

Reformation & Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 1, No. 4 • Fall 1992

there are so many Christian people in that great nation, so little difference is made. But is that really so? No doubt as American teachers and pastors themselves say, there is superficiality everywhere. But there is also *immense influence*. The current Presidential election campaign is revealing. Neither side can ignore the convictions of Christians regarding abortion. (The same could not be said in Great Britain!) Who listens to the church in the U.K., or even if they hear its voice, fear its wrath? It is the same old story. Trying to be "relevant" and politically committed, we are ignored, by and large. But seek first the kingdom (and I am not talking about the errant kingdom theology of some evangelicals) and preach the real gospel, in season and out of season, and we begin to see God at work in society. Look at Charles Colson in the U.S. Has any committee or reform group achieved a fraction of what he has for American prisons? Men are born anew through the living and abiding word of God. No preaching of the good news means no new births from above! No new births means no salt and light in the world. No salt and light in society means increasing disintegration, decay, and despair in the secular city.

Many more things could be said. *Who else* can demonstrate that the evangelism of full value means sowing as well as reaping? *Who else* is so well equipped for the big spiritual battles ahead, both with unfaith and with fanaticism? *Who else* but the man with the sword of the Spirit in his hand and the knowledge of how to wield it?

Author

Rev. Richard C. Lucas has served as pastor of St. Helen's Bishopsgate, a Church of England ministry in London, since 1962. He is the author of *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (InterVarsity Press, 1980).

The word *revival* sometimes has unfortunate connotations. When it is used, people frequently think of emotion-drenched, protracted meetings, aimed at inducing a kind of spiritual excitement which may then be identified as a moving of God's Spirit. Such excitement quite possibly has nothing whatever to do with God's Spirit, for God is not the author of confusion but of peace.

It would be difficult to improve upon Charles Hodge's description of the nature of revival:

It is a familiar fact that religion in the soul is sometimes in a lower and sometimes in a higher state. The passage from the one to the other is more or less rapid. So in a church or community there are periods of decline and periods of refreshing. So under the Old Testament dispensation. So in the time of Christ. So in the time of the Reformation, in the time of Edwards and since. The phrase here has acquired a conventional sense. It is confined to a sudden change from general inattention to a general attention to religion, to those seasons in which the zeal of Christians is manifestly increased and in which large numbers of persons are converted to God.

In this definition Hodge stresses perhaps too much the suddenness of revivals, but he is surely correct in underscoring the key ideas: increased zeal among Christians and large numbers of conversions.

Perhaps the finest book on the subject of revivals is that by William B. Sprague, once exceedingly well known among the ministers of this country. His *Lectures on Revival* was reprinted some years ago by the Banner of Truth Trust. A revival of religion, Sprague says,

Is a revival of scriptural knowledge, of vital piety, of practical obedience. . . . Wherever you see religion rising up from a

state of comparative depression to a tone of increased vigor and strength; wherever you see professing Christians becoming more faithful to their obligations, and behold the strength of the church increased by fresh accessions of plety from the world; there is a state of things you need not hesitate to denominate a revival of religion.

How does a revival come about? Answers to this question have been different, depending upon who was responding. Charles Grandison Finney, the well-known nineteenth-century evangelist, held that revival can be produced by the right use of appropriate means. Many have felt—I think that they are right—that Finney’s teaching here and at other points was exceedingly deficient. It amounted to revival by manipulation. It downplayed the necessity of the divine operation of the Holy Spirit. Generally, however, the best writers on the subject have insisted that revival is produced by a sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit of God. God brings revival to His church. So any revival which does not come from the living God is not a true revival at all but is a specious and false one.

At the same time, we know very well that God works through means, through human beings. So we ask again: In what way does the Holy Spirit of God revive and quicken the church? In most instances the principal instrument by which revival has been given to the church is the preaching of the gospel—indispensably linked with believing, passionate, consistent prayer—but nevertheless the preaching of the gospel.

Truth Driven Home

What is preaching? This is not an easy question to answer. The subject is large, complex, and glorious all at the same time. The old definition of preaching is still a good one: Preaching is the exposition and application of the Word of

God. The very content of preaching, the very substance of what is proclaimed when ministers lift up their voices and address themselves to those who hear, is the Word of God. At the same time preaching is not simply an explanation of the Word of God. It is more than a lecture. It is an explanation accompanied by application. It is truth driven home. People must be shown where the truth fits their needs, and they must be led to humble themselves before God, not in general terms, but in the most specific and individual terms.

