

How Christians come to believe in revival



This article is about revival, so I ought to explain how I am using the word. By 'revival' I mean a sovereign act of God in which He pours out His Holy Spirit with the result that people are awed by His being, His attributes and His works. Christians are awakened from their lethargy, ministers preach Christ with new power, unbelievers are converted, indifference to spiritual things becomes rare, and prayerfulness is widespread.

For many Christians today, and even for many ministers, the subject of revival is of no real interest. They hardly think about it, seldom talk about it, and rarely (if ever) mention it in their prayers. Others, however, think about revival every day, study it, long for it, talk about it – and pray for it in their private devotions, in their prayer meetings and in their church services.

Why does this difference exist? People come to believe in revival because they have walked one of four roads. In fact it is not quite as straightforward as that. What actually happens is that they begin by walking one road but, as time goes by, find that they are now also walking a second one, then a third, and often a fourth.

Experience

Some Christians come to believe in revival by the way of *experience*. This was the case with me. In my early Christian life I often heard the word 'revival', but did not know what people were talking about. I heard an occasional sermon on the subject, but at the time it meant nothing to me. I was even taken to meet an old man in North Wales who had wonderful things to say about what he witnessed in 1904-5, but I simply could not grasp what he was trying to tell me.

Everything changed when I heard Hywel Griffiths preach in Cosheston in the early 1960s. Even today I do not have enough words to explain adequately what so many of us experienced and felt during those wonderful meetings when heaven came to earth, when the invisible was more real than the visible, and when the word came to our hearts with an all-conquering, ravishing power that showed us that Christ is more precious than life itself. Oh, the awe-filled silences that followed the messages! Oh, the sacred moments of loving, worshipful prayer! Oh, the lives that were changed for ever!

From those days until today I have lived with the conviction that there are dimensions of the Spirit's work, and of spiritual experience, of which we know very little. Those who have experienced an outpouring of the Spirit cannot doubt that there is such a thing; nor can they doubt that the Spirit can be outpoured in even greater measure. Those of us who preach the gospel spend a lot of time plodding. With the Lord's help, the work goes slowly forward. We do not despise the day of small things. But we are glad, nonetheless, to know that it is not always like that. There are times when the gospel leaps forward in bounds. There are times when the Spirit does His work with greater intensity and more obvious effect. Those who have seen it cannot deny it. They come to believe in revival by the way of *experience*.

History

Some Christians come to believe in revival by the way of *history*. They read about it, either in a magazine article or in a book, or perhaps come across a DVD or website. Many others have had their interest sparked by visiting a site where the Lord has once worked wonderfully. Grown men weep as they stand under Calvin's pulpit in Geneva and recall what the Lord did from there in the sixteenth-century. Other believers are moved to silence, weeping, singing or shouting as they sit in the chapel on the site of where Daniel Rowland preached in Llangeitho, or visit Moriah Chapel in Loughor, the scene of some of Evan Roberts' early labours.

You cannot argue with history. What happened, happened. Historians offer their own interpretations of exactly why it happened, and how. But the fact is that it happened. Before 1735 Wales was as godless as any place in Europe. One initial outpouring of the Spirit, followed over the next 130 years by other revivals both local and national, changed the nation beyond recognition. The results were several martyrs, tens of thousands of godly lives, generations of fine preachers, new dimensions in music, a uniquely rich hymnology, a national improvement in education, a developed aesthetic sense, the preservation of a language, and a 'Nonconformist conscience' so strong that it totally changed the dynamics of Welsh politics. All over our now largely ungodly land stand thousands of chapels, used, abandoned, or devoted to other purposes. If their stones could speak, what would they say? Every one of them would tell us that it believed in revival, for what happened, happened.

Theology

Some Christians come to believe in revival by the way of *theology*. Some aspect of the Bible's teaching convinces them of the fact of revival, or of its possibility. Different people are convinced in different ways. For example, there are those who study the ups and downs of Old Testament Israel and see how the Lord, in grace, frequently restored the fortunes of His backsliding people, and often did it in a dramatic way. This convinces them that the Lord, who does not change, will show the same grace, and the same reviving power, when and where His church today does not appear to have a future.

Others come to embrace a theology of revival from the New Testament. They see that although the day of Pentecost occupies a unique place in redemptive history, there are other outpourings and fillings of the Spirit recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. There can never be another Pentecost (with a big 'P'), but why can there not be other pentecosts (with a small 'p') both individual and communal?

I can see the force of both these theological arguments. However, speaking strictly for myself, it is not by either of these ways that I came to believe in revival on a theological level. What convinced me was the Scripture's teaching about regeneration. Men and women are 'dead in trespasses and sins' (Ephesians. 2:1). There is no hope for them unless they have a spiritual resurrection. Even the preaching of the word, on its own, cannot bring this about. What they need is for the Holy Spirit to work within their soul, supernaturally to enlighten and to enliven it, and to give to its active powers a completely new direction.

But the God who is able to do this is also well able to spiritually resurrect a multitude at the same time. This He has done many times, as the pages of Scripture make clear. Only unbelief would conclude that He is neither able nor willing to do it today. It is clear to me that if I did not believe in revival I would be insulting God.

Desperation

Some Christians come to believe in revival by the way of *desperation*. Most of these are believers who are anxious to see people come to Christ, but who see how wicked this age is in which we live. How will anyone ever be brought to fear an invisible God, own up to their sins, throw themselves on the crucified and resurrected Christ, and follow Him every day in self-denying, unashamed discipleship?

It is humanly impossible to bring people to Christ. We can preach, persuade and plead as much as we like, but nothing will come of it. The field in which all preachers and Christian workers labour is a cemetery. However accurate our message, and however forcefully or attractively presented, the corpses all around us will remain corpses. So how will the masses ever be won for Christ?

The situation is desperate. It is precisely because they see this so clearly that some Christians come to believe in revival. If God does not do something, nothing will get done. If He does not work on a grand scale in a great awakening, our society will be more devilish from hour to hour, and nothing will stop millions from plunging into hell. Only God, by His Holy Spirit, can raise the dead. Is He not 'gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy'? (Psalm 145:8). Oh, that He would resurrect multitudes! Oh that He would do it in this poor Wales, throughout this United Kingdom and across the world! To admit such a possibility, and to have such a prayer, is truly to believe in revival.

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