



# REVIVAL IN THE DRÔME

## Revival in the Drôme Valley, France

I would like to start by saying that it is not a very easy subject for me, because speaking to Welsh people about revival is a bit like bringing coals to Newcastle, or at least to South Wales. And if you don't know anything about the Drôme Valley, then I think you certainly know probably quite a lot more than I do about revival - at least some of you will do. But this revival took place in France, and it lasted, in various manifestations, over a period of ten or twelve years. It is a very interesting story of enterprise and vision for the Lord's Kingdom; it is a story of great courage, it is a story of suffering and it is also a tragic story, for the reasons I will explain towards the end of the lecture. But it is most of all a very human story - it is a story about four young men who were pastors who found themselves in their first ministries without a message! And the revival touched them first of all, before it spread to others.

Now, if anyone's interested in the subject, I can give you several book titles, but one of the actors in this revival was Jean Cadier, and he became later Professor of Church History at the Faculty of Theology of Montpellier, and one of the leading French Calvin scholars. He wrote a little book, published after his death, chronicling the events of this revival in the Drôme Valley, entitled in French *Le Matin Vient* ('The Morning is Coming'). This book is one of the major sources of information and anecdotes about this revival, although there are several other writings on the subject. I also had a look at the book by Noel Gibbard *The Wings of a Dove* because I thought maybe you'd be interested to know whether the Welsh revivals of 1905 and 1906 had anything to do with this revival in the 1920s in France. And as far as I can make out, the answer is 'practically nothing'. I may be wrong on this but I cannot find any direct links between the Welsh revival and this revival in the Drôme, apart from one interesting fact: that is, that

Reuben Sayance, the French Baptist pastor from Paris, who visited South Wales in 1905 and 1906 and assisted at meetings, returned to France to spread news about what was happening in South Wales at that time. And also, he was accompanied on one of his trips, I think, by Henri Bois, who was a Professor at Montpellier, who wrote a book on the Welsh revival in French. Now Bois was a liberal, and taught liberal theology, but he was interested in a revival as a sociological phenomenon, and he wrote his book from that perspective. But he was Cadier's professor at Montpellier. So Cadier knew about the Welsh revivals. When Cadier was a boy in Vardres, in the south-west of France, in the Tarn area, between Toulouse and Bordeaux, his father was a pastor, and Reuben Sayance visited his church and spoke about the Welsh revival at the Reformed church in the town. Cadier was a boy of about nine at this time, and at the end, the preacher made an appeal: "Anyone who wants to pray every day for revival is invited to come and get a card with a Bible verse on it". And Cadier, went out and got one of these cards - little knowing that later he was going to become one of the main actors, if not the leading theological actor, in the revival in the Drôme. And that's the only

link, more or less, that I found between South Wales and what happened in the south of France in the 1920s.

### The Revival in the Drôme

Where is the Drôme? If you imagine the Mediterranean coast, in the extreme south of France you have the city of Marseille, 800,000 people today. And going up the centre of France is a very large river called the Rhone. Now if you start in the south, at the Rhône delta, and head north, first of all you reach Arles, and then Avignon (about 100 kilometres from Marseille), and just to the left is the town of Nîmes. Nîmes, Arles and Avignon were all Roman towns, with very fine Roman remains. But Nîmes is the capital of French Protestantism traditionally. Behind Nîmes you have the Cévennes Mountains, which is one of the Protestant areas of France, and above the Cévennes is the Ardèche. These were traditional Protestant strongholds. This is where the Camisards had meetings in what they called 'the desert', hidden away from

the King's troops. This is also where there were many pastors who were arrested and sent to the galleys. Now if you keep on going up the Rhône valley a little further, you come to a town called Montélimar, where they make nougat. And on the other side of the Rhône Valley, that is the east side, (the Cévennes and the Ardèche are on the west), is the region called the Drôme. And this also is a traditional Protestant area. There are only really three other areas where there are concentrations of Protestants in France: one is in the south-west, in the Tarn, in the valleys there between Toulouse and Bordeaux, and the other has been traditionally in the Poitou area, around Poitiers, and finally

in the north-east, Alsace and Lorraine have been more traditionally Protestant areas because of their attachment to Germany in the past.

