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An Anatomy of Revival

Dr Gray is currently Secretary of the Religious and Theological Students Fellowship and the Tyndale Fellowship Associates. His article brings some clarity to an area which is easily prone to loose definitions and consequent loose thinking.

Key words: Theology; church; revival; Holy Spirit.

This paper attempts to outline the main elements of a historical and contemporary theology of revival, presenting the issues and challenges raised by such a theology. It then argues that the category of 'revival' may not in fact be specifically helpful to our general understanding of Christian theology. Talk of revival is today common place. Although the force of the 'Toronto Blessing' may now have passed, together with other movements it re-ignited discussions concerning revival, and in particular whether the Toronto phenomena were foretastes of a revival to come. In the light of this, sales of classics on revival have rocketed, and once again the possibility that revival is on its way is up for discussion.

I. Historical perspective

It is unnecessary to repeat in detail the histories and events of periods in the church's history which have been labelled as revival. A number are worth mentioning for the importance which they are later given. Most significant perhaps are the First and Second Great Awakenings in the United States. The most well-known and concentrated works on revival come from the pen of Jonathan Edwards.² *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England in 1740* (1742), and *A Treatise on Religious Affections* (1746) all contributed to Edwards' cyclical view of revival.³ Thus, revival was seen as a stage in God's plan of history, where God

1 Thanks to the notes and thoughts of Mark Smith on this subject, which helped me to form some of the structure of this paper.

2 For an excellent overview of the theologian Edwards, see Jenson, R., *America's Theologian* (Oxford: OUP, 1988). See also Murray, I., *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

3 Various editions of these and other works are available. The massive Yale compendium of the complete works is the best collection, although not the most accessible.

breaks into human experience in exceptional ways. This was certainly the historical experience of Edwards and the churches in which he was involved. Similarly, the preaching of George Whitefield took a central place in the first great awakening. Plenty of accounts and histories of these men, and the events surrounding their ministries, exist.⁴ In summary, their preaching emphasised the sovereignty of God, upon whom humans were dependent for their salvation. Although the number of converts varied geographically, the impact on American society is beyond doubt.

At the turn of the century, the Second Great Awakening had similar force, yet shifted towards a more Arminian theology, focusing towards the end on the person of Charles Finney, and his influential *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835). He emphasised a move away from a Calvinistic theology, and engineered a process whereby the church could bring God's revival to the world. The influence of this approach would be felt most by the work of Dwight L. Moody, who visited Britain between 1873 and 1875. During a four month campaign in London he preached to more than two and a half million people.⁵ The British Evangelical Revival can perhaps be summed up by the famous experience of John Wesley who, writing on 24th May 1738, described the warming of his heart and his trust in Christ. Wesley's itinerant preaching, as that of Whitefield, was to bring the gospel to thousands. In addition to these periods, there are a number of other movements that are often referred to as experiencing revival: Kilsyth in 1839; Wales in 1904–05; Rwanda in the 1930s; and the Hebrides in 1950–2.

II. The contemporary scene

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, it would be easy to attribute revivalist fervour to the United States alone, or to pretend that issues that may concern us regarding revival are mainly an American issue. Although revivalism has predominantly created its own culture in the States,⁶ it is not restricted to those

3 (continued) For some of the relevant works, see *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), which has been reprinted 5 times since its 1965 edition.

4 See, for example, Noll, M., *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (London: SPCK, 1992), 91–113; idem., *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Leicester: IVP, 1997), 221–224; Ward, W. R., *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992); Murray, I., *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994); Tidball, D., *Who are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 54–66.

5 See Pollock, J., *Moody without Sankey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963).

6 For a fascinating study of parts of this subculture, see Balmer, R., *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (Oxford: OUP, 1993).

shores. The current influence of revivalist theology can be traced amongst Pentecostals, charismatics both within and outside new/house churches, and restorationists.⁷ Although the agenda of restoration churches was not strictly or solely revivalist, the theology of renewal was bound to spill over into revival rhetoric.⁸ In a sense, charismatic renewal has come to be seen by many as a continuous revival. It must also be remembered that alongside this interest in revival from Pentecostal and charismatic circles, the continued reformed emphasis on revival as a sovereign act of God has remained in force.

A number of movements and events clamour to be seen as revival, or as precursors to revival. The 'Toronto Blessing' is the best known, and has perhaps done most to increase discussion of revival. Although Toronto is not now the highest point on most people's agenda, the rhetoric and experiences remain in many church circles. In spite of the fact that a statement by Evangelical Leaders put out under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance in 1994 claimed that 'We do not believe that the Church in the United Kingdom is presently experiencing revival', many saw it as the beginnings of something new – possibly revival. Other events have followed.

