



REMEMBERING 1904-05

Discernment in Times of Revival

Rev. Dafydd Job

The subject of revival can evoke extreme reactions among people. There will be some who are enthusiastic, and will talk all day about it, to the exclusion of all other subjects; whilst others will be thinking - Not again!! Can't we turn our minds to more relevant subjects, more practical issues? And in its extreme form there will be those who would say that it is worse than a distraction; it is a danger. You find the two extremes - those for and those against. Now we're here this evening considering the whole subject of revival, and we want to avoid either of those extremes - because on the one hand there are other issues which need to be addressed among us. Whilst we long for revival, we should long more for the second coming of our Lord. Whilst we pray for revival, we also need to pray for many other things. But on the other hand revival has been a constant factor in the growth of the church throughout the ages. We are in desperate need of a work of God in our midst in a way which we haven't seen for a long time - both in our lives as individual Christians, and in the life of the church.

So if we're thinking about this subject we need to do this in a relevant way. If we take a trip down memory lane, we need to remember to come back up the lane or we'll be living in the past - and that is not how the church should ever live.

So I want to do something that may be a little bit uncomfortable this evening. I want us to look at some of the problems of revival. This is because revival is not always an unmixed blessing for the church.

The Need for Discernment.

As we consider the past and, God willing, if we were to experience revival in our time, it is important to use discernment. I have here a glass of water. It looks like pure water. However I'm sure that if we analysed it we would find that it's far from being pure H₂O. Whether it's come from the tap, or from the shop in a bottle, there is always a mixture with quite a few impurities.

This is also true of revival. When God does an extraordinary work, we normally see, very quickly, the hand of man. There is a mixture of that which comes from God and that which reflects sinful humanity. In the book of Acts there was that which helped and that which hindered. For example, the story of Ananias and Sapphira needed the discernment of Peter; or the distribution of food amongst the needy, called for much wisdom on the part of the apostles. And these things cause confusion.

We are longing for God to work, but we want any work which happens to be genuine, pure, or at least as free from impurities as possible. So when we hear about something happening in another part of the world there is something in us which says - "Wonderful" and we want it to be true. But there is also something in us which says "Wait a minute, is it really a work of God?" There have been true revivals, and false revivals. There have been revivals which have left their mark in a positive way on the church, and there have been those movements which have left a mixed blessing. We don't want to be deceived.

And this tendency to fear is not made easier by what we see on the media. A recent documentary on Welsh Television went to a church in another part of the world which says it has been in revival for a number of years. What was seen was total confusion, with the man leading the meeting seemingly making a fool of himself. The reaction of many people to this programme was - if that is revival we don't want it here.

Now we don't want to be found judging a work of God, but we do need to know what is genuine, and what is not. So how do we discern when God actually is at work? We do not want to be stretching out our hand against the Lord's anointed. Yet we know that men are men - they have feet of clay, and not everything a servant of God does, even a servant under a great measure of blessing, is right.

One of the prime examples is that of Evan Roberts in one of the meetings telling the people that there was one present who was among the reprobate, and that there was no point in praying for him - he was already damned. That surely is not correct. The eternal counsel of God is for God alone to determine.

So we need to ask sometimes, did they do things which were unwise, or could they have done things in a better way. We must not be gullible. We can learn not only from the blessings of the past, but also from the mistakes of the past, so that we may be better prepared to make the most of the blessing which God in His mercy might bestow upon His church. Whilst we look at what happened one hundred years ago with reverence and a true sense that God was at work, we need also to be discerning, looking at the events with a critical eye - critical not of what God was doing, but of man's shortcomings. We are commanded in Scripture to *try the spirits whether they are of God* [1 John 4:1]. *We are not to be "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive"* [Ephesians 4:14].

