

Preaching of the Great Awakening: The Sermons of Samuel Davies

by Gerald M. Bilkes

I have been solicitously thinking in what way my life, redeemed from the grave, may be of most service to my dear people ... If I knew what subject has the most direct tendency to save your souls, that is the subject to which my heart would cling with peculiar endearment Samuel Davies.¹

I. The "Great Awakening"

1. The Narrative

It is customary to refer to that time period which spanned and surrounded the years 1740-1742 as the Great Awakening in North American history. The literature dedicated to the treatment of this era has developed the tradition of tracing the revival from the Middle Colonies centripetally out to the Northern Colonies and the Southern Colonies. The name of Theodorus Frelinghuysen usually inaugurates the narrative, as preliminary to the Log College, its Founder, William Tennent, and its chief Alumni, Gilbert Tennent, and his brothers John, and William Jr., Samuel and John Blair, Samuel Finley and others, so significantly portrayed in Archibald Alexander's gripping Sketches.² The "mind" of the revival, Jonathan Edwards, pastored at first in the Northampton region of New England, but was later drawn into the orbit of the Log College, filling the post of President for lamentably only three months. Besides the Log College, another centralizing force of this revival was the "Star from the East," George Whitefield. His rhetorical abilities have been recognized as superior, his insight into Scripture as incisive, and his generosity of spirit boundless.

The narrative of the "Great Awakening" reaches back to those passionate and fearless Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who championed biblical and experiential religion as the singular remedy for a nation and a people clinging to forms and superstitions. And before them the Reformers of the sixteenth century held up the banner of the Christ of the Scriptures and none other. And so one could trace the paths of recorded history and find the heirs of that captive prophet, Ezekiel, to whom the Lord spake: "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD" (Ezek 37:4).

2. The Term

¹ Sermon 2; John 3:16. I have consulted the following editions: Samuel Davies, Sermons on Important Subjects (3 vols.; New York: Carter, 1845). An edition by the Presbyterian Board of Publication (1854) has been recently reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria (1993-1996). To facilitate ease in conferring with the sermons in the various versions, I refer to the sermons by number. Introductory literature on Samuel Davies includes Iain H. Murray, Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) 1-31; Thomas Talbot Ellis, "Samuel Davies: Apostle of Virginia" The Banner of Truth 235 (April 1983) 21-27; "Samuel Davies: Characteristics of Life and Message," The Banner of Truth 236 (May 1983) 10-18.

² Archibald Alexander, Biographical Sketches of the Founder, and Principal Alumni of the Log College (Princeton: Robinson, 1945). Also published by the Banner of Truth Trust, 1968.

The term “the Great Awakening” actually could be considered a misnomer. Historically, it is true, this term has received legitimation. And we are thankful for Jonathan Edwards’ A Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in Northampton³ and Alexander’s Log College. Also it is true that the term “Awakening” is appropriate, for the revival of the soul is veritably an awakening from the slumber of sin, yea, even the sleep of death. And when one compares the moral degeneracy and religious laxitude prevalent in the early colonies with the spiritual fervor and moral sincerity subsequent to the revivals, the mutation is great enough to be called a collective awakening. And yet, I feel constrained to say, that I find the term “the Great Awakening” to be theologically imprecise. The tacit assumption is that the Awakening has deserved the attribute “great” because the conversions were numerous. Nevertheless, it must be upheld that the genuine awakening of one solitary sinner brings infinite joy, as the Lord declares: “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:7). The quickening of the soul from death to life is such an infinite change, that the term “Great” must be applied to each authentic Awakening. The implication of the term “Great Awakening” is that there can also be a “trivial” or “insignificant” Awakening. I would aver that as far as the conversion of souls is concerned, the words “small” and “awakening” are as incompatible as the words “small” and “Christ.”

My further dispute with the term “Great Awakening” concerns the potential for idolatry. If every unfeigned Awakening flows forth from the work of Christ, accomplished once for all, then the glory of the matter belongs solely to Christ. Also historically we must learn to turn our gaze from mortals and fix it upon the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. To those who protest that one could never esteem such unmistakable servants of the Lord too highly, I would hasten to point to what some have made of Peter, preacher of “this Jesus,” or Mary, whose “soul magnified the Lord.”⁴ But God be the judge, for idolatry is chiefly a matter of the heart (Ezek 14:3).

And the problem is then not in the terminology. Thus, while warning against idolatry, I proceed to use the term “Great Awakening” and I pray that you would pardon me if I hereby confuse any of you.

