

# Martyn Lloyd-Jones Warts and All

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) and Twentieth Century Evangelicalism*

John Brencher

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I close my eyes, and I can see it now, as clear as if it were yesterday. Nay, more, in the deep of my soul, somehow I can still feel it. A bright summer evening, under a cloudless sky, somewhere near the head of a South Wales valley in the early sixties. A little township, nestling in the hills high above the valley below. In the midst, and prominent against the broad green swathe of the mountain moorland, stood the salient stone grey edifice of the Meeting-House, its facade bearing, in large and uncompromising capitals, the legend: “Calvinistic Methodist Chapel.”

And on that day, there was a traffic jam around that little town, and you could have seen hundreds, and hundreds, arriving in cars, buses, or on bicycles ... a mass of humanity that pressed, possessed of a solemn, silent determination, toward the doors of the Meeting-House on the mountainside.

Young and old, we packed the building cram full that evening. Charged with an air of expectation, we fairly must have “lifted the roof off” with our hymn-singing. English the words might have been, but the tunes, and the accents, were Welsh! And as the crimson rays of the setting sun beamed through the windows, the preacher opened God’s book, and for an hour, we were transported beyond the realms of this broken world ... for an hour the little Welshman held us rapt before the unfolding Word of Jesus Christ and His glorious Gospel ... and the claims of God on our souls.

It is now nearly quarter of a century since the voice of that little Welsh preacher was stilled in death. We look in vain today, it seems, in our land, to find another who could stir so many souls so often, so profoundly, and for so long. A new generation has arisen, to whom the name “Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones” figures only to indicate someone, and something, beyond the orbit of the ethos of modern religion. The age, it would seem, of “great preachers” is past and gone.

But this passing of the age of the “great pulpit expositors” was already coming to an end in the closing years of the Lloyd-Jones era. Dr. John Brencher, in his important study of our eponymous subject, perspicaciously points out

that whereas in the forties and the fifties, London could boast three pulpit “giants” in the shape of Lloyd-Jones, Dr. Sangster, and Leslie Weatherhead, from the sixties onwards, Lloyd-Jones, and perhaps to a lesser extent, John Stott, held the fort alone. And with the death of Lloyd-Jones, and the retirement of Stott, none of such calibre have arisen in their place.

Like every great preacher of modern times, Dr. Lloyd-Jones has had his biographers. First on the scene was the important 1200 pages-plus two volume work of Iain Murray, a work which Dr. Brencher can inform us was selling at the rate of 700 copies per year as late as 1996. These well-produced volumes will, we anticipate, remain the *locus classicus* of information for Lloyd-Jones’ life probably for all time, and probably deserve so to be.

However, biographical studies of Christians are difficult to execute. The biographer tends to veer off into one of two extremes. Firstly, he might be so enamoured with his subject that he produces what amounts to a “hagiography,” in which the subject’s achievements and good points are heavily emphasised, paralleled by the minimisation, or even exclusion, of his failures and bad points. Such a biography, of course, cannot really escape being seen by some as, to some extent at least, misinformative. In the worst of such cases a distortion of the subject’s life is effectively presented to the public, and it is difficult for the public (who, unlike the biographer, will not have had access to the subject’s personal papers and family life) to tell to what degree the biography does distort, or gives an over-optimistic impression.

One cannot come away from reading Iain Murray’s two volumes without feeling that if anything, Murray leans in the hagiographic direction. This is not to denigrate Murray’s work, it is rather more to recognise the humanity of it. As such it is extremely valuable in that it records the profound impression Lloyd-Jones made on the biographer and his peers. And, it should be noted, it is a most delicate business to handle in a biography the sins and failures of one who was a true Christian. One feels as if such things ought to be put out of sight. And while this is indubitably true concerning the subject’s personal life, it does however, take a different turn with respect to the public side of such a person. For a preacher is a public person, his actions, his sermons, his example, are in the public eye.

Consequently, and secondly, there are those who would want to write a biography of such public figures from the angle of drawing out, discussing, and evaluating, all those areas of the subject’s activity which were a cause of controversy, of confusion, of dissension, even of disaffection. And this angle, albeit as valuable as the “hagiographic” tendency, can be dangerous too, in that it can

distort the subject matter in the opposite direction, and produce something that tends to vilify the subject.

Dr. Brencher has therefore, in this important study, indebted us all to him, in that he has been bold enough to give us a portrait of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, one might say, as Cromwell said, “warts and all.” Whilst he has clearly avoided any tendency to hagiography, he has, we believe, made a strenuous attempt to maintain a balanced objectivity whilst introducing a number of “hot potatoes” concerning Lloyd-Jones’ character and his interaction with the churches and Christians around him. There will be some, no doubt, who will feel offended by some of the discussions in Brencher’s study, and who will want to take issue with the author in various quarters, but overall I think it right to say that Dr. Brencher’s book needs to be read alongside Iain Murray’s volumes. Both together will provide a comprehensive and intelligent insight into the great preacher’s life and work.