Let us note that we do need to be understanding as we look at these things. For example, Evan Roberts was 26 years old when he was thrust into prominence, not only by what was happening, but also by the "Western Mail" reports. He had no theological training, and had little to equip him emotionally for the great events of the revival. When I was 26, how foolish was I? And undoubtedly Evan Roberts was used by God to the blessing of many.

So we need discernment in the things of God.

The Place of Emotion

There are some people who would say that revival is nothing but emotion. I was talking two weeks ago to someone who had asked her grandmother what she thought of the revival - her answer was - "That's not our sort of religion". Emotionalism is dangerous - it makes people do things they wouldn't normally do - it stops us being sensible. It leads to extremism. Another eyewitness of Evan Roberts' visit to Bethesda said that as soon as it was apparent that he was there, the young women started to throw their hats into the air, and the young men took off their jackets to throw them in the air. Is this not pure hysteria?

Consider this portion of a letter written in January 1905 by a young woman, Cadi, from Caernarfon in response to a letter she received from one of her friends in a village in rural North Wales:

"I was very glad to hear about the Diwygiad at your place. I hope very much that you will get your wish (will be gratified) and that you will feel 'pethau mawrion' (*great things*). I am feeling exactly as you do. And I know that heaps of other people are the same.

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I felt terribly in one or two meetings at home. *But the feelings don't last.* I want *great things* like yourself and am so disappointed that they don't come . . .”

Note the need to feel great things - does not this sound as though she is ripe for emotional manipulation? Later on in the same letter she says:

“The Diwygiad is in town, too. Some young fellows are doing splendid work. We had a *United Prayer Meeting* last night at Siloh. It was crammed and an overflow meeting had to be held in Moriah. We had a fairly good meeting at Siloh - one convert remained. But in Siloh bach, *the mission chapel, they had a feast.* Nineteen were converted last night alone. Wasn't it grand? They were there until half past 11, *rejoicing with all their might.*”

[Letter from Cadi to Kate Jones Shaw: 11 January 1905.]

Now what is this rejoicing with all their might, this longing to feel great things? Is it pure emotionalism? We know that the age was one full of sentimentality. When you think of some of the religious songs that were around - about some poor orphan girl left out in the cold by the grave of her mother - it's easy to think, here were people who could easily be manipulated emotionally. Was the revival just an outburst of emotion - a psychological release in difficult times?

And yet, the Bible tells us that there is such a thing as “*Joy unspeakable and full of glory*” [1 Peter 1:8]. The Bible tells us that people sometimes delve into the depths of despair, and experience all sorts of feelings. We are complex creatures, with minds and bodies. We have adrenalin coursing through our veins at times.

Our Lord himself, we are told, wept, laughed, rejoiced and grieved. We are people of emotion.

We need therefore to feel. We know of the danger of Sandemanianism - the danger of making faith nothing more than a cold mental assent to truth. But if in a time of blessing I am faced on the one hand with my own sinfulness in the face of God's justice, do I not feel the depravity of my heart and grieve for it? Or on the other if I see a dying Lord who came to give His life as a ransom for me, out of pure divine love, then surely I will feel something, as the divine forgiveness is applied to my heart. And therefore it is not strange that great emotions were experienced during the revival. In a letter written from Cardiff on 6th January 1905, the Rev Evan Rees, Minister at Seion, (later Pembroke Terrace), says:

“It is glorious here, and thanks be to God for similar news in the North. This town has been waiting a long time, and now great drops of the divine shower are falling upon us, and we believe surely that the great showers will soon be here. The most incredible things happen here daily - things most like miracles since the days of the apostles. This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. We have read many times of the years of the Lord's right hand, and here we are in their midst. Glory! The fire is spreading rapidly over the borders, and the nations are singing and rejoicing in its warmth.”

[Letter from Rev. E. Rees to Rev. J. T. Job: 6 January 1905.]