3. An Offshoot

³ New York: American Tract Society, 1735.

⁴ Davies raises the issue with his congregation: “[W]e should always remember, even in the ardor of friendship, that he is a jealous God; jealous of his honor, and warmly resents it, when any of his poor servants are made the idols of his people, and draw off their regard from him. And I am afraid, some of you are in danger of this idolatry. I have indeed been shocked at the high character I have heard of myself on this occasion. What am I at best, but an unworthy minister of Christ, by whom some of you have believed?” (Sermon 81; Matthew 13:14)

My survey of the Great Awakening from Frelinghuysen and the Tennents on out has hopefully fixed your attention upon the cruciality of the Log College, later named the College of New Jersey, the heir of which is the modern Princeton University. For the purposes of narrowing the subject matter of “Preaching of the Great Awakening” I would like to direct your attention to someone affiliated with the Log College during this time period, the Rev. Mr. Samuel Davies, a Presbyterian preacher, born in 1723 and taken from this life in 1761 at the young age of 37 years.⁵ He was affiliated with the College of New Jersey in at least a three-fold way:

- 1) academically, through his training with Samuel Blair at the latter’s Fagg’s College in Pennsylvania, modeled after the Log College, from which Blair had graduated;
- 2) economically, as a fund-raiser for the College in England for three years (1753-1755) together with the Rev. Mr. Gilbert Tennent;
- 3) administratively, as President of the Log College from 1759 till his death in 1761, a brief eighteen months.

The other place to which the greatest part of his ministerial life was dedicated was Hanover County, Virginia, where most of his preaching activity was performed. Virginia had been almost exclusively Anglican in religion, with only a few dissenters of Puritan persuasion. They were congregating unofficially in small numbers, until Samuel Davies felt the call to take up the ministry of the Word in this colony otherwise so indifferent to Presbyterianism. During his ten year ministry there, interrupted only by the three year tour of England, the congregation grew swiftly. Already after five years it numbered between 500 and 600 souls, many of whom were apparently African slaves.⁶ His hearers urged Davies to prepare his sermons for publication. Later these sermons were to find a wide and eager audience and have been republished most recently by the Pennsylvania publisher, Soli Deo Gloria (1993-1996). Throughout the centuries, his sermons have been hailed as extraordinary, impressive, and even unsurpassed. Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones has expressed the opinion that in his mind, Samuel Davies was the greatest preacher America ever produced.⁷ Archibald Alexander acclaimed him as “first of American preachers”;⁸ a Virginia historian determined that “in many respects [Davies was] the greatest preacher that America has ever known.”⁹ Another has claimed that Davies spoke with a “glowing zeal, combined with exemplary prudence, and an eloquence more impressive and effective than had then ever graced the American pulpit.”¹⁰ Of course, these evaluations are extremely relative and rather preposterous. Often they are saying no more than “I felt quite powerfully addressed by these sermons.” The focus is then so easily upon the self. Yet, these quotations give a sense of how Davies has been received by subsequent generations, and Archibald Alexander’s testimony is no mean one. He augments his observations concerning Davies with these words: he “was so distinguished for dignity and solemnity in the pulpit, that one of the most excellent laymen I ever knew, told me, that he went to hear Mr. Davies preach, when he was just grown up, and that the sight of the man, and the mere utterance of his text ‘Martha, Martha, [thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful]’ made a deeper impression on him, than all the sermons he had ever heard before.”¹¹ Such

⁵ Details concerning Davies’ life can be found conveniently in introductions prefaced to his Sermons. Cf. Albert Barnes, “Introductory Essay on the Life and Times of the Author,” in Sermons (Vol 1; 4th ed.; New York: Robert Carter, 1845) xi-lxix; or Howard Griffith’s introduction to Sermons (Vol 1; Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993). Otherwise, the aforementioned treatments by Murray and Ellis provide some background (vide footnote 1). The most extensive source on his life I have consulted is George William Pilcher, “Preacher of the New Light, Samuel Davies, 1724-1761,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1963 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, nd).

⁶ Pilcher, “Preacher of the New Light,” 100.

⁷ Cf. the reference, e.g., in the introduction to Davies’ Sermons by Howard Griffith in the most recent publication of the Sermons, (Vol. 1; Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993).

⁸ Log College, 262.

⁹ Robert Ried Howison, cited in Pilcher, “Preacher of the New Light,” 220.

¹⁰ William Buell Sprague, “expert” on the history of American preaching, who lived during the mid-nineteenth century, cited in Ibid., 219.