At the beginning of 2000, an internet search, using the America On Line search engine, received 13439 matches with the term 'Christian Revival.' Admittedly not all of these sites are directly concerned with revival, or are in any sense main stream, yet such a figure illustrates that this is not a passing phase.⁹ Among the web sites are pages acting as directories to the best revival sites on the net. Popular verses quoted on pages include Joel 2:23, Dt. 11:13–14, and Zc. 10:1. The site for the Revival Ministries of Dr Rodney Howard-Browne (linked with Toronto) had been visited 88,000 times in the two year period between January 1996 and January 1998, where it is claimed that the meetings held by Howard-Browne are 'reminiscent of revivals of the past.'¹⁰ A Methodist page on revival claims that 'the currents of the Holy Spirit renewal and revival around the world are touching Britain

7 For a detailed study of restorationism, see Walker, A., *Restoring the Kingdom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985; 2nd Ed 1989; 3rd Ed 1998). A treatment of charismatics by Scotland, N., *Charismatics and the Next Millennium* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995) gives some detail to the charismatic-revivalist link.

8 See especially Walker's chapter on Restorationism and Classical Pentecostalism, 247ff.

9 There is of course an issue here as to the reliability of research undertaken on the web. Although numbers may not ultimately be that significant, the fact that so many sites exist illustrates the contemporary liveliness of the discussion. Even if it is merely a perceived need that such web pages should exist, they are obviously successful enough to be used in the marketing of all manner of merchandise linked to the topic of revival. For example, www.revivalnow.com acts as a revival shopping web site.

10 This is perhaps one of the most interesting series of web pages, www.revival.com. There are numerous links provided from this site, as well as detailed information on the work of Howard-Browne.

in an increasing way.' A purported 128,949 people have made decisions for Christ at the Brownsville Assemblies of God church in Pensacola, according to its official site. At Marsham Street, Westminster, a reputed 60,000 people have attended revival meetings, with over 6,000 making a response to God. According to Marc DuPont, leader of some of the meetings, 'we are living in a historic time where God is taking back his church.' Wheaton College, Illinois, has seen hundreds of students come to repent and dedicate themselves to holy living before God, yet another event widely reported in the Christian media.

As merely one example, the May 1998 issue of *Renewal* magazine contained advertisements for events such as 'Sowing and Building for Revival' (p. 51), 'Revival Fire 98' (p. 44), 'Revival Weekend' (p. 36) and 'Celebration for Revival' (p. 41), together with an article by Michael Harper on 'Is it to be revival or survival?' (pp. 12–14). The same magazine records the Evangelical Alliance's call to a national day of prayer in 1998, of which one of the four themes was 'Revival: Seeing the United Kingdom Changed.' At the end of 1997, 3 networks of churches backed a major conference for their leaders entitled, 'Theology for Revival.' Millennium (and millennial) fever is also in evidence on many Christian book shop shelves.¹¹ Even two years later, similar evidence can be found across the sweep of Christian media.¹² In the UK, the group of churches organised around the Kensington City Temple call their journal 'Revival Times', and provide a whole host of resources on the internet linked to this theme.¹³ Despite the fading into the background of some Toronto experiences, revival is still very much on the agenda.

Revival today?

Perhaps the most discussed contemporary question regarding revival is whether the church is in the midst of revival, or on the verge of revival. Most church leaders are hesitant to claim that we are currently in the midst of revival. However, Gerald Coates is adamant:

11 The term 'Pre-Millennial Tension' (PMT) has been coined by Andrew Walker to describe the religious phenomena that have burst into the scene in the past 10 years as the new millennium makes its impact on religious and cultural life. Of course the link between revival and eschatology is not a new theme, and one which is not taken up here in detail. Richard Kyle briefly explores the link as it appeared in the Great Awakening in *Awaiting the Millennium* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 80–81.

12 As this paper was completed, a search on www.goshen.net (a search engine related to Christian subjects) discovered 182 whole sites devoted to a ministry that was classified as 'revival', and another 612 that mentioned the theme.

13 www.revivaltimes.org.

Obviously we are in the middle of a colossal revival. . . . My phrase is 'Revival is here but it's on its way'.¹⁴

Coates backs up his belief with evidence internationally (China, Korea, Brazil, Pensacola, Wheaton, Toronto), and nationally (prisoners coming to Christ, gypsies, Alpha courses, etc.).¹⁵ He replies to critics by arguing that these are local and people-group orientated revivals. Revival may not be happening everywhere to everyone, but it is happening. In this conviction, meetings continue at Marsham Street church, Westminster, with international evangelists and revivalists taking part weekly.