Strong emotions therefore do not in and of themselves deny the reality of a work of God. But, of course, neither do they guarantee that God is at work. Jonathan Edwards put it like this:

“A work is not to be judged of by any effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength..... The reason is, because Scripture nowhere gives us any such rule. We cannot conclude that persons are under the influence of the true Spirit, because we see such effects on their bodies, because this is not given as a mark of the true Spirit; nor are we to conclude, from any such outward appearances, that persons are not under the influence of the Spirit of God.”

[Jonathan Edwards; *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol.2, p.261. Banner of Truth.]

In other words, whilst strong emotions and their manifestations are not unusual in a time of revival, this is not how we discern whether God is at work. And the trouble is so many hone in on the unusual, on the spectacular, on the manifestations.

If sentimentalism was a danger in 1904, entertainment is a danger in ours. And we can be caught - if we are credulous, when something spectacular happens we say it's of God. If we err on the side of the Sandemanians, we say, if it's spectacular, it cannot be of God, it's just entertainment. And if we're cynics, we'll say it's all emotionalism anyway.

Now I believe that Cadi was right to want to **feel great things**. Because we are creatures who feel - when my children were born I felt; I felt joy, amazement, wonder, gratitude, terror. It shows we are alive. And in the things of God we should feel. And that is what happened to many in the revival 100 years ago. In a report about what was happening in Port-Dinorwic, a few miles from Bangor, the pastor says:

“Up to last Thursday the numbers of converts were 72. But the greatest work maybe has been upon those of us who were members in name, and many of us not members in truth, and none of us as we should be.”
[W. R. Owen in *Y Diwygiad ar Diwygyr*, p.245.]

For them it was the difference between the known theory, and the felt reality. Evan Roberts put his finger on something when he told people early on in the revival that they needed to feel conviction of sin, and feel the forgiveness of the cross. We need to feel, but it must not just be feeling. If I may parody that title of a book, it has to be ‘more than emotion’. And here the responsibilities of the leaders when a work of God commences is immense.

For example, in leading the meetings, Evan Roberts and others insisted that the Spirit must be Lord, and He must guide. Under this creed, Evan Roberts would sometimes (although maybe not as often as some suggest) remain silent - the Spirit had not moved him to speak. He did not prepare sermons, but spoke as the Spirit moved his heart. Whilst this sounds commendable, and at times under God's grace is very effective, (especially when men are so busy in the heat of revival that they do not have time to prepare their messages carefully) yet this method is open to danger. How can we be sure that it is the Spirit of God who is moving us? Over the years God has used means, and there has always been a prominent place to preaching of the word, following deep meditation on behalf of the preacher. Many of the other men used preaching to great effect: R. B. Jones at Rhosllannerchrugog; J.H. Williams of Llangefni who was one of the lesser known men, yet used much in Anglesey; the Rev. J. T. Job in his diary notes one meeting where someone swooned whilst he was preaching, and calls it a disturbance, which he did not appreciate; Joseph Jenkins of Ceinewydd, where the revival of 04/05 is generally accepted to have started, was a man who was first and foremost a preacher,

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sometimes compared to a volcano. His words about the revival on him were that “he had never before had such a fever of a passion for preaching”

We need to pray that if God were to bless, that He would give us leaders who would on the one hand be willing for the Spirit to be Lord, but on the other be able to guide the work safely.

Caring for the Converted

And what about dealing with the converted? Let me take you to a different revival. Here I am indebted to Professor David Bebbington, the professor of History at the University of Stirling. He has made a study of the revival in 1859 in Ferryden, a village near the mouth of the River South Esk facing the port of Montrose on the north bank, in Scotland. This was a small fishing community. In 1855 there were sixty-eight boats and 186 fishermen in a village of about 1200 souls, with many of the other men in related work and nearly all the women regularly occupied in baiting lines [P. F. Anson, *Fishing boats and Fisher Folk on the East Coast of Scotland* (London, 1930), p.269]. Dr. Bebbington says “The revival there in 1859 was remarkable in several ways. It was the first Scottish awakening to display the physical manifestations that during recent months had marked a revival in northern Ireland. It therefore attracted a huge influx of visitors, eager to see within Britain what had long been publicised in Ireland. The religious stirring made a profound impact on the community, leading, according to a careful estimate, to some two hundred professions of conversion. It was thought to be as deep-seated as the more celebrated awakening at Kilsyth twenty years before.” [D. W. Bebbington; *Revival and the Clash of Cultures: Ferryden, Forfarshire, in 1859*. Lecture given at Bangor University.]

