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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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Reformation
& Revival



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I have somewhere met the remark, that “the chariot of the gospel never has free course, but the devil tries to be the charioteer.” There is nothing he is so much afraid of as the power of the Holy Ghost. Where he cannot arrest the showers of blessing, it has ever been one of his devices to dilute or poison the streams. . . . With the obvious signs of the times in view, who does not see that this artful foe would enjoy his malignant triumph, if he could prejudice the minds of good men against all *revivals of religion*? This he does, not so much by opposing them, as by counterfeiting the genuine coin, and by *getting up* revivals that are spurious and to his liking. Revivals are always spurious when they are got up by man’s device, and not *brought down* by the Spirit of God.

Gardiner Spring

An impression prevails that Presbyterians of the Old School, do not believe in revivals of religion, but this is erroneous. The differences between them and the New School are not as to the fact of revivals, but as to the evidences of their genuineness.

Lewis Cheeseman

The idea that there can be no real improvement or advance without revival, is quite the opposite of the teaching of Christ where he would have us understand that, as in nature, the law of slow and gradual growth is the norm in his kingdom (Matt. 13:31-33).

Iain Murray

Thinking Critically About Revival

Tom Wells

A group of us were sitting around a table at our monthly pastors fellowship in Dayton, Ohio, agilely flitting from subject to subject when someone mentioned revival. The ensuing discussion went something like this: “What about the revival in China?” The question was directed to a missionary who had visited the People’s Republic no less than ten times in recent years to evangelize college students in one of the major cities.

“You can’t believe what you hear coming out of China,” was the reply. “I’ve seen nothing to confirm the stories of miracles that you may have heard of here in the States.” He went on to cite an exciting story of superhuman endurance under trial by a Chinese believer. It was a good story, but it was false. Someone else chimed in. “But we’ve heard that there are fifty million Christians in China now. Is that true?”

“Yes,” replied our friend, “that is true if you count all those who profess any kind of Christianity. Fifty million would be a fair estimate.”

I remember this exchange because it well illustrates the difficulty we have in understanding one another. When the missionary heard the word “revival” he assumed the question was about the exciting and the miraculous. But others heard a question about the vast numbers of men and women who have turned to Christ in China in the last twenty-plus years. It took a few minutes to unravel the confusion and to get us all thinking along the same lines.

Questions about the meaning of revival are not uncommon. Maybe you have heard a conversation that went like something like this: “Revival occurs when God brings a large number of people to Himself, when, in other words, men and women are being born again.” “Not so fast! You can’t revive what’s never been alive. Revival is a work among the people of God. Dead sinners don’t come into it at the earliest stage.” Clearly there is a difference here, but who is right and who is wrong?

I suspect that the answer lies in associating our present use

of the term with a text like, "O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years" (Hab. 3:2). Whenever God is unusually and powerfully at work in His world, there we rightly speak of revival. If we want to think critically about revival, then, we will concentrate on times and places where God is manifestly at work. I suppose there will not be much controversy about this.

But the first thing we have to think critically about shows that my own definition of revival, though accurate as far as it goes, begs an important question, "When is God manifestly at work?" Let me show you what I mean.

Let's compare the world as it exists today with the world at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time the knowledge of Christ was largely confined to the West. But then came the beginning of what has been called "the Modern Missionary Movement." Since that time the Gospel has been carried to every part of the globe, and millions upon millions of men and women have been saved. If this is not an evidence of God reviving His work we would be hard pressed to identify such evidence anywhere in history.

It appears, then, that all of us are living within a time of revival, though we may have never thought of it in those terms. And this fact suggests an important ingredient in thinking critically about revival: Regardless of the claims that we may hear, identifying a revival demands time for reflection. A present claim that revival is happening may be true or it may be false. Only time will tell.

That does not mean, of course, that we must stand aloof from an apparent unusual work of God, but it does lead to an important question we must ask about what appears to be revival: Are prayer and the preaching of Jesus Christ prominent parts of what is happening? We understand, I think, that conversions do not come, men and women are not born again, except in connection with preaching and teaching about the Lord Jesus. "How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

(Rom. 10:14). We may add that progress in the Christian life, whether dramatic or more pedestrian, arises from the same source. We seek to "grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). We expect to find growth in grace and in knowledge proceeding hand in hand. Men and women who are laboring to see revival may be doing what they would normally be doing: praying and spreading the knowledge of God in Christ. True, they may be doing it with extraordinary intensity, but these are the two instruments to which God has promised blessing.

