

**TAMIL DAVID,
The Tamil Evangelist.
“Vathakunu Deresegayam David,”
(V.D. “Eye of faith, God helps”).**

**Ian Welch
Pacific and Asian History
School of Culture, History and Language
College of Asia and the Pacific
Australian National University
Canberra.**

WORKING PAPER

© Ian Welch 2014

Comments on this working paper are welcome.

TAMIL DAVID,

The Tamil Evangelist.

“Vathakunu Deresegayam David,”

(V.D. “Eye of faith, God helps”).

V. D. David or “Tamil David” (1853-1923) was involved in evangelistic work in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), India, Australia, Great Britain (England, Scotland, Ireland) and the United States where he was associated with Dwight Moody, one of America’s greatest evangelists.

Tamil David was born in Tirunelveli¹ District of Tamil Nadu state into an Anglican (Episcopal) family. His father, a mission worker, died when he was two and he moved to Sri Lanka at the age of sixteen where he learned Sinhalese² and worked as a self-employed (and totally untrained) English teacher and later an “accountant” in a liquor business. By his own account he was a thoroughly bad young man until his mother, a mission schoolteacher, arrived in Ceylon and persuaded him to return home.³ He was multi-skilled at a very basic level, learning bookkeeping, photography, the accordion and violin.⁴ After his conversion, through the influence of his wife, Mary, he became a catechist associated with the Anglican Church Missionary Society.

Before they were married David was not converted, and the mother had many doubts about consenting to the marriage, as she had heard that David was not a man of a very good character.⁵

After a troubled period, during which he nearly died of cholera, he was transformed from a nominal to an active Christian faith, along with his brother, Moses, and his mother. He had an instinct for public speaking and said of himself:

I was not satisfied with the result of my work. I gathered large crowds when preaching. My words

1 Tirunelveli District was formed in 1790 by the British East India Company (English name Tinnevely and is the name most used in missionary records). Tirunelveli comes from three Tamil words meaning Sacred Paddy (Rice) Hedge.

2 Sinhalese is the modern terms for the language spoken by most Sri Lankans. In missionary archives an older form—Cingalese—is common.

3 Banks, Rev. Louis A., *David and His Friends, A Series of Revival Sermons*, (New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), p.. 201.

4 Millard, E. C., “*What God Hath Wrought,*” *Being An Account of the Mission Tour of the Rev. G. C. Grubb, M.S., Through Ceylon, South India, Australia, New Zealand, Cape Colony*, London, E. Marlborough, 1901 (Originally published 1891), p. 159.

5 Millard 1901 op cit, p. 159.

touched their heads but not their hearts. My addresses were enjoyed by many like a spiritual picnic. Only temporary impressions were made. No deep convictions. The fact is I did not expect to see souls converted on the spot. My object was only to preach the word and go away.⁶

In 1887 he had an experience that fundamentally changed him and the nature of his future work.

David received the baptism of the Holy Ghost about two years ago (1887) in Colombo ... His own account of it is this: "I surrendered all to God that night about twelve o'clock after the S.A. captain had spoken to me, and I trusted for the gift of the fulness of the Spirit. I did not feel anything; but the next day (Sunday), as I was coming out of church, I felt impelled to say to a catechist who was walking by my side, 'I am going to live wholly for God.' I then turned and said the same thing to another man walking close behind. That evening I had a meeting, and I cried as I spoke to the people, and they cried, and seven or eight souls were converted that night, and it has been victory ever since"

David is the most advanced Tamil Christian we have met; his zeal, earnestness, humility, and love for the Bible being very great.⁷

At the heart of his experience was the role of the Holy Spirit in the daily lives of Christian believers. Millard's two books cited in this article highlight the importance of the Wesleyan concepts of "sanctification" and "sinless perfection" that underpinned the British holiness movement. Dwight Moody said at the Fifteenth Northfield Conference discussed later that English Keswick values had merged with an initially Wesleyan American holiness movement.

The English preachers have a message which American Christians need more than any other that will be given here. ... He likes the searching, personal character of the sermons from beyond the seas.⁸

The American movement began early in the 19th century, influenced the rise of modern Pentecostalism in Los Angeles (Asuza St Revival) in 1906).

The preeminent characteristic of Protestant Christianity is the centrality of the Bible as the supreme standard of faith and conduct. The 19th century saw the rise of the concept of divine "verbal inspiration" of the original writers coupled with various understandings of "Biblical inerrancy"; 'Biblical infallibility: and "Biblical inerrancy." This is too complex an issue for this short discussion of Tamil David's life but there is no doubt that he believed in the authority of the Bible as a complete response to every human need.

In 1889, the Keswick Convention trustees sent Irish clergyman, the Rev. George Grubb, to Ceylon where David served as his very effective Tamil interpreter, later travelling with Grubb and his party to South India.⁹ The following provides insight into Grubb's lifeview.