It was in this area, in the south of France, on the east of the Rhone, between Marseilles and Lyon, that these revivals took place in the 1920s and the 1930s. You have to imagine at this time a rural population, depending on agriculture and cultivation for their livelihood, concentrated in villages where many members of the male population didn't come back from the First World War; an area which had already started to be depopulated as people left to go to cities like Lyon and Marseille, and was furthermore depopulated by the War; people living in conditions of social and economic hardship. Because many of the pastors who had served the Protestant churches in this area had been military chaplains and had not come back from the War either, in the 1920s we find a new generation of pastors who are young men in their twenties, who have just finished theological studies and come to enter the ministry for the first time. And this is the setting for the revival in the Drôme.



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Cadier was just on the point, in 1922, of finishing his theological studies, and in his memoir, he has a kind of prayer in which he asks the Lord to forgive him for his rationalism, because he was a liberal. His theological studies had left him with a form of piety but without any biblical foundation. He wrote a thesis on Jesus Christ's titles in the Gospel, which was totally critical, and he asked the Lord to forgive him the bad work he did on the gospels when he was a theological student. And he arrived there in November 1922. He came first of all as a theological student to preach in the church. He was asked back at Christmas to preach in the same church. He describes how he walked 10 kilometres through the snow from the railway station to get to the church, which was well away from any large town. And he arrived there and found the church full. And the mayor of the village said, "You're the pastor we need, we want you to come back when you've finished your studies in June." So early in 1923, Cadier arrived in this small village church with his wife and a 9-month old daughter, on a horse and cart, and there he began his ministry.

## The Beginning of the Revival

But something had already happened, because in an adjoining village, an older experienced man of 45 from the Bible Society in Geneva called Victor Bordigoni, had been sent into one of the neighbouring churches as interim pastor. And in the summer preceding Cadier's arrival in the Drôme, Victor Bordigoni had begun preaching in a place called La Motte Chalen. He went there to preach at the time of the lavender harvest in August 1922, and something remarkable happened in that service. He preached a normal sermon and at the end of the sermon a woman whose name was Alice Pensin got up and she said: "You all know me. Up till now I have only lived for my sheep and my fields, but now I want to give my life to the Lord. I want to serve Him and Him only." And other people in the church were profoundly marked by this very original confession of faith. People began to get down on their knees and to pray God for forgiveness. And in the two or three churches for which Bordigoni had responsibility, there were revivals of a similar nature breaking out.

So in November 1922 28 pastors from the locality met in a town called Crest for three days. And everyone knew the revivals had begun to break out in the areas where Bordigoni, who was not a pastor, was ministering. And at the end of the three days, the pastors who were from both churches, the Reformed Church and the Reformed Evangelical Church, were going to take the Lord's Supper together. And at this point Bordigoni got up and he said the following thing to the assembled pastors, "My brothers, my friends, for three days I have been with you and I hear you talking about God and about your ministry, but I wonder, listening to you, if you know who God is, and if you know how to minister for Him." Then he stopped and he got down on his knees. And he went on, "God is holy and His demands are holy. Do you believe that He can be happy with us the way we are, He who has called us to His service? God hasn't changed in His love for us, nor in His power to save. It is we who have changed, we who hesitate to confess His name. But if we believe, we will see the promises of God fulfilled for us." This speech on the part of Bordigoni produced among the pastors a stocktaking of their situation, and many of the pastors present got down on their knees, confessed their sins before the Lord, and asked for forgiveness and for renewal in their ministry.

Now there were two particular men there on that day: one of them had been a student at Montpellier, a little older than Cadier. His name was Henri Eberhart, and he was at a place called Dieu-Le-Fit, where he was a pastor. The other man, Edouard Champandal, was Swiss, from Geneva. Eberhart went home, it was a Saturday night, he ripped up the sermon which he'd prepared for the following day, put it in the bin, got down on his knees before the Lord and asked God to show Him how to serve Him in a true way. The following day in his pulpit in the Reformed Evangelical Church, Eberhart got up and he said "Revival has begun, and I am the first one to be converted". And many of his congregation afterwards knew an experience of conversion and spiritual renewal. So, in the summer of 1923, when Cadier arrived, a revival was already beginning in this area of France. There is Bordigoni, Champandal, Eberhart and finally Cadier, young men between 25 and 27, apart from Bordigoni, 45 years old, who was their leader. They got together and felt the need to work together for the revival and the renewal of their church.