Let me add a final point that will help us think both critically and sympathetically about revival: It is no proof that a revival does not exist just because it is accompanied by significant abuses. Men's carnality often gets mixed in with undoubted works of God.

Since this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* is devoted to the First Great Awakening, let's take an example from that movement of God. The story of abuses fostered by James Davenport has often been told, but let's consider another figure, a far more central figure than Davenport, the preacher Gilbert Tennent, a man whose memory is honored by all those who are friends of revival.

Tennent was an earnest servant of Christ, greatly used of God, but in the matter we are about to examine he was a man "who acted more from feeling than from principle." And his feelings reached fever pitch when he thought he saw opposition or indifference to the revival in his brother ministers. Where less confident men would have hesitated, he knew exactly what he would do. He published what has come to be known as his "Nottingham Sermon" on unconverted ministers, "which is one of the most terrible pieces of denunciation in the English language."

Two things made this sermon odious to many of his fellow ministers. First, Tennent urged the lawfulness of leaving the ministry of any pastor who was godly but had inferior gifts.

There might have been some logic to this plea if he had used the inferiority of their gifts to show that they were not called to the ministry. But that was not his point, as we may see from the illustration he uses of many leaving John the Baptist to follow Christ.

Second, Tennent argued from his first point in these words: "If it be lawful to withdraw from the ministry of a pious man ... how much more from the ministry of a natural man? Surely it is both lawful and expedient...."

We are not surprised to hear a gospel minister urge us to turn from the ministry of hypocrites. But what made his exhortation so prejudicial to the cause of revival was his application of this rule to a large number of ministers who were sound in doctrine and gave every appearance of being godly men except for their lack of enthusiasm for the awakening. In fact, many of them might have been brought around in time, but treating them as enemies of God strengthened their resolve to have nothing to do with Tennent and those who thought like him.

The result of Tennent's intemperate zeal leaped across the bounds of individual lives to split the Presbyterian denomination into two churches, a wound that was not healed for seventeen years (1741-58). Yet the revival was real, and Tennent was a man greatly used of God.

Years later Tennent himself helped to heal the wound by recognizing the folly his otherwise commendable zeal had led him into. In his *Irenicum Ecclesiasticum* he wrote that his earlier denunciation of his brother ministers was

an evil pregnant with pride, malice, and mischief, though perhaps not perceived or intended; an evil, which under a cloak of misguided zeal for God ... [and] under the pretext of kindness and piety, cruelly rends our neighbor's character, saps the foundation of the church's peace, and turns its union, order, and harmony, into the wildest confusion of ungoverned anarchy, schism, prejudice, and hate.

Thus ended a sad chapter in the history of genuine revival.

Let me review, in reverse order, the three tests of revival I have laid out above.

1) The presence of abuse does not prove that a revival is not of God. I have cited a denunciatory attitude toward fellow believers as one such abuse. There have been many others. In fact, there are many others in what often passes for revival in our own day. These things in themselves do not prove the absence of the Spirit of God. They do, however, alert us in two ways: first, to have nothing to do with the excesses as far as we can determine what they are, and second, to apply the next test.

2) We should expect true revival to engage men in both prayer and supreme emphasis on Jesus Christ. The absence of these things is fatal to any claim of revival. We hear pleas today to believe that roarings and infectious laughter signal the presence of revival. But are they the results of careful exposition of the Lord Jesus as our Prophet, Priest and King? When the apparent author or chief promoter of the current craze for laughter tells jokes in public meetings to prompt it, it is not hard to know what to think. And when he defends it on the ABC television network by pleading that since people laugh longer at his jokes than the jokes themselves warrant, it shows that the Holy Spirit is the source of the laughter, we may be excused for being skeptical.

3) We often need the perspective of years to make a final judgment. At the end of the day the passage of time will settle the issue in two ways. First, it will help us to examine the lasting influence of the revival. Are the participants more godly today than they were then? If they were among the abusers of revival, have they owned their abuses as both James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent did? Questions like these cannot be answered immediately.

Second, the passage of time will bring us to the judgment of

the infallible Judge. There we will learn the verdict of the One with infinite wisdom. His will be the final court of appeal.

In the meantime we will continue to suspect with Austin Phelps that

if the secret connections of revivals with the destiny of nations could be disclosed, they would appear to be more critical evolutions of history than the Gothic invasions. A volume has been compiled, narrating the decisive battles of the world. But more significant than this, and probing deeper the Divine government of the world, would be the history of revivals.

Author

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