There is more to preaching even than this. Preaching is not simply the exposition and application of the Word of God generally. It is the exposition and application of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A minister is a Christian man. He is one who knows the Lord, understands that there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. The sermon which is the richest, most profitable, instructive, and edifying is the one which is fullest of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is still more. One of the Greek words employed in the New Testament to describe the preacher and preaching is the “heralding” of the gospel, *kerygma*. This means that the minister is not his own man. He does not speak his own words. Rather, he is a minister of Jesus Christ, a herald, an ambassador. He is an emissary, a representative, a sent one. He conveys and communicates only the message that the Savior Himself has commanded him to bring.

The apostle Paul gives us a great pronouncement on the preaching of the gospel in Romans 10:14-15:

How, then, can they call on the one [that is, Christ] they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

That is a text with which we are familiar. We know those beautiful expressions, and they speak to us of the blessedness of preaching. But there is often a misapprehension here. For Paul did not actually say, as many translations have it, "How can they believe on the One of whom they have not heard?" but rather, "How can they believe the one whom they have not heard?" This indicates that preaching the gospel is not simply a case of a human minister speaking but rather of the speaking of the Lord Jesus Himself. Preaching is Christ's own witness. Calvin wrote, "God deigns to consecrate to Himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that His voice may resound in them." So much is this the case, Calvin insists, that he who hears the minister, hears the Lord Jesus Christ, and he who rejects the minister who is faithful and true to the Scriptures and to our Savior, refuses to hear the Lord Jesus Christ.

Preaching in Revival Times

What happens to preaching when revival comes? Is there anything that can be said about the special nature and character of preaching in revival settings? There are some great truths which may be spoken in this connection, truths which will help us understand what happens to preaching and how revival and preaching are to be understood.

First, in revival, preaching is kindled. It comes alive. It grows into a flame. Of course, even in ordinary times, preaching may be mightily used of God. It is the principal means God employs to draw sinners to Himself. Preaching comes to us from God. So, whenever the gospel of Christ is proclaimed, it is as though the Lord Himself were telling us, "Come unto Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29). However, when God is pleased by His Holy Spirit to come down and move His

church, preaching is then clothed with a power, majesty, and glory it does not otherwise possess.

A remarkable illustration of this is what took place on June 21, 1630, in the little village of Shotts, on the road between Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland. This day has not been forgotten by those who still love truth and long for the revival of God's work in Scotland. It was the communion season, and several notable ministers had been gathered together for the preliminary services and the administration of the Lord's Supper on June 20. It was decided that the communion season should be lengthened by an additional day and that a young man named John Livingston should be asked to preach on that occasion. He had great fear and trepidation at the thought of doing that. He was inexperienced, and there were others present who had already been much used in the quickening of the church. Livingston turned to God in prayer. He sought a place of solitude apart from the thousands of people there present and poured out his heart to God. He asked God for power and for a text which would be useful in extending Christ's kingdom.

At mid-morning Livingston preached on Ezekiel 36:25-26:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Livingston expounded that text for an hour and a half, and the people hung on every word. There was an evident movement of the Holy Spirit across that great congregation. Toward the end of his exposition rain began to fall, but people were crying out from the depths of their being, and Livingston was led to speak for an additional hour, addressing

himself particularly to the unconverted. God came down, and the preaching was so majestic, so glorious—God was so manifestly present in the midst of His people—that on every side men and women both of high station and low were crying, “Sir, what must I do to be saved?” More than 500 were converted.

So much did that 21st day of June become a part of the spiritual history of Scotland that for centuries afterward, when the communion season came to be held, there was on the Monday following, a service of praise and thanksgiving. In revival, preaching comes alive in an intensification of its fundamental character.

Not By Might Nor Power

It should be noted also that in revival the power of preaching does not depend on the gifts or abilities of the preacher. Instance after instance could be adduced to show that this is the case.

One of the finest modern books on revival is Arthur Fawcett’s *The Cambuslang Revival*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1971. Fawcett speaks of the ministers William McCulloch (Cambuslang) and James Robe (Kilsyth) who lived and served in the middle years of the eighteenth century. Neither was of outstanding ability. Yet although John McLauren (“Glorying in the Cross of the Lord Jesus”) and George Whitefield also preached in their parishes, it was through these undistinguished ministers that God was pleased to work.