Cadier began to realise that his theology was no use for him as a pastor, and in contact with these other men, he knew a real experience of conversion. And in December 1923 the first mission was led by these four men together, who took upon themselves the name of Brigade. They were called 'The Brigade of the Drôme', or 'The Brigadiers of the Drôme'. Cadier said in his book, "Nobody really knows what this name means." (Brigade is the word you use for a company of policemen in French, the gendarmerie, but it doesn't really come from that. Is it like a company of soldiers?) These Brigadiers of the Drôme organised missions in their own parishes, then missions in other parishes, and in 1923 they organised their first convention. Now one of Cadier's former classmates at Montpellier, a young and very brilliant man called Pierre Carron, came to Dieu-Le-Fit, Eberhart's church, to the first convention. Cadier says, "While I was speaking I could hear him laughing from the back". He was laughing at his former classmates who were bearing witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. But when in the afternoon some young people got up and gave their testimony, Pierre Carron was touched to the heart, was converted and he came up to Cadier and said "This is new, I am joining you in this mission". And later he came to one of the churches just nearby.

## The Growth of the Revival

From 1923 to 1925 a series of missions took place in local churches throughout the Drôme. Many people turned to the Lord and were converted. Many people who had been living without faith and without hope were truly brought into the Kingdom of God. What was amazing about the work of the Brigadiers of the Drôme, was that they worked together. They prepared their missions through several days of prayer together. Then they would collaborate during the meetings: each would speak for fifteen minutes on a theme that they had chosen together and over which they'd prayed. Then, at the end of the meeting, they would invite anyone who had an interest in Jesus Christ to come and receive a decision card. And Cadier said, "Tens of thousands of these decision cards were distributed in the Drôme during this time". People would keep half of the card for themselves, with an engagement of faith in Jesus Christ, and return the other half of the card to the pastor of the local church. And so the Brigadiers worked together in different churches and always used the same methods.

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They also did something which was very shocking at the time. They organised meetings in local casinos and local cinemas, something which was considered to be scandalous at the time. And people came to the meetings. Sometimes there was opposition. One meeting near Montélimar, a group of communist workers from Marseille disrupted the meeting and stopped the meeting going on. Later in Nîmes, when they were invited to organise a mission, it was the local pastors who tried to boycott the meetings and who later sent letters of protest to the four Brigadiers about their activities 'on their patch'. This was in 1925 and there was a group formed in the Nîmes area called the 'La Brigadette' ('the small brigade'). This was formed by three other students who had been at Montpellier, and they, in the Cévennes and the Ardèche area, did the same work together as Cadier and Bordigoni had been doing in the Drôme. And this revival grew gradually and one of the signs of the revival was not only increased church attendance, but also the opening of new churches, and the restoration of churches which were ruined. And in many of the villages places of worship were re-opened.

Cadier says in his book, "We don't know how many people were converted, we're not interested in statistics, we never counted", but many people came to know the gospel through the ministry of these four young men.

And then their mission extended beyond the Drôme. There were missions in Paris, in Mazamet, in Belgium, in Switzerland, and throughout the French-speaking world these four young men would travel together by train, spend a weekend in a mission or a week in a mission, and then return to their own churches on Sunday for their Sunday ministry. And this revival movement was growing gradually, but in a sure and a solid way. They also had three other forms of action, which were very important. First of all, they published a newspaper once a month, with sermons in and with peoples' testimonies and Bible meditations, and about 5000 or 6000 of these were distributed every month. They also published a one-page information sheet about their meetings, announcing where their meetings would be, and after 1927 a small theological periodical called *Le Matin Vient* was published until 1939 four times a year, with essential material on revival, and reflections on revival, and theological examinations of revivals of the past. So these were three forms of action which complemented the ministry of the Brigadiers.

## Crises for the Revival

1927 was a very bad year for them, because there were two major crises. One was a crisis of unfaithfulness. Bordigoni, the older man, who had started the revival, put a letter designed for his secretary in an envelope to Champandal, and revealed that through this time he sadly had been having an illicit relationship with her. He confessed it and denied it, and then confessed it again and left the group. This really shook the younger men. How, while doing this great work for the Lord, could this unfaithfulness have been co-existing with that?