Now the people there were very superstitious. For example if someone whistled on one of the boats out on the sea, then the whole fleet would have to return to port. Or another manifestation of their superstitions was that a fisherman would consider it an evil omen, and not go out to sea, if on the way to the boat he saw either a pig or a minister! However in 1859 a work of God broke out there. People were overcome with crying out, with shaking, with falling down at times. There were radicals who encouraged this emphasis on strong experiences and emotions. This therefore was the occasion of many criticising the revival there. But a local minister, the Rev. William Nixon, recorded what was happening, and the testimony of a number of the converts. And he certainly was not a gullible man.

In decrying the exaggerated appeal to experience of the radicals, Nixon urged that sinners should be taught not just to love and serve Christ for the comfort that He brought them, but also for ‘His own sake’. Underlying this remark was a substantive point of doctrine that is laid bare in a memorable exchange that Nixon records between himself and a girl who worked as a fish-curer in Montrose but was hurrying home to Ferryden ready for the evening revival meeting:

Q. Well, girl, where are you going?

A. To the meeting . . .

Q. And what think you of this work that is going on? Have you, think you, got any good from it?

A. I have found Christ, sir . . .

Q. Perhaps you love Jesus merely for your own sake, because of what you think He will do for you, and not because you see in His character that which makes you also love Him for His own excellences and attractions. Suppose now that He would shut you out of heaven, would you still see anything in Him to make you love Him?

A. He'll no do that. [D. W. Bebbington; pp.58 & 47-8.]

Our natural sympathies for the girl must not obscure the significance of Nixon's sentiments here. He was offering a distant echo of the teaching of the American theologian Samuel Hopkins, who in *An Inquiry into the Nature of True Holiness* (1773) had contended that self-interest, even a desire for personal salvation, must not be the basis of motivation in the regenerate. He went so far as to suggest that penitent sinners should be willing to be damned in order to show that they were truly converted [P. D. Jauhainen, ‘Samuel Hopkins’, in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Leicester, 2003, p.310]. The fish-curer was being subjected to Hopkins's test of spiritual authenticity, and happily she passed.”

Now this surely teaches us something. We live in an age of tolerance and we are told that we must not be negative. But William Nixon did not fear to challenge those who made a profession of faith. Part of the genius of methodism was the organising of societies to help and nurture the converts, and those converts were not accepted into membership lightly.

Now in 1904/05 there were those who were undoubtedly converted and blessed, and that blessing remained with them. But we also hear of others who were only affected temporarily. We need to be careful when we try to assess the numbers. The number of backsliders can be overemphasised. (Church membership did slip after the revival, as with the 1859 revival, but the general trend did not take a downward turn, according to Dr. Tudur Jones, until the 1930s, and that was despite a war which took away many, and a deep recession.) We also know from our Lord in the parable of the sower that not all who have a promising beginning will bring forth fruit eventually. But is there a question at least that needs to be asked regarding assessing true faith? Dr. Gibbard in his earlier address noted that the 100 converts linked to Tabernacle were cared for, and at Tredegarville Baptist they assessed the applicants for membership, testing the candidates. But there is at least some doubt as to how much assessment and discernment was used generally to help those affected by the revival. This was partly because many had already been received into membership lightly before the revival, and it was not realised that they needed to be treated as babes in Christ.

