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What is Revival?

Rev. Brian Edwards

The word 'revival' has never been more used, and never more abused, than it is in our times, to such an extent that its meaning is often unclear. Also the question is asked, where is revival taking place today? That is a large question, but we can point to South Vietnam where, after bitter persecution of Christians in 1975, there was much spiritual blessing and an increase in the number of Christians from 1.2 to 1.5 million. Similar remarkable events have been experienced in mainland China where 30 million Bibles were distributed over twenty years and, despite its restrictions, the government had to admit that the number of Christians was as high as 15 million. This was a definite and clear work of God. So, too, in Cambodia between 1991 and 2001 there was a 30% increase per annum in the Christian population.

Yet across vast areas of the world, especially in Western Europe, times are hard and little growth can be seen. Like the disciples, we toil all night and catch nothing, and there are two responses to our failure. People either say the boat is empty and will remain so, or they pretend it is full - and all the while there is an army of salesmen knocking on the doors of both groups of fishing-huts bringing their books and videos and seminars and courses explaining how to become complete anglers so that they will never lack a full boat again.

In such a confused situation the word revival is in danger of being re-defined, especially since other words are used as if they were synonymous with it. It is helpful, therefore, to clarify what is not revival before considering the essential features of revival.

Reformation is not to be confused with revival. Reforming the church to conform to biblical teachings involves theology and practice, whereas revival involves new life. Reformation may include revival but churches can have their theology in good order but certainly require new life. Also, reformation comes mainly from leaders, while revival is usually a people's movement, and although some individuals may play a prominent part in a revival, they are not leaders as such. For example, in the Old Testament the reign of Josiah saw a reformation of religious life through the rediscovery of God's law, but the reign of Hezekiah, while including reformation, saw a time of new spiritual life.

Restoration is not the same as revival. In modern times this refers to the restoring of pentecostal gifts that have been lost by the church at large. However, evidence reveals that spiritual gifts do not figure largely in historical accounts of revival. They may be present before revival occurs and continue so during the course of a revival, but rarely, if ever, are they introduced as part of a revival. Furthermore, if the presence of spiritual gifts is a sign of revival, why do charismatic and pentecostal churches still go on praying for revival? It is significant that Paul's great prayers in Ephesians 1, Philippians 1 and Colossians 1 never once include these gifts and, if we take biblical prayers and use them as our pattern, we will never find better examples than in those three epistles.

Renewal should not be confused with revival. This word is used in various ways to convey the idea of spiritual awakening-either in a church or an individual-and it is often associated with restoration. However, it is important to appreciate that blessing is not revival; a few extra converts, glorious as that may be, is not revival; neither is a packed church revival; nor are music and movement in the sanctuary; nor are phenomena and excitement. All these things can be present without revival taking place.

Mission and Evangelism should not be regarded as revival. While this has not been so prominent in Britain, it has caused particular problems in North America as a result of the tradition which has descended from Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) whose *'Lectures on Revival'* in 1834 were persuasively presented and became massively popular. Undoubtedly many people were converted under Finney's ministry, but his emphasis was that using the right methods would always produce the right results. Therefore, if churches organised 'revivalist' meetings revival would follow, and this led to conversion being seen not as regeneration but as moral persuasion, and the tradition developed that treats evangelism and revival as the same thing.

Transformation is also not revival, although during revivals communities have been transformed. However, there is a current movement-known by various names such as 'territorial spirits' or 'strategic level spiritual warfare'-which uses transformation in a different way. It is based on the idea that while God is or has been at work in certain places in revival, there are other areas that are controlled by forces that resist God's power. These are regarded as 'strongholds of darkness' with their own identities and, in order to understand them and pray against their particular conditions, it is necessary to undertake diagnostic research or 'spiritual mapping'. Against such an idea it must be pointed out that it has never been needed in the past, also that it focuses chiefly on the state of society and ignores the spiritual lethargy of the church, whereas revival focuses on the state of the church. For example, note the prayer of Evan Roberts in 1904, "Bend the church and save the world". Finally, it appears to be a search for yet another methodology to counteract the problems of the world.

