

Preoccupation with Revival

While the church flounders on all sides, there has rarely been a time when there has been so much talk about, and hope for, revival. Charismatics keep producing prophecies about global, national, regional and city-wide revivals, but none of them come to pass. There should be public repentance for these bogus prophecies, such as the 1990 claim that Britain would see a powerful revival beginning in London.

However, many evangelical folk also centre their ministry on revival. Some organisations use the word in the title of their publications and logos. Many have written books on the subject, of varying value, while others claim that there is no hope apart from it. It is sad to know that some famous preachers, who held out all their lives for a national revival, went to their grave bitterly disappointed men. I have been to many fervent prayer meetings for revival in the past but have never seen these prayers answered; rather I have seen the church fall apart in heresy and apostasy, the secular world become openly and utterly depraved and evangelism collapse in effectiveness.

What are we to say about all this? Is hoping for revival a good thing and should we continue in praying for it? I propose to investigate this here.

What is revival?

We first have to make some sort of definition; revival may imply one thing to one person but something very different to someone else. Charismatics understand revival as involving supposed works of power – claims of healings, miracles, resurrections, falling over and so on; their future global revival will include superhuman apostles and prophets. Those inclined towards ethics and social issues chiefly see revival as affecting a nation's morals for the better. Most evangelicals would recognise the main factor as multitudes of conversions; many folk wistfully look back to the Great Awakening, the 1859 or Methodist revivals, hoping for such days to come again.

As in all matters we must first look to scripture and not history or men.

There is evidence of what may be called revival in the Bible; the work of the apostles after Pentecost is certainly such a case. But there are also shadows of it in the Old Testament; the outworking of the reformations of Josiah, the revival in Nineveh under Jonah (which was really a revival of Jonah) and the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem being examples.

Here are all the examples of the word 'revive' in scripture:

For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. Ezra 9:9

You, who have shown me great and severe troubles, shall revive me again, and bring me up again from the depths of the earth. You shall increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. Ps 71:20-21

Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, upon the son of man *whom* you made strong for yourself. Then we will not turn back from you; revive us, and we will call upon your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; cause your face to shine, and we shall be saved! Ps 80:17-19

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your mercy, LORD, and grant us your salvation. Ps 85:6-7

Revive me according to your word. ... *And* revive me in your way. ... Revive me in your righteousness. ... Revive me according to your lovingkindness, so that I may keep the testimony of your mouth. ... I am afflicted very much; revive me, O LORD, according to your word. ... O LORD, revive me according to your justice. ... Revive me according to your word. ... Revive me according to your judgments. ... Revive me, O LORD, according to your lovingkindness. Ps 119:25, 37, 40, 88, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you will revive me; you will stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand will save me. Ps 138:7

Revive me, O LORD, for your name's sake! For your righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble. Ps 143:11

For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name *is* Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy *place*, with him *who* has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.' Isa 57:15

Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight. Hos 6:1-2

Those who dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall be revived *like* grain, and grow like a vine. Their scent *shall be* like the wine of Lebanon. Hos 14:7

O LORD, I have heard your speech *and* was afraid; O LORD, revive your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make *it* known; in wrath remember mercy. Hab 3:2

The word 'revival' occurs once (in the NKJV, not at all in the AV) in connection with the Jewish restoration, And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival ['reviving' AV] in our bondage. Ezra 9:8

The word 'revive' [Hebrew *chayah*] simply means to live, be alive, restored to health, preserved or to be revived from sickness, discouragement or death. It is the restoration of someone or something from a period of sickness, atrophy; restitution from disgrace or even resurrection from death or near death.

From the texts above we can list the factors in Biblical revival as follows:

- The church (temple) functioning in the way that it should. [Ezra 9:9] A revival of the Lord's work in the church after a period of degeneration. [Ezra 9:8; Hab 3:2]
- The people of God living in security. [Ezra 9:9]
- The comfort of God after a time of persecution or affliction. [Ps 71:20-21]
- Restoration to former greatness. [Ps 71:20-21]
- A corporate calling upon the name of the Lord [Ps 80:17-19]
- God's people rejoicing in seeing mercy and salvation [Ps 85:6-7]
- Personal revival from affliction or persecution [Ps 119, 138:7, 143:11; Hos 6:1-2, 14:7]
- A personal restoration of the humble and contrite [Isa 57:15]

So, we can observe two main applications:

1. **PERSONAL SPIRITUAL REVIVAL AND CONSOLATION.** This involves an emphasis upon God's word, being revitalised in our walk, being re-focused on righteousness to give a good testimony of God's justice accompanied by an experience of God's faithfulness and covenant love (Ps 119).
2. **CORPORATE REVIVAL IN THE CHURCH; REVITALISATION OF THE LORD'S PEOPLE.** This involves an experience of God's comfort, mercy and practical salvation. It results in the church properly calling upon the Lord (worshipful, effectual praying in God's will). In revival God restores the church from its former failings and forgives sin.

The word 'revival' may have an implication of conversions in the popular mind, but this is certainly not stressed in scripture because unbelievers cannot be revived but must become new creatures through regeneration and conversion. The focus is a) upon God and b) upon his work in the church. Can we see any practical outworking of this in history? Certainly!

The apostles

There is no doubt that the work of the early church was done in a period of revival. If ever there was a vivifying of the Lord's people it was after Pentecost. The initial emphasis and the goal of ministry in this revival was the building of the church. The Lord's disciples were traumatised by his death and were a frightened, dejected group. Though they should have understood the Lord's teaching about his death and resurrection, they failed to grasp the real significance. Thomas was even slow to believe that Jesus had been raised at all.

This all changed after the Spirit had been outpoured upon the church and the apostles were completely different men. They proclaimed Christ's Lordship and Messiahship boldly and rejoiced to suffer for it. Early on James was killed. Gospel preaching was accompanied by many conversions and the apostles began to understand how to gather the church into assemblies. They were then slow to reach out to the nations, but were forced out by persecution. Even then the main apostles stayed in Jerusalem for many years.