¹¹ Log College, 264.

an experience is, of course, formidable, but one should be careful to universalize from this impression. So I refrain from such superlative appraisals. Allow me to simply say that I found in Davies' Sermons such compelling and incisive proclamation, that I have chosen them as the subject for what follows.

II. His View of the Ministry

Perhaps a profitable segue into Davies' preaching is to study the sermons which touch explicitly upon the nature and requisites of the ministry. Among the eighty-two sermons which have been preserved, a number deal quite expressly with the office of a minister, its motivations, demeanor, and objects.

Davies insists, first of all, upon the necessity of a profound love of souls. Davies preached as a pastor to a flock. The title of one of his sermons on the matter is revealing: "The Love of Souls a Necessary Qualification for the Ministerial Office."¹²

Secondly, Davies demonstrates a pastoral knowledge of the flock. In a sermon on Galatians 4:19-20, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you," Davies confides to his own congregation that he shares Paul's concern (Sermon 45). He pauses to address those who so blatantly neglect the exercises of religion in their families. Then he fixes his attention upon those for whom spiritual disciplines constitute only a formal veneer. He turns to those who exhibit much attraction to the world and then to those who have been too easily satisfied with superficial impressions. There are those concerning whom Davies has no doubt at all, for by their profane walk they demonstrate quite clearly that they "are destitute of all true religion." Davies' preaching had a varied address, much like Israel, who had a private word for each son (Gen 49), or Moses who uttered a seasoned bidding to each tribe (Deut 33).

Davies, thirdly, confesses a profound sense of personal insufficiency for preaching. In the aforementioned sermon on Gal 4:19-20 (no. 45), he laments: "You seldom hear a sermon from me but what fills me with shame and confusion in the review; and I almost cease to wonder that the gospel has so little success among you, while managed by so unskillful a hand." A similar sentiment is evident in his description of the office of a bishop as a "good work" (1 Tim 3:1). In this sermon Davies is elaborating upon the dual character of the ministry, on the one hand "laborious" (work), while on the other hand, "good" (Sermon 78; 1 Tim 3:1). When Davies expands on its laborious character, he does not first of all point to the strenuous and several duties of a bishop, nor to the difficult character of parishioners. Instead, he cites the mortification of his own flesh and the struggle against sin associated with the assiduity of "working out his own salvation" (Phil 2:12). He adds that such discharges of duty are noble and delightful, but also intensely laborious. The minister is not to lose sight of personal insufficiency and incessant need of private mortification.

¹² The text whereupon the sermon is based is 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us" (Sermon 77).

Fourthly, Davies pairs a sense of personal ineptitude with a reliance upon and faith in the power of divine influences. He affirms that “the success of the ministry of the gospel with respect to saints and sinners, entirely depends upon the concurring influences of divine grace; or, that without the divine agency to render the gospel successful, all the labors of its ministers will be in vain” (Sermon 57).¹³ The arguments he uses to develop this doctrine include, 1) the degeneracy of human nature, 2) the promises and declarations of the gospel, and 3) the varied success which there has been under similar ministries in the history of the church. Consequently, Davies urges a whole and deep dependence upon divine influences.

Fifthly, Davies declares the cross of Christ to be at the heart of preaching. If Christianity were to aim simply at the improvement of moral deportment, it would be the most excellent system upon earth. Yet, this would be infinitely removed from a suitable provision for sinners. Sinners are principally in need of “a method of salvation for the lost, of pardon for the guilty, and of sanctifying grace for the weak and wicked” (Sermon 24).¹⁴ To that end, the gospel most excellently

publishes a crucified Christ as an all-sufficient Saviour to a guilty, perishing world. It is its glorious peculiarity that it reveals a method of salvation every way honourable to God and his government, and every way suitable to our necessities; and that is, by the sufferings of Christ, the Founder of this religion. This is the ground, the substance, and marrow of the gospel; and it is this, above all other things, that its ministers ought to preach and inculcate. It should have the same place in their sermons which it has in that gospel which it is their business to preach; that is, it should be the foundation, the substance, the centre, the drift of all.

Davies enjoins his colleagues to be ministers of that glorious and rich New Testament, a theme which “animates the song of angels and saints above,” and whereupon even unhallowed lips may seek to dwell.

Finally, Davies concerns himself with the welfare of souls without respect of persons. In his sermon on the Lord of the banquet, who turned to the highways and hedges (Luke 14:21-24), Davies appeals to the Africans in his audience, who in his mind, “with peculiar propriety” are represented of the latecomers to the banquet. They too have the same need of the blessings of the gospel, whether they realize it or not. With an open earnestness, he beckons them: “[L]et this feast be adorned with your sable countenances, and furnished with guests from the savage wilds of Africa” (Sermon 55).