The most common belief seems to be that revival is imminent. Thus the current outpourings of the Spirit seen across the world are signs of an imminent world-wide revival. Mark Stibbe bases his understanding of the contemporary scene on the prophecy given in Ezk. 47 (see below). As the prophecy predicts 4 stages of the Spirit's blessing, so Stibbe and others see today's experiences as the foretaste of the final stage of revival to come. Historically, the first three 'waves' have been: (1) The emergence of Pentecostalism; (2) The emergence of Charismatic Renewal in the 1960s; (3) The emergence of Protestant Evangelical renewal in the early 1980s, linked especially to the Signs and Wonders movement of Wimber.¹⁶ Stibbe then suggests that what we have seen in the Toronto movement and elsewhere are the beginnings of the fourth wave. Tying this in with a prophecy given to Smith Wigglesworth which predicted not only the second wave, but also two other great movements of God, one stressing the word, the other the Spirit, Stibbe identifies that both have happened, one amongst charismatics, the other amongst evangelical scholars and others (as examples he gives Billy Graham, John Stott, and F. F. Bruce).

If this Third Wave is all about the reintegration of the Word and the Spirit, then that is significant. Smith Wigglesworth prophesied that it would be when Scripture and the Spirit – the two hands of God, according to Irenaeus – were united in one spirituality that the world would witness a huge revival. My deep conviction is that the current blessings witnessed in Toronto and in thousands of churches throughout the world are the first hints of a fourth wave.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Christianity Today*, January 1998, 25–26.

¹⁵ This is also reported in Hilborn, D., *Picking up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 156, where Coates is making the challenge that revival is happening where expository preaching is absent. This again seems to reflect the division between a revival and a revivalism mentality.

¹⁶ *Times of Refreshing*, 10–22; this scheme is common, see for example Wagner, C. Peter, 'Third Wave', in S. M. Burgess and G. B. McGee, eds, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 843f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

Similar thinking was represented by R. T. Kendall and Paul Cain as they co-authored *The Word and the Spirit*.¹⁸ As lectures given at Wembley in 1992, these papers were to demonstrate the coming together of Word and Spirit, subsequently being distributed in the context of the Toronto blessing. In the preface, Kendall wrote that,

I believe that ancient history is repeating itself. As Abraham sincerely thought that Ishmael was the promised son, so many have believed that the Pentecostal/charismatic movement was *the* revival God promised. It is my view that Isaac is coming, a work of God greater than anything heretofore seen – even in proportion to Isaac's greatness over Ishmael. . . . Paul and I firmly believe the church is on the brink of a post-charismatic era of unprecedented glory.¹⁹

Rob Warner shares the same enthusiasm:

For all the failings and weaknesses of the modern Church, we stand at the climax of centuries which have seen, step by step, the restoration of the priorities and practices of the Apostolic era. The Spirit of God has surely been bringing a continuing reformation to the Church, in order to equip us for an advance unparalleled since the first Christian generation. What is more, the globalisation of modern culture and the speed of modern travel and communication together provide the opportunity for revival not merely on a national, but on a global scale. We could be on the brink of the greatest revival in the history of the Church, the revival that precedes the return of Christ. The Bride is being prepared for glory. We have received the Apostolic priorities and practices. Now once again we need to receive the power.²⁰

Scholars such as Nigel Scotland recognise the historical precedents for phenomena seen in movements such as the Toronto blessing.²¹ They are cautious, however, to either deny that revival is on its way, or to proclaim that revival is just around the corner:

When this move finally impacts the ways of God on to the life of the nation as a whole, then we may perhaps be permitted to regard Toronto as a prelude to what later became a revival. At the moment it is too early to tell whether this movement is going to become a full-blown revival. Most revivals extend for a period of several years. It is only then that there is time for a wider impact on the surrounding society and culture. Perhaps the most encouraging sign for the future is that many senior Christian leaders are

18 Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1996.

19 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

20 Warner, R., *Prepare for Revival* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 171. See also 77, 80, & 175.

21 *Charismatics and the Next Millennium*, 214ff.

resolved that this move of the Holy Spirit should have positive, practical outcomes in British society.²²

In 1998 many UK commentators believed that revival was either just about starting, or just around the corner. Nevertheless, most historians, both Christian and non-Christian, would agree that contemporary evaluations of society are notoriously difficult. We may like to think that we can read the signs of the times as we sit in the midst of them, but a few years hind-sight can prove us sadly mistaken. Even if we were to take the leap of faith and claim that we can do such a task, Nigel Scotland's cautionary note concerning the impact a movement must have on British society before it may accept the label 'revival' must be heeded.