John Brencher attended Westminster Chapel during the years when Lloyd-Jones was at the height of his powers. He trained for the ministry at London Bible College, and is a past President of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). His contacts and interaction with Dr. Lloyd-Jones, and his meticulous research, he has distilled into the 260 or more pages of this present volume. The 14-page bibliography beginning on page 219 bears eloquent testimony to the painstaking labour that has gone into this work, extending as it does to the level of a plethora of private correspondence, tape-recorded interviews, unpublished documents, theses, books, and magazine articles.

At the outset, it must be said that Brencher’s book does not read with the ease one associates with biography as a general rule. The book is based on the author’s 1997 doctoral thesis for Sheffield University, and in consequence it is characterised by the clinical, detached, and objective style commensurate with a scholarly investigation and evaluation. Unlike the usual biographical emphasis, the approach is taken from a thematic point of view rather than that of a chronological sequentiation, though one is aware of a tracing of the themes as they develop chronologically. The author is more concerned to examine Lloyd-Jones as he interacted with the church and evangelical life of his era, so we find he approaches his subject from the standpoint of preaching and preachers, interdenominational relationships, ecumenism, evangelicals and unity, Wales and the Welsh, the characteristics of Lloyd-Jones as a leader, and the effects of his influences in various demographic and ecclesiastical spheres. The chapter headings reflect this strategy.

At the outset Dr. Brencher admits that his view of Lloyd-Jones presented therein is one that will be less popular than some would like, as it was his aim to

present a view of Lloyd-Jones more consonant with the harsh facts of reality and from a wider viewpoint than such as is found in Murray's work. All this means he is more critical of his subject, a feature that emerges oftentimes in the evaluative segments of his discourse. He points out, too, that there are further controversial elements of Lloyd-Jones life and leadership which could have been examined, but being of lesser importance than those already chosen for his thesis, he chose to leave these in abeyance.

Thus we find an analysis of the Westminster Chapel ministry with a comparison of the regime of Campbell Morgan and his predecessors, with the acutely different style of Lloyd-Jones. The evidence presented by Dr. Brencher indicates the degree of tension and controversy generated by Lloyd-Jones' somewhat different approach to pastoral matters as compared to Campbell Morgan. It is illuminating to read how much dissension Lloyd-Jones' methods caused among the Westminster Congregation, and even surprising to find Campbell Morgan's daughter rebuking him for undoing her father's work. Surprising too, to discover that Lloyd-Jones himself described his first years at Westminster as "hell."

As one pursues the narratives through the book, it also becomes clear that Lloyd-Jones was definitely lacking in his appreciation for organisation and pastoral care at Westminster, and would have done well to have continued Campbell Morgan's structure and insights somewhat more closely. Indeed, it seems that much of the good pastoral work undertaken during the time of his ministry was the result of individual church members, like Elizabeth Braund, striking out in initiatives of their own. To his credit, Lloyd-Jones gave them his blessing, but, it seems, little of his leadership. His whole energies, it seems, were taken up by his preaching and his weekly forays into various quarters of the British Isles, and Brencher rightly discusses the question as to what degree Westminster Chapel was, in the end, more of a preaching station than a church.

An enigmatic side of the subject's character emerges in his views of church government. Many of us were aware of this in a way, but this is the first time I have seen these idiosyncrasies expressed, authoritatively, in print, with supporting evidence. Despite being by upbringing a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist (a.k.a. Presbyterian Church of Wales), Lloyd-Jones took a definitively Congregationalist standpoint on ecclesiological issues, yet, paradoxically, in his person and in his praxis he was every bit as authoritative as a Diocesan Bishop. Indeed, those of us who have had experience as office bearers in the Church of England will bear out the fact that few, if any Anglican bishops, carried the authoritarian disposition or gained such deference in their ecclesiastical world as Lloyd-Jones

did amongst Calvinist evangelicals. So marked is this paradox that, as Dr. Brencher points out in various aspects, Lloyd-Jones gained a reputation among some quarters for arrogance. In my own experience too, the Doctor came over as being “above criticism,” and virtually “infallible.” An article I wrote on him for this journal some five or six years ago precipitated a vitriolic attack on me by one Calvinist evangelical, despite the fact that I wrote nothing that was not obviously true and evidenced by facts known widely.