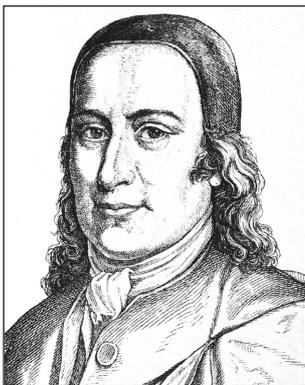
Entertainment is not revival. Although that is an obvious statement, it is sadly not always understood. Too often it is assumed that an 'atmosphere' of revival can be achieved by using music, lighting and techno-media presentation. Highly organised events with attractive multi-coloured brochures can generate excitement and draw large crowds, but it is misleading to think that 'having a good time' equates to spiritual revival. It is very easy to be negative about such displays but the problem remains that we lack spiritual vitality and life, and we are often boringly out of touch and traditional, or else events like that would not seem so attractive to young people. The sad fact is that we have an idea in our heads of something far better, but in our hearts and experience too often there is not much that is better.

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A helpful approach is to understand the hallmarks of revival and then plead for it in prayer. It is easier to describe revival than to define it. Duncan Campbell in his book 'The Price and Power of Revival' (1956) quoted Psalm 24:3-5 "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in His holy place? . . . He shall receive the blessing of the Lord", and commented, "That is revival. That is God let loose through human personality. The floodgates of heaven opened and dry places flooded . . . a community saturated with God." That is the difference between revival and successful evangelism. One may produce new converts here and there, but the community remains unchanged and men move on to a Christless hell. But when God steps down-when hearts are made clean by Him-then He finds an avenue through which He can move. The community becomes "saturated with God", so that many who find the Saviour come into a saving relationship with Him before they come near any church or place of worship.

So, therefore, revival can be defined as a sovereign work of God's Spirit producing an unusual awakening of spiritual life among God's people and accompanied by an awesome awareness of God, a deep hatred of sin, a longing for holiness and a passion to reach the unsaved. Does that describe the church that you represent? Probably not - and that is why we need revival. Revival is big, it is radical, it is God-initiated and it is God-honouring. There are four major hallmarks of revival and, although other indications can occur, these four are indispensable and indisputable marks and, without even one of them, there is not true revival.



Count Zindendorf

An Overwhelming Sense of God's Presence: We have to admit that we cannot create revival or manufacture it, but we can quench it and we can spoil it. However, as with many of God's sovereign acts, we do have a responsibility ourselves and when we read about revivals in history we soon discover accounts of the 'felt presence' of God, or what was frequently termed the 'sensible' presence of God. In Exodus 33:15 we find Moses beseeching God, "If Thy

presence go not with me, carry us not up hence", and he went on to claim that nothing else would distinguish between them and the other nations around - or convince others that they belonged to God - but that the evident presence of God was with them. The Hebrew word for 'presence' actually means 'face' - so to see someone's face implied you were in their presence. That's what Moses longed for and what God wonderfully gave him in the cloud and pillar of fire.

In Jeremiah 5:22 God says, "Fear ye not Me? Will ye not tremble at my presence?" and examples of this awareness of God's nearness can be found repeatedly. On 13th August 1727 the community gathered at Herrnhut on the estate of Count Zinzendorf in Saxony set themselves to a time of prayer and communion after several days of fruitless discussion and argument. Zinzendorf wrote later, "A sense of the nearness of Christ was given to us all at the same

moment. What the Lord did for Herrnhut from that time until the winter of the same year is inexpressible. The whole place appeared as a visible tabernacle of God with men. Each felt themselves face to face with God." That is what is meant by the overwhelming sense of the presence of God.

In Cambuslang, Scotland in 1742 when Whitefield was preaching, we read of "the gracious and sensible (felt) presence of God". In Wales in 1859 it was recorded that "the house was so full of the divine presence that ungodly men trembled". Similarly in North Korea in 1907 at Pyongyang, we are told "each felt as they entered the church that the room was full of God's presence. That night in Pyongyang there was a sense of God's nearness impossible of description". During the revival at Lowestoft in England in 1921 it was said that "the atmosphere was charged with the presence of God". On the Isle of Lewis in 1947 the community became alive with an awareness of God's presence and people out on the peat moors would know that God was there amongst them to such an extent that some were converted without even having gone to the minister to ask for the way of salvation - they were aware that God was moving. In 1952 on the Isle of Harris we are told that the most outstanding feature was "the awe-inspiring sense of the presence of God".