6 David, "How Tamil Evangelist David was Converted, Cleansed and Filled," *The India Alliance*, (Christian and Missionary Alliance, Maharashtra), Bombay, Vol 1 No 10, September 1895, p. 116; Vol 1 No 11, December 1895. P. 127.

7 Millard 1901 op cit, p. 64

8 *New York Tribune*, 4 August 1897.

9 Cash, Prebendary W. Wilson, "Keswick and the Mission," *The Keswick Story in Print 1941*, (London, Marshall,

Grubb was a man of emotions ... a man of sheer faith who fully expected, and often saw, the most improbable occurrences in answer to prayer. His views were black and white. He dismissed all culture as worldly.¹⁰

Although David's English was not perfect he was able to convey clearly the spiritual meaning of Grubb's words to non-English speakers.¹¹ When Grubb left Sri Lanka on his first journey to Australia and New Zealand David was bitterly disappointed not to go with him.¹²

Tamil David joined the second Grubb Australia mission in 1891 although he was not initially included in the group.¹³ A South Australian newspaper described him as this, "coloured preacher from Ceylon" later regretting that he could not stay longer in Adelaide¹⁴ A key theme in their travels was Grubb's (and his colleagues) sharing of accommodation with David, centred on their Bible-based certainty that Christian faith transcended all human differences.¹⁵

David later spoke at Keswick Conventions where he further absorbed holiness values and became widely known.¹⁶ He was in England in 1893 when he met Benjamin Davidson, founder of the Ceylon and India General Mission (CIGM) who later remarked;

I always spoke as if I were going out again to Ceylon ... but at what time I was going, I could not tell ... I went to London ... Nearly all my old friends from Ceylon, who were with Mr. Grubb through Australia, were now in London ... Mr. Campbell was living there. Mr. Jackson was in charge of a Missionary Training Home. David, the Tamil, was itinerating about.¹⁷

In Ceylon David was an active evangelist holding meetings in his house for local beggars, an extraordinary step, in traditional Indian culture, for a man of high caste status. His firm roots in his own culture are illustrated, if simplistically, by many references to his love of curry.

I started alone for David's indoor meeting ... When the meeting was over I had tiffin with David. The natives have a weakness for curry, and David is no exception. Once the curry was so hot that although I took very little, I needed three helpings of rice to get through it. David said: "You are a true Tamil when can eat my curry. After tiffin we went to another meeting, at which I spoke, and David followed

Morgan & Scott, p.83

10 Pollock, J. C. and Ian M. Randall, *The Keswick Story: The Authorized History of the Keswick Convention, updated!* (Fort Washington PA, CLC Publications, 2006), p. 1910.

11 Millard 1901, op cit, p. 134.

12 Millard 1901, op cit, p. 168.

13 Millard, E. C., *The Same Lord: An Account of the Mission Tour of the Rev. George C. Grubb, MA, in Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand*, (London, E. Marlborough & Co, 1893), p. 18.

14 *The South Australian Register*, 15 December 1891, 17 December 1891.

15 *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ch 17. V. 26. Grubb and his colleagues used the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible:— (God) "hath made of one blood all nations of men."

16 On Keswick and the 19th century "holiness" movement see Harford, Charles F., *The Keswick Convention: Its Message, Its Method and Its Men*, (London, Marshall Bros, c1907).

17 *Darkness and Light*, No 1, November 1893, pp 3-4.

on ... Of course, I understood nothing, it being all in Tamil.¹⁸

At the first Annual Meeting of the CIGM, held in the Mildmay Conference Hall¹⁹ in London, Grubb read a letter from David in which his concept of a personal relationship with God, in the Holy Spirit, was affirmed.

God has been showing me that I can only have power with the people in public in proportion as I have power with Him in private. Specially He has taught me the secret of unbroken communion with Him, and also His true yoke.²⁰

Tamil David wrote a number of small pamphlets on various issues. One that has survived was “When you can and when you cannot glorify God.”²¹ Another, “Have you received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit” came into the hands of an Irish Anglican lay missionary in Uganda, later the Rev. George Pilkington, in 1893, who wrote:

If it had not been that God enabled me, after three years in the Mission field, to accept by faith the gift of the Holy Spirit, I should have given up on the work. ... A book by David, the Tamil evangelist, shewed me that my life was not right, that I had not the power of the Holy Host. I had consecrated myself hundreds of times, but I had not accepted God’s gift, I saw now that God commanded me to be filled with the Spirit.²²

David’s teaching on “The Life More Abundant,” attracted considerable attention and he presented this principle many times. In an address in San Francisco on 11 July 1897 he made four points:

The cross, the tomb, the resurrection and the Pentecost Christian. In speaking under the head of the Pentecost Christian life he said in part:

You cannot fully consecrate yourself and care for earthly things at the same time. You must yield all on the altar of God. If you want to be filled with the Holy Ghost you must yield your all.²³

In December 1894 Tamil David visited the southern Indian territory of Kerala where Christianity was introduced by the Apostle Thomas in c52AD. The liturgical traditions of the Mar Thoma Church followed those of the ancient Syrian Orthodox Church. David’s preaching emphasized

18 *Darkness and Light*, No 1, February 1894, p. 19.

