

Revival

(Special emphasis on the 18th Century revival in England)

Did you know that there hasn't been revival in England for nearly 300 years?

The Welsh revival of 1904-1905, touched part of this country, as did the revival in Northern Ireland in 1859. However, a major move of God touching lives and souls and changing the spiritual & moral climate of this country hasn't occurred since the 17th century revival under John Wesley and George Whitfield.

Would it be fair to say that revival is only answer to what we need today - that is, for God to move on this land by the pouring out of his Spirit and to bring it back from the brink of moral & spiritual bankruptcy that we see all around us?

Firstly, what do we mean by revival? Well, the word 'revive' comes from the Greek word 'anathallo', which means '*to live again - to flourish anew - to flourish or blossom*'. So when we talk about revival, it means we *flourish or blossom - like a flower in bud*. When a flower blossoms, it reaches its full potential and becomes everything it was created to be in all its glory. That's exactly what happens in revival - we flourish - we blossom spiritually - we become what we are meant to be (or at least in a greater measure) The English definition for the word 'revive' or 'revival' is '*to bring back to life again*' - which is interesting because you can't revive something that hasn't once had 'life' to some degree.

When we talk about revival in the spiritual sense, we are nearly always talking about those who have experienced some form of spiritual life already - for example, the church of God - that's us! Suddenly the power of God comes down from the heavens and we are bought into a new and more profound awareness of the great truths of our faith (which perhaps we had known intellectually before but not in experience or reality). We experience a greater desire to know God and to serve him - we are enlivened, invigorated in our faith. Also, new power comes into the preaching of the ministers of God, the leaders in the church and as a result of this; those outside of the church are convicted / converted and brought into the kingdom of God.

In essence then every revival has 2 characteristics:-

Firstly, the extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit on the church of God.

Secondly, as a consequence of this, those outside of the church are affected in an equally extraordinary way by the newly anointed preaching and message from those renewed inside the church and are bought into the kingdom of God. We have seen this with past revivals with people like George Whitfield and John Wesley who were ministers in the Church of England. They had experienced some form of spiritual awakening already - in fact some of these men in this great revival had been converted for years - yet when Gods special anointing touched their lives, they moved in such power and unction they simply had not experienced in their faith before.

When does revival occur? - Well, as revival is a sovereign act of God, we cannot predict when it will occur or put a timetable on it. God brings it about in His own time and place subject to His grace and mercy. Wouldn't it be great if we had a sort of 'spiritual barometer' that when the moral & spiritual climate hit a low level, a thermostat would kick in and God would send His Holy Spirit to revive? Sadly, it doesn't work like that. Scripture says - "*Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?*" (Rom 11:34). No one can predict when God is going to do something.

However, what we do know is that revival comes out of a barren place - a dry land. As we heard earlier, to revive is to bring back to life something that once had life - so it stands to reason revival comes to a place that desperately needs it.

Isaiah 40 says this:-

"A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain land the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken".

Isaiah 35:1 reads:-

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus".

And God loves to work in this way - remember the story of the dry bones in Ezekiel?

Ezek 37 says:

"This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will come to life"

God so loves to make something out of nothing - to rescue and revive something that appears extinct, dead.

Could we say then, that we are in a ‘barren place’ at the moment? Are we in a ‘desert place’, in a wilderness as a nation, a country or a Church? If so, the conditions are right for revival! I have read quite a bit recently about the revival or the ‘Great Awakening’ as it was called in the 18th century in this country. It was said of this great revival, that it was ‘*the greatest movement of God since the time of the apostles*’.

JC Ryle in his book on this revival (called 18th Century Leaders and written in 1868), described some of the conditions in England 300 years ago - before this great movement of God took place. He says of the political scene that “*corruption, jobbing and mismanagement in high places was the rule and purity the exception*” as well as pointing out that “*the state of the country from a religious and moral point of view was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it*”

He goes onto say:- “*From the year 1700 till about the era of the French revolution England seemed barren of all that is really good. How such a state of things can have risen in a land of free bibles and professing Protestantism is almost past comprehension. Christianity seemed to lie as one dead in such a way you might have said ‘she is dead’ - morality however, much exalted in the pulpits, was thoroughly trampled underfoot in the streets. There was darkness in high places, darkness in low places, darkness in the court, the camp, the parliament, the bar - darkness in the country and darkness in the town - darkness among rich and darkness among poor - a gross, thick, religious and moral darkness - a darkness that might be felt*”.