Two years on, and opinion is still unclear. The leader of the Kensington temple, a Pentecostal church at the forefront of revivalist meetings, believes that thinking in terms of degree offers a helpful answer to the question of whether revival is currently occurring or. Thus he writes in the February edition of *Revival Times*:

What of the revival? It is clear that the revival that began to stir thousands of believers across Britain in the 1990s has not yet reached the scale of a national move of God. The time of great re-awakening of the nation to Christ seems a long way off. But this does not mean that there is no hope. If we regain our lost sense of urgency and deal with blind complacency, we can yet reverse the trend. It is time for a new prophetic call to come to the churches of Britain and Europe.²³

Even if events may have gone slightly off the boil, expectation remains strong, as does the call to pray and be active.

III. Issues

Defining revival

Revival versus Revivalism

Attempts to define revival have proliferated. A helpful perspective can be discerned by looking at what some scholars claim to be a difference between *revivals* and *revivalism*. The thesis that revival historians have misunderstood the distinction between revivals and revivalism is best seen in a response given by Martyn Lloyd-Jones to Dr William Sargant's book, *Battle for the Mind*.²⁴ Sargant's work examines the processes by which people are converted and kept within a religious tradition. In

22 *Ibid.*, 228.

23 *Revival Times* 2.2 (2000), also published on www.revivaltimes.com.

24 William Heinemann Ltd, 1957.

particular, Sargant examines the religious revivals associated with Charles Finney. However, Lloyd-Jones maintains that, because Sargant's whole thesis completely overlooks the work and person of the Holy Spirit, Sargant misses the crucial distinction between the revivalism of Finney, and revivals in history brought about by God's sovereign action:

[Finney] was a man who taught quite definitely that, if one applied a given technique, one could have a revival at any time. That is the essence of Finney's teaching in his book on revivals. But history has surely proved that Finney was quite wrong. Many have tried to plan revivals by using his technique . . . but the desired revival has not come. One of Finney's cardinal errors was to confuse an evangelistic campaign and a revival, and to forget that the latter is something that is always given in the sovereignty of God. . . . It is the fallacy of believing that if we produce the *results* and *consequences* of revival, we shall have the revival itself!²⁵

Lloyd-Jones explains that, as Finney was for a number of years caught up in a genuine revival, he mistook his methods with God's sovereign action in true revival. True revival is 'an outpouring of the Holy Spirit . . . When God acts in revival everybody present feels and knows that God is there.'²⁶ The result of this confusion was that revivalism grew in the US to become a recognisable phenomenon, and so even to be confused with the older view of revivals.

Such a charge is the main thesis of Iain Murray's work, *Revival and Revivalism*.²⁷ As a definition of revival, Murray quotes approvingly from Edwards:

The work of God is carried on with greater speed and swiftness, and there are often instances of sudden conversions at such a time. So it was in the apostles' days, when there was a time of the most extraordinary pouring out of the Spirit that ever was! How quick and sudden were conversions in those days . . . So it is in some degree whenever there is an extraordinary pouring out of the Spirit of God; more or less so, in proportion to the greatness of that effusion.²⁸

Murray argues that such an understanding was common amongst the evangelical leaders of the eighteenth century – men such as

25 Lloyd-Jones, M., 'Conversions: Psychological and Spiritual' in *Knowing the Times* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 82; paper originally given to ministers at an Evangelical Alliance conference at High Leigh, published originally by IVP in 1959.

26 Quoted in Murray, I., *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith: 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 380. For a summary of Murray's interpretation of Lloyd-Jones' views on revival and the work of the Holy Spirit, see 380–88.

27 *Op. Cit.*

28 Edwards, J., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London, 1834; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), vol. I, 539.

Whitefield, Samuel Blair, and Jonathan Dickinson. This understanding of revival was not something special and tacked on, but something integral to basic Christian belief. The stuff of revival was the stuff of normal Christian experience, only that number and speed of conversions are greater than normal – ‘a difference in degree, not in kind.’²⁹ Commenting on Edwards’ work at Northampton, Jenson makes the illuminating observation that,

It is a fundamental and forgotten fact about America’s Christian heritage: revival was not in its founding beginning a means to promote religion; it was the surprising result of a *critique* of religion.³⁰

Thus Edwards had never intended revival, he had merely preached against the errors he saw in his local situation. To his surprise revival was the result that God brought about.