While there were multitudes of people saved all around the Roman Empire (Clement said that Paul even went to the furthest reaches of the western empire i.e. Britain), the letters of the apostles show that their chief focus was to securely gather the saints and edify them in properly constituted local churches. Without being gathered, disciplined and built up, converts soon fall away. Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Galatians show that even when a church is properly founded by an apostle, it is still in great danger of apostasy if it does not continue in sound doctrine. At the end of the century, John's letters also demonstrate the great dangers facing churches from false teachers and false prophets. The work of the apostles, though it included evangelism, was to found, equip and protect the local churches under their care.

Thus revival does not chiefly aim at many conversions, but rather founding the church properly. Sound churches will evangelise effectively, but stumbling churches will be effective in nothing. The goal of revival is to establish the Lord's people, encourage them to walk right with God, and then works of evangelism will follow. God may pour out his Spirit effecting many conversions, but he may not. There were sometimes thousands saved after a single sermon in the beginning of the apostolic revival, but later in the century (while the work of revival was still going on) there were much fewer conversions.

We should also bear in mind that the explosion of converts at the beginning was a powerful work of God to establish the church out of nothing. There will never be such an explosion of evangelism again because the situation will never be the same again. After Jesus died, was raised and ascended, there were only a few disciples who followed his teaching;

perhaps numbering a couple of hundred in Palestine. To build the church and establish Christianity on Earth, God called thousands and thousands to his name, from many nations, within a few years. This was necessity to establish the church from virtually nothing. Also there was no Bible, as we know it, and this necessitated supernatural gifts (like prophecy) and a powerful work by the Holy Spirit. Our situation is very different today.

The Reformation

The Reformation is the chief, post-apostolic, historical example of a sovereign work of God in taking the church out of darkness, failure, weakness and near death, into a powerful understanding of his glory, associated with gathering His people into functioning Biblical congregations.

We cannot take time to explain this in detail; for more information see my book, *Was the Reformation Good News?* The point here is that this work did not involve miracle working, or people falling over or any exercise of supernatural gifts. Where these things supposedly emerged it was amongst heretical cults and sectarian groups which did great damage to the work (such as: the Munster tragedy, the Zwickau prophets or the Schwenkfelders). Neither was the Reformation primarily about thousands of new converts being fed into the existing church system (but there were many converts over time).

What happened in the Reformation was a sovereign move of God to open up his word to key men, whom he raised up to teach the elect. Sound doctrines were re-discovered and were spread through the gift of godly preaching and education. This preaching occurred in sermons, discussions, debates, catechising, house-to-house visitation, and in letters, tracts and books. The main focus in the best ministry was God himself; indeed Calvin was called disparaging names about this since even those in the world recognised what Calvin centred upon. As a result of the focus upon God's name and glory, there was an emphasis upon God's sovereignty in salvation; thus the doctrines of total depravity, election, calling, and justification by faith alone were elevated after centuries of being ignored or denied.

The impact of this focus upon God and his work did two things (amongst many others). It built up the church into an edifying institution that sought to equip men and women to serve the Lord. It taught them very practical things about living the Christian life, such as the Protestant work ethic (working hard and efficiently in your daily life to glorify God). This strengthening of the church, and increasing moral qualities in men, also led to big social and political changes over time; indeed modern social liberty and political democracy emerged bringing about the modern period of secular history. The Reformation even led to changes in art and literature, forming the foundation of literature in places like France, Germany and England. It was also the beginning of many missions, such as the sending of Huguenot missionaries to Brazil, aided by Calvin.

Where God is exalted and his truth honoured in sound doctrine, the result is not only strong believers who live right, but it always impacts the nation as a corollary. Yet the centre of the revival is not social change, nor a general awakening, but getting the church right based upon sound Biblical doctrine. When the church is right and the Lord's people are set upon God's glory foremost, then there will always be a secondary affect upon evangelism and social action (doing good to people, e.g. in education or charity).

Thus true revival is not about power in superficially 'miraculous' ways; it is not fanaticism or 'enthusiasm' (emotionalism), but is an elevation of God in the church worked out in true doctrine and practical godliness. These then result in evangelism and good works.

God does not drop a package of grace upon the world to save multitudes in revival, but chiefly works in believers to concentrate upon him and serve each other. Revival centres upon God not upon sinners.

Before the Reformation the Roman church emphasised the work of men. It made salvation the result of effort and doing prescribed things. It elevated men in the church and took away attention from God himself, substituting a man in authority. The Reformation broke this hold on the church and revealed that salvation was by grace under God's sovereignty, and that the church is not a centralised, hierarchical, human institution but Christ's body. Revival puts God in his place as Lord, taking the veil from the eyes of misguided people in the churches who deny this and reawakening their desire to serve him from the heart.

What should we be concentrating upon?

Many see revival as the antidote to all that is going wrong. They believe they can do little to change things today and rest upon a hope that God will sovereignly do everything for them. They harp on past glories when God did great things through weak men and fail in their duty to fight for the truth today.

God's providence

This attitude reveals a complete failure to understand God's purposes, or his decrees. Whether revival comes or not, we know what our task is and have clear Biblical instructions on how to spend our lives – serving God, building up the church, honouring God in our daily lives, living righteously, preaching the Gospel and doing good to all. Whether revival comes or not, these tasks do not change. Wistfully hoping for revival when there is much work to be done in the church (perhaps more than ever in history) is, at least, energy sapping and demoralising. The church today needs to roll up its sleeves and get moving. There is much to be done.