19 The influence of the Anglican minister, Rev. William Pennefather, and the still existing Mildmay movement, is discussed in Braithwaite, Robert, *The Life and Letters of Rev. William Pennefather*, (London, John F. Shaw, 1878). Pennefather is suggested as the originator of Bible Conferences, see pp 297-320. See Sidwell, Mark, “The Origin of the Bible Conference Movement, pp 75-98 in *Detroit Baptist Theological Journal (DSBJ)*, Vol 13, 2008. Online <https://www.dbts.edu/journals/2008/Naselli.pdf> The principal financing of the Mildmay Conference Hall came from an evangelically minded Anglo-Australian millionaire businessman, Mr. Henry Reed of Launceston, Tasmania.

20 *Darkness and Light*, No 12, December 1894, p. 135.

21 The complete text will be found in *Daily News*, Perth, Western Australia, 20 July 1895.

22 Harford-Battersby, Charles F., *Pilkington of Uganda*, (London, Marshall Bros, 1899), p. 222.

23 *San Francisco Call*, 12 July 1897. Another reference to this theme appeared in the *Roanoke Times* VA, 12 December 1897.

Biblical authority and infallibility, lay leadership, salvation by faith alone and quality of personal life, i.e, holiness teachings. David was the leading speaker in the first (March 1895) Maramon Convention, now in its 119th year and believed to be the largest annual Christian gathering in Asia.

In mid 1895 he was preaching, for a second time, in Mumbai (Bombay) to Marathi Christians. He was reported as: “A plain preacher of righteousness and puts truth in an unflinching manner, but in great love.”²⁴ An 1897 report described him as a “celebrated preacher in India” and “an Indian Whitefield or Spurgeon.”²⁵ He was also described in an American newspaper as “the Moody of India.”²⁶

In 1897 he addressed a national Christian Endeavour convention in Portland, Oregon and Dwight Moody’s Northfield General Conference for Christian Workers in Massachusetts in August.²⁷ He was well received when he preached in San Francisco²⁸ and attracted more attention a few days later. His delivery attracted this comment.

Four churches of Portland were favored by the presence of Tamil David ... who is now making a tour over a portion of the American continent ... The evangelist was accorded a warm reception wherever he preached, and interested his audience with his fervid and energetic style of speaking. His discourses, like those of other evangelists, were of character to affect the audience through the force of sympathetic appeal, rather than by arguments of a philosophical sort. Throughout his addresses there are frequent interesting references to his native land and its customs, which impress the listener. He speaks rapidly, and has a lack of distinctness that at times makes hearing him slightly difficult but when he reaches the more striking periods of the subject, the intensity of his manner and forceful illustrations impart an eloquence that is very attractive.²⁹

His comment on the Portland convention reflects comments also made about the Rev. George Grubb’s and David’s ministry in Australia and illustrates the premillennialist nature of their preaching.

The outcome of this convention ... will be Christians coming out for the Lord and going out to preach as volunteers. I have faith that that will be the result in Christianity for this convention, for that is what ought to come out of it. There will be a wonderful revival of Christianity in this State as a result of these thousands of consecrated, self-sacrificing, Christlike young Christians in your midst. But this must come through the Christians, and that this may come the Christians must be filled with a Pentecostal power. Then the Lord Jesus will come in power; and he is coming—coming soon.³⁰

24 *The India Alliance*, (Christian and Missionary Alliance, Maharashtra), Bombay, Vol 1 No 10, September 1895, p. 116. Vol 1 No 11, December 1895.

25 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, Sydney, 3 April 1897.

26 *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 August 1897.

27 *Morning Oregonian*, Portland, 23 July 1897.

28 *San Francisco Call*, 12 July 1897.

29 *Morning Oregonian*, Portland, 23 July 1897. 25 July 1897.

30 *San Francisco Call*, 6 July 1897.

His address would have needed a special boost for he remarked that

He was so used to talking for twelve hours at a time that he did not see how he could confine himself to the short five minutes allotted to him by the chairman ... He got into his Indian habit and continued talking after he was called down by the little buzzer on the platform, and finally Secretary Baer had to lead him from the platform.³¹

David spent three days in Sacramento³² before travelling across America and in August participated in Dwight Moody's Fifteenth General Conference for Christian Workers at Northfield, Massachusetts.