Thus, as Dr. Brencher has portrayed, Lloyd-Jones seemed to be able to combine Congregational church polity with, in the case of his own person, an autocratic and episcopal style of ministry. One thinks too, of how Lloyd-Jones’ regular preaching tours resembled the Diocesan tours of an Anglican bishop. Weekday affairs and humdrum pastoral matters at Westminster Chapel were left, it seems, in the hands of the assistant pastor, who effectively acted like Lloyd-Jones’ “cathedral dean” with one salient exception ... whilst in every Anglican diocese the dean preaches regularly every Sabbath in the Cathedral, at this non-conformist “cathedral” in Westminster the “dean” was side-lined and virtually never given the pulpit on the Lord’s Day.

Confusion and paradox too, surrounded Lloyd-Jones’ views on evangelical unity, and the concatenation of evidence provided by Dr. Brencher indicates how the whole scenario leading up to, and beyond the disastrous Evangelical Alliance meeting of 1966 led, and could only lead, to fiasco, with evangelicalism in Britain entering a critical, and extremely fissile phase of development. This era saw Dr. Packer peremptorily frozen out of fellowship, and a fragmentation of the overall evangelical and Calvinistic witness that had been gradually building during the forties and fifties. It meant too, that ultimately Lloyd-Jones himself was frozen out of fellowship with the greater mass of the very evangelicals he hoped to lead, with a corresponding curtailment of his influence both in this country and abroad. Brencher’s thesis is thick on the ground with documented detail covering these matters, and it is difficult in the space of a review to do proper justice to the mass of data in his presentation.

In the early sixties, churches of all denominations began to feel the force of the “charismatic revival” so-called. Many believers in those days were aware that there was some enigmatic but undefined connection between this phenomenon and Dr. Lloyd-Jones. As is well-known, Lloyd-Jones had majored his emphases to a great degree on the notion of “revival.” His Welsh background in his denomination had impressed on him deeply from his youth the lore of the Welsh “revivals,” and the figures of Calvinistic Methodist leaders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were virtually iconised in the thoughts of

many of later generations. By the late fifties and early sixties, however, there seemed to be no sign of the great “revival” that Lloyd-Jones and his supporters prayed for, and worked for, and it is during those years that the charismatic influence began to penetrate the Doctor’s thinking. But nothing ever seemed to come out definitively in print, to tell one exactly what Lloyd-Jones’ position was vis-à-vis the phenomenon. Just hearsay, suggestion, a general undercurrent. One could detect the powerful undertow of a rip-tide in the Pentecostal direction, especially in Welsh evangelical circles, and that this trend had “the Doctor’s sanction,” indeed, his “recommendation.” We are indebted to Dr. Brencher for illuminating this area of Lloyd-Jones’ leadership. Even more salient facts supportive of Dr. Brencher’s thesis have emerged since from the recently published *First Fifty Years* history of the Evangelical Movement of Wales written by Noel Gibbard. Pages 121-122 of this latter volume reveal the influence of Cwm-twrch Pentecostal Church in West Glamorgan, and the involvement there of the “miracle revivalist,” Peter Scothern. A “revival” broke out, right on time as per a “prophetic vision” given to a “farmer’s daughter.” Investigation of this phenomenon by leaders in the Evangelical Movement of Wales brought the matter to the attention of Lloyd-Jones, who contacted the Pentecostal pastor, and later invited him to speak at the Welsh Evangelical ministers conference in Cilgwyn. Around this time, as Dr. Brencher can tell us, Lloyd-Jones was also encouraging those doyens of the New Charismaticism, David Watson, John Collins, and Michael Harper, telling them that he believed their experience to be genuinely biblical. But no clear public declaration by the Doctor one way or the other left evangelicals in a quandary. He was not without his criticisms of the Pentecostals, and overall he was, it appears, trying to maintain a “balance.” But it appeared as an enigma to the general evangelical public. It was circulated by word of mouth in South Wales in those days that he was sending men down to Cwm-twrch, with the instructions that they were to stay there until they had received the same experience as the members of that little Pentecostal congregation. Stories abounded in South Wales, of how leading evangelical Calvinist ministers were “speaking in tongues” and even “dancing in the spirit,” and it was most disconcerting for an enquirer to run into a wall of ecclesiastical esoterism that would neither affirm nor deny such happenings. It has to be said, in my view, that Lloyd-Jones did not “sound his trumpet” with a “certain sound” over this matter. Dr. Brencher can enlighten us to the fact that Lloyd-Jones was at the least, sympathetic to, but not uncritical of, Charismaticism.