But a key problem with centring on revival is misunderstanding what God is sovereignly doing in the world. This is equally the case with those leaders who spend all their time working on trying to change the state of the country through political activism, petitions, marches, complaints to MPs, forming Christian political parties and so on. We must concentrate upon God first and understand what he is saying today – and it is not trying to change the world. People who do this have little understanding, not only of God's plan but also of how the world is really governed. If they think that national leaders can change governing strategies they are deluded. The western nations have no national sovereignty anymore in any real sense; the shots are being called much higher than parliaments. However, I will resist the temptation of explaining the satanic political strategy in developing a world empire through various hegemonies here, and will concentrate upon God's attributes and decree.

The attributes of God

God is absolutely sovereign. God is infinitely wise. God is perfect. If he has sovereignly placed us in a time of small things then it is his perfect and wise will for us to be there. If we kick against this choice, wistfully wanting to be in a time of revival, then we are dishonouring God's attributes and living irreverently. **'In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you'** (1 Thess 5:18).

God is righteous. Everything God does is right and holy. The situation we find ourselves in is right, not only for us but for also those we interact with. If we complain about this we dishonour God's character and can miss the real targets in front of us. We honour God by

accepting God's righteous choice for our lives, whatever the circumstances. 'Teach me to do your will, for you *are* my God; your Spirit *is* good. Lead me in the land of uprightness' (Ps 143:10).

God is immutable. God neither changes, nor does his will ever deviate from its purpose. He has a plan for our lives and this plan is fixed in eternity and does not change. To wish we lived in another time or in different circumstances is to dishonour God. 'Show me your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you *are* the God of my salvation; on you I wait all the day' (Ps 25:4-5).

God's sovereign decree

People who keep hoping for a change of circumstances are offending the God who predestined those circumstances from eternity. Our times are in God's hands; even the hairs on our heads are under his sovereign control and plan. If God has placed us in a time of difficulty and poor response to the Gospel, our job is to thank him for it and keep preaching the Gospel. If we are in a period of persecution we must praise God for this opportunity to witness to him in oppressive times. If our work is small, there is no loss of reward than if our work is large; the measure of reward is due to faithfulness to God not the size of the work.

There is a great danger that the motivation to keep praying for revival may actually be rebellion against God's will today, and it suggests a failure to understand that our God decrees and predestines all things – including our time of poor response to ministry. Above all else we must be faithful to God and honour his truth. Hoping for better things can only be done in the background of obeying God's word.

The judgment of God

It is also very important to consider the principle of God's temporal judgment. There are many occasions when God severely punishes a nation today, as well as condemning its governors to punishment at the Last Day for political corruption. There are many examples of this in the Old Testament, and examples can be found in history. When a nation's sin reaches a certain point of fulness, God sometimes decrees temporal judgment – such as when the sin of the Canaanites reached fulness and the outcome was commanded genocide. On other occasions he is very patient and tolerates the sin for a longer period; God does what pleases him (Eph 1:9).

This means that it is very important to discern what God is doing at any particular time. This does not affect our job, it is always the same, but it does affect our praying and the direction of our efforts. If a nation is under God's temporal judgment, then seeking and praying for national revival is actually disobeying God and misunderstanding his will. A fascination and preoccupation with revival can actually be working against God's purposes. When Daniel was in a time of national judgment, he mourned for sin; he did not get excited about the prospect of revival but was sad because God had been disobeyed by his own people. The Jews in that time would not see revival until the period of judgment was ended after seventy years.

How do we discern our times? Thankfully, we can have the mind of Christ on issues like this (1 Cor 2:16). Like the apostle Paul we need to know when to move forward and when to stop; when the work is being hindered by Satan (requiring persistence) and when it is being halted by the Spirit (when it needs to wait); when to accommodate (Acts 16:3) and when to resist (Gal 2:3). The ability to discern the times is one of the greatest lacks in the modern church.

- Example of those who can't discern: You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times. (Matt 16:3)

- Example of those who can: **The sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.** (1 Chron 12:32).

Focusing on revival during a time of national judgment is going to distract the Lord's people from their work, which will be hard enough. I propose that our nation has been under God's judgment for some years, and that he is allowing the nation, and the professing church, to plunge deeper into depravity at this time. We need to set our minds upon God's glory and study his word and be ready to do his will, day by day.

Do your job

For who has despised the day of small things? Zech 4:10

The instructions of the Lord to his people never change; they remain as steadfast as God himself. Does revival vivify the Lord's people and gift certain men to preach the Gospel with power? Then praise God. However, is this a day of small things when there is little life and times are hard? Then praise God. There is no difference in our task between these two manifestations of God's providence. Whether it is a time of difficulty, struggle, persecution and suffering matters little; our job is just the same as under a time of great empowerment by God's Spirit. Wishing for a revival and better times does nobody any good. We must accept the time God has given us and obey him – equipping and edifying the church and preaching the Gospel.

There is a great danger that those who are preoccupied with revival and experiencing God's power in the church can actually be distracted from focusing upon God himself and getting on with their normal job in preaching the Gospel and edifying the saints.

Too many look at the lives of the apostles with rose-coloured spectacles, thinking that all was revival, all was power, all was effectual and forward movement. In fact the truth is that the effectiveness that God sourced and blessed in these men involved their hard work in dire circumstances. These men suffered continually for their faith and often struggled to minister in great adversity. There were setbacks, opposition, slander, persecution, hunger, thirst, treachery and apostasy by colleagues, and so on. Paul lists his suffering more than once and it is clear that his ministry was not always riding on the crest of a revival wave – but he kept working anyway.

The crucial factor was the gift and grace of God in these men plus the commitment and hard work delivered by these men. We don't need revival, we need the same grace and the same commitment to work as the apostles. The same is equally true of the Reformers; rarely in history have we seen such hard work as that evidenced by Luther and Calvin.

A wrong focus in hoping for revival

A crucial truth that undergirds the believer's hope, and one that is foundational for church growth ideas, is that Christ is building his church.

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matt 16:18)

Here we have an unequivocal statement from the Lord himself that pertains to all history. He builds the church in his way, in his time, as he sees fit. He does not build the church according to our hopes, desires or prayers. As with all scripture, this is foundational to how we believe and act.