Furthermore he says:- “*Does anyone ask what the churches were doing? The answer is soon given - the Church of England existed in those days with her admirable articles, her time honoured liturgy, her parochial system, her Sunday services and her 10,000 clergy - they existed but they could hardly be said to have lived. They did nothing. They were sound asleep. Cold morality or barren orthodoxy formed the staple teaching both in church and chapel - sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert or to save souls. They seemed agreed at one point - and that was to let the devil alone and do nothing for hearts and souls. It can surprise no one that the land was deluged with infidelity and scepticism - the Prince of this world made good use of the opportunity*”.

He continues:- “*His agents were zealous in propagating every type of strange and blasphemous opinion. Tindal denounced Christianity as a priest craft. Whiston pronounced the miracles of the bible as deception. Woolston declared them to be mere fanciful stories of the utter incapacity of the pulpit to stem the tide of this flood of evil*”.

“The celebrated lawyer of his time, William Blackstone, had the curiosity early in the reign of George the 3rd, to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He said he did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Roman statesman Marcus Cicero and that it would have been impossible for him to discover from what he heard whether the preacher was a follower of Confucius, Mohamed or of Christ”

Bishop Butler at the time said- “*It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is no longer a subject of enquiry but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious*” Such was the moral & spiritual state of England 300 years ago - yet God poured out his revival blessing unto this dry & barren land so much so that it was unrecognizable 50 years later.

How similar are our days to the ones described here? We live in times when we cannot trust our leaders, immorality and corruption are rife. Judges 21v25 says” *Israel had no King and everyone did as they saw fit*”. A good description of our times - everyone does as they see fit, without real leaders, without direction and we have no spiritual or moral compass anymore.

Perversions that would have shocked people 300 years ago and even shocked our ‘modern society’ 50 years ago, are now seen as an acceptable means of behaviour. We have turned our back on God - the way God wants us to live.

As Romans 3 says - “*all have gone astray - no one seeks God*”.

Christianity is seen as irrelevant, or as an extreme viewpoint which can be harsh or judgmental, in these ‘modern times’ when you try to speak out about your faith, it can be seen to ‘cause offence to others’.

What about the church? Are we in a healthy state? I am always a bit reluctant to speak about the church because the church is you and I! - We are the ‘bride of Christ’ but we cannot ignore it when the bride is led astray.

If we were to ‘tour’ the churches in this country today in 21st century England as they did 300 years ago, what would we see and more importantly, what would we hear? Let me tell you what I believe we would hear, at least in the large part anyway:-

1. An ‘ecumenical gospel’- this is where it says ‘lets not talk about our differences - let’s talk about what we have in common’. Sounds good but often it’s a compromise of basic biblical truths. One Christian writer said- “*The undiluted preaching from God’s Word and an authoritative stand on truth, seem to be on the decline. What we are seeing instead, is a broadening of the gospel, a redefining of what it means to be a Christian and a growing emphasis on inclusion and tolerance*”.

Ecumenism has come to mean- reducing all elements of faith to the lowest common denominator. God’s Word is neglected, experience is valued above truth, a false and selfish faith is promoted and sound doctrine and correction are despised as ‘divisive’ and ‘unloving’.

What else might we see out there?

2. A ‘cult gospel’- this takes the emphasis away from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the need for repentance and rebirth and adds on ‘extra bits’ from people supposedly blessed with divine revelation - which turns out in the end to be salvation by works. By man’s own efforts, there are numerous cult gospels out there - too many to mention.

3. A‘part gospel’ - this is where you will hear only truths that are believed to be palatable to people, for example - ‘Jesus is your friend’ or‘God is love’, which or course are true but is not the full picture. There is no mention of how God is our judge or any mention of sin, the holiness of God, the righteousness of God, or hell or final judgment. The trouble with this gospel is many that sit under it are not converted at all!

What else might we hear?

4. A ‘what can Jesus do for you gospel’ - health, wealth and prosperity - this is an ‘all about me’ gospel as if Jesus was the formula for success to get what we want out of life to reach our full potential. It preaches that nobody will be poor or sick and emphasizes one main principle (but in a twisted way) -‘that it is more blessed to give than to receive’ - and how do you do this? As I saw the other day on the TV screen “and please give by sending your cheques to the number at the bottom of the screen”!

