

Richard Davis of Rothwell (1658–1714)

by Peter Beale

A Welshman born in Cardiganshire in 1658, at the age of 22 he moved to London where he became master of a grammar school from 1680 until he was called to Rothwell. It was while in London that God brought him to faith in Christ. One factor leading up to his conversion was a conversation he had with Dr John Owen, who asked him after what manner he thought to go to God. “Through the Mediator” was his response. At this Dr Owen replied: “Young man, that is easily said; but I do assure you that it is another thing to go to God through the Mediator indeed, than perhaps many men who make use of the expression are aware of. I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little if any experimental acquaintance with God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my Spirit, in a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, ‘But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.’ From whence I received special instruction, peace and comfort, in drawing near to God, through the Mediator; and preached thereupon, immediately after my recovery.”

Following his conversion he became a member of Silver Street Congregational Church. Before long his gifts were recognised by the church, and he was encouraged to make public use of them. It was not long before news of him reached the Congregational Church at Rothwell in Northamptonshire, which had been formed in around 1655, and he received a call to the pastorate there.

Controversial

He was a controversial figure, and attracted much criticism: to what extent this was due to his somewhat combative nature it is difficult to estimate at this distance in time: there may just be an element of truth in the claim made by his most ardent detractor that critics were dismissed on the grounds that “they that speak against Mr. Davis speak against the gospel.”

One of the accusations made against him was that he was a hyper-Calvinist, denying the free offer of the gospel. However, Mike Plant in a paper given at the Congregational Studies Conference in 1987, shows convincingly that he continued to uphold the free offer throughout his ministry.

One of the remarkable things about Richard Davis’s ministry at Rothwell, particularly in the early years, was the phenomenal growth in the membership, and undoubtedly the Lord was at work in revival. And the blessing was not restricted to the town of Rothwell, but folk from the surrounding areas were converted in large numbers. During the course of his ministry, six churches were planted from Rothwell.

Lay Preachers

A notable feature of his practice, and one which brought him much criticism particularly from Presbyterians, was his use of what might be called “lay preachers.” Norman Glass writes: “He not only preached himself wherever he was requested, or wherever he thought the people greatly needed the sound of the gospel; but he also sent out members of his own church to minister in far distance places to those whom he had gathered into church fellowship. This in his day was a completely new thing: it was ‘Independentism’ with a vengeance.”

Evangelistic Zeal

Davis describes his fervent evangelistic aims in his ministry at Rothwell writing at a time when ill-health prevented the journeyings of earlier years: “Since it pleased the God of all grace to call me to labour in his vineyard, he thought good to implant in me some bowels for poor souls, which laid me under a necessity to take many journeys formerly, to offer the grace of God in Christ, and to proclaim his name to saints and sinners, under many labours, frowns, and reproaches. Thus I continued when the darkness grew great amongst God’s children and my labours met with many discouragements, because I thought the Lord’s sick family did in a manner want visits of love, and the souls of the disciples stood in the greatest need of confirmation in so gloomy a dispensation.”

Davis died on 11 September 1714, in his 56th year. The church book records, “Mr. Richard Davis Pastor, after he had faithfully with hard labour and travel thro’ many and great difficulties, slanders, reproaches, and persecutions, for about five and twenty years served the Lord in this house. He was taken to rest. And to receive the crown of glory.” Maurice writes: “His mind was stayed upon the Lord, and so was kept in perfect peace. The doctrine of God’s everlasting love to his chosen, their covenant-

relation to Christ, their justification through grace in the imputed righteousness of Christ, together with all their salvation under the operations of the Spirit, through all grace, unto all glory, his soul to the last delighted in. He rejoiced greatly that he was going to the God of all grace, and desired others might rejoice with him on that account; and having gone through his appointed time fell asleep in Jesus.”

(Published in the series, ‘Congregational Worthies’ in Congregational Concern, Magazine of the EFCC. Used with permission)