Jesus is Lord! The working of history is under his divine control and according to God's plan and purpose in eternity. That we can identify times of acceleration in this building and times of quiet is irrelevant. These are not indicative of better and worse times of

building, but of God's wisdom. The building in the quiet times is as important as in the times of rapid conversions.

This equates to the way God develops his people. There are times of vitality, success, and growth, but also times of anguish, suffering, confusion and affliction. God is working in us equally in the hard times as the good times; thus we are commanded to thank him for all that occurs to us, knowing that it is his will and all works together for our good. In the same way, God has seasons of fast, strong growth (sometimes called revival) and times of persecution or slow movement. One is not to be preferred above the other, but God is to be thanked in all. Our job is to accept whatever the position it is that God puts us in, and not desire a different one.

Unhelpful definitions

The focus on revival can actually offend the God who is working out his purpose for the church at all times. Some definitions of revival include:

- *Times of refreshing* – but God never leaves his people, always refreshes his people and promises to always provide for them (Heb 13:5-6). Praying for special times of refreshing (e.g. feeling God's presence in a special way) ignores the providence of God that is always working for his people according to his divine plan. We are to live by faith in God's providence not by feelings.
- *Times of outpouring* – but God has already poured out the Spirit in fulness upon the elect (1 Cor 12:13). The church has been baptised in the Spirit once for all time, and needs no special revitalisation. True believers ought to be praying for God to fill them with his Spirit everyday, as commanded by the apostles (Eph 5:18). Why would we need more than this fulness already given? We are complete in Christ, who is the fulness of (Col 2:9-10); we do not need an emotional experience to give us a shot in the arm.
- *Times of awakening* – this is not a Biblical word in the sense used in revivals; it is often used to refer to a general, superficial, conviction about religion in the society around a revival area. However, God only awakens the elect through regeneration. Superficial conviction or remorse amongst people in the world means nothing if there is no fruit following the emotion. Revivals always produce thousands of people supposedly 'awakened' who never become believers. What is needed is to build the church through preaching the Gospel, not a raising of religious sensitivity in the populace that never bears fruit but only produces excitement.
- *Showers of blessing* – This utterly fails to understand what salvation is. All God's blessing has been poured into Christ and he is the fulness that supplies all our need. Christ is our full sufficiency; we need no other. He is the source of every spiritual blessing, which are ours in him (Eph 1:3). To look for blessing elsewhere is wrong; to seek it in human experiences, places and men (preachers) is absolutely futile. In revivals, people hurry to travel, sometimes hundreds of miles, in order to be where 'the blessing' is and get their shot of excitement. This is merely revival frenzy distracting people from Christ. Do they not understand the omnipresence of God and the promise of Christ (Matt 28:20).

A false pilgrimage

What is worse is the pilgrimage mentality that many evangelicals have regarding past revivals. Not only do individuals go to the scenes of past revivals hoping for spiritual stimulation, but coach parties are organised to take groups round various places where historic revivals were experienced. Some writers have even said that recalling places and past events is important to spiritual refreshment! This is close to Romanism.

We are commanded to look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith and not to the labours of men or the places where events happened in the past. Anything that distracts us

from following Christ and giving him all our attention is to be deplored. For this reason John Calvin wisely commanded that he was buried without a headstone so that no one could make it a shrine; its exact site is unknown to this day.

Becoming so preoccupied with revival that one travels to visit towns where famous revivals occurred, as if there is some benefit or sanctity in material places, is foolishness.

Confusion about praying for revival

It is common to hear Reformed folk bewail their condition and pray in terms of, *'Send the fire, Lord'*, and suchlike. Is this a good idea?

Firstly such prayers can lead to confusion. Charismatics pray these exact prayers but mean something very different. Revival fire to Charismatics and Pentecostals means 'powerful' visible effects in people falling over, crying out, screaming, laughing, shaking, jumping – and so on. Modern movements that produced no verifiable healings or miracles are called a 'revival' simply because a lot of people manifested exotic phenomena, such as laughing, falling or wailing. Do we really want to encourage this pagan idea?

Secondly, the Biblical idea of sending fire has to do with the ministry of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. There was divine approval of Elijah's offering manifested in holy fire devouring the sacrifice, a visible proof of godly ministry; but this fire came primarily with judgment, not revival. It resulted in the execution of the prophets of Baal and increasing opposition to Elijah, such that he became depressed. Also there were no subsequent widespread conversions to God, but it was a time of relative smallness; only 7,000 remained faithful to God out of millions. God's subsequent re-commissioning of Elijah had to do with judgment and who would be killed by the sword by whom (1 Kg 19).

On another occasion Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy two separate companies of soldiers (2 Kg 1). In Leviticus 10 fire comes from heaven to kill Nadab and Abihu for their profane offering. In Numbers 16 the rebellion of Korah was judged with fire from heaven killing 250 rebels. Heavenly fire is associated with judgment; is this really what people are praying for? Verses speaking of God sending fire always refer to judgment on sin in the Old Testament (Ezek 39:6; Hos 8:14; Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 2:2, 5). In the New Testament divine fire usually speaks of judgment, culminating at the end when God will, *'in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ'* (2 Thess 1:8).

I do not read of apostles praying that God would send fire, so why should we? What I do see is that the apostles prayed for boldness to speak God's word, *'grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word'* (Acts 4:29). The apostles of the Lamb were sovereignly gifted to break open the times with miraculous gifts in order to lay the foundation of the church (Acts 4:30; Heb 2:4); this is not our gift today, but the proclamation of the word is still our responsibility. We should pray that God will enable us to be bold and preach the truth, rather than ask for some vague metaphorical fire.

