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IN REVIVAL**

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Reformation in Revival



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There are those for whom the idea of revival and the need for it are unbiblical and unnecessary. They maintain that the work of Christ's kingdom is to be carried on by the faithful use of the means of grace in the context of a rightly constituted and disciplined church structure. Such a position, often sincerely held and carefully argued, goes against the strongly held convictions of others, for whom historical accounts, individual experience, and a sustained burden in prayer have been cherished realities. Again, for some, revival is so much emotional froth, revival accounts are a form of religious propaganda; the Welsh revival of 1904-05, for example, was a disruptive phenomenon, and hymns such as those of Charles Wesley and William Williams, forged during such times, are nothing more than some kind of strange fire.

DEFINITION

It is important at the outset to define our terminology. Revival is a sovereign and extraordinary work of God's Spirit, bringing about in a short time an enlargement of Christ's kingdom. During such times the spiritual life of God's people is intensified, unbelievers are converted, and societies are transformed. Revival presupposes reformation, and may refer to an individual quickening of spiritual life or to a more gen-

eral outpouring of God's Spirit upon a wide community. The Psalmist cries out for personal revival repeatedly, as in Psalm 119:25, 37, 40, 88, 107, 149, 156; and God's people collectively have prayed for the reviving of the church in words like those found, for example, in Psalm 102:13-16. As God gave promise regarding material prosperity for his people in the old dispensation of grace, so he encourages us to seek spiritual prosperity in the Gospel Day.

It is right as well to note the essentials of revival, as distinguished from the peripheral, occasional and often sensational elements. Experiences may be heightened in revival, with accompanying remarkable manifestations, but grace is still grace, and its true fruit is still the same. Let us name some of these essentials, then, so that wherever these are found in strength and vitality, there, it may be said, is a revival of true religion: a sense of God's presence: Christ glorified as Savior and Lord; the Holy Spirit obeyed in his promptings and power through the Word; godliness established and the means of grace honored; marks of grace in evidence among those who profess conversion; acceptance of discipline in the context of fellowship; sin and worldliness renounced; boldness and endurance in the face of adversity. In revival seasons these are the things that dominate and the influences that last.

REVIVAL CHARACTERISTICS

As a starting point we can set out what is perhaps the most widely known account of revival, that written by Jonathan Edwards concerning the revival at Northampton, New Hampshire, in 1734-35:

And then it was, in the latter part of *December*, that the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us; and there were, very *suddenly*, one after another, five or six persons, who were to all appearances savingly converted, and some of them wrought upon in an extraordinary manner. . . . A great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became *universal* in all parts of the town . . . all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things,

was soon thrown by. . . . It was then a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons' minds were intent upon was to *escape for their lives*, and to *fly from the wrath to come*. All would eagerly take hold of opportunities for their souls, and were wont very often to meet together in private houses, for religious purposes: and such meetings when appointed were greatly thronged. . . . And the work of *conversion* was carried on in a most *astonishing* manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. . . . In the spring and summer following, *anno 1735*, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of *love*, nor of *joy*, and yet so full of distress, as then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. . . . Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was *alive* in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship; every *hearer* eager to drink in the words of the *minister* as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in *tears* while the word was preached; *some* weeping with sorrow and distress, *others* with joy and love, *others* with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.¹

Revival is a sovereign work of God, initiated, sustained and withdrawn by him. Edwards had been preaching God's Word faithfully for some time before 1734, but seemingly with little outward success. William McCullough had been preaching for a whole year on regeneration at Cambuslang, Scotland, before the time of bountiful reaping the spiritual harvest in 1743. This distinguishes it from revivalism when human agencies and methods control religious activities in the belief that the use of appropriate means would guarantee success. We thus need to distinguish between revival and *revivalism*: the former a sovereign, extraordinary manifestation of spiritual activity initiated by God, the latter a product of man's ingenuity and ability. Behind the one lies confidence in the sovereign initiative and ministry of the Holy Spirit, behind the other, confidence in human resources. Few instances illustrate this better than the case of two men involved in the 1859 revival in Wales. Humphrey Jones returned from America to

his native Wales convinced of the legitimacy of Finney's "new measures." His expectation of those measures producing results led him to predict that the Holy Spirit would descend visibly at a specified time, day and place, and when that did not happen, he withdrew from the work a disillusioned man. The other leading figure in that revival was Dafydd Morgan, whose preaching before and after the revival was in the Calvinistic Methodist mold, sound in doctrine and experimental in thrust. Extensive fruit to his labors, however, were confined to a period of some two years, and which he later compared to the granting and withdrawal of a divine commission.²

