

TITLE:

Interest in the possibility of revival is very strong among some Protestant and Evangelical groups. What are the key features of revival that you have identified in the stories of the great revivals, and what are the contemporary lessons?

A. The use of the term 'Revival'

B. The pattern of the Great Awakening

C. The pattern of Finney and his 'new measures'

D. Subsequent developments

E. Critique

F. Conclusions

A. The use of the term 'Revival'

Pinning down the phenomenon of *revival* is beset with difficulties, because the term is of relatively recent origin not necessarily directly applicable to the whole history of Christianity. Furthermore, its meaning has been gradually altered in different branches of the Church. For these reasons some examination of its history is necessary.

B. The pattern of the Great Awakening

The term 'revival' was in use in a non-technical sense in the seventeenth century¹, but seems first to have been defined by revival's first theologian, Jonathan Edwards², who was of course at the centre of the events that led to his understanding of the phenomenon. He drew the word from Scripture where, however, it is clearly not a technical term, referring to the renewing of God's works in general (*Hab.3.2*), and to individual spiritual grace (*Isa.57.15*), as well as to a more widespread returning to God (*Ps.85.6*). Indeed, Edwards himself uses other terms almost interchangeably, such as *awakening* or *reformation*³.

The environment of the Awakening in America was somewhat different from that of the Methodist revival in England, as was the background of their main personalities (Edwards in America and Whitefield and the Wesleys in England). But these differences underline the unity of the phenomenon.

Edwards was in something of a backwater, carrying on a faithful and essentially Puritan ministry from his grandfather in a relatively godly

community, which actually felt threatened by the recent emergence of Arminianism nearby⁴.

The English scene was of much greater deadness in religion following the Restoration. This was appreciated by the Methodists in their Oxford days, who at first sought greater personal piety through self-effort. Whitefield discovered the 'new birth' through reading Puritans such as Scougal, Baxter, Alleine and Matthew Henry⁵. The Wesleys came to their convictions through the Pietism of Peter Böhler and the Moravians, but significantly both brothers were also influenced by the commentaries of Luther, and came to break with the Moravians partly because

...their general scheme is mystical, not scriptural.⁶

To all these leaders, then, the heart of the Awakening was the preaching of the old Reformation doctrine of salvation by faith alone, from which both Church and people had declined. When they had such widespread and spectacular results, all (even the Arminian John Wesley) saw this as a providential blessing from God.

It is true that they both believed in, and preached for, a sudden and highly experiential conversion, and this was characteristic of the whole revival. But this was not new, having been assumed by the Puritans too, and even by Calvin⁷.

It may be argued that this emphasis on the experience of assurance was excessive, and even potentially manipulative once the revival became a mass-movement. In the light of present psychological knowledge it is tempting to

account for many of the excesses bewailed by Edwards by the pressure to conform to certain emotional experiences. But as Edwards rightly pointed out,

True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.⁸

As we will examine later there were particular historical reasons for the strong emotion produced in so many at that time. At present, let us observe that the ‘revivalists’ saw it as *incidental* evidence for the work of God in producing repentance and faith through the faithful preaching of the gospel of salvation from sin by the death of Christ. Greater evidence of conversion, for them, was the evidence of reformed life and manners.

The Awakening provided a model of revival, for subsequent generations, of powerful and emotional evangelical preaching, leading to numbers of sometimes dramatic conversions, at all levels of society, large enough to affect the whole life of nations. But its leaders seem more aware than their successors of the admixture of

...the evil and pernicious tendency of what has been
bad...⁹

Unlike many nowadays, when Edwards read the term ‘revival’ back into Reformation and even Biblical events, he was referring to a providentially great response to gospel preaching, rather than to the particular pattern of his own experiences.

C. The pattern of Finney and his ‘new measures’

In contrast to this, the teaching of Charles Finney a century later sees the (by then) established *phenomenology* of revival as the central matter. His

theology, generally considered as ‘New School Calvinist’, was in practice far more Arminian than Wesley’s ever was.

Religion is the work of man. It is something for man to do.¹⁰

Therefore he saw God’s providence in revival only as a vague influence, subordinate to the human means used to procure it:

A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means - as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.¹¹

To Finney, man’s natural tendency to drift away from religion meant that, in practice,

...as yet the state of the Christian world is such, that to expect to promote religion without excitements is unphilosophical and absurd.¹²

To be fair, the gospel he was aiming to promote by revival was still that of repentance, faith in the blood of Christ, and reformation of life. And perhaps he was close to the Methodists in concentrating on the active proclamation of the Gospel rather than on waiting passively, as many now did, for God to bring revival apart from the work of preaching.