Or How about:

5. A ‘social gospel’ - this teaches that we are getting better - man is improving with time with more learning and education. It has no concern about the individual souls of men or the corruption of man’s heart. Jesus becomes a political figure and promotes the betterment of society through a Christian disguise and to worldly standards.

Clearly with all the above - One of the greatest needs of our time in the church is a ‘spirit of discernment’.

Is the state of the church today much different to how it was 300 years ago?

Of course we have bible believing church’s teaching the true gospel and thank God for them however, it is becoming increasingly rare and the teaching of the bible has become increasingly compromised. Paul says in 2 Timothy-“*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths*”.

We need to be on our guard!

Where does revival occur? - Well, it starts in the most unusual places such as little towns and villages. The Welsh revival started in Loughor near Swansea - anybody heard of that? It started with prayer in small school rooms and likewise it started in small towns and hamlets in the 18th century. If it was left to man, it would start at somewhere big like Wembley stadium with some great celebrity announcing it! - But God isn’t like that. He confounds the wisdom of the wise. It’s the same with the people God used in revival - they were just ordinary people.

George Whitfield was born and brought up in a pub with pimps and drunkards all around him - Evan Roberts, who was prominent in the Welsh revival, was an ex miner.

(I corr 1:26):“*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth*”

Likewise, as man cannot predict when a revival will occur or start he cannot keep it going when it has stopped! It is quite amusing when we hear of these revival meetings where they seem to believe they can turn the Holy Spirit ‘on and off’ at their command but there is always a suddenness and unexpectedness about the movement of the Spirit of God, it comes when you least expect it and when its gone, no mere man or woman can maintain it or keep hold of it.

So how does revival occur?-There are a couple of areas we can look at that appear to be common in all revivals:-

1. The first main recurring factor in all revivals is prayer. Matthew Henry wrote -“*When God intends great mercy for all his people he first of all sets them praying*”. It may only be a few people praying but prayer, deep intercessory prayer is always going on.

What about the forerunner of all revivals - Pentecost - in Acts 1? Jesus told his disciples -“*Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my father has promised you*”. What were the disciples doing when it came? Acts 1:14 says:“*they were all joined together in prayer*”.

When God brought revival to the Israelites when they were in bondage to Egypt, it was because God was moved by their prayers - their cries.

Exodus 2.23 says: “*During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob*”. Prayer can be perceived as ‘groaning’.

If we look at the first great revival to the Gentiles (that's us!), we see that again God was moved by prayer. You remember Peter preached to the Gentiles for the first time in Acts 10 in obedience to a vision he had. It all came about because an angel had visited a man called Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian regiment. It was said of Cornelius in scripture "*that he and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly*"

When the angel spoke to him, (Acts 2v4 says this) - "*Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.* The angel answered, *"Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God".*

So, prayer was again a factor. We need to become desperate for God again - a desperation that puts us on our knees and gives us a heart for the lost and a sense of our own absolute impotence without the supernatural empowering of God in our lives

2. The second main factor, or agency, God uses in all revivals, is **preaching**. As we read earlier, Isaiah 40:3 says: "*hear the voice of one calling in the desert*". That's how God works in revival - God anointing the spoken word within a chosen vessel.

When we think about revival how do we think it will come about - some indefinable power from heaven we cannot see? Well yes, the Spirit of God 'blows where it will' - but with that power expressing itself in the spoken word - a supernatural word from God.

History shows again and again, that it is as the word of God is spoken, the anointing falls on the people. When Peter preached his first sermon in Acts 2 v37, it says "*people were cut to the heart*" - "*what shall we do?*" - They said.

In acts 10 v44 when Peter spoke to Cornelius household, it says that while Peter was still speaking, "*the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message*".

When Paul spoke to Lydia in acts 16v14, it says "*the Lord opened her heart*" to Paul's message. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4 and said "*the Spirit of the lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor to set captives free*".

God anointed Moses' lips when he spoke to the Israelites as they came out of Egypt into revival. God anointed Nehemiah as he spoke to the Jews and the city walls were restored.

God anointed Jonah's lips when he eventually preached to Nineveh and they repented and turned from their sins and were revived.

We need to be careful of any trend to relegate preaching. The puritans called the place of preaching the 'throne of the word of God' - it had the prime place in their services. That's where the raised pulpits came from because they put the preaching of the word of God in a very high place.

There is a danger today in our churches, that preaching gets swallowed up with other activities. Other means of expression come in - drama, testimonies, video's, entertainment etc. These are not wrong in there place however we need to recognise it's the individual set apart by God to deliver His message - to preach/ proclaim His Good News. This is the chosen instrument of God in revival.