It is an extraordinary work. It is extraordinary in the measure of success that attends the means of grace. The means which God uses neither replace nor differ from the essential means at other times. After giving the above account of revival, Jonathan Edwards comments that when "God in so remarkable a manner took the work into his own hands, there was as much done in a day or two, as at ordinary times is done in a year." John Calvin enlarges on this aspect in his commentary on Isaiah 66:7-8:

This work of God shall be sudden and unexpected; for he guards believers against carnal views, that they may not judge of the restoration of the Church according to their own opinion. Women carry a child in the womb for nine months, and at length give birth to it with great pain. But the Lord has a very different manner of bringing forth children. . . . On this account he likewise claims the whole praise for himself, because a miracle sets aside the industry of men . . . we often see that the Church brings forth, which previously did not appear to be pregnant. Nay more, when she is thought to be barren, she is rendered fruitful by the preaching of the gospel; so that we greatly admire the event, when it has happened, which formerly we reckoned to be altogether incredible. . . . In our own times, have we not seen the fulfilment of this prophecy? How many children has the Church brought forth during the last thirty years, in which the gospel has been preached? . . . God, in a wonderful manner, will cause innumerable children of the

Church, in an extraordinary manner, to be born all at once and suddenly."³

Since a sinner's regeneration is extraordinary and "reckoned to be altogether incredible," should not we expect a similarly extraordinary and incredible work of God in reviving his church?

It is a work in which a sense of God's presence predominates. In the following narrative, an ordinary farmer records his inexplicable response to news of a visiting preacher:

On a sudden in the morning about 8 or 9 o'clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield was to preach at Middletown at 10. I was in my field at work. I dropped my tool and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly. Then I ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late. Having my horse, I with my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, as if we were fleeing for our lives. When I came near I could see a steady stream of horses. I found a vacancy between 2 horses. I heard no man speak a word all the way for 3 miles, but everyone pressing forward in great haste. 3-4,000 people together. It put me into a trembling fear before Mr Whitefield began to preach, for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the great God. My hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God's blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me."⁴

Never before in his life had preaching stirred such a fervent reaction within his soul. Urgency, desire, danger, necessity, all these were in tumultuous exercise, not in him alone, but it seemed throughout the whole locality. Such a general awareness of God, eternity, and the priority of spiritual realities presuppose revival conditions.

It is a work that transforms communities to spiritual and moral awareness. Consider this account of social change in Tahiti, told by John Davies, a Welsh missionary sent to the island by the London Missionary Society:

The awakening and reformation which began with us in 1813 and 1814, increased in 1815-17, so that at present the islands of Tahiti, Eimeo, Teturoa, etc. have renounced idolatry altogether. The gods and altars are entirely destroyed and human sacrifices, infanticide, etc., have fully ceased, and the worship of the true God and a Christian profession is general. The people gather for worship three times each Sabbath as well as on Wednesday evenings. The Lord's Day is carefully observed throughout the islands, and family and private prayer is common among the people. Some 4,000 have learned to read and many can write. In a word, the transformation in our midst is in every respect beyond all expectation. Truly, the Lord has done great things for us.⁵

By way of confirmation that revival is no passing, spurious phenomenon, Davies went on to translate into the native language portions of Scripture, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Westminster Catechisms. The Tahitian revival was to be sustained as a work of reformation.

It is a work that acknowledges the authority of God's Word, exalts God's Son, and promotes personal holiness. For this reason, it may be distinguished from contemporary "renewal" movements in which certain emphases, in lesser or greater measure, predominate. A subtle shift can be detected in the nature of spiritual authority, from divine truth to individual experience. One type of experience, or one individual's experience, becomes mandatory or determinative for others. This is often accompanied by prominence being given to the ministry of the Spirit, with an attendant neglect of Christ's Person and work. As a consequence, gifts rather than graces are seen as God's essential work in the soul. On this issue, Jonathan Edwards has this to say: "God communicates his own nature to the soul in saving grace in the heart, more than in all miraculous gifts. The blessed image of God consists in that, not in these. The excellency, happiness and glory of the soul consist in the former. This is a root which bears infinitely more excellent fruit. Salvation and the eternal enjoyment of God is promised to divine grace, but not to inspiration."⁶

OBJECTIONS IN PRINCIPLE

Objections to the idea of revival arise from both principle and practice. In terms of principle, the sufficiency of ordinary means as God's blueprint for God's work throughout history is often insisted upon. Few would deny that God's normal pattern for church growth is the regular preaching of God's Word, administration of the Sacraments, and of discipline. This, however, does not exclude God's extraordinary work in revival. Jonathan Edwards, in his *Distinguishing Marks*, deals with one aspect of this, namely that revivals overthrow the use of means.