Davies ministry among the African slaves was apparently blessed. He wrote in a letter to a friend that the slaves, “wherever they could get an hour’s leisure from their masters, would hurry away to my house.” There they eagerly received instruction in literacy and divinity. Davies notes their particular predilection for learning Psalms and Hymns. He continues: “Sundry of them have lodged all night in my kitchen; and sometimes, when I have awaked about two or three a-clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony poured into my chamber, and carried my mind away to Heaven. In this seraphic exercise, some of them spend almost the whole night.”¹⁵ So Davies ministered without respect of persons, and with deep interest in the welfare of souls.

¹³ The sermon is fittingly based on 1 Corinthians 3:7, “So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.”

¹⁴ The text is: “For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

¹⁵ Davies to J.F., 2 March 1756, Davies, *Letters*, pp. 15-16 [quoted in Pilcher 1963].

III. The Manner of his Preaching

1. Poetical

Author of poems and hymns, Davies' poetic ability is unmistakable both in his surviving poetry and in his sermons themselves.¹⁶ Davies' sermons disclose their author to be a lyrical preacher, who harnessed similes and images with the effectiveness which few can procure. The opening of his sermon "The General Resurrection" is illustrative:¹⁷ "Ever since sin entered into the world, and death by sin, this earth has been a vast grave-yard, or burying-place, for her children. In every age, and in every country, that sentence has been executing, Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return. The earth has been arched with graves, the last lodgings of mortals, and the bottom of the ocean paved with the bones of men." It is almost as if Davies has to restrain himself not to put his sentences into rhyme, so poetic is their tenor. Here theology and poetry have met together!

2. Logical

Besides being exuberantly poetic, Davies' sermons are also rigidly logical, rhetorical, if you will. They are designed to persuade the audience as much as lies within ministerial ability, to leave off the way to perdition, and "follow holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). An exceptional example of this is his sermon entitled "The Vessels of Mercy and the Vessels of Wrath Delineated" on the basis of Rom 9:22-23 (Sermon 43). Herein he explains how the vessels of wrath have fitted themselves to destruction, whereas the vessels of mercy have not fitted themselves for mercy. Rather, as the text makes clear, they "were afore prepared unto glory." The logical strain through the sermon consists of demonstrating the correlation of our habitual dispositions and the fitness for hell or the fittedness (!) for heaven. He reasons with his hearers:

Are you fit for heaven? Do you love and delight in God -- in a God of infinite purity? If not, the enjoyment of his presence, and the beatific vision of his face, which is the principal ingredient of heavenly happiness, could afford no happiness to you. Do you delight in the service of God, in contemplating his glories, in celebrating his praises, and in the humble forms of worship in his church on earth? Do these afford you the most exalted pleasure? If not, heaven is no place for you; for these are the eternal exercises there: And to such of you as have no pleasure in them, the heavenly state would be an eternal drudgery.

In general, Davies is concerned that the Christian religion be understood as "a rational and well-grounded faith" (Sermon 1; Luke 16:27-31). His method is to "prove that Christianity answers all the ends of a religion from God" and "that no sufficient objections can be offered against it" (Ibid). Davies coordinates both verification and falsification. As the law is a means in the hand of the preacher "to the pulling down of strong holds", so also are the "troops of arguments, which one would think would soon overpower a reasonable creature" (Sermon 36; 2 Cor 10:4-5). One sermon of Davies is entitled: "Rejection of Christ A Common, But Most Unreasonable Iniquity" (Sermon 39; Mark 12:6). In this text the Almighty even parabolically "represents himself as presuming or

¹⁶ For Davies' poetry, vide Richard B. Davis, ed., Collected Poems of Samuel Davies, 1723-1761 (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968).

¹⁷ The text is "The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

expecting” that persons would “receive his Son” (Mark 12:6). The presumptions of reason, however, do not accord with the actuality of the matter.

Those who claim to persist in arguments for unbelief in truth, however, rarely make thorough work of it.¹⁸ Their affectation and delusion of triumph does not negate that “such men find the arms of their own reason often against them, and their own conscience forms violent insurrections in favour of religion, which they cannot entirely suppress” (Sermon 51; Acts 9:5). It is difficult “to kick against the pricks.” Davies observes that “the principle of reason is still alive” in fallen persons. Though it is “God alone that can quicken,” yet “he effects this by a power that does not exclude, but attends rational instructions and persuasions to your understanding” (Sermon 4; Eph 2:1,5).