Such examples are not quoted because people read accounts of other revivals and thought they ought to include references to the presence of God - it is just that it was the uppermost thing in their minds. It was an experience common to all who knew true revival. At Bowden Methodist Church in Australia in 1905 "manifestations of the divine presence and power were marked and felt by all present". Or again, in Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, a large church building with a small congregation, Joseph Kemp had worn himself out as their minister and, having been sent to recuperate in Bournemouth in 1905, he had heard of the revival sweeping through Wales. He decided to go there to see for himself and was deeply moved with a longing for a similar work in Scotland. Soon after returning to Edinburgh he wrote, "Quite suddenly upon one another came an overwhelming sense of the reality and awfulness of His presence and of eternal things". Duncan Campbell stated, "I have no hesitation in saying that this awareness of God is the crying need of the church today". In visiting churches up and down our land, whether they are full of music and bright lights or cold and formal, no sense of God's presence is experienced - only a longing to know that God was there.

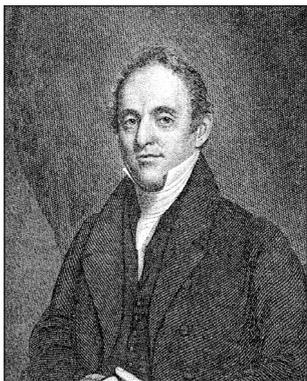
An Aweful Awareness of the Seriousness of Sin: This second hallmark of revival follows on inevitably from the first and it begins with the church. Too often Christians are careless, unholy and indistinguishable from the world, but an awareness of God's holiness will lead to a deep conviction of sin which cannot be produced by human activity. What God did in Congo (Zaire) in 1953 was a remarkable work and it was two months before the unbelieving world was touched. But those were two terrible months for the pastors, missionaries and church members, as people were broken by their sense of sinfulness. In North Korea in 1907 a missionary describing the revival there wrote, "As the prayer continued a spirit of heaviness and sorrow for sin came down upon the audience. Over on one side someone began to weep and in a moment the whole audience was weeping. Man after man would rise, confess

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his sins, break down and weep and then throw himself to the floor and beat the floor with his fists in a perfect agony of conviction." He went on to record the terrible consequences that followed a few nights later. "My last glimpse of the audience is photographed indelibly on my brain. Some threw themselves on the floor. Hundreds stood with arms outstretched towards heaven. Every man forgot each other. Each was face to face with God. I can hear yet that fearful sound of hundreds of men pleading with God for life, for mercy. The cry went out over the city until the heathen were in consternation." Oh that God would do something among us today to cause the heathen to tremble!

Exactly the same happened in Ulster in 1859 and again in Lowestoft in 1921, but this is not the same as the modern phenomenon of 'slaying in the spirit' and certainly not 'laughing in the spirit'. Conviction of sin is not created by copying physical reactions. When God came upon mainland China in remarkable ways in 1906, it was said that it was marked by "a wholly unusual conviction of sin". In Cornwall in 1814 the phrase "penitential pain" was coined because there was such a deep work of the Spirit of God that people felt absolutely crushed and broken by their sense of sin - before they came into an overwhelming sense of peace with God through forgiveness. At a meeting at Tuckingmill that went on from Sunday to the following Friday as people came and went, it was written, "Hundreds were crying for mercy at once. Some remained in great distress of soul for one hour, some for two, some for six or nine, or twelve or fifteen hours before the Lord spoke peace to their soul." It is not suggested that this is precisely what happens in every revival but the theme of intense awareness of sin certainly is present, and that is why it must be stressed - do not dare to pray for revival while harbouring cherished sins or it will be a terrible time.

In the early 19th century the ministry of Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844) was often blessed with revival over a period of thirty years, and during his preaching scenes of deep conviction were commonplace. One observer at a meeting at Saratoga Springs wrote, "The room was so crowded that we were obliged to request all those who had recently found relief to venture below and spend their time praying for those above. This evening will never be forgotten - the scene is beyond description. Did you ever witness two hundred sinners with one accord in one place weeping for their sin? I felt as though I was standing



Asahel Nettleton

on the verge of the eternal world while the floor under my feet was shaken by the trembling of anxious souls in view of the judgment to come. The solemnity was still heightened when every knee was bent at the throne of grace and the intervening silence of the voice of prayer was interrupted only by the sighs and sobs of anxious souls. I only add that some of the most stout, hard-hearted, Heaven-daring rebels had been in the most awful distress."

