



## BRIEF MUSINGS ON REVIVAL

There is no doubt that the church today is in need of a sweeping national and international revival. Across the West there is a loss of a felt sense of God's glory, a decline in attention to the means of grace and to obedience to the Word of God, and a drought of conversions in many places. Society has suffered accordingly, mocking the weakness of the church, bent on dismantling the Judeo-Christian hegemony developed over the last centuries and on brushing over its traces, silencing in the process those attempting to gainsay the "victories" of this post-Christian era.

The Welsh are especially aware of the need of revival, not because the church in Wales is in a worse condition than other parts of the West, but because it was there that the church in the West last knew in 1904–1905 national revival and consequent awakening, better enlivening. Those (re-)visiting the principality need only go to a prayer meeting in our evangelical circles to sense that revival remains the burning desire of many of God's people—a concern that is admirable and a marked feature of Welsh spirituality and devotion.

That said, there are dangers to be aware of in yearning for God "to rend the heavens and come down" (Is. 64:1). By identifying some of the main ones, we may be better placed to build consensus concerning the need of the hour.

### FIRST DANGER: A LOPSIDED HISTORICAL APPROACH

Amid all the prayers for revival there seems to be little in-depth biblical reflection on that for which we implore God. Plenty of history of revival, plenty of principles distinguishing revival from revivalism, but very little that reliably interprets and exegetes Scripture. While we cannot coerce God to revive his church, we can and ought to use these years of waiting actively on God to search the Scriptures afresh and to assess in light of it the historical accounts on which we rely for our understanding of revival.

Such accounts do matter, but we read them in the light of Scripture and not *vice versa*. Ensuring the primacy of Scripture, we maintain the distinction between God-centered revival from man-centered revivalism, but there is need of ending the lopsided use of one Testament to understand revival (Abraham Kuyper denying revival under the old covenant, Iain Murray under the old), the misuse of the language of Pentecost, and the confusion of the baptism with and the filling of the Spirit. The Reformed criticize the generic evangelical for confusing revivalism with revival, and yet the Reformed have not escaped the paucity of interpreting what the Bible has to say of revival and are capable of misusing references to Pentecost and of muddling the language of Holy Spirit baptism and of Spirit-filling.

### SECOND DANGER: A LOPSIDED PASSIVE APPROACH

Regardless of whether we understand aright the details of Scripture, in yearning for revival we can adopt an attitude of what Scottish scholar Donald Meek calls "revival dependency."<sup>1</sup> Revival dependency is that attitude that puts on hold for a better day—a day of an extraordinary operation of the Holy Spirit—what can be attempted or begun in this day amid the Spirit's ordinary operations.

To avoid this lopsidedness it is worth remembering, first, that revival is not a panacea for all the churches ills. In fact, when Satan cannot prevent revival, he seeks to mimic it, thereby endeavoring to destroy it from within. Revival can also be harmed by the way it is handled. It is said, for instance, that the longevity of the effects of the Welsh revival of 1904–1905 became truncated by the emphasis on singing rather than preaching.

Second, while revival hails a fresh filling with the Spirit, outside of revival we nevertheless possess the baptism of the Spirit given us in conversion. This baptism is warrant enough to pursue the health

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<sup>1</sup> Donald E Meek, "Gaelic Bible, Revival and Mission: the spiritual rebirth of the nineteenth-century Highlands" in *The Church in the Highlands*, edited by James Kirk (Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 1998), 141.



and mission of the church. While, then, we cannot procure revival, we can maintain a healthy balance between a reliance on the sovereign movement of the Spirit and the fulfilment of our ongoing responsibilities in the life of the church: attending to preaching, discipleship, prayer, outreach, church planting, and contention for the faith.

The saying of Oliver Cromwell in regard to the English Civil War of the seventeenth century comes to mind: "Pray to God but keep your gunpowder dry." In God's ordering of our affairs, fulfillment of our human responsibility runs parallel with dependence on God for the blowing of his Spirit. As we sometimes say, we work for the Lord as if it all depends on us, but we pray to God in the midst of the work knowing that the success of it all depends on him.

### THIRD DANGER: A LOPSIDED ACTIVE APPROACH

We are, conversely, to guard against over-reaction to the passive approach, avoiding what we may call revival independency. It manifests itself in such a reliance on the Spirit's ordinary operations that we lose sight of how much more can be accomplished, and in a shorter time, when the Spirit acts in extraordinary ways.

If the answer to revival dependency is found in our duty to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), the answer to revival independency arises from remembering those moments when, in the inspiration of the moment, the Spirit-filled afresh the people of God (Acts 4:23-31). The early church needed boldness to go on preaching Jesus in the hostile atmosphere of post-crucifixion Jerusalem. They therefore gathered together to commit the matter to their sovereign Lord. The fact that the Lord answered their prayer for boldness with a fresh and mighty filling of the Spirit suggests we cannot afford, not least in these days, to ignore the role revival can play in God's hand in granting us what we need in our time and place to be faithful to God and fruitful in his work.

### CONCLUSION

Evidently, these are just a few brief musings about revival, influenced by Scripture and by attitudes to revival experienced first-hand in the United Kingdom and United States, especially. They are preparatory to a more in-depth study of revival.

My point is this: the theme is one of a number requiring in our evangelical and Reformed circles a fresh sympathetic-critical approach. This sympathetic criticism (we might call it creative orthodoxy) is overdue, for so wedded are we to our historical heroes in the faith that we are in danger of simply regurgitating their thought instead of renewing it through the ongoing study of Scripture. That is itself an evidence of our need of revival, for revival can bring with it fresh energy for reform according to God's Word. The Lord make it so!

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