This does not entail that Davies thought of assent to true religion as a natural or automatic matter. Davies indefatigably preached the necessity of the divine implantation of the principle of new life. All religion is vain which “is gained in the same manner that a man learns a trade, or an uncultivated mind becomes knowing and learned, namely, by the repeated exercises of our natural powers in the use of proper means, and under the aids of common providence” (Sermon 50; Gal 2:20).¹⁹ Yet this was not because genuine godliness is unnatural or unreasonable in itself. It is precisely because true piety does not extend from our depraved nature that in religion folly prevails over wisdom, prejudice over truth, and darkness over light (Sermon 36; 2 Cor 10:4-5). Our comportment accords with our crooked nature. In light of this, preaching must be designed to hold forth the total absurdity of sin and “fasten conviction upon the guilty” (Sermon 39).

There is some evidence that Davies was somewhat unsettled with this logical aspect of his discourse. In a letter to his brother-in-law he confesses: “I do detest the Parade of Scholasticism, & the Formalities of Pedantry; but by some strange Fatality, I can seldom keep from them ... I have been long chastising myself for this Fault; but I almost despair of a Reformation.”²⁰ As unsettled as Davies was by the employment of reason, so unsettling were its effects designed to be upon the hearers.

V. The Matter of his Preaching

Here we come the real argument of my discourse, namely, that Davies’ sermons disclose to us a man, eschatological in vision, and experiential at heart. He met the tremors of the eschaton with a sweetness in the soul. His eye beheld the two roads to travel, and his heart knew the one thing needful. In the midst of the shadows all about, he would dwell upon the life and immortality brought to light by the gospel. He would warn about the nature and universality of spiritual death, and then portray the nature and process of spiritual life. He would expose the danger of making light of Christ, but show forth the poor and contrite as objects of the divine favour. He would proclaim, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” and would instead marvel at the

¹⁸ Davies rightly observes that “a professed speculative atheist” is not as often found as “practical” atheists, those who operate with a disjunction between principle and practice. Davies has dedicated a whole sermon to the exposition of this breed by means of the text: “And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees; that say in their heart, the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil” (Zeph 1:12; Sermon 72).

¹⁹ This is probably the most intellectually challenging sermon preserved of Davies. Despite its difficulty, the tenor is both clear and profound. Anyone seeking clarity on the relationship of faith and reason will find here an important and edifying treatment of the matter. It deserves separate treatment in order to do it justice.

²⁰ Quoted in Pilcher, “Preacher of the New Light,” 235.

unregenerate kicking against the pricks. With ardency he would point to the signs of the times and the uncertain doom of kingdoms; he would take heed to the earthquakes and rumors of wars; he would register the certainty of death and the doom of impenitent hearers, but there was also a word for the smoking flax and the bruised reed. Davies was an eschatological visionary and a spiritual physician. His eye was upon the tremulous turmoil, but his heart grounded upon the one foundation. I will focus on three matters: the weight of eternity, the duality of states, and the method of salvation.

1. Regard for Eternity Urged

Paul bound it upon the hearts of the Corinthians that “the time is short” (1 Cor 7:29). Davies knew the time, namely, that it was high time to awake (Sermon 59; Rom 13:11). Many of his sermons show a decidedly eschatological orientation. This is evident in the choice of texts: “Nation shall rise against nation...” (Luke 21:10; Sermon 64); “The foundations of the earth do shake...” (Isa 24:18; Sermon 67); “The hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth...” (John 5:28; Sermon 19); “This year thou shalt die” (Jer 28:16; Sermon 34). It is evident in sermon titles such as “The Doom of the Incurable Sinner” (Prov 29:1; Sermon 40); “Indifference to Life Urged from its Shortness and Vanity” (1 Cor 1:22-24; Sermon 24); “The Universal Judgment” (Acts 17:30-31; Sermon 20), etc. Very frequently, Davies provided eschatological commentary on natural disasters or political events, and especially the symmetry between them: the death of King George II (1 Sam 1:19; Sermon 60); the earthquake which occasioned the ruin of Lisbon (1755; Isa 24:18-20; Sermon 67); the defeat of General Braddock of the Colonies against the French (1755; Isa 22:12-14; Sermon 69), etc. All these happenings are the works of God, but then “prognosticative” acts, whose design is twofold: to signal some great revolution in worldly governments, and to be harbingers of that great day of judgment.²¹