If that account seems truly historic then remember what is recorded in Acts 2:37 when the people were cut to the heart and implored Peter and the other disciples "What shall we do?" Or think of Psalm 38 where David felt overwhelmed by his sense of guilt which was like a burden

too heavy to bear. So intense was his anguish that his sight, hearing and speech all seemed to fail him and his strength was gone. Although David wrote that psalm three thousand years ago it describes exactly what happens when the Spirit of God comes in power upon His people - and remember it is upon His people He will come, and search them out.

An Unusual Evidence of Transformed Lives: God does not come in His presence and convict us deeply and hurtfully of sin and then leave us unchanged - that is not His purpose at all. He only comes like a kind physician to cut deeply and hurt the body in order to heal it and restore it, and that is what God does. If there is not a transformation of lives, then it is certain that there is no evidence of a work of God. We have a very low view of conversion today, as can be seen in the debate over the 'Lordship of Christ'. This reflects the present-day attitude that Christ can be taken as your Saviour and then subsequently as your Lord. Although God would like you to take Jesus as your Lord, you may decide to or not. So, as a result of that attitude, you can claim Him as your Saviour but make no significant change in your lifestyle, because you haven't taken Him as your Lord. Now that is one of the great lies used by Satan today to deceive people into thinking they can have Christ as their Saviour and enjoy all the privileges of a child of God without having to give up anything or change anything.

However, in true spiritual revival it does not work like that - and it shouldn't, anyway, because Christ doesn't offer Himself in two parts. He is both Saviour and Lord. True revival is always a revival of holiness - Psalm 85 ends, "Righteousness shall go before Him and make His footsteps into a way". The revival in the 18th century involving the Wesleys, Whitefield and others certainly saved England from the worst effects of industrialisation and possibly from an event similar to the French Revolution; and although some historians dispute that claim, there is no doubt that the religious revival changed the face of the nation and not only kept it back from the worst excesses that might have followed, but also prepared the way for much of the philanthropic work of the 19th century.

It is recorded that the work of God at Cambuslang in 1742 embraced all classes, all ages and all moral conditions - cursing, swearing and drunkenness were given up by those who came under its power. The powerful work of the Spirit that swept across Kentucky in 1800 left the State entirely changed, as one observer noted, "I found Kentucky as remarkable for sobriety as it had formerly been for dissoluteness and immorality. A profane expression was hardly ever heard. A religious awe seemed to pervade the country." There are similar accounts about the South Wales coal mines in the 1904 revival, where some of the most blasphemous foul-mouthed men looked after the pit ponies. But when the men were converted their ponies could no longer understand their language and stopped working. In Birmingham during the 1830s it was said of one minister that "he left the public houses vocal with grumblers", because so few gathered there any more.

Often the question is asked, "Does it last?" Statistics show that in the 1859 revival in Wales about one hundred thousand were converted and it was reckoned that forty years later only 5% had lapsed - which meant that around ninety-five thousand were still standing for Christ. In the hundred years between 1762 and 1862 Wales experienced fifteen or more revivals and public law and order improved to the point that judges were often presented with white gloves, which was the custom when there were no cases to be brought before the court. Robert Murray M'Cheyne at St.

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Peter's Church in Dundee said in 1839, "The Spirit spread a sweet influence over the whole place", meaning the area around the town, not just in his church. In the Congo in 1953 the revival led to the wholesale restitution of goods stolen from the government, to such an extent that the Belgian authorities arranged for missionary buildings to act as collection centres because they were inundated with returned goods. That is called transformation.

An Effective Passion to Reach the Unsaved: The key words are 'effective passion' because revival always stimulates a desperate longing to reach others with the Gospel, but it is an effective passion because God has prepared the climate so that men and women are open to the work of His Spirit. One of the most remarkable missionary movements in church history is one of the least known in Britain, and that is the Waldensians in the 12th century. They had a long and noble record, having to endure bitter persecution for many years by the Roman church, yet by the end of the 16th century it was estimated that Waldensians in the Piedmont valley of Italy outnumbered Catholics by a hundred to one. It was claimed that it was possible to travel six hundred miles and spend every night in a home of the Waldensian brethren, so far had they spread.