Yet in the early 1800’s, the theology of revivalism propagated by Finney spread, and took over from this more conventional view. If Christians followed the correct methods, then God would save thousands. Finney’s own ministry saw many conversions. However, Murray and Lloyd-Jones maintain that this was due to a sovereign work of God already in existence, not to Finney’s own strategy. The spread of Finney’s views can be accounted for by the promises of mass conversions (which Christians rightly long to see), the apparent success at the time, and the publicity Finney’s work attracted.³¹ Such a view of the relationship between revival and revivalism sees great dangers, the worst of which is described in the following passage from Murray:

[Finney’s] view had very far reaching consequences. It made ‘special efforts’ the hall-mark of evangelism for the next hundred years and in so doing it inevitably induced discouragement over all that was not ‘special’. For in the special, supposedly, lay the only hope. Built into this error was an unscripturally exaggerated view of revival. According to the older belief, revival meant a larger degree of the influences of the Spirit of God but it never asserted an absence of those influences at other times. It never supposed that there could be no effective evangelism without revival. To have done so would have been to deny Scripture. The Spirit is given to the church ‘for ever’ (John 14.16). He is her constant helper in all her life and service. In a time of revival, conversions appear on a larger and wider scale but they are the same as conversions that are seen in other times.³²

Viewing revival as something different from revivalism is wide-spread amongst other theologians. James Packer, for example, presents a

²⁹ Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 23.

³⁰ Jenson, *America’s Theologian*, 63.

³¹ See Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 298.

³² *Ibid.*, 384.

similar picture in his *Keep in Step with the Spirit*.³³ Although Christians may organise, and indeed must pray, 'revival is God displaying the sovereignty of his grace.'³⁴

The tensions that these two different perspectives give rise to can be most clearly seen in ecumenical evangelical attempts at mission. Many look back on the work of Billy Graham in London in the 1950s as something almost akin to revival, and indeed through his ministry (which involves very meticulously planned and organised 'crusades') thousands upon thousands have made professions of faith. Many however were suspicious of Graham. This of course was due to a collection of issues—an American cultural idiom, ecumenical compromise (especially on the issue of co-operation with Roman Catholics), and Arminian theology. Amongst these criticisms, and particularly associated with the latter issue of an Arminian theology, was the claim that Graham relied too heavily on the techniques of revivalism.³⁵

Contemporary Definition

In spite of this history, there are many who continue to be, at the very least, unaware of the supposed differences between the approach of Whitefield & Edwards, and that of Finney. For example, Nicky Gumbel's book, *The Heart of Revival*,³⁶ makes no mention of the distinction. In connection with this, the same book raises an interesting question as to what qualifies as a revival – Gumbel lists both Pentecost and the Reformation with the examples given above.³⁷ Of course both Pentecost and the Reformation were decisive events in the history of the church, with great multitudes coming to a real and personal faith. Yet are these the events commonly in mind when 'revival' is spoken of? The crux of this issue is therefore the definition of revival. According to those given by Edwards and Lloyd-Jones, it may be appropriate to record both the work of Luther and Calvin, and the Asuza Street phenomena, as marks of revival.³⁸

To help in this question, it may be useful to try and identify the characteristics of revival. A number of lists have recently been provided, all

33 Leicester: IVP, 1984, 255–258.

34 *Ibid.*, 257.

35 Some of these tensions are explored in 'New Evangelicals, Old Fundamentalists', chapter 13 of the biography of Billy Graham by Martin, W., *The Billy Graham Story: A Prophet With Honour* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), and also at times by Graham himself in *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

36 Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997.

37 Gumbel, 106.

38 The Asuza Street phenomena, which in some way marked the beginning of modern day Pentecostalism, are often put under the 'revival' heading. For an important history of Pentecostalism, see Hollenweger, W., *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM, 1972).

of which demonstrate some overlap. In *Times of Refreshing*, Stibbe lists the following as characteristics of the Pentecost and the 1904 Welsh revivals. Revivals are God's initiative, not ours; revivals follow pleading to God in prayer; revivals are intimately connected with the exaltation of Jesus Christ; revivals are accompanied by extraordinary phenomena; they result in continuous and exuberant praise; revivals impact the globe centrifugally; the location of revival has a marked centripetal effect; revival leads to the effective preaching of the gospel; revival evokes an acute consciousness of human sin; revivals produce large numbers of converts; revivals result in a hunger for the word of God; revivals lead to a profound unity between Spirit-filled believers; they bring about a remarkable renewal of prayer; they create a sense of awe at God's holy and pervasive presence; in revivals, people cannot stop meeting in order to encounter God; they produce a much higher level of financial giving; they produce beneficial effects in the wider community; they lead to a sense of the imminence of the Parousia.³⁹

Although Stibbe does not want to provide a restrictive or exhaustive grid, and although he believed at the time of writing that it was too early to tell, he concluded that 'the early signs are that the Toronto blessing has many of the characteristics of revival in the making.'⁴⁰