Lloyd-Jones was a Welshman. Now it happens, that every race under the sun can take a parochial view of itself and its own history. And so we find, that to

many a Welshman, understandably the Welsh language is vastly superior to English as a mode of communication. (The English of course, naturally enough, hold to the mirror image of this view.) And one finds that to a Welshman, Welsh preachers are vastly superior to the English, and Welsh hymns and hymn-singing likewise. Such sentiments were naturally enough present in the psyche of Lloyd-Jones, and Dr. Brencher brings forward evidence to the effect that Lloyd-Jones seemed to despise the English, and contrasted them unfavourably with the Welsh. This bias, one remembers, emerges in the Doctor's book on the "Puritans," especially where he isolates Welsh Calvinistic Methodism as the epitome of true Biblical Christianity. The Doctor was insistent that the essence of true revival was Biblical truth on fire, as it were, and that only, or at least mainly, amongst the ranks of Calvinistic Methodists might you find such exemplified without parallel. Calvinism, he would say, without Methodism, is dangerous and leads to dead orthodoxy. Likewise, Methodism, without Calvinism can be deficient too. The two together constitute Biblical Christianity, and it is part of the genius of the Celtic psyche that the Celt can make this connection in his religious devotions. By inference, it would seem that the English, and other races seemed not to have this faculty so readily as the Welsh, and needed to submit, perhaps to Welsh leadership and instruction?

Such sentiments are of course, let it be said, total unbiblical nonsense, and reflect a narrow parochial viewpoint. As the great apostle to the Gentiles was wont to emphasise, there is no profit in the flesh, one's racial pedigree carries zero currency in the courts of the Almighty. In the light of all this Dr. Brencher is able to present a lengthy chapter reviewing Lloyd-Jones' views on Wales and the Welsh. Again, heavily documented and clinically presented, Brencher assays an evaluation of Lloyd-Jones' position on these matters, and arrives, we believe, at a balanced assessment, which needless, to say, is spiced with a touch of humour. It is natural, right and good, for one to love one's country and one's people, but to amplify this affection to an elevated position over one's neighbouring nation is an affective exaggeration and distortion of something intrinsically good and God-given.

Perhaps we are not inclined to endorse every criticism of Lloyd-Jones made by the learned Dr. Brencher. We noted a communication documented from no less than Gilbert Kirby to the effect that the Doctor took an hour to say what other preachers would take only twenty minutes to say. In response to this I would want to say that after one hour of the Doctor's ministry everybody seemed to be still on the edges of their seats, whereas at the end of the twenty minutes of a good many more minister's discourses, many of us seem to be already

about ten minutes into a gentle doze, if not an outright blatant snooze. Perhaps that's putting it a little unkindly, but the one lasting thing about Lloyd-Jones' ministry is precisely this, that his preaching was like a giant portal opening up into the realms of Eternity, an experience that swept up multitudes in worship before the Lamb on His throne.

I travelled, a few years ago, on another summer evening, back to the mountainside above the South Wales valley, where so long ago on that summer evening of old, the multitudes had gathered with breathless hush and expectancy, to wait upon the ministry of the Divine Word. Replete with camera, I hoped to record the place where God's presence was opened to His people on that blessed day. To my chagrin, I discovered that the chapel had gone, not even rubble remained. Only green grass grew over the spot that once had resounded with the praises of the saints. An era had gone, the great Gospel preacher, and the chapel. Who guides now to yon Celestial Hill?

But if the Preacher has passed on, and the Chapel has been demolished, the spiritual life imparted lives on. All over Wales, and the British Isles, and indeed in many quarters of the whole world, they still gather to hold the torch of God's Truth, they who learned it under the ministry of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Aye, Lloyd-Jones, warts and all, Lloyd-Jones, warts or no warts, one might add.

As one matures toward old age, one can look back on one's parents. And one can, with the wisdom of hindsight and life-long experience, pick out the faults in one's own father and mother. One can see faults in them now, to which we were oblivious when we were young, and clung to them in childlike affection. And what? When we see those faults, sins, errors, in those whom we loved, those who, under God, gave us life and breath and the gift of existence, do we learn therefrom to despise our own parents? Nay, but rather, on beholding their faults and sins, do we not feel the tremor in the lip, and the moistening in the eye, when we see and recognise their sheer humanity, stumbling through the odds of life, miscalculating, misapprehending, sinning, yet somehow striving for heaven? Does not this very humanity endear them all the more to us?

Thus then, Dr. Lloyd-Jones, warts and all. Whatever his faults, his errors, his sins, he preached the Gospel, and preached it with all his might. Under God, hundreds, maybe thousands, gained their first saving touch with Christ under his ministry. And when we behold his faults, shall we not all feel that same moistened eye, and love this dear brother in Christ all the more? And then the glory too, is all to God, who, in His majestic course, works such mighty wonders by such poor human servants.