In England at the time of John Wyclif (c1320-84) and his 'poor preachers' - the Lollards - although written accounts



John Wyclif

were not often kept, it is known that they translated the whole Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate. It must have been attended by a significant work of God because over a hundred years later Sir Thomas More complained that "You couldn't meet two men on the roads of England without one of them being a Wyclifite." Even allowing for More's anti-evangelical bias he must have had good

reason to remark on the large numbers of Lollards whose great grass-roots movement in the late 14th to early 15th centuries helped to prepare the way for William Tyndale's translation of the Bible and its availability throughout the nation. The time of the Lollards must have been a period of real spiritual revival.

But in missionary terms one of the greatest movements of God was done amongst Count Zinzendorf's community at Herrnhut from 1727 onwards. God transformed the lives of the believers in Moravia to such a degree that over the next sixty years their missionaries travelled to most of Europe, across vast areas of North and South America, Asia, Africa, the West Indies and even as far as Greenland. More was achieved by the Moravians than the entire Christian church had done in the previous two hundred years. They were powerful missionary pioneers who were driven on by the kind of experience which Evan Roberts described shortly before the 1904 revival began; "Then a fearful bending of the Judgment Day came to my mind and I was filled with compassion for those who would bend at the Judgment Seat, and I wept. Following that, the salvation of the human soul was solemnly impressed upon me and I felt ablaze with the desire to go through the length and breadth of Wales to tell of the Saviour, and had this been possible I would have been willing to pay God for the privilege of doing so." That is how passionate he felt, and so too did Howell Harris

(1714-73) when he stated, "I shall be more satisfied when I am instrument to bring one soul to the knowledge of Christ than if I got £1,000." That would be worth a labourer's wages for twelve years in those days! Would we give up twelve years' wages to lead one soul to Christ?

In Borneo in the mid-20th century a little old tribes-woman who was half deaf but who had listened to the Gospel and responded to Christ and found assurance of salvation, was seen by the missionaries hurrying off into the jungle saying, "I must tell the others about this". Isn't that the inevitable response when the Spirit of God comes amongst us in power? David Brainerd (1718-47), who was greatly used by God amongst the North American Indians and gave his life for them in the raw frontier territories of New England, wrote, "When I was asleep I dreamed of these things and when I awoke the first thing I thought of was this great work of pleading with God against Satan for the souls of the Susquehanna Indians. All things here below vanished and there appeared to be nothing of importance to me but holiness of heart and the conversion of the heathen to God." That passion consumed his life - quite literally.

The Welsh revival of 1904-05 caused missionaries to go out all over the world - to India, Africa, Madagascar, Poland, Korea, Japan, South America and on and on. William Carey (1761-1834) went out to India as a result of revival; Henry Martyn (1781-1812) went to Persia; Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) to Burma; James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) to China - all children of spiritual revival. Revival led to great surges of evangelism in India in 1944; in Uganda in the 1950s and 1960s; in Korea in 1907; in China in 1906; and in many other places on other occasions. At the turn of the 19th century about 14,000 Protestant missionaries were serving around the world and by 1925 that number had almost doubled, due in great measure to the impetus of the 1904-05 revival in Wales. Surely it is our deepest longing that God would once again do such a work in a time of spiritual revival!

What Can We Do?

This is a question that is frequently asked, and while it must be admitted that revival cannot be worked up by human effort and that it must come down from God, we nevertheless cannot sit idly by as if it doesn't concern us. Several points can be suggested:

1. Do not ignore what God is doing elsewhere; make it your business to find out and be well-informed.
2. Do not give up doing what is your Christian duty - but do it better, not for your own credit, but for the sake of those who otherwise might never hear the Gospel.
3. Admit how bad our condition is and do not blame the world or point to others for the divided, confused and spiritually cold condition of the church.
4. Keep your understanding and appetite for revival alive; even if God chooses not to come again in great power in our lifetime, there is still much to be done in living and witnessing for Him.
5. Attend the prayer meeting and pray for revival, using biblical prayers to guide and inspire your prayers.
6. And pray . . .
7. And pray and pray . . .

(Transcribed from an address at Heath Church by Rev. Brian Edwards of Surbiton on 23 February, 2004).