I mentioned above John Livingstone and his sermon at the Kirk of Shotts in 1630. This was Livingstone’s one great sermon. No other sermon of his lives on. He was a good and gracious minister for many years afterward, having moved from Scotland to Rotterdam when the times of persecution came. He did some good writing. He was certainly respected. But this was his one great sermon. What happened to him

at the Kirk of Shott’s on June 21, 1630, never happened to him again. It was not that John Livingstone had such mighty pulpit gifts, but that God took hold of his mind, tongue and vocal cords and spoke through him to the multitudes on that day.

The experience of the Kirk of Shotts is well enough known. What is not so well known is what happened only a week later. At the invitation of David Dickson, one of the great ministers of the seventeenth century in Scotland, Livingstone went to preach at Irvine where Dickson was minister. When he tried to preach at Irvine—I say this to the comfort of many who are themselves ministers of the gospel—he had to say to himself:

I was so deserted that the points I had meditated and written and which I had fully in my memory, I was not for my heart able to get them pronounced. . . . This so discouraged me that I was for some time resolved not to preach, at least not in Irvine.

He had preached at Shotts as few men have ever preached. God was on him. The very mantle of the Holy Spirit rested on his shoulders; he spoke as though straight from the throne of heaven. But at Irvine, only a few days afterward, he could not even remember the divisions of his sermon. The power of preaching in revival does not derive from the gifts and abilities of those who preach.

Solemn Preaching

Third, revival preaching is solemn preaching. When God begins to move and people are concerned about spiritual questions, when they are jarred loose from their continual preoccupation with transient and perishing things, they are no longer satisfied with the light and frivolous things that too often have come from pulpits. They are taken up in

spiritual seriousness, and those who address them are likewise utterly solemn.

Imagine Jonathan Edwards speaking as a jokester from the pulpit of Northampton! Imagine Edwards as anything other than desperately in earnest when he addressed himself to that congregation about the things of Jesus Christ and dealt with them about their need for the interposition of God's mercy in their lives if they were to be saved.

You find solemnity to be the case again and again when God moves. Preaching is transformed in many respects but not least in this—that ministers of the gospel are no longer perfunctory in the performance of their religious duties, but understand, as they ought always surely to understand, that eternal issues are in the balance, that souls are at stake. They know that this is no time for taking half measures, for crying, "peace, peace," when there is no peace. This is no time for healing slightly the hurt of the daughter of God's people.

The Doctrines of Grace

In revival, preaching concentrates on great gospel truths. There is no time for the intricacies, for example, of various schemes of eschatological speculation. People are not interested in that. They want to know how to be saved, and ministers, when revival comes, are concerned to tell them how to be saved.

In my own reading on this subject, one thing which has struck me particularly is that both William McCulloch and James Robe preached for a year or more on regeneration. I found that extremely significant. McCulloch, for twelve months before the beginning of the revival, preached on the new birth. What in the world did he find to say on the subject of the new birth? Well, investigate the ministry of William McCulloch and study the doctrine of regeneration for yourself, and you will soon discover what there is to say

over a period of a year on the subject of the new birth. How many of us would have the courage, not to say insight, to speak of such a subject over so extensive a period? We would be fearful lest people should lose interest, lest they should say, "I think I'll stay home this Sunday; our minister only speaks on one subject."

I suggest that at the present time, when the new birth is so much in the popular mind, and so large a percentage of the people of our own country are persisting in speaking of themselves as having been born again, we who are ministers should give serious thought to the kind of teaching our contemporaries cry out for. We should use the texts:

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (John 3:3).

How can a man be born when he is old? . . . Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born! (John 3:4).

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit of God (John 3:5).

You are Israel's teacher . . . and do you not understand these things? (John 3:10).

Revival preaching has always concentrated on the great doctrines of the gospel: human depravity, the cross, the necessity for regeneration, conversion, repentance, the exercise of saving faith, justification by faith alone, the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ to save. It has concentrated on the "doctrines of grace." I do not know how old that expression is. I found George Whitefield using it in the eighteenth century precisely as we do now. He meant the so-called five points of Calvinism, those truths which stand as sentinels around the cross and secure the integrity of God's mercy and grace in the Lord Jesus. The doctrines

of grace stress, as we must always stress, that it is “not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Power from on High

Revival preaching is Holy Spirit enabled. There is no other explanation for it. When revival comes the Holy Spirit is at work in a marvelous way.