Now the conviction of sinners for their conversion is the obtaining of the end of religious means. . . . But is God pleased to convince the consciences of persons, so that they cannot avoid great outward manifestations, even to interrupting and breaking off those public means they were attending, I do not think this is confusion or an unhappy interruption. . . . We need not be sorry for breaking the order of means, by obtaining the end to which that order is directed. He who is going to fetch a treasure need not be sorry that he is stopped by meeting the treasure in the midst of his journey.⁷

We do not choose between one or the other, but embrace both as taught in God's Word. The New England Presbyterian Jonathan Dickinson's tract, *A Display of God's Grace*, often reprinted after its first appearance in Boston in 1742, speaks of "the more plentiful Effusion of the blessed Spirit" in his day than in former times. He concluded: "Whence is it that the Ordinances, that were before but as a dead Letter, do now make such a lively Impression? Certainly this is the Lord's Doing; and it is marvellous in our Eyes."⁸

Another aspect of objection to revivals on the basis of principle is that of their seemingly *recent origin* in the eighteenth-century Great Awakening. But God has not left himself without witness in any generation. Revivals are not uniform, either in intensity or extent, and lesser periods of extraordi-

nary expansion partook of the same essential features that have been already defined. The period of the Lollards in England (1382–1413), the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan era demonstrate this great variety in the manner of God's dealings. Even in the darkest times God has his remnant. Who will deny them the reality of revival, when such graces shone in them, even though the name of revival is absent? The same may be said of the word "gospel"—strictly it is a New Testament word, and the Good News was proclaimed by the prophets only in promise. Yet the Holy Spirit tells us in Galatians 3:8 that the gospel was preached even to Abraham, since the reality of grace obtained before Christ as it does in this day of grace.

Some have misgivings over the parallel drawn occasionally between revivals and Pentecost. William Cooper, in his "Preface" to Jonathan Edwards's *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* concluded that the "apostolic times seem to have returned upon us." Similarly, William Williams, speaking of revival Wales in 1762 considers the same comparison alone to be adequate: "to my mind like the time of the Apostles, when the Spirit descended from on high to a handful of fearful people. . . . As it was then, so it was here now."⁹ Comparing revival to Pentecost does not make it another Pentecost, any more than referring to a minister's labors as "apostolic" makes him an apostle. The descent of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was the unique fulfilment of "the promise of the Father," and referring to seasons of revival as "apostolic" is merely to establish similarity in manifestation and outcome.

OBJECTIONS TO PHENOMENA

One charge often made against revivals is the display of emotion, which can be violent and extreme. But the alternative to false emotion is not no emotion at all, but emotion sanctified by God's Spirit, taking its proper place in the wholeness of God's dealings with the human personality. After all, that is how God made us—mind, conscience, imagination, memory, emotions, will—all these need a work of grace to restore them to God-centeredness and balance. The

Scriptures declare as much when they speak of fear, confession, trembling, rejoicing, and gladness in those who heard the Word of God (Acts 8:8; 16:29,34). Our Lord wept (John 11:35), and Paul feared and trembled as he preached at Corinth (1 Corinthians 2:3).

The incidence of false conversions in a time of revival is raised as another objection. Counterfeit responses are to be expected in gospel work because Satan imitates God's work; there always will be bad fish as well as good fish caught in the gospel net. Every work of God dealing with flawed human nature will be a mixed work: the wheat of genuine conversions will be mixed with the tares of artificial experiences. For those who concentrate only on these, the whole sowing and reaping process is faulty. But this is to deny God's truth and power. It is surely dishonoring to God to discount his genuine work because of the parody of Satan. To draw a comparison: who would denounce the use of penicillin because some have an allergic reaction to it, and others have diarrhea? The right attitude is to discern and monitor all experiences in revival in the light of Scripture for evidences of a genuine work of grace.

