, unscrewed the ten rods safely enough, but now he was lacking a walking stick as well as a brush. Then the doorbell rang, and at the door was the man who had come to install a TV aerial and attach it to the chimney. (This all happened in June 1955 when I had passed my nine subjects for my general School Certificate of Education. My parents would not let a TV enter the house until I had passed that exam.) So, the engineer put up his ladder and roof ladder, climbed up, and stood at the chimney and looked down, but there was no sight of the brush, though he did toss down the walking stick. Dad was almost in tears. What was there to do now but knock a hole in the chimney breast?

He tried again, cutting a branch off a holly bush from the garden and tying it very securely to the first rod, and then gingerly and with little to lose, pushing the rodded bush firmly up the chimney. My mother went out to inform him that she could see the bush poking out of the chimney top. He pulled them down rod by rod until the holly bush appeared—but no brush.

In desperation he stretched his arm up into the gloom, and his fingers touched a bristle. He pinched it between his fingers, pulled, and there was movement. With a flurry of soot, down came the brush! What relief! The next day he was able to restore the complete set of rods and the brush back to the porter from whom he had borrowed them. It was his first and last attempt to be a chimney sweep.

Dad had much ability and initiative and was so kind toward me, but sadly, he had little concept of God's grace and of Christ's accomplished and applied redemption because he had never been taught these things in the churches he attended.

### **My Uncle Bryn**

Dad's twin brother, Bryn, became a shop assistant but wanted to become a minister and so applied to the Congregational College in Brecon. They interviewed him but concluded that he was not physically robust enough, that his heart was too weak for this profession, and they turned him down, much to his disappointment. But speaking to a friend, he learned that recently a young man had begun his ministry at Bethlehem Forward Movement Church (Sandfields) in Port Talbot. His name was Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and he had been a heart specialist in London. The friend asked him, "Why don't you write to him and tell him of your dilemma and ask him if he will examine your heart?" Uncle Bryn did this, an appointment was made, and in Sandfields the Doctor examined the patient. Lloyd-Jones concluded that his heart was perfectly sound, and Bryn went with the news to the college, where he was accepted to take the theological course. I once told Dr. Lloyd-Jones of this incident. He had no memory of it at all, as so many people went to see him for similar reasons. Then he paused and asked me, "Well, how did he do?" "He is still alive today," I told him. "Oh, very good," said the Doctor, clapping his hands with delight at a successful diagnosis.

But the theology Bryn Thomas was taught in Brecon was far from New Testament Christianity. He did not preach on the writings of the apostle Paul for years and then a text or two, infrequently and selectively. He had been taught that the simple Galilean gospel of Jesus had been scholastically misinterpreted by Paul. Dad's sister Olive married a man from Bethania named Stanley, who also went to Brecon Congregational Memorial College, along with his brother, Elvert, and they became Congregationalist preachers with those same bereft ideas. Those boys were being confronted with a Hobson's choice—that is, both alternatives facing them being bad. They were asked to choose between the obscurantist man-manipulation of the methodology of Charles Grandison Finney or the dry, cerebral religion of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Those were not the only alternatives, however. There were hundreds of people, especially among the Presbyterians and Baptists, for

whom the climactic aspect of worship at their meeting places, after they had sung their praises and prayed to the living God, was that the Lord spoke to them in the opening up of a passage of Scripture that the preacher announced to them. The preacher often felt guided to that passage by God and had studied it and prayed diligently over his text during the previous week.

Since the Reformation this is how churches in the historical Christian tradition in the United Kingdom responded to God's grace, and in such churches and under such ministries in the opening years of the twentieth century, many ministers knew great unction from God in their sermons to growing and attentive congregations. There was a burst of growth that continued for a couple of years, but then the general trend was decline.

### **The Aberfan Disaster**

My uncle, Stanley Lloyd, was the local minister in Aberfan at the occasion of that infamous and fearful disaster when a coal tip of millions of tons of rocks and slurry hurtled down a mountain and hit an elementary school one morning on October 21, 1966, killing 144 people, including 116 children and five teachers from the school. The school was fifty yards away from Stanley's manse, while his chapel was one hundred yards away, and so the bodies were finally discovered, removed, carried to the chapel, and laid out on each pew and covered with a blanket. A policewoman then admitted parents one by one into the chapel, and they uncovered the faces of the children until their child was identified. What horrors. The chapel was never used again and subsequently was demolished. Tens of thousands of pounds were sent to Uncle Stanley from Congregational churches in England and North America, and he and my father worked out a method of payment, a scale of financial conferment to a parent or grandparent or sibling of any of the children killed at the school, depending on the closeness of the relationship. People lined up at the Aberfan manse to explain their relationship to the deceased and to receive this bestowment. My mother made cups of tea and Welsh cakes for them.

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Uncle Stanley led the funeral service a couple of weeks later when members of the royal family attended. The following year, Dr. Lloyd-Jones was invited to preach at a memorial service in Aberfan, and his text was from Paul's letter to the Romans where the apostle declares that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us. It was a definitive response to the disaster and greatly appreciated by the Christians there on that unforgettable occasion.

### **Concluding Reflections**

My first two decades I lived in a number of station houses as Dad moved up the grades from becoming a railway clerk to a stationmaster in Abercanaid, Pentrebach, Nelson, and Llancaiach, and finally to stations around Barry. He went to church twice each Sunday and to the prayer meeting in the week, but I am sad to say I cannot remember him or his father or other members of the family reading the Scriptures. He did not grasp the gospel until I became his pastor for the last decade of his life. But I rarely remember him reading any book at all. He read the daily paper. He was vaguely interested in sports.