Rob Warner also lists the characteristics of an outpouring of the Spirit, which would be found at a time of revival. Warner does 'not wish to imply that all the signs are present with equal force in every outpouring. Nonetheless, they are all biblical indicators. The more these signs increase, the more confident we can be that we are indeed experiencing a significant new wave of the Spirit.'⁴¹ So the signs are that the Spirit glorifies Jesus, brings submission to Jesus as Lord, invokes repentance before God's holiness, engenders awe and worship before God's glory, and stirs up hunger for God's word; by the Spirit we receive God's love, the Spirit stirs up thirst for God, restores our passion for God, presses on us the presence of God, releases God's power, provides assurance of salvation, strengthens our confidence in the gospel, brings a passion for the lost, brings compassion for the poor, propels an increase in world mission, and promotes intercessory prayer; the Spirit generates empowered preaching, enlarges love of truth, increases spiritual fruit, promotes growth in humility, inflames generous giving, increases love for one another, provokes opposition and persecution, exposes unclean spirits, pours out spiritual gifts, provides healings, signs, and wonders; the Spirit increases faith and expectancy, brings a longing for heaven, stirs up expectations of the second coming, releases new creativity, inspires new ways of being church, encourages non-denominational

39 Stibbe, M., *Times of Refreshing* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 49–62.

40 *Ibid.*, 63.

41 *Prepare for Revival* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 146.

co-operation, increases the number of candidates for full-time ministry, brings freedom to captives, and releases abundant life.⁴²

Lovelace provides a table which draws out from his biblical and historical studies the elements of renewal. These are categorised as primary (whereby people are prepared for the gospel by an awareness of sin and an awareness of the holiness of God, and take the gospel on board by accepting justification, sanctification, the indwelling Spirit, and authority given to them in spiritual conflict), and secondary (Christians and the revived church then work the gospel out via the secondary elements of renewal – mission, prayer, community life, disenculturation, and theological integration).⁴³

A more simple contemporary definition of revival is to equate it with what happened at Pentecost. Stibbe writes:

In my opinion, a revival is a restoration of the people of God to the reality of Pentecost – i.e., a profound sense of God's presence in worship, a new holiness of life, true and authentic community, and a potent effectiveness in reaching out to the lost. It is, in short, a restoration of the body of Christ to the pattern and power of Pentecost.⁴⁴

Rob Warner provides the following bullet-points to define revival:

- Revival is an outpouring of the Spirit of God.
- Revival is a work of God in power.
- The Church in the New Testament, warts and all, is a church in revival.
- When the Church enters revival, we experience days of heaven on earth.
- All subsequent revivals entail nothing less than a return to something of the spiritual vitality of the early church.⁴⁵

In a similar fashion (although note the emphasis that Pentecost is not repeated), Sinclair Ferguson concurs that,

It is by the signal empowering of the Spirit (first exemplified at Pentecost) that monumental advances take place in the kingdom of Christ. The inaugural outpouring of the Spirit creates ripples throughout the world as

42 *Ibid.*, 146–164.

43 Lovelace, R., *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979), 75.

44 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, 45. This of course seems to assume an answer to the question of the status of Pentecost in salvation-historical terms. That is, whether it was a unique event which marked the change between the two covenants, or an event which carries exemplary and teaching significance for the rest of the church's life. For the former account see Ferguson, below.

45 Warner, 36.

the Spirit continues to come in power. Pentecost is the epicentre; but the earthquake gives forth further after-shocks. Those rumbles continue through the ages. Pentecost itself is not repeated; but a theology of the Spirit which did not give rise to prayer for his coming in power would not be a theology of *ruach*.⁴⁶

Such an understanding is widespread. In his detailed work on renewal, Richard Lovelace claims that '*Renewal, revival and awakening* trace back to biblical metaphors for the infusion of spiritual life in Christian experience by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 6:4; 8:2–11; Eph. 1:17–23; 3:14–19; 5:14). Usually they are used synonymously for broad-scale movements of the Holy Spirit's work in renewing spiritual vitality in the church and in fostering its expansion in mission and evangelism. *Reformation* refers to the purifying of doctrine and structures in the church, but implies a component of spiritual revitalisation.'⁴⁷

Although strict definitions of revival do not agree, there seems to be something of a consensus concerning the marks of a revival, even if theologians and church leaders may disagree about the positive and negative aspects of revivalism. The marks of observed revival entail at least an emphasis on number of conversions, and increased commitment to all central areas of Christian life and theology. Having said this, it is clear that many of the revivals seen today would come under the label 'revivalism', rather than 'revival'. Both the events at the Pentecostal church in Brownsville, Pensacola, and the meetings arranged by Pioneer Churches at Marsham Street, Westminster, are very much in the mould of planned revivalist meetings. For example, a recent report of the Pensacola events remarks that 'Revival is work – major work. It needs a faithful people to sustain a revival.'⁴⁸ Nevertheless, even those adopting the thinking and methodology of Finney usually remain committed to both the marks of revival given above, and the belief that revival is a sovereign act of God.⁴⁹ Thus such a distinction between revival and revivalism must be careful not to blur at least the claims made by those involved.⁵⁰