More general, less attended to, and yet more significant is the certainty of death for everyone. Davies emphasized its sudden and final character: “A creature treading every moment upon the slippery brink of the grave, and ready every moment to shoot the gulf of eternity, and launch away to some unknown coast ought always to stand in the posture of serious expectation” (Sermon 23; 1 Cor 7:29-31). The death of others speaks to us of the inevitability of our own: “Dying beds, the last struggles and groans of dissolving nature, pale, cold, ghastly corpses ... these are the very alarming monitors of our own mortality: these out-preach the loudest preacher” (Sermon 23; 1 Cor 7:29-31). Often Davies’ sermons open with a reference to the reality of death, e.g.: “My fellow-mortals! So I call you, because mortality is the certain doom of us all” (Sermon 66; Jer 5:3).

Davies’ persistent reference to death is not simply a morbid preoccupation with natural death. Physical death speaks to us of spiritual death. Davies draws the parallel clearly in the opening of his sermon on Ephesians 2:1 and 5. He commences with a paragraph on physical death:

There is a kind of death which we all expect to feel, that carries terror in the very sound, and all its circumstances are shocking to nature. The ghastly countenance, the convulsive agonies, the expiring groan, the coffin, the grave, the devouring worm, the stupor, the insensibility, the universal inactivity, these strike a damp to the spirit,

²¹ As was his discomfiture with his scholastic style, so was his unease with dwelling upon profane subjects. He writes: “I am by no means fond of employing your sacred time in harangues upon political or military subjects; and last Sunday I intended to touch upon them once for all, and then confine myself to the more important concerns of religion and eternity.” Apparently some new military developments warranted, he felt, some further commentary (Sermon 71; Ezek 20:43-44).

and we turn pale at the thought. With such objects as these in view, courage fails, levity looks serious, presumption is dashed, the cheerful passions sink, and all is solemn, all is melancholy. The most stupid and hardy sinner cannot but be moved to see these things exemplified in others; and when he cannot avoid the prospect, he is shocked to think that he himself must feel them.

But then he transitions to a treatment of spiritual death:

But there is another kind of death little regarded in deed, little feared, little lamented, which is infinitely more terrible--the death, not of the body, but of the soul; a death which does not stupefy the limbs, but the faculties of the mind; a death which does not separate the soul and body, and consign the latter to the grave, but that separates the soul from God, excludes it from all the joys of his presence, and delivers it over to everlasting misery; a tremendous death indeed! (Sermon 4; Eph 2:1,5).

The inevitable and abrupt character of natural death lends urgency to serious concern with the gospel. But it is the infinite character of spiritual death which is answered by the gospel. Thus he writes: "Time, like an ever-running stream, is perpetually gliding on, and hurrying us and all the sons of men into the boundless ocean of eternity" (Sermon 59; Rom 13:11). Beyond Davies' attention to death lies a solemn view on things eternal. This might seem an obvious and negligible point, but I think it is important. Though most of our world lives in denial of death; yet there is also a preoccupation with death. If, however, this concern is not conjoined with eternity and divinity, then this concern is nothing but natural and unsanctified. For Davies the emphasis is not on death, but on eternity; the urgency of regarding eternal things is not even a goal in itself, but subservient to the gospel of reconciliation.

2. The Two Ways Delineated

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks of the two gates and the two ways (Matt 7:13-14; cf. Ps 1). The emphasis on this same duality pervades Davies' sermons. The following sermon titles serve to illustrate: "Saints Saved with Difficulty, and the Certain Perdition of Sinners" (Sermon 22; 1 Pet 4:18); "The Characters of the Whole and Sick, in a Spiritual Sense, Considered and Contrasted" (Sermon 52; Matt 9:12); "The Vessels of Mercy and the Vessels of Wrath Delineated" (Sermon 43; Rom 9:22-23), etc. In these sermons the two ways are contrasted. Other times a sermon would focus on one of the two ways. There are titles such as: "The Doom of the Incurable Sinner" (Sermon 40; Prov 29:1); "The Guilt and Doom of Impenitent Hearers" (Sermon 81; Matt 13:14); on the other hand, there are titles such as: "Poor and Contrite Spirits the Objects of Divine Favor" (Sermon 6; Isa 66:2); "The Compassion of Christ to Weak Believers" (Sermon 8; Matt 12:20).