But nevertheless, his approach meant that the *phenomena* of revival now occupied a far more central place than would have been allowed before, as well as placing a far greater emphasis on human effort both in procuring, and responding to, revival.

D. Subsequent developments

Local revivals had continued into the nineteenth century in Britain, largely through Wesleyans¹³. More widespread revival spread across the Atlantic in 1859, following ‘Finney’ style prayer meetings in New York the previous year. Much genuine fruit resulted, although many Evangelicals were hesitant in their support, not least because of the

defective and inadequate theology of the evangelists. They were often men of fervent religion and deep spiritual experience, but apt to deviate into wild doctrines and eccentric conduct.¹⁴

Here again we see a drift towards revival sought as a spiritual phenomenon in its own right, with a dilution of the importance of the *content* of the preaching, which had been the *sine qua non* of the Great Awakening. This tendency culminated in what has proved (until now) to be the last revival in mainland Britain, that in Wales of 1904.

There had probably been a greater tradition of revival in Wales than in England since the time of Howell Harris, as evidenced by the wealth of chapels still to be seen there. The human moving force of the 1904 revival was Evan Roberts, whose spiritual experiences led him to pray for (and secure!) 100,000 converts.

There were detractors from the very beginning of this movement, but that many came to a lasting and real faith in Christ is without doubt. However, even the revival’s most sympathetic critics see weaknesses in it that greatly reduced any long-term benefits. And once more, the decline doctrinal emphasis has much to do with this.

Roberts himself was greatly influenced by the Keswick Movement and the direct experience of the Holy Spirit's power propounded in its teaching. As a result, phenomena attributable to the Spirit *became* the revival, rather than merely supporting evidence:

As a result a ministry of the Word was often absent, depriving the congregations of basic teaching which was crucial not only to a right understanding of the faith, but also to ensure proper growth in it...it led to a rapid decline in the spiritual discernment and vigour of many...¹⁵

Worse still, this neglect was at the very heart of Roberts' understanding of what was happening:

'Why should I teach when the Spirit is teaching?...And why should I control the meetings? The meetings control themselves, or rather the Spirit that is in them controls them.'¹⁶

In the United States the process had gone even further. '*Revivalism*' came to denote no more than a *style* of corporate religion, strong on emotional appeals but weak on any kind of content. America is a vast country, and any generalisations must be over-simplifications. But it is probably true that the worst manifestations of American Christianity - such as the tele-evangelists, prosperity teachers, and many cult-leaders - stand in direct line of descent from this historical development in the understanding of revival.

Elsewhere in the world revival, as such, is even harder to assess. It is not always clear that when overseas 'revivals' are referred to in this country, they are necessarily seen in exactly the same light by those involved. Where

they *are* seen as ‘revivals’, expectations may be coloured by western influences.

For example, the East Africa Revival of this century, which undoubtedly led to great spiritual blessing for many, had its roots in and was greatly influenced by Keswick Holiness Teaching¹⁷, and so was coloured by the expectations of the developed western view of what revival should be.

E. Critique

From the start, as has been stated, Edwards saw the phenomena of his day as a mixture of good and evil, which he attributed to the counterfeiting of ‘true’ religious affections by Satan or human weakness. This led him, sometimes, to take a strong pastoral line with those he felt to be deluded by their experiences.

In modern times, sociological and psychological explanations have been sought not only for the aberrations, but for the whole occurrence, of revivals. This has some foundation. It is easy to see, in Wesley’s or Whitefield’s journals¹⁸, the extreme anti-emotionalism of eighteenth century religion. The reaction against the Puritans had ensured that ‘*enthusiasm*’ was almost the unforgivable sin.

The force of a gospel-message which spoke deeply to people’s emotions must have been enormously cathartic both to those who genuinely believed, and to many who were swept along by the general atmosphere. In general the extent of the emotional phenomena - the physical prostrations and groanings - was far greater than those at the time of the Reformation or of the

Puritans, and perhaps the ‘emotional deprivation’ of the population helps explain this difference.

Nevertheless gospel preaching had certainly produced great fruit in former days. For example Richard Baxter’s Kidderminster church had a regular attendance of over a thousand, and many other preachers produced a steady stream of true conversions.