Reformed versus Arminian Theology

Having said this, it is clear that the sharp division between revival and revivalism at points reflects the division in the church between a reformed theology (Calvinist) and a Wesleyan theology (Arminian). In his analysis of American evangelicalism, the Reformed theologian

46 Ferguson, S., *The Holy Spirit* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 91.

47 *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 21–22.

48 'Revival at Pensacola', *Aglow Spring* 1997, 7.

49 *Ibid.*

50 A point Stibbe is keen to make clear in his most recent work, *Revival* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1998), chapter 7.

David Wells believes that the growth of revivalism reflected, in the words of McLoughlin, 'the theological side of the political shift to democracy'.⁵¹ Wells continues,

The church-centered faith that had been favored before the Revolution retreated before itinerant revivalism, reasoned faith retreated before exuberant testimony, and theological confession retreated before the self-evident truths of experience.⁵²

In Wells' view, then, revivalism is guilty in the fact that it played a part in the dumbing-down of American evangelicalism, such that 'evangelicals operate on the assumption that ideas have no intrinsic value, that they receive value when people determine that they are legitimate.' This is a triumph of Arminianism over Calvinism.⁵³

Wells is obviously driven by a critique of some elements of contemporary evangelicalism which elevate experience above doctrine. Such a challenge is to be welcomed, even if we must be careful to read his critique according to the situation in which it is written. However, it would be unfair to over-simplify the connections between revivalism, experience dominated church life, and Arminianism. There are indeed groups which reflect a Reformed theology whilst engaging in activities which seem revivalist.⁵⁴ In addition, an Arminian theology does not necessarily lead to an elevation of experience over truth. Contemporary revivalist authors already mentioned, such as Stibbe and Warner, stress the need for Christians to engage seriously with the revelation of God as a result of their experiences.⁵⁵ And of course the historical Arminian position, whether one agrees with it or not, makes direct claims about Scripture and establishes a clear theological confession.

Having said this, then, it would be fairer to say that the differentiation between revival and revivalism reflects more of a continuum than a sharp distinction. The continuum is also reflected in theological convictions, and whilst some people with a revival outlook may give their allegiance to Reformed theology and others to Arminian theology, the differences are not always so clear cut.

51 William J McLoughlin, quoted in Wells, D. F., *God in the Wasteland* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 67.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 One example in the UK would be the work of New Frontiers International, headed up by Terry Virgo.

55 In *Times of Refreshing* Stibbe begins by arguing for the need of biblical theology. Warner's second chapter offers 'a biblical perspective on meeting God in power', 21. And Nicky Gumbel's work is offered as a study on Isaiah that leads to an understanding of revival.

Revival as the normal church pattern

Having outlined some of the issues in the historical and contemporary understanding of revival, it is worth stopping briefly to evaluate this material. Whether Arminian or Reformed, the descriptions of revival offered appear to have one thing in common. That is, they describe the features of New Testament church life, distinctive only by matter of degree rather than by matter of kind. This is indeed what makes it difficult to decide what counts as revival or what does not count as revival. Although church historians may use the label to describe a particular connection of events in a period of church history, there is no distinctive element which marks out this 'revival' period from other times of church life, apart from a difference of degree. On the definitions offered by Stibbe, Warner, and Lovelace (see above), we see a description of the New Testament community of believers. Even Ferguson, who would understand revival in terms of significant 'advances', appears therefore to endorse the idea that revivals differ only in degree rather than in kind. This therefore raises the question of whether talk of 'revival' is in fact necessary or helpful at all.

Challenges

The current interest in the issue of revival raises numerous questions. This final section of this paper attempts to raise some of them.

Is revival biblical?

Numerous attempts are made to argue either that revival is seen as a phenomenon of God's action in the life of his people (both Israel and the church), and so it continues today, or more specifically, that Scripture predicts a revival that will shortly occur. Ezk. 47:1-2 is seen by a number of people as a paradigm for what has occurred and is occurring in the twentieth century. The imagery of a flowing river, influencing 4 stages, is widely used and appealed to.⁵⁶ The cyclical pattern of Judges is also seen as a biblical precedent. Here a cycle of rebellion, recession, repentance, and restoration is repeated 7 times.⁵⁷ Nicky Gumbel bases his work on revival on Is. 40-66. Yet it is probably Pentecost and the rest of the history of the early church in Acts which provides the most inspiration - here is the church in the very first Christian revival. Acts 3.19, speaking of times of refreshing coming from the Lord, seems to indicate that revival may be a pattern that God uses.