Nor is it an argument against revival that they decline. The church at Ephesus came into being amidst powerful preaching, fierce opposition and book-burning, and the record in Acts 19:20 concludes "So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed." Its spiritual life, according to the Ephesians letter, could only be measured in superlative terms: "all spiritual blessings," "the exceeding greatness of His power," "the unsearchable riches of Christ"; "to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge," and so on. But in Revelation 2:4 the church is reproved by the Holy Spirit, because it has left its first love. That is declension, and yet the message is addressed "to the angel of the church at Ephesus." The Spirit did not unchurch them, or deny his own work at their first coming to faith in Christ. Saints are cumbered by sin as long as their earthly pilgrimage lasts, and the best saints know, and grieve over, this most profoundly.

RESPONSIBILITY TODAY

So what is our responsibility today?

We need to evaluate the biblical evidence for revival. Our doctrine of the Holy Spirit needs to include his extraordinary effusion to change decline into expansion. Our view of preaching needs to embrace reliance on God's Spirit for authority and success. Our manner of preaching also needs to include application as well as exposition. "Was there ever an age wherein strength and penetration of reason, extent of learning, exactness of distinction, correctness of style, and clearness of expression, did so abound?", asks Jonathan Edwards. He continues, "And yet, was there ever an age, wherein there has been so little sense of the evil of sin, so little love to God, heavenly-mindedness, and holiness of life among professors of true religion? Our people do not so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched; and they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching which had the greatest tendency to do this."¹⁰ Our understanding of Christian experience needs to define the place of emotion and identify criteria to distinguish between true and false experiences. Our sense of the need for prayer should embrace the whole congregation of God's people as in Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:24; and 12:5. We will do well to heed Spurgeon's experience:

Spurgeon came to London conscious that God had been hiding his face from his people. His knowledge of the Bible and of Christian history convinced him that, compared with what the church had a warrant to expect, the Spirit of God was in a great measure withdrawn, and if God continued to withhold his face, he declared to his people, nothing could be done to extend his kingdom. It is not your knowledge, nor your talent, nor your zeal, he would say, that can perform God's work. "Yet brethren, this can be done—we will cry to the Lord until he reveals his face again." "All we want is the Spirit of God. Dear Christian friends, go home and pray for it; give yourselves no rest until God reveals himself; do not tarry where you are, do not be content to go on in your everlasting jog-trot as you have done; do not be

content with the mere round of formalities. Awake, O Zion!; awake, awake, awake!" Before many months had passed . . . what a change took place in the prayer meetings! Now instead of the old, dull prayers, "Every man seemed like a crusader beseeching the New Jerusalem, each one appeared to storm the Celestial City by the might of intercession; and soon the blessing came upon us in such abundance that we had not room enough to receive it."¹¹

Meanwhile, with our confidence in God's work of grace and day of grace, we should use the means of grace. This means seeking the Holy Spirit's unction to make the preaching of the Word of God effective.

Another salutary exercise in our day of small things is to study God's mighty works in history up to and including our own day. Finally, we are to seek God's glory in the extension of his kingdom. For this we have both precept and example. The former is found in passages such as Isaiah 62:6, "Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth." One instance of the latter is found in Psalm 44. The time when religion flourished is reviewed in verses 1-3; verses 9-16 call us to evaluate the measure of declension in our midst today; the remainder of the Psalm calls us to echo the cry of God's people that God's church should prosper. "Come down . . . to make your name known" (Isaiah 64:1-2), is such a cry, from a longing that the reformation we seek should become a reality in our day.

Author

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Notes

1. *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 74-76.
2. Eifion Evans, *Fire in the Thatch*, (Bridgend, Wales: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1996), 200-01; 222-23.
3. John Calvin. *Commentaries* (Volume VIII, Volume Fourth of Isaiah) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 422-23.
4. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, editors, *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis, Indiana, and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 184-85.
5. *Fire in the Thatch*, 174.
6. *Select Works*, 138.
7. *Select Works*, 126-27.
8. *Great Awakening*, 178.
9. *Select Works*, 77; *The Experience Meeting* (London: Evangelical Press, 1973), 9.
10. "Some Thoughts on the Present Revival of Religion in New England," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, A.M. (Andover: Allen, Morrill & Wardwell, 1842, London edition 1834, p. 391.)
11. Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 42-43.