

THE NEED FOR REVIVAL - THE ASSEMBLIES IN AN AGE OF CRISIS

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It is clear that we live in an age of crisis, and that it is marked by speed, complexity, and inequality of life. Its demands are more clamant and pressing, and its whole atmosphere is one of materialism, such values having the chief place in the life and thought of the masses. Indeed it would be true to say that the whole climate of the age is against any change. Yet if there is to be any appreciation of spiritual values, revival is needed. We are faced with the apparent ineffectiveness of the Christian Church - yet such a renowned Church historian as Dr. Kenneth Latourette believes that there is much cause for encouragement among Christians, despite what seems to the contrary. The mighty impact upon the world of its day of the Spirit-filled Church at Pentecost and throughout that generation is a challenge that we dare not ignore.

A Survey of Revivals

Revival is a spiritual awakening among God's people which powerfully affects the outside world. The Biblical usage of the word as something that is essentially to do with the people of God is sometimes lost sight of through the more popular use of 'revival' as denoting a time of considerable blessing in conversions, perhaps following on some special campaigns, as in the days of the Moody and Sankey evangelistic missions.

We can only mention some of the periods of revival without enlarging upon them, but in such a list reference must be made to the great period of spiritual awakening that we call the Reformation; the Evangelical Revival through the ministry of John Wesley; the 1859 Revival that began in Ulster; the Welsh Revival of 1904; the wave of blessing among fishermen in East Anglia that began with the preaching of the Rev. Douglas Brown, a Baptist Minister, in 1922; the great work of W.P. Nicholson in Belfast round about 1930; and the Revival in the Hebrides as recently as 1948. The New England Revival of the 18th century under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards is a chapter in the religious history of America, and one of absorbing interest. There are many occasions of special blessing in evangelism which we cannot consider, such as that in North East Scotland under the preaching of Donald Ross, Alexander Marshall and others, the Moody and Sankey period, and the awakening in Ruanda that went on over many years. Whatever list might be given it would be incomplete - the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit has always transcended human powers of understanding, appropriating or interpreting it.

Marks of Revival

Duncan Campbell has said, in commenting on the 1948 Revival in the Hebrides, that it was accompanied by (a) a strong sense of God, and (b) a strong sense of sin. The fact and the power of God, and a dawning sense of His readiness to bless, seem to have marked every period of revival blessing. Along with this has gone an acute sense of conviction of sin, so that people have cried aloud in meetings, or when alone, that God may have mercy upon them. It is well to note, in addition, that spiritual awakenings appear to know no denominational boundaries: the divine blessing has fallen upon men and women irrespective of their background or of the denominational attachment of the preacher or the place of worship associated with his Ministry. Revivals are characterised by certain fundamental features as those mentioned, yet they

are not necessarily all cast in the same mould - there have been different emphases at times both in preaching and in the resultant issues of such work. Contrary to some popular thought, they have not all been cast in what might be termed the Moody and Sankey mould. Many movements back to the Bible have been clearly distinguished from other equally evident works of God - the Reformation and the Brethren Movements being two dissimilar examples of this fact.

The Part Played by Brethren

We have said that the Brethren Movement itself was a revival. This can be seen from the simplicity of faith that marked its early days, the grasp of eternal realities that was seen in both leaders and assemblies as a whole. The tract by Anthony Norris Groves, Christian Devotedness, proved to be an epoch-making message to large numbers of Christians of the time. Their unworldly spirit was in harmony with the spiritual power that marked their witness, while a stream of light came from the Scriptures through the ministry of men who were obviously men of God. In general it can be fairly said that Brethren and their stand for the things of God acted as a powerful stimulant to many of the spiritual movements of the 19th century.

Writing in his book, 'Brethren: the Story of the Great Recovery', David J. Beattie refers to the Ulster Revival of 1859 as follows: 'That notable work of grace in the year 1859 began near Kells, County Antrim, through the exercise of several young brethren, amongst them being Jeremiah Meneely. The movement spread far and wide, one of the first districts to be reached being near the town of Randalstown, County Antrim, where many were saved through the ministry of the renowned C. H. Mackintosh and a brother called Moore' (p.281). It was by prayer and wholehearted Christian testimony that many Brethren helped forward such work. Perhaps their contribution has been more than that of indirect than direct help, or where it has been indirect it has more frequently been the work of individuals than of assemblies as such. Yet it has always been in evidence somewhere; and to this day there are few active interdenominational evangelistic bodies or associations where various representatives of Brethren have not been found participating for the progress of the gospel.

What hinders Revival?

There are many things that hinder revival among God's people - apathy, complacency, unreality, prayerlessness, lack of consecration, sectarianism, encrusted traditionalism ... and perhaps even that sometimes we are looking for the wrong thing while talking of revival. This raises some pertinent questions. Are we suspicious of enthusiasm? People were in Wesley's day, though he lived to be regarded as 'respectable'. How much should we expect revival? If we sufficiently deplore our failures and sins, will revival come? Against such queries we may set some others, such as, How far is the Christian life one of steady discipline? Should we aim at devotion to Christ, making that our goal, instead of aiming at revival? The consequences of this might be far-reaching; perhaps God would then send revival.

The Way of Revival

Revival will be seen in personal life, and in the church. The Lord's dealings with the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2:3) reveal the differences that can be found in Christian community life - some can reach high levels of

spiritual experience, while others can decline and fall, eventually losing their very existence as churches. If our church life is to be spiritually awake, we must honestly and quietly seek the will of God, remembering the importance of ascertaining what may be His present will for His Church. We must rise above and beyond our 'forms' even if they be the simpler forms of Nonconformist congregations. We must be ready to discard the dead wood of mere custom, that we may hold all the more firmly to what Holy Scripture really teaches.

The preaching of the Word needs to be given its rightful place. The Reformers placed the pulpit central in their churches, displacing the central place given in pre-Reformation days to the altar. This was a wise insight, for it was the preaching of the Word of God that established their doctrines, bringing back the truth of God into free circulation among His people. Have we not at times been in danger of displacing the preaching of the Word? Let this be restored, and our churches supplied with spiritual ministries - and we shall thus make a way for the Holy Spirit to act through the Scriptures.

Arising out of this comes the question of training and equipping those men who are plainly called of God to the ministry of His Word. We can merely mention this in passing as a matter that demands close attention, if the primacy of the preaching of the Word is to be realised among our churches, to any general extent.

We must get our thinking straight on many matters. The ever-present danger in an affluent society is that Christians will become tinged with the spirit of materialism, and cease to be useable for the furtherance of God's purposes. Souls will not be saved if an assembly is riddled with a materialistic outlook. This was the sin of Laodicea, with its consequent condemnation by our Lord. Complacency is perhaps the crowning sin of the Christian Church: may we be kept from it in the mercy of God.

The way of revival in personal life may prove very demanding. If we give the Word of God its rightful place in the church, that Word will be addressed to us individually. Will we receive it as God's Word? Will we let God deal with us privately and individually? If we are prepared for this, we shall come to a new sense of God ... and of sin. The hindrance is largely because often we are not prepared for God to deal with us as closely as that. The Psalmist cried, 'Quicken Thou me, according to Thy Word' (Psalm 119: 25). Most of the things we have referred to are found here in this verse - Prayer, humility, a sense of personal guilt and need, and all of it based upon the Word of God. Today we are hearing a call to more disciplined living. It will affect our time, our substance, our occupations, our outlook if we respond. Yet that is the way of blessing, in the quickening that God can bring to us all. In such spiritual reformation, according to God's Word we shall experience the awakening for ourselves, and for our churches.