Confusion about the effects of revivals

The prevailing evangelical opinion is that any questioning of a revival, in its conduct or effect, is generally deemed inadmissible. Once a movement is widely termed a 'revival', there is almost a superstition that no one can say anything against a work supposedly sponsored by God. Thankfully, God himself tells us that we are to evaluate and judge these events (1 Thess 5:21; Isa 8:20; Matt 7:15-20; Lk 12:57; Rm 12:2; 1 Cor 2:15; 1 Jn 4:1).

Over time the excesses of some historical events get watered down and the high points compressed; this is particularly true of revivals. One hears stories of all the good things and none of the bad things. It is also difficult to properly assess what teaching may have taken place. The result is that evangelicals have grown up with very favourable impressions of certain revival preachers and revival movements, when the truth is that these were, at least in part, harmful to the church. I will give a few examples.

CG Finney

When I was a young believer the ministry of Finney was held up to me as the pinnacle of an evangelist working under the power of God. His ability to bring hard men to their knees, to change the morality of towns and to produce multitudes of converts was expressed in near-apostolic terms. How shocking it was to me when, years later, I learned for myself that the truth was very different.

Firstly, Finney was no Calvinist (though he claimed to be one to get ordained). In fact, Finney's ideas were such an extreme variant of Arminianism that he can be described as a near Pelagian. He emphasised free will and told men that they could regenerate themselves: *'Conversion, or regeneration, is the work of man ... a change of heart is the sinner's own act ... God commands you to make you a new heart, expects you to do it'*. [Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, p197.] Finney spoke virulently about Calvinism and called the Westminster Confession *'theological fiction'*. He was so confused that he failed to understand justification by faith, which is the foundation of the Gospel; *'Gospel justification is not the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.'* [Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians*, p252] Later Finney (and his colleague Asa Mahan at Oberlin College) went so far as creating a new form of entire sanctification, or perfectionism. They took their terms from Wesley but differed from his system in claiming that man can perfectly fulfil the law and be like God himself; this is identical to Pelagianism.

His ideas about revival were just as dishonouring to God, teaching that any man, if he fulfilled all the necessary conditions, can initiate a revival. His methods for gaining conversions were equally appalling. He used emotionalism and even threatening speech to frighten people and cajole them into repentance. Though not the first, he championed such 'New Measures' as the 'anxious seat' which popularised the idea of manipulating a service so that people could be pressurised into coming forward to be prayed with. The invitation system followed on the heels of this and continues to damage evangelism to this day as 'decisionism'. Finney's meetings were dramatic, manipulative, hypnotic, emotional, superficial and very short on truth. His meetings were described as a tornado of emotional exuberance, which often left a trail of desolation. His theology was unbiblical, his ministry ungodly and his character suspicious. In fact, if there had not been a genuine revival already occurring in the regions where he ministered (particularly under Calvinist Asahel Nettleton), it is doubtful that he would have had any effect at all.

Finney's objectionable methods, which included personal defamatory accusations, even in prayer, led to many churches refusing him to return to their parishes due to the damage his new measures brought. Churches were split, Bible reading neglected, Sunday Schools abandoned and many other evils resulted from his ministry. Soon many beloved and trusted pastors denounced these new measures.

It is not surprising that many of the claimed conversions were exaggerated and even Finney had to admit at the end of his life that only a very small proportion of the claimed large numbers were truly saved. His co-worker, Asa Mahan, stated that *'everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like*

a dead coal which could not be re-ignited.' [B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, Baker, 2:26-27.] Another co-worker said, *'I have visited and revisited many of these fields and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches have fallen and fallen very soon after we first departed from among them.'* [ibid.]

In comparison, the converts of the Calvinist Nettleton (considered to be over 30,000) generally remained steadfast. To cite just one case, all the 84 converts of an 1818 revival at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, remained faithful 26 years later. Despite all this, many modern evangelicals aspire to the flamboyant ministry of Finney, still defend his extreme revivalist methods and have never heard of godly Asahel Nettleton.

Contrary to Finney, Nettleton's meetings were conducted in good order. When people cried out under conviction of sin, he had them removed to be personally counselled. He not only was a supreme evangelist (only Whitefield saw more conversions), but he edified churches, healed breaches in churches, revitalised dead churches and many positive social repercussions followed his preaching. The differences between Calvinistic and Arminian revival ministry are clearly seen; in a nutshell, one works and glorifies God, the other doesn't!

John Wesley

What would you think of a supposed Christian teacher who hated the doctrine of election and called it devilish and *'a deadly poison'*?¹ What of a man who savagely attacked the idea of God's sovereignty and predestination calling it 'blasphemy'?² What of a leader who upheld the sovereignty of man in the Gospel, teaching that sanctification and even glorification result from human works?³ Would you trust a preacher who told you that you could have an experience that would enable you never to commit sin?⁴ What about a man who taught that justification was not ultimately by faith and that water baptism washed away sin (just as Roman Catholics believe)?⁵ Would you follow a man who justified praying for the dead⁶ and believed that pagans would be saved in their unbelief if they were nice?⁷

What about a man who drew lots for divination, who plagiarised other writers, who committed fraud and forgery at a time when it was a treasonable offence? What about someone who endorsed women church leaders and was ecumenical regarding Rome? Would you follow a man who accepted people falling down, crying, laughing and wailing during his preaching? Would you honour a man that ignored his wife but had *'romantic debacles'* with other women? What if he also supported gambling? If the fruit of this man's ministry was a number of heretical rogue movements, would he be sound? Finally, what if, at the end of his life, this man said, *'I do not love God, I never did. Therefore I never believed, in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen'*?⁸

Well, all of these things are true of John Wesley; the revival he was involved with, though it had many social effects, has to be considered very suspicious indeed. I find it hard to believe that John Wesley could have been a genuine Christian. Indeed, the bulk of the genuine evangelism in the country in this period was done by George Whitefield who

¹ *Works*, Vol 13, p193, p243, 285.

² *Works*, Vol 7, p424-6.