Dad wonderfully supported me throughout my life and was proud of me; he was delighted that I became a preacher. When something was suggested for him and Mam to do, he was initially and characteristically negative about it and saw only the problems, but then he accepted it, went ahead and did it, and did it well.

The annual two-weeks' holiday was an unmissable feature of every year, generally to a bed-and-breakfast establishment recommended by another railwayman or chapel-goer and frequently on the south coast, places like Bournemouth, Weymouth, New Quay in Cornwall, or Worthing, but occasionally to Jersey in the Channel Islands. With the free passes he got as a railwayman, he grew more ambitious as they began to embrace the continent. In 1950 we went to Interlaken, and a few years later to Menton. Thenceforth, often we went to the continent. By that time of my teens, I had discovered the joy of camps.

One year the family spent a week at a Butlin's Holiday Camp in Filey. We went incognito with some secrecy. It was a working-class place to visit, while we were lower-middle class. I was told not to tell my friends, and on the train journey north, we met a fellow railwayman whom we informed we were traveling to nearby Scarborough, and he told us the same. But as barriers broke down, we each admitted to the other we were actually going to Butlins. It was a grand week for me, like a week at Blackpool or Atlantic City.

We were a middle-class family bettering ourselves, careful with money. We steadily purchased a washing machine, an electric iron, a vacuum cleaner, a refrigerator, a radio, and after the School Certificate exams were navigated by me in 1955, we bought a television. We never had a phone or a car; Dad could not drive. He had little need to, for he had privilege tickets on the trains that went all over South Wales.

Every two weeks he went to spend an evening with his father, Grandpa Thomas, in Aberfan. I wish I had known about Bethania and Evan Roberts and Peter Price then, for I would have gently interrogated my grandfather. Grandpa Thomas lived a declining, sad life. I do not remember any laughter. The century started for him with a beautiful young wife and five children (two of whom died in infancy). They had a maid called Miriam. He had been in a thousand-member congregation amid a rich bilingual culture, with a love for one's neighbor ethic—the front door never needed to be locked at night—and there was a high view of Sunday's sanctity. He was to witness irrevocable decline in the culture and in the chapel with every passing decade until his death in 1957. When my father was born, there were fifty Welsh-language congregations in the Merthyr district, but by 1990 they had all closed. Not a single Welsh-language church survives among the sixty thousand residents of the borough of Merthyr today. Grandpa Thomas and his wife determined that they would not speak Welsh to their twin boys and daughter, and so I grew up in an impoverished, monolingual household, having painfully to learn the language in my teens at school. Grandpa was a victim of theological betrayal and cultural decline. Interestingly, in

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the last year a charismatic group has purchased the Bethania building after years of abandonment, and now one hears atonement, a supernatural gospel, and conversion and salvation through faith in Christ being spoken of in the old building.

I was one of the few boys in school whose father attended church regularly. My parents voted in the general election, but I had no idea for whom they voted. I suppose Dad as a Welshman was traditionally a supporter of the Liberal Party. He was no socialist, and for Welsh people then the Tories were the party of the establishment, the nobility, the established Church of England and the well-off, so he could not vote for them. But the Liberal Party had been decimated in the 1945 general election. Dad was once asked to stand as a Liberal candidate for the Barry and Vale of Glamorgan constituency in a general election in the late 1950s, but to my intense relief he rejected the invitation.

Dad and Mam moved to Aberystwyth to spend their final years there, and he died on Christmas Day in 1978 in the same bedroom in the house that is now mine—in fact, in the bedroom and the same bed where I often sleep. I think about him and the twenty years we lived together, with that holy mixture of thanksgiving to God for many sweet remembrances of him and for my anticipation of seeing him again in heaven. Yet I also have many regrets I was not a better son and that it has taken time to appreciate him and his gifts. There was much I unconsciously and consciously learned from him. I miss him and am sorry that I ever caused him pain. He made a massive positive contribution to who I am and what I have become today.

Starting with my dad assists me to explain how my life panned out. Dad could have had strong socioeconomic convictions. He could have been politically conscious and followed David Lloyd-George and the Liberal Party or grew excited at Clement Attlee and the Socialist victory of 1945. He could have believed in what the world refers to as “science” and “evolution” though not understanding it, and then how different my life would have been. He could have been a businessman and lived for a product, but there was nothing like that interest in Dad. At the back of his mind there was

a Book and a person in that Book whom he valued, in his own way. And he sought to live by that Book, and the people who congregated around that Book were his people, and thus I, with greater focus and stronger convictions, was the same, and I had the privilege of teaching him about the grace of God.

But of course, everyone has some book they unconsciously make reference to and live by. That book they have written in their minds says that man is the measure of all things; that Jesus Christ was important but confused; that the Bible has good things to say but is also muddled and needs to be treated cautiously; that this life is all we have; that there is no heaven, above us only sky, and nothingness after we die; and that everyone has to work out their values and believe in themselves. That is probably something like the book some readers of these words have written in their minds. But the presupposition of my life since I became a Christian has been that the Bible is true and Jesus Christ is the incarnate God. Only by His life and atoning death can forgiveness and eternal life be mine. I got that from Dad but, particularly, from Mam, to whom I must now turn.