The second major thing which cropped up was the arrival in Loriol, which is not far from the Drôme area, of a Pentecostal evangelist from this country called Douglas Scott. He was invited by the pastor of the free church and also the pastor of the Reformed Church of Priva, and, profiting by the success of the revival in the Drôme, these two men sought to introduce another form of revival, a Pentecostal revival. This led to very great opposition between the four men of the Brigade and those who were in favour of Pentecostalism. Also at this time there was the presence in the south of France of Donald Gee, the Pentecostal

preacher, and I've read, but I've not found any details of names, that in 1927 there were four Pentecostal pastors from Wales, who visited the Brigadiers in Dieu-Le-Fit. However, a little later on, things crystallised more and more because of the success of the Pentecostal preaching in the reformed churches, and Pierre Carron, one of the Brigadiers who was very good with his pen, wrote an article against Pentecostalism, entitled 'Recklessness'. In his article he talks about this Pentecostal pastor, Douglas Scott, and his judgment is very hard about this. He says "Pentecostalism will force the weaker Christians towards rationalism, it will trouble people who have nervous disorders, it will push those who are faithful towards sectarianism. Because Pentecostalism is a mixture of what is true and what is false, this movement is from the Antichrist." So, there was a clear break between the revival of the Drôme and Pentecostal revival. On the east side of the Rhône you had a Reformed revival and renewal, on the west side of the Rhône in the Reformed churches and the Reformed Evangelical Churches you had a Pentecostal renewal. Louis Dalliére, the most influential pastor in the area, was favourable towards Pentecostalism. So, the Brigadiers, by the early 1930s, had two forms of opposition: from liberals on the one hand and Pentecostals on the other.

## Their Theology

That is the story of how this revival took place. It's a story of enterprise, of vision, of young men who come to know the Lord in the first days of their ministry and who begin to preach the gospel and are blessed and who see souls come to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now Cadier was undoubtedly the theological leader in this movement. After his conversion he began to read the Bible thoroughly, as he had never done during his theological studies. Also Cadier admits, "I never read Calvin's Institutes". Cadier started to read the Institutes in the late 1920s and became a Calvinist, and he says in his book, "I was supposed to have studied theology, but I really did my theology on the corner of the kitchen table with the Bible and the Institutes." This was the spirit behind this movement.

And now a few words about the theology of the movement. There were, in this movement, very firm emphases on conversion, forgiveness of sins, the promises of God, repentance and opposition to Pentecostalism. In his book (p.129), Cadier resumes the basic theological position of the movement in the following way: "The Cross, grace, forgiveness, victorious life, the reality of heaven and its glories, and the person of Christ crucified and raised from the dead were the central and the strong points of our message. We met together to prepare our missions in prayer, thinking along these themes". And the themes of their conferences at the conventions each year were along these lines.

- \* Everything must change, including you.
- \* God has not changed.
- \* Lift your eyes above.
- \* How to be a victor.
- \* Lord, create in me a pure heart.
- \* You will be my witnesses.
- \* Stand together for the truth.
- \* My only hope before a holy God is to be a forgiven sinner.

These were the themes of the conferences which were organised and so Cadier insisted always on placing the accent in these revivals on the sovereignty of God in the work of salvation.

At the same time in the 1930s, there was a famous Reformed theologian, Auguste Leserf, in Paris. He wrote to Cadier: "What interests me in your movement is that you have found Calvinism

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through practical experience, I have found Calvinism through study.” And Leserf wrote to Cadier to encourage him. These two were of different churches: Leserf, the Reformed Church, Cadier, the Reformed Evangelical Church, their common Calvinistic basis made for the developments in the future which were to be tragic.

The second major point about the revival in the Drôme, other than the theological points I have indicated already, was the idea that for a revival to be really blessed by the Lord, the unity of divided Christians must be sought. And so the second big point which the Brigadiers emphasised was that it was necessary to rediscover the unity of the Reformed Church of France between the Reformed Church and the Reformed Evangelical Churches. And during the 1930s, there sprang up from the Drôme, where the revival had been, a unity movement which was in 1938 to re-unite the two alienated churches which had been separated since 1905. The liberal church and the more evangelical church were shepherded towards unity on the impulsion of the revival which had happened in the Drôme, and this led to a new Reformed Church of France which we have in France today.

## Desire for unity

There is one additional factor: you have the Calvinism of Leserf and Cadier, the revival of the Drôme, but in France in the 1930s you also have Karl Barth. Now this may seem a strange mixture. But Cadier and Leserf thought until 1936 that Karl Barth was an authentic Calvinist. It was only at the Calvinistic Conference at Geneva in 1936 that Leserf started to realise that the new orthodoxy wasn't Calvinism. But up to that point they thought that revival, church unity, Barthian theology and Calvinism were all running in the same direction to sweep liberalism out of the church and bring a new revived Reformed Church to France, and a new witness for French Protestantism in France - the work of the Holy Spirit to produce a new united Reformed Protestant Church which would bring the message of the gospel to the French people. And so they worked in this direction. They sincerely thought that liberalism would be pushed to one side and that the whole of the Reformed Presbyterian Churches in France were going to become revived, renewed and reformed in the true sense.