³ *Works*, Vol 8, p39, 55-56; Vol 10, p450; Vol 11, p578-9.

⁴ *Works*, Vol 5, p283, 336-7; Vol 6, p19, 28, 31, 462, 465; Vol 10, p432; Vol 11, p523.

⁵ *Works*, Vol 10, p227-229.

⁶ *Works*, Vol 9 p68.

⁷ *Works*, Vol 6, p233; Vol 7, p63, 226, 394; Vol 8, p397.

⁸ Letter to Charles Wesley, 1766, in Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley, A Biography*; Lion Pub., (2003) p168. For further information on all these points see my paper, *The Problem of John Wesley*.

virtually handed over many of his converts for Wesley to organise into groups. I find it hard to believe that people can read Wesley's journals and not see the serious theological and character errors of the man, and I suspect that most people just read eulogies by modern misguided biographers. Why do so many modern believers fail to appreciate the obvious facts about false teachers like Finney and Wesley when the information is not hard to come by?

The 1904 Welsh Revival

This Welsh Revival was a very mixed affair. That many were truly converted is undeniable; that many were turned to God and re-consecrated to his work is clearly true; and yet there were a great many spurious experiences. This mixture is partly reflected in the men who were important leaders. There were godly, experienced preachers who sought to bring balance, order and discipline to meetings and also proclaim the glory and honour of God by Biblical exposition. Such were men like RB Jones whose ministry did not have the accompaniment of disorder and emotionalism. However, much greater attention was, and still is, placed upon Evan Roberts who was a curious and somewhat confused person.

The problem with Roberts, who was no doubt overwhelmingly interested in glorifying God, was that his ministry ended up being emotionalism without balance, discipline or teaching. Sometimes he would simply pray an emotional, subjective prayer ('bend me oh Lord') and then allow wild exuberance to take place without preaching at all. Often those affected by this extravagant 'enthusiasm' were believers who had come to receive power and a spiritual stimulus rather than the unconverted who needed salvation. Such scenes were similar to those found in the recent Toronto Experience.

It is not surprising that Roberts was soon burned out, psychologically broken and had to retire to be looked after by Jessie Penn-Lewis. Without doubt the principality of Wales was dramatically affected and the reports of emotional hysteria spread around the world where it helped to promote the birth of Pentecostalism. But the lasting fruit of this supposedly powerful revival is that, within 80 years, genuine Christianity had virtually shrivelled up in Wales and multitudes of chapels were converted into homes for the rich. As in all such movements there were cases of true conviction, repentance, conversion and the founding of some good local churches, but the exceptions do not prove the value of the movement considered as a whole. Judged by the tests of sound preaching that glorifies God, promotion of personal godliness and establishment of genuine churches with meetings conducted in decency and good order, this particular Welsh Revival (there were several others) leaves much to be desired.

The 1859 Ulster Revival

Reformed folk may well agree that there were difficulties with the 1904 Welsh revival or that Finney was not to be trusted; they may even accept that John Wesley's ministry led to much bad fruit. But they will die in a ditch defending the 1859 Ulster Revival and books keep being printed by publishers drawing attention to the beneficial effects of it. A recent one by Barry Shucksmith, [*Send the Fire Lord*], was recently published by 'Our Inheritance Ministries', which is committed to Reformed standards. I realise that the purpose of this is to deplore the current state of the churches and to stimulate prayer for God to change things; but why not simply expound scripture to do this rather than set before men a popular movement with very mixed fruit?

William Hamilton was a godly pastor who wrote an eyewitness account of the revival in very critical terms [*An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, The Reformed Book Outlet, Hudsonville, Michigan; 1993 reprint]. Modern writers who unquestionably praise this revival should first consult this work and revise their opinions.

This revival was a direct repercussion of the contemporary revivals in the United States, particularly of Charles Finney whose practice of stimulating excitement was reproduced in Ulster [*Inquiry*, p161.]. A detailed evaluation isn't suitable here but the following observations must be made; I will add quotes from William Hamilton.