Could another possible reason for a weakness in the assessment and care of the converts be the theological climate? Ten years previously in his final lecture at Trevecca Theological College, the Rev. J. T. Job was warned not to let his sermons to the people carry the “doubt of Modern Criticism”. But certainly the new teaching had intimidated many, and brought a division between Theology and the Bible. The emphasis changed, and rather than the Bible having final authority in all things, reason and feeling were brought in to be the benchmark for deciding what was true. When J. T. Job during the revival said “It is the old Gospel which saves people”, it was in the face of other gospels becoming more prominent in the churches. Not all church leaders held unwaveringly to the doctrines of the new birth, the necessity of the atonement, the need for repentance, and the lost-ness of the soul without Christ. So the children of the revival were not welcomed in all of the churches - this gave rise of course to the Gospel Halls and Pentecostal causes. The climate which caused Evangelicals to leave the Theological debate to the Liberals in the colleges and universities - with the eventual decline of the SCM and the need for the IVF - in church life took the edge off responsible church discipline. The revival, with its emphasis on experience, gave rise to a theology based on experience rather than Scripture. This means that some who were heavily involved in the revival later became out and out liberals.

And it could be said that the theology of some of the leaders of the revival was not grounded well enough in Scripture. Finney's work had come into Wales and had an

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effect, placing the onus on man to fulfill the conditions needed for revival. Evan Roberts was heavily influenced by the Keswick teaching which Jessie Penn Lewis had been so influential in bringing into Wales. R. B. Jones, E. Keri Evans, and others were not immune to this, with its emphasis on obedience as the path to blessing. We don't deny the need for obedience to God's word, but true blessing invariably comes as a gracious act of God. We have someone like R. B. Jones insisting that one of the greatest fruits of the revival was bringing premillennialism to the fore in church thinking. Those who were most closely tied to the old Theology which had dominated church life in Wales for centuries, did not take seriously the challenge from liberalism on the one hand, and man-centred Arminianism on the other. This led to weakness both in the nurture of the children of the revival, and the path of the traditional church bodies.

Encouraging Conclusions

Now as I said at the beginning, I wanted to ask some of the awkward questions this evening. And my reason for doing this is not to belittle the enormous blessings which undoubtedly came through what happened. There was rejoicing in heaven because of the thousands who were brought into the fold during this time. Great evangelistic activity came into being. Blessings extended into other parts of the world from Wales. God moved among His people.

But when God does move, it brings challenges. We cannot control revival, but when God gives a blessing, we are responsible for how we deal with it. It is easy to rejoice in the excitement, and enjoy the days of favour. But we also need to be responsible. Our leaders must be open to the moving of the Spirit, but also be theologically aware, well grounded in Scripture. In our day feelings are paramount for the younger generation - if it feels right it must be right. So we need to

ensure that our young people are well grounded in the Scriptures, and taught to be theologically astute. They need to be as those in Berea, who "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" [Acts 17:4]. Because it could be that from among these God will raise up those who would be used as a means of reviving the church. They also need to hear not only of what God did a hundred years ago, but of the other revivals in Wales. We do not presume to dictate to God what He should do, but conditions today are much more similar to those which gave rise to the 18th century revivals than the 04/05 blessing.

But before I close, I would like to stress the enormous benefits of what happened. The church was blessed with a time of grace in our country. Throughout the principality many thousands of people were brought into a living relationship with God. Many church members, whose religion had been formal, were brought into a vital living faith. There were benefits for society in general as drunkenness, violence, and crime were for a while at least diminished. Women who sold their bodies on the street were brought back into society. Soup kitchens were opened for the poor in some areas. There was a healing of society in places such as Bethesda in North Wales. A generation of young men, who would before long face death in the trenches of the First World War, was given a Saviour. And a song of love for Christ was placed in the hearts of many - a song which echoed throughout their lives here on earth, and continues in heaven before the throne of God.

May God again visit us with such a blessing.

[Transcribed from an address at Heath Church on 25 October 2004.]