These titles might give the impression that the focus is anthropological, namely, on the persons upon the two ways. In actuality, Davies' emphasis is more upon the states of spiritual life and spiritual death. Thus there are also sermons with titles such as "Primitive and Present State of Man Compared" (Sermon 73; Rom 5:17); "Religion the Highest Wisdom, and Sin the Greatest Madness and Folly" (Sermon 38; Ps 111:10); and "Things Unseen to be Preferred to Things Seen" (Sermon 11; 2 Cor 4:18). Very clear are two sermons, the one entitled "The Nature and Universality of Spiritual Death" (Sermon 4; Eph 2:1,5), and the other "The Nature and Process of Spiritual Life" (Sermon 5; Eph 2:3-5).

In these two sermons, the state of spiritual death is described by analogy to natural death. Granted,

there is this difference between nature and spirit: natural death effects the finality of all powers; spiritual death constitutes the finality of certain powers. Thus, physical, intellectual, psychological, and religious power, are still operative, albeit corrupted and limited. Notwithstanding, “there is a kind of spiritual life of which he is entirely destitute,” namely, “the innate passions of the new man.” Spiritual death entails that persons by nature are spiritually inactive, insensible to their inactivity, and incapable of quickening themselves. They are dead “in trespasses and sins.” This points to the cause of death and the nature of death: original and actual sins have effected this death, and the soul lies buried in the midst of trespasses and sins.

Spiritual life can also be described by analogy to natural life: the soul “pants and breathes after God; it feeds upon his word, it feels an almighty energy in eternal things, and receives vital sensations from them. It discovers life and vigor in devotion, and serves the living God with pleasure, though it is also subject to fits of languishment, and at times seems just expiring, and to lose all sensation.” As a result of the Lord speaking his Word (for “the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and live” [John 5:25]), the soul is animated with new life--one feels the instincts, the appetites, the sympathies, and antipathies of spiritual life. Davies mentions “the pulse of sacred passions,” “the vital warmth of love,” the breathings of “desires and prayers before God,” the lispings “Abba Father,” the “hungering and thirsting after righteousness,” the impressions of religion and eternity, and the service unto God. This quickening is with Christ and by the Spirit of Christ.²²

The two ways correspond to the two states, that of spiritual life and spiritual death. Preaching for Davies draws these distinctions for the congregation, within the congregation, and from out of the Scriptures.

3. Salvation Explained and Recommended

The above paragraph might leave the impression that the subject of Davies preaching was more the nature and process of the two ways than it was “Christ and him crucified.” Caution should be advised at this point. Davies himself saw the preaching of the cross, or “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:22-24; Sermon 24) as the centre-piece of preaching. In the midst of a “perverse and untoward generation,” this preaching is on the one hand, a “stumbling-block” and “foolishness,” and on the other hand, “wisdom to those who are called.” This duality is effected by, but is also embodied in preaching. Preaching of the cross of Christ and preaching of the two ways are therefore not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the word “of” here is used in two different senses. The cross of Christ is the spring-head of preaching, as well as its actual content. The “two ways” is not the source of preaching, but comprises the form of preaching.

To gather together Davies’ explanation of the method of salvation, I will point to his two sermons on John 3, one on verse 16 (“For God so loved...”; Sermon 2), the other on verse 7 (“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again”; Sermon 48). The latter explicates the doctrine of regeneration, its nature, its author, and its method. The analogy used by Christ is that of natural birth. It signals a great change, from infidelity to faith, from hate to love, from corruption to incorruption, from unrighteousness to righteousness, etc. With the phrase “Marvel not” Christ would intimate that persons must learn not to be astonished at the necessity of this change. This

²² This christological and pneumatological strain is not as clear in sermon 4 and 5 as it is, e.g., in 49.

birth is “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,” specifically the Spirit of God. The method whereby the Spirit leads is to convince of the need of change which cannot be wrought by the unquickened will, to implant the principle of divine life; to crucify and to lead into holiness and divinity.

It would be a primordial heresy to intimate that the Spirit works these things in isolation from the other persons of the blessed Godhead. The Spirit takes out of Christ and declares Christ to the believer. The connection between the Spirit is indissoluble. In his sermon on John 3:16 (Sermon 2), Davies elaborates upon the work of Christ in close connection with the plan of the Father. This is inherent in the text: “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son.” We should never emphasize one person of the Godhead at the neglect of the other, but always in conjunction with the others. Thus to focus solely on the initiative of the Father and to disregard the willingness of the Son is dangerous, says Davies. For Christ was most willing, at his own disposal, above the law, and beloved of the Father. On the other hand, apart from the perfections and love of the Father, the nature and purpose of Christ’s work is not understood. Christ must always be preached as the power of God and the wisdom of God, that is to say, in relation to the Father. The Trinitarian framework and thrust of salvation must be kept in view.