- The underlying ethos of the revival was Arminian. [*Inquiry*, p175]
- Many Reformed folk who support this revival would denounce the recent Toronto 'Blessing', but there were many superficial similarities between the two. The key difference was that the people crying out and falling down in 1859 were unbelievers under conviction of sin, whereas in 1994-6 it was mostly believers.
- The meetings included typical mystical features (common in modern Charismaticism) that advanced subjective delusion. ['The meetings are protracted often through the whole night, generally to a late hour. They sing, and pray, and exhort, and repeat these exercises, often singing on their knees, and when a case of striking occurs, every energy is redoubled, and the excitement is increased.' *Inquiry*, p162.]
- There was a widespread lack of Biblical preaching; indeed it was common for young people who had been 'stricken' (falling down or crying in agony of conviction of sin) to be the prominent speaker in later meetings, giving a testimony of what happened and urging others to follow suit. Many meetings were conducted in great disorder where scripture reading and exposition were utterly ignored. There was nothing held up to believe in; Christ as saviour and free grace were not effectively preached. ['Of teaching, there is worse than none, while the teachers that could teach the way of salvation, and that would teach, are set aside, nay, covered with odium, as enemies to godliness, while boys or females, ignorant as can be, are put forward, and, sad to tell, the people take pleasure in such things.' *Inquiry*, p169.]
- In the majority of cases of 'conversion' the repentance was not the result of responding to the word of God, but of some form of subjective, emotional stimulation.
- Psychological hypnotic phenomena ('striking') included: falling down, trembling, prolonged prostration, shaking hands, deafness, dumbness, screaming, crying out, other bodily movements and various forms of indecent behaviour. It is the striking that gather the crowds and public attention. [*Inquiry*, p32-33 etc.]
- Some of these aberrations display great similarities with historic cases of false religious 'enthusiasm' and dementia. The majority of those so affected were women. ['A young woman', who had been stricken, 'lay extended at full length, her eyes closed, her hands clasped and elevated, and her body curved in a spasm so violent, that it appeared to rest, archlike, on her heels and back part of her head. In this position she lay, without speech or motion, for several minutes. Suddenly she uttered a terrific scream, and tore handfuls of hair from her uncovered head ...' quoted in *Inquiry*, p33. Note that at this time, just the sight of a woman with an uncovered head, especially in church, was a scandal.]
- These aberrations were attributed to the work of the Spirit by the revival leaders. ['The Spirit smashes them down' ... 'They are smitten by an unseen hand, which they cannot resist'. Quotes in *Inquiry*, p55.] **Sound, godly, discerning ministers ascribed this to satanic delusion.** ['To ascribe this revival, as is usually done, to the Spirit as his work is contrary to Scripture from beginning to end.' *Inquiry*, p207. 'We affirm that the Father's work is not in this Revival.' *Inquiry*, p224. 'Prostration is Satan's work, and throughout Scripture, from beginning to end, such a work is not ascribed to the Spirit's agency.' *Inquiry*, p251. 'We ask, with trembling, seeing it is such a sin to ascribe the work of the Spirit to the evil one, what is it to ascribe the work of the evil one ...to the Spirit?' *Inquiry*, p285-286.]
- Meetings often broke up into in multiple groups of people doing various things, the whole thing descending into a confusing cacophony of noise; some singing, some praying, some crying or screaming, some prostrate, some counselling, some running about, some rejoicing and all creating a sense of emotional excitement. [See descriptions on *Inquiry*, p8, 10-11 etc. 'The warmest friends of the movement have often pronounced it "great confusion".' *Inquiry*, p75. 'Meetings ... have more resemblance to the orgies of the heathen than to assemblies for Christian worship.' *Inquiry*, p176.]
- There were deleterious repercussions to social life. Meetings would continue into the early hours making people unfit for work. Sometimes young people got lost in the dark countryside on their long way home, forcing parents to form search parties. Sometimes parents condemned the large excitable meetings and took their teenage children out. Some impressionable folk continued to fall down and cry out the next day at work making them unfit for labour. The local testimony was often very poor and the

meetings condemned. [‘Should this revival, so rejoiced in, extend and continue, there will be an end in a short time to all social well being as well as religious order. ... All secular and relative duties are overlooked and neglected.’ *Inquiry*, p171, 170.]

- There was a fleshly anger manifested towards believers, especially ministers, who would not join the revival. [‘The fruit of this Revival, largely developed, but altogether ignored ... namely the spirit of intolerant bitterness, nay, enmity, generated towards those who will not join the movement. ... There is “no toleration” for the minister who will not join it.’ *Inquiry*, p288]

In finalising his work on the revival six years afterwards, Hamilton says,

A false, delusive, ignorant fanaticism is put in place of holiness,-an outward profession instead of unfeigned faith and true obedience,-a multiplying of man’s devices and increasing intolerance. The scriptural ministry has, through this Revival, greatly departed from the scriptural means, while unscriptural teachers are multiplied, and unscriptural teaching encouraged and strengthened. [*Inquiry*, P293.]

This brief list of observations shows how close the 1859 Ulster Revival was to the Toronto Experience. Hamilton even informs us that many advocates of the revival came to consider that Satan was behind the manifestations, even ascribing the strikings to demonic possession. The stricken people themselves commonly believed that the evil one was active in their own case. [*Inquiry*, p230-231.]

In contrast to all this we should note these scriptural particulars:

1. There is no Biblical example of people being brought to faith in Christ by extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. The purpose of miracles and healings was to demonstrate the divine authority in the apostles.
2. The means of true conversion is the word of God applied by the ordinary work of the Spirit to the mind. ‘So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rm 10:17). ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”’ (Jn 3:6-7)
3. There is no Biblical evidence that the Spirit causes anything but good. He does not lead men into distress of mind, paroxysms, prostrations, screaming, barking or tearing out their hair. [The case of Nebuchadnezzar’s fall from humanity was divine judgment for pride.] ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ (Gal 5:22-23).
4. Biblical cases of prostration were caused by the human reaction to the glory of God, not the Spirit’s converting work. God did not directly cause the faint. In each case there was an immediate encouraging divine word to stand up because no one can understand spiritual things when fainted. The Spirit works with the word of God to establish the man and raises him up. The man fell on his face, as if in worship, not backward (Ezek 1:27-28; Dan 8:17; John in Rev 1:17). In all cases of demonic induced phenomena, and in most cases of prostration recorded in revival, the person falls backward, as when someone swoons through a malady.
5. Paul is the only significant case of the prostration of an unbeliever. Yet the features are the same: he falls as a reaction to seeing the glory of God and the renewing and command to rise was by God’s word and Spirit (Acts 9:4 ff.).
6. There is no Biblical evidence that the Spirit causes prostration to effect his saving work. He works in the mind and heart to apply God’s word in the Gospel.

That there was a special move of God in many UK areas beginning in 1859 is without doubt; it particularly affected Northern Ireland and Wales, and many genuine converts emerged. But what is obvious is that the results of this varied depending upon the leadership of the churches. As in the 1904 Welsh Revival, where godly men preached the Gospel properly and enforced strong discipline on meetings, removing disorderly elements, then people were soundly converted and believers built up. However, where church leaders allowed or encouraged emotionalism to run unchecked, resulting in

mystical phenomena and disorder, then the results were little short of the paganism evident in modern Charismatic churches. It appears from contemporary records that in Ulster there was a significant loss of control leading to widespread spurious results.