There was this terrific desire for unity which characterizes French Protestantism down to today. Terrific desire not to break ranks at any costs. Where does this come from? It's something that I find mysterious, that people who differ on the essentials of the gospel can sit together in the same church and say 'we are united'. It's something I find very difficult to understand. I think this desire for unity comes from the fact that Protestants have been a persecuted minority for so long that there is the feeling that 'if we don't stick together, we're lost because we're a minority'.

There was also the idea of a Protestant identity, where Protestants and Protestants should be united. There was a terrific fear among French Protestants of schism and division, of extremism, which led Cadier to reject Pentecostalism. And all these things played on this desire for unity which was realised in 1938.

When the two churches, the liberal and the more evangelical church came together with some free churches and some of the Methodist churches, they formed what is now the Reformed Church of France. This church was not a confessionally-based church and Cadier was the first moderator of the synod of this new church. From revival to church unity in the most vague and hazy sense was the direction that was taken, and this is the tragedy of the revival of the Drôme. It led to a false spirit and a false unity which brought disaster upon the Church in later years. Why?

Because instead of having the courage to go back to the French Confession of Faith, the La Rochelle Confession of 1559, written by Calvin, they made a church on the basis of the fact that pastors at the moment of their ordination engaged to respect the Confession of Faith, not in its letter but in the spirit of salvation it professes. This was the undoing of French Reformed Protestantism: that a pastor, in taking up his ministry, adheres not to the Confession in its letter, but to the spirit of salvation which is expressed in the Confession. This means that a liberal can subscribe to the Confession without subscribing to the letter.

Now the consequences of this were very serious for Reformed churches in France. The consequence was that there was no strong church position in France that corresponded to the aspirations of revival and unity, and Pierre Cortial, my former colleague in Aix, who was the youngest delegate at the synod in which the re-uniting of the two churches was accomplished in 1938, admitted in one of his writings that this was a false hope, which led to dashed expectations. The immediate consequence was that there was one Reformed Protestant Church in France and this church remained relatively strong in an evangelical sense, through the War years, through the 1950s, but at the beginning of the 1960s started to fall apart and various theological currents started to become evident in a conflictual sense in this church. And the church, as far as doctrinal unity is concerned, fell apart in the 1960s when Barthianism fell apart, and the Reformed Church of France in 1971 at the Synod of Pau, in the south-west of France, accepted pluralism as being the foundation of the unity of the Church. No-one, it says, has the right to say what the gospel is other than to say 'this is my gospel'. Pluralism became a dogma in 1971 in the Reformed Church of France and this church became a totally mixed church, with people who are for political theology, for renewal of liturgy, for Barthianism, people who are feminists, people who have no theology at all. If you are a true Calvinist, to stay in that church is almost impossible without a multitude of compromises. Many of my former students have gone into that church thinking that they are going to change the church: in the end it's the church that changes them. They lose their hold on the gospel and they go away into some kind of liberalism. It's a very sad situation. So we have in France today the tragic situation that out of a desire to revive the church, out of a false view of the church and the unity of the church, we have a church which has auto-destructed.

## Food for Thought

This, in conclusion, is something which gives us lots of food for thought today. The questions are still the same today. They are basically the same issues which we face - what is a church? what is conversion? what is preaching of the gospel of grace? what is our great need for the day? Well, let's not be too hard in our judgment. In their day the Brigadiers did what they could. In hindsight we may say that they lacked in one area, the area of the church as a body of Christ, a vision for a pure church didn't fall within their bounds of a Biblical approach to the question, and they lost it there. But the same question is there for us today - what's our view of church unity? what's our view of what the church is? what's our view of the purity of the church? and how are we acting to promote that in our own time? I think the example of these men calls us to look to ourselves and to how we are acting faced by the same challenges they were facing, seeking the same answers and seeking to serve the same Lord. So it's an encouraging story, it's a story which is sad in its conclusions and which leaves us with a lot of questions.

[Transcribed from a lecture given by Professor Paul Wells on 11 April 2005 in the church]