The greater numerical results of the Awakening may have been purely the results of God’s blessing, or because of the effectiveness of the leaders (both in preaching and in organising the converts), or for sociological reasons. But they were no different in kind from those previously produced by biblical preaching.

The first generation recognised this. They looked to preach faithfully and win souls, and were astonished at both the numbers convicted and by the outward signs manifested¹⁹.

The later tendency to cast all great works of God into the mould of the Great Awakening, under the technical umbrella of ‘*revival*’, has inherent dangers, and can also become a distraction from what God is actually doing in a different age.

The first danger, as we have seen, is to make revival a man-centred technique, rather than a God-initiated blessing. Finney’s rebuttal of those who see revival as a miraculous intervention from God may serve as an antidote to quietism, but undoubtedly tends to encourage a man-centred gospel. The personality of the preacher tends to be exalted, salvation tends to become by man’s choice rather than God’s grace, and God himself tends to become a

shadowy figure who responds to man's initiative in following a set of spiritual 'rules'.

The second danger is the exaltation of (and the quest for) phenomena rather than making disciples.

The natural man is ever tempted to see God in the unusual and the catastrophic; and to miss His influence in the usual and the commonplace.²⁰

As we saw in the Welsh 1904 Revival this tendency became greater once the idea grew that such phenomena were the direct manifestation of the Holy Spirit rather than the natural response of a person under God's influence. It then became blasphemous to question them.

This has now reached a natural conclusion in phenomena like the *Toronto Blessing*, where the effects of revival have become separated (in many cases) not only from preaching, but even from the concept of conversion. The 'blessing' has mainly affected Christians, and those who have previously been 'baptized in the Spirit' at that.

It is by such a separation of 'revival' from repentance, faith, and consequent assurance that a desire for it can be compatible with modern understandings of conversion. Evangelicals nowadays have largely jettisoned the necessity for, and even the desirability of, dramatic conversion. So, for example, the Alpha Course seeks conversion through gradual assimilation into the people of God, the only 'drama' being the post-conversion experience of filling with the Spirit. This contradiction, probably, would have seemed very strange to Edwards, but once revival becomes an experience in itself rather than a mark of the new birth, it is not irrational.

Lastly, concentration on revival after the 18th century pattern can blind us to what God is doing in other ways. It is interesting that the 1859 events are seen as revival, whereas the evangelistic campaigns of Dwight Moody or Billy Graham, the response to Alpha courses, or even the steady growth of some evangelical churches are not. The numbers affected cannot be far different, with many fewer casualties from excesses and perversions. This distinction seems somewhat artificial.

F. Conclusions

The term 'revival' originally implied a widespread, deep response to the faithful preaching of the gospel, regardless of the means God employs. Its common usage now is of a spectacular supernatural event, perhaps linked to certain personalities but to no particular message. Somewhere along the way the centrality of the cross, repentance and Scriptural faith seem to have been mislaid. As A W Tozer said in a slightly different context,

A widespread revival of the kind of Christianity we know today might prove to be a moral tragedy from which we would not recover in a hundred years.²¹

If, on the other hand, we learn from the example of past revivals the importance of a biblical and thoroughly experiential faith, our individual and corporate life will be a far more effective witness to a generation equally without God. Then who knows what kind of vehicle God will use to advance his Kingdom?

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- ¹ For example, Cambridge University Library lists works by Henry Hurst (1678), on the application of the sacrament for ‘...the revival of grace’, and Thomas Beverly (1695), after the death of the queen, on the need for prayer for ‘...the revival of the work of God.’
- ² Edwards, 1965, p.149; Edwards, 1851, pp.ii-iii, 126.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 1851, p.ii.
- ⁴ *Op. cit.*, 1965, p.11.
- ⁵ J C Ryle in Whitefield, 1958, p.15.
- ⁶ John Wesley, in Idle, 1986, p.75.
- ⁷ ‘Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed in our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.’ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.7.
- ⁸ *Op. cit.*, 1851, p.7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.ii.
- ¹⁰ Finney, 1835, *Revivals of Religion, Lecture I*.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Elliott-Binns, 1936, p.215.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.214f.
- ¹⁵ Evans, 1969, p.163f.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.168.
- ¹⁷ Butler, 1976, p.40.
- ¹⁸ Idle, *op. cit.*, p.64.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.62.
- ²⁰ Elliott-Binns, *op. cit.*, p.214.
- ²¹ Tozer, 1983, p.18.

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