Some, such as William Richey [*Connor and Coleraine, Scenes and sketches of the Ulster Revival, 1870*] tell of faithful Gospel preaching and Bible reading in the north, while the Hibernian Bible Society distributed 20,423 copies of scripture in a few months in 1859. Sales of Bibles rose by 700%, and New Testament sales increased tenfold, in Belfast during 1859. In some places many Bible classes and Sunday schools were opened. All this is to be welcomed and to be expected following the work of gifted evangelists. There are also stories of God's great mercy, such as in sovereignly converting young boys while at a Coleraine school whereupon whole classes ceased studies and spontaneously gathered for earnest prayer under the supervision of their schoolmasters. The conviction of sin spread to the girl's classes and then to local neighbours until the whole community was on its knees. In other places open-air meetings occurred, with hundreds of people being very attentive to calmly spoken Gospel preaching. It is noteworthy that such scenes are not part of rowdy, frenzied, uncontrolled, hysterical meetings with hundreds of onlookers.

What good emerged from this revival is to be welcomed, and that is the fruit following godly preachers of God's word, such as the Scottish evangelist Brownlow North or Spurgeon preaching in the Belfast Botanical Gardens to 40,000 people. It is also interesting that when the revival began in Connor, there were no physical manifestations at all. The hysteria developed as the excitement of American revivalism attracted itself to an existing evangelistic work; soon prostrations were everywhere. What is to be deplored is the frenzied emotionalism and disorder that prevailed, and for which the revival was famous. People, chiefly, did not crowd the meetings to hear a preacher, indeed on many occasions there was no preaching; they came for the emotional disorder, the fallings, the cries and the spectacle. This is deplorable and carries no spiritual fruit.

It is important to understand that this paper does not deny God's prerogative to temporarily empower an evangelist to great success, or to sovereignly bring conviction of sin to large numbers in his wisdom. Indeed this happened under apostolic ministry and it seems to have happened in some parts of the Ulster Revival and others. What is denied is that the whipping up of excitement and hysteria, accompanied by wild disorder in the congregation, is in any way godly. Neither is it acceptable for church leaders, when confronted by such wild scenes, to allow them to continue or endorse them. Godly men in the past, when such manifestations occurred, took the stricken people out for private counselling, and continued to conduct the meeting in decency and order. The problem is that it is the volatile scenes that most people seek in revival.

Conclusion

The problem with the history of revivals is that there is so much excitable literature which only features the positive aspects and ignores the deleterious side effects. On many occasions the negative far outweighs the positive, but popular paperbacks completely ignore this. It is important to read first-hand accounts from trustworthy people and see the actual things that went on. Often such books give a completely different perspective to the revival and serve as a warning to those who would simply accept sensational accounts by inaccurate historians.

This is not to say that all revivals are evil or that all books on them are flawed. That God sovereignly empowered the ministry of some men is without doubt and there are good accounts of many such cases. But sensational historical accounts must be read with great

caution, while wide reading to secure a balanced view is essential. Often godly Calvinists, who were used by God to great and unusual effect, themselves write of the need for caution and record the events with humility; one can consider the autobiographical works or journals of Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent and others in this respect. The sober work of many other highly successful Reformed evangelists was recorded by equally godly biographers; for instance, see the biographies of Robert Murray M'Cheyne by Andrew Bonar, of Asahel Nettleton by JF Thornbury and that of R & J Haldane by Alexander Haldane.

Those who base their Christian walk upon revivalism and excitement will be dumbfounded in the end. Revival is no basis for a foundation; only Christ is. Many revivals spawned new denominations based around certain idiosyncrasies; but most of these vanished within 100 years or less; some lingered on a while longer. Even Methodism, a sectarian development out of Anglicanism prompted by the Wesleyan 'revival', is now facing extinction in the UK after 200 years. Looking to revival as a means of hope for one's nation is utterly wrong; believers must only concentrate upon Christ and follow his leading.

There is no need to set up revival prayer meetings, or become pre-occupied with revival. If God blesses our ministry in an unusual manner, we should respond with humble thanks, but our chief focus is to work hard to glorify Christ in all that we do. If we establish our ministry on the right foundation, we will be prepared for whatever God predestines for us, whether it is great success or hard affliction. What is important is that, as ministers, we are found performing our tasks faithfully and glorifying God. We don't need revival to be successful, but we do need to be faithful to make a success of our lives and please God.

Summary

- Scripture does not give specific teaching on revival. However, it does teach that God revives his people and restores their fortunes, and this is primarily what revival means – to vivify the church. There are occasions in scripture where we can identify such reviving of the church that led to much fruit.
- Historic revivals were very mixed affairs. Some were the result of a sovereign move of God to equip a certain man with the gift of evangelism and providentially order his circumstances so that he was heard by multitudes (e.g. Whitefield, Nettleton). Others were utterly spurious, being based upon deceitful doctrines and the psychological manipulation or effective administration of strong characters (e.g. Finney, John Wesley). Yet others were a curious mix of events, characters, doctrine and Biblicity. A part of these movements was acceptable but other aspects stand condemned (e.g. 1859 Ulster Revival, 1904 Welsh Revival).
- Reading about revivals clearly requires the exercise of discernment and not being restricted to populist books. Evangelical authors who emphasise the positive features of a very mixed, and possibly spurious, revival should be ashamed of themselves.
- Should we devote prayer meetings to revival? I don't believe so; rather we should be praying that God will glorify his Son through our labours and that his will should be done on Earth and his kingdom come.
- What is our prime task? It is to obey God and fulfil all his will, in serving the church and preaching the Gospel to God's glory. Focusing on a hoped for revival will only distract us in these endeavours.

God has given us full instructions on how to conduct our Christian life. He has taught us how to pray, how to think, how to work and what our priorities ought to be. In none of these instructions does he tell us to seek revival or to pray for it. Indeed, he everywhere tells us to be long-suffering in promised affliction and persecution. Problems are certainly ordained for us (Acts 14:22), but revival (or experiencing times of great success and

vivification) may not be. Either way our job is simply to get on with what God has commanded us to do: to do good to all, especially to the household of faith; to preach the Gospel by being witnesses of Christ; to live righteously; and to edify the saints. What more do we need?

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2009
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>