One fascinating revival took place in the year 1839, almost 100 years after the revival under McCulloch and Robe . . . and in precisely the same place. The human instrument used in bringing about the revival was a young man of 24 years of age by the name of William Chalmers Burns. He was a great man by any estimate, but the measure of his greatness was in a sense, I think it fair to say, just his anonymity so far as subsequent generations are concerned. He had a mighty ministry in Scotland as a young probationer. He then went to China, but he so abandoned himself to China as to remove himself from the centers of the Christian world, and today only those who know the history of missions know his name.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was the minister of Saint Peter's Church, Dundee. He is well known. Because of a breakdown in his health and under the mandate of a committee of the General Assembly he was sent with Andrew Bonar and others to spy out Eastern Europe and the Near East with a view to the establishment of missions to the Jews. While he was away William Chalmers Burns took his place. It was in those months, when M'Cheyne was away and the young Burns was preaching and doing the pastoral work in the congregation, that revival came.

One might think M'Cheyne was the sort of man through whom God would revive His church. He could preach! He could preach the great doctrines of the gospel meltingly

and movingly. It was M'Cheyne who said that whenever a minister of the gospel spoke on the subject of eternal punishment he must do so with tears. But M'Cheyne was in the Holy Land, many miles from Scotland, and Burns was in his pulpit when God took the young man out of himself, as it were, visited him with power and unction of the Holy Spirit, and moved him to speak as men have seldom spoken since the days of the apostles. No one would have looked for revival through that young fellow—not yet ordained to the ministry, fresh out of the divinity hall. Yet it was through him that it came.

Christ and Him Crucified

Finally, and most important of all, revival preaching is preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is much that is said in revival preaching. The fallow ground must be broken up. The law must be proclaimed. People have to understand their desperate condition apart from the grace and mercy of God. The necessity of regeneration is plainly taught. People are commanded to turn from sin. Be that as it may, it is he, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is at the very heart of all revival preaching.

When the Holy Spirit came down on William Chalmers Burns, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, James Robe, William McCulloch, and many, many others, people began to be alarmed because of the desperate condition in which they were living. As they became aware of their state, so inconsolable were they that ministers of the gospel discovered that the only thing that would quiet their troubled, tempest-tossed souls was the word of Jesus: “And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.” That is the truth of the matter.

You and I cannot command God. We do not have the Holy Spirit at our disposal. But we are to pray and crave the blessing of God. We are to work and preach. We are to

preach the whole counsel of God. We are to know that at the heart of our preaching there is to be the blessed message of redemption and deliverance through the only Savior of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ. That name alone has power to set men free.

Author

Dr. John Richard de Witt serves as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN. He was previously a professor, at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS and is the author of *Amazing Grace* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1981).

This article is from *Tenth* (1982) and was taken from an address given at the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology in 1982.

The Cry for Revival

Robert Murray M'Cheyne

"Wilt Thou not revive us again; that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?" Ps. 85:6, KJV).

It is interesting to notice the *time when this prayer was offered*. It was a time of mercy. "Lord, Thou hast been favorable unto Thy land." It was a time when God had led many to the knowledge of Christ and covered many sins. "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of Thy people." It was now they began to feel their need of another visit of mercy—"Wilt Thou not revive us again?"

The thing prayed for: "Revive us again," or literally, return and make us live anew. It is a prayer of those who have received some life but feel their need of more. They had been made alive by the Holy Spirit. They felt the sweetness and excellence of this new, hidden, divine life. They pant for more—"Wilt Thou not revive us again?"

The argument presented: "That Thy people may rejoice in Thee." They plead with God to do this for the sake of His people, that their joy may be full; and that it may be in the Lord—in the Lord their Righteousness—in the Lord their Strength.

When Is This Prayer Needed?

1. In a Time of Backsliding

There are times when, like Ephesus, many of God's children lose their first love. Iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxes cold.

Believers lose their close and tender walking with God. They lose their close and near communion with God. They go out of the holiest, and pray at a distance with a curtain between. They lose their fervency, sweetness, and fullness in secret prayer. They do not pour out their hearts to God.

They have lost their clear discovery of Christ. They see Him but dimly. They have lost the sight of His beauty—the