At these meetings the major Christian doctrines are presented by able Bible students, plans and methods of Christian work are discussed by the clergy and lay workers, various Christian enterprises are represented and the promotion and deepening of spiritual life are especially sought.³³

Moody circularized the American press that:

The time has come for believers in a whole Bible, a divine Christ and a living Spirit to join in earnest and determined forward movement.³⁴

Another paper reported that:

The coming of V. D. David, the Tamil evangelist in India, is looked forward to with considerable anticipation. He is considered one of the leaders in Christian work in India, a deep Bible student and an eloquent speaker.³⁵

A summary of David's six addresses at Northfield noted.

V. D. David, the Tamil evangelist from India, spoke again this afternoon ... It is said that ten thousand people have been converted under his preaching. Besides what he can do personally, he supports six native evangelists or pastors, who supplement his work. His scheme of teaching the life more abundant, as he terms it, centres around several mountains—Sinai, representing convictions; Calvary, representing pardon; Moriah, which stands for consecration; Hermon or Tabor, meaning transfiguration. Pisgah, glory-land ahead, and Zion, life more abundant now. This afternoon he spoke on the third subject, assuming that all of his hearers had already passed the other two mountains.³⁶

Another report stated:

His address was one of the most remarkable that have been heard in Northfield in recent years. It was sharp, searching and intensely practical.³⁷

In the address referred to above, David's theme repeated his favourite topic of abundant

31 *San Francisco Call*, 10 July 1897. The context was a series of brief introductory addresses by the representatives of many American States and overseas countries attending the Conference.

32 *Record Union*, Sacramento, 17 July 1897.

33 *San Francisco Call*, 31 July 1897.

34 *Roanoke Times VA*, 27 June 1897. Moody's letter was dated 8 June 1897.

35 *New York Tribune*, 26 July 1897.

36 *New York Tribune*, 10 August 1897.

37 *New York Tribune*, 2 August 1897.

Christian living.

His commitment to long sermons attracted Dwight Moody's notice as the usual program at Northfield allowed each speaker just one hour to make a presentation.

Yesterday "Tamil David" as the evangelist from India is called, spoke for two hours at Camp Northfield. Mr. Moody does not approve of long sermons, but he said apologetically that he understood it took his friend David twelve hours to handle a religious subject to his entire satisfaction.³⁸

Along the way to Northfield he left in Minneapolis "a doctrine of holiness that made some of us feel extremely our own shortcomings."³⁹ In Evanston, Illinois, he delivered addresses for four weeks in Willard Hall of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in January 1898.⁴⁰

A later event, c1915, records the Rev. Tamil David preaching in the Lucknow Central Methodist Church where the Rev. E. Stanley Jones, then a young American Methodist Episcopal missionary, was experiencing what today would be called "burnout." Jones wrote:

I was in the Central Methodist Church in Lucknow. The Reverend Tamil David was in charge of the evangelistic services. I was at the back of the church kneeling in prayer, not for myself but for others, when God said to me, "Are you yourself ready for the work to which I have called you?" My reply: "No, Lord, I'm done for. I've reached the end of my resources and I can't go on." "If you'll turn that problem over to me and not worry about it, I'll take care of it." My eager reply: "Lord, I close the bargain right here." I arose from my knees knowing I was a well man.⁴¹

David's story has a very modern ring. A troubled boy, a single parent family, a loving mother, an unrealized religious belief, delinquency and a misspent youth, conversion, and finally a permanent transformation of his life through a deepened sense of God's presence.

38 *New York Tribune*, 4 August 1897.

39 Riley, William B., *Vagaries and Verities or Sunday Nights in Soul Winning*, (Minneapolis, Hall, Black & D0, 1906), p. 185. Riley was a leading figure in the rise of Biblical Fundamentalism in the United States.

40 *The Union Signal; A Journal of Social Welfare*, (Evanston ILL-Women's Christian Temperance Union), 6 January 1898,

41 Jones, E. Stanley, *Song of Ascents: A Spiritual Autobiography*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 89.

DAVID,

(The Tamil Evangelist)

IS COMING.

India's First Missionary to America.

*Highly recommended by D. L. Moody, and one
of the speakers at Northfield this year.*

He will speak every Afternoon and Evening

AT THE

WELLINGTON ST. FREE BAPTIST CHURCH,

BEGINNING

SEPTEMBER 5th, 1897.

ALL ARE WELCOME.

Afternoon Service 3.30. Evening, 7.30.

G. B. WOOD, PRINTER, 50 FOSTER STREET.

Tamil David in *San Francisco Call*, 10 July 1875



V D David, Tamil Evangelist, *San Francisco Call*, 6 July 1897.