So then, what sort of preaching was it and what sort of message did they bring that had such a profound effect on people?

There are 3 areas we can look at here:-

1. It was simple and direct - Augustine said '*A wooden key is not so beautiful as a golden one but if it opens the door when the golden one can't its far more useful*'.

That's how they preached - simply and directly - they saw their mark and went for it!

Some of the men God used 300 years ago were graduates of Oxford but when you look at their sermons, they brought things down to the level of the 'hearers' who were often un-educated

miners or farmers- illiterate in fact .

Jesus often spoke in parables - and why was that? - So the disciples could understand him.

2. It was also practical preaching- it gave the '**how**' in the Christian life. It's alright preaching great deep probing, theological sermons but if it leaves you with more questions than answers, what's the point! That's what people are looking for today - answers. There are enough questions around. Revival preaching isn't vague - it gives you the answers. It was like the preaching of the apostle Paul who always gave you the practical outworking (the answer) of what he said.

Here are some examples:-

Eph 4:28 : "*He who has been stealing must steal no longer*" - (So, what must you do?) - "but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need".

Eph4:25: "*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood*" - (So, what must you do?) - "and speak truthfully to his neighbour"

Eph4:9: "*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths*" - (So, what must you do?) - "but only what is helpful for building others up"

There was no vagueness. Revival preaching has clarity and a practicality to it and they told you what you shouldn't do as well as what you should do.

3. In revival preaching, they preached the full gospel. As was said earlier, there is a tendency today to preach what is palatable or to emphasise one particular area in neglect of the other. God however, anoints the full picture. They preached on heaven but also on hell. They preached on the new life in Christ but also on the sinfulness of man. They preached on God's love but also his righteousness & judgement. They didn't avoid difficult theology and didn't get tired of the old truths, and most of all they passionately believed in what they said. As JC Ryle said - "*there must be unmistakable faith and conviction in the pulpit if there is to be faith and conviction in the pews*". This is the sort of preaching that God anoints.

What are the effects of revival on a country and its people? - I read an excerpt from a Welsh newspaper at the time of the Welsh revival in 1904. "*Work in various coalmines and metal works started with a prayer*" (Can you imagine that?)... "*Drunkards have been soberised, publicans have lost much business, conduct on public streets has been elevated and the police and magistrates have had quieter times. The bottom of the pits have been utilised as centres for prayer and praise meetings and there has been a general raising of the standard of public life*".

This was from an independent source not a religious magazine.

It was said of the 18th century revival that it averted an English revolution, like the revolution that took place in France, due to the change in people's behaviour and attitudes. The tide of evil was stemmed. It changed completely the spiritual, social & moral landscape of this country to such an effect we still see remnants of it today - through our political, social and welfare systems our institutes and societies - I will say it again! Do we desperately need the same in our day?

We should have an expectation for revival. There is lots of talk today about the end times and clearly God is shaking the nation but history shows us Gods continual grace and patience to us, holding back the end so that 'the elect may come in' and that no one who is called should perish. That's what revival does - it grants another season of his mercy.

Isaiah 40:s3-5 says this:

"A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain land the glory of the Lord

will be revealed”

It goes on to say-“And it will be said: Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people”.

“Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God” - there is a picture here of preparing for the Lord’s coming - removing obstacles out of the way.

So how then, can we prepare for His coming - for his revival in our own lives, as revival can be both a personal, as well as corporate thing?

Well, we should examine our own hearts. Isaiah says *“he revives the heart of the contrite”*.

Confession and repentance usually precedes revival. That doesn’t mean digging around searching for stuff but dealing with things in ourselves as they arise from the Holy Spirits prompting.

Let us also hold to the truth- know the scriptures. We live in an age of so many false teachers; we need to contend for the truth. know it -fight for it - never compromise it - proclaim it wherever we are. Even if we may even be the only ones! There is a battle today for the very truth in this book the Bible. And the truth from Church history and the great revivals of the past is, God will only anoint the whole truth of his word. No true revival has ever taken place where the full gospel is not proclaimed.

Last of all; let us pray that God would revive his work in England in our great country. Let us pray expectantly that God can visit this land and that what He has done, He can do so again. He can do it, He is willing to do it and he waits for our petitions. Let us pray that God would raise up men and women for our times to stem the tide of evil that is so prevalent so that glory of the Lord will be revealed again.

Amen.

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