John 3:16 also speaks of the necessity of faith. Through faith the benefits and person of Christ are appropriated to the heart. Davies describes the nature of faith as both “speculative”, “experimental” or “practical”. These aspects correspond to the “certain knowledge” and “assured confidence” of Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The “whosoever” of the text (John 3:16) serves to put sinners all on equal footing and reinforce the absolute necessity of faith and faith alone. To substitute the “whosoever” with any requirement of self is to nullify the nature of faith.” The proper understanding of faith is intimately related to a Trinitarian view of the divine work. Human work would impinge upon the work of God. Faith is rooted in God, directed toward God, and maintained by God.

There is not a sermon in which Davies does not show concern to recommend this way of salvation to those in his hearing. This is evident in the quote at the opening of this paper. Conversely, Davies would vigorously denounce the way of unbelief, presumption, and impenitence. I conclude this section with a piercing quote directed at the impenitents within his audience:

Yes, sinners, God forbid that I should cease to pray for you and pity you. While my tongue is capable of pronouncing a word, and you think it worth your while to hear me, I will send the calls of the gospel after you, and if you perish after all, you shall drop into hell with the offers of heaven in your ears. Fain would I clear myself and say, “Your blood be upon your own heads: I am clean.” But alas! my heart recoils and fails. I have no doubt at all, but the gospel I have preached to you is indeed the gospel of Christ, and I cheerfully venture my own soul upon it. But in dispensing it among you, I am conscious of so much weakness, coldness, and unskillfulness, that I am at times shocked at myself, lest I should be accessory to your ruin. However, this is certain, great guilt with fall somewhere. I desire to take my own share of shame and guilt upon myself, and to humble myself for it before God. And I pray you do the same. O humble yourselves before God, for your past conduct; and prepare, prepare to meet him, in the midst of a burning world.

Or, if you continue obstinately impenitent still, prepare to make your defense against your poor minister there, when he will be obliged to appear as a swift witness against you, and say, “Lord, I can appeal to thyself, that I warned them to prepare for this day, though with so many guilty infirmities, as nothing but thy mercy can forgive. But they would not regard my warnings, though given in thine awful Name, and sometimes enforced with my own compassionate tears.” There, sirs, at the supreme tribunal, prepare to meet me; and thither I dare appeal for the truth and importance of the things I have inculcated upon you.” (Sermon 67; Isa 24:18,19,30).

VI. Conclusion

I return to the remarks made in the introduction concerning of the propriety of the term “Great Awakening.” Davies’ ministry has been traditionally understood in terms of the historical period designated by the term. It is interesting that Davies himself did not recognize much of an Awakening around him. In fact, there is evidence from the Sermons that he thought the opposite: “[I]t has been lamentably evident, there has not been of late any such general outpouring of the Spirit, as is necessary to produce a public national reformation; which is the only cure for a body politic so far gone as ours.”

In 1756, Davies recorded a communication of Rev. Bellamy from the northern colonies to him: “A dark cloud seems to be gathering over a sinful land. We have had a day of great grace: that is past and gone, and a day of great wrath seems to be at hand! Our northern army is sickly and likely to do nothing; our treasury is exhausted; people’s spirits low; great murmurings, but no reformation. For all these things we feel and fear we do not return unto the Lord” (Sermon 66; Jer 5:3). His mentor Samuel Blair wrote Davies along the same lines: “I have not enjoyed the sweet supports of success in my ministry. Under all this heavy scene of judgment, our people are manifestly more and more hardened” (Ibid.). Similar reports reached him from England and Scotland.

I deem it, nevertheless, a propos to speak of Samuel Davies as preaching of the Great Awakening. Davies combined eschatological fervor with experiential splendor to proclaim the need for and possibility and beauty of this awakening. With poetic profuseness and logical precision Davies poured forth utterance on this theme. His speech embodied Paul’s “if by any means” (Rom 11:14). This awakening was a supernatural and infinite quickening and therefore “great.” It was an awakening which was rooted in the work of Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God, and therefore “great.” It was an awakening with a Trinitarian ground and thrust, and therefore great. It was an awakening to which Scripture gave the trumpet blast, and therefore great.

Come, thou life of souls! Thou [S]pirit of the gospel! Thou quickener of ordinances!
Thou assistant of poor ministers! Thou opener of their hearers’ hearts! ... and Christ
shall be formed in us, the hope and the earnest of glory.²³

²³ Sermon 45; Gal 4:19-20.