56 Stibbe, 3-11.

57 Stibbe, 45-47.

However, is talk of revival is in fact importing into the text something which is alien? For example, one recent commentator has questioned the interpretation of Ezekiel given by Stibbe.

It is too much to claim that the text sets out a pattern for the way things will actually happen. The text promises complete renewal, and symbolises this by the number four. It does not promise four actual stages to renewal. Claiming that is like claiming there really are four winds or four corners of the earth.⁵⁸

The cyclical pattern is just that—it is a pattern that is not predicted for the rest of God's dealings in history. Whilst arguments from silence must be taken with care, so must arguments which see a precedent because what is observed now *seems* to be what was observed then. Regarding Pentecost, interpreters must first of all decide whether these events are unique. If they are, then we do not necessarily have a pattern for the rest of church life. If they are not unique, then it may still be argued that what is demonstrated there is *normal* church life. Finally, Acts 3.19, whatever else it may say, has a decidedly eschatological ring to it. Peter urges repentance so that times of refreshing may come together with the return of Christ. To read 'times of refreshing' as referring to revival times is only one reading.

Whether old-style revivalist talk, or contemporary charismatic predictions, both are practising eisegesis.⁵⁹ It may be true to say that these patterns, these ways of God's dealings, have happened both scripturally and historically. Yet there seems to be no explicit promise that this is the way Christian and church life *will* be. In fact, Paul, who one would expect to comment on revival if it were to be the pattern, concentrates on the on-going everyday practicalities and tensions of Christian life – the struggles with the flesh, the church being caught between the now and the not yet, etc. Amazing acts of God have occurred in the biblical testimony and in church history, yet there seems to be no established pattern whereby part of Christian life is looking for and praying for the next special outpouring. Rather, Christians are urged to hold on to the hope before them of the final

58 Smith, M. D. J., *Testing the Fire: A Biblical Analysis of the 'Toronto Blessing'* (Cambridge: St Matthew Publishing, 1996), 51; see 46ff.

59 This is perhaps the major challenge facing those who want to encourage interaction between charismatics / Pentecostals committed to revival today, and those who do not see revival prophesied for today. Stibbe explains a Pentecostal hermeneutic, 3–7, one which is set in opposition to both liberal and conservative approaches. It is here that we see one of the most fundamental differences between various theological positions on revival and the work of the Spirit. For an analysis of this Pentecostal hermeneutic, see Mark Smith, 'This is That' Hermeneutics', in Pietersen, L., ed., *The Mark of the Spirit? A Charismatic Critique of the Toronto Blessing* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 33–62.

coming of Christ, the resurrection of their bodies, and the complete transformation of this world order.

It must be emphasised that such a position neither demands a cessationist view of the work of the Holy Spirit through the gifts, nor does it down-play the significance of those historical events labelled as 'revivals'. So although a historian may wish to use the term, there is no biblical warrant for expecting revivals at specific stages during the history of the church.⁶⁰

Is revival helpful

Abuse of Power?

One recent analysis of revivalism believes that the language and rhetoric of revival is chiefly engaged in describing and distributing power. In *Words, Wonders and Power*, Martyn Percy, whilst somewhat confusing a number of different categories, analyses the work and words of John Wimber as someone who exhibited a revivalist mentality.⁶¹ With roots in Puritan conversion language, Methodist talk of personal testimony, and Pentecostal experientialism, Wimber's rhetoric appealed to feelings, passions, and emotions. In order for the Spirit to flow, unity of mind and aim is required of the congregation. With this established, further ideological principles can be put in place, and as such power is controlled in a particular direction.⁶² Revival experiences may be explained psychologically,⁶³ and in a sense one use of the power hidden in revival meetings is as a kind of therapy. Percy further explores some of these ideas in a collection of essays entitled *Power and the Church: Ecclesiology in an Age of Transition*.⁶⁴ One of his contentions is that the emotionalism of most revival meetings, especially that exhibited at churches connected with the 'Toronto Blessing,' can in fact be traced as a re-kindling of eroticism. That is, 'the ideology consists of symbols and metaphors that connect deeply with the emotional realm and offer a framework in which individuals can find identity and power, and see it magnified in their own language about God. It is irresistible passion encountering passivity.'⁶⁵

60 This of course does not preclude that God could act in this way, or that he has acted in this way, merely it questions whether God *should* act in this way.

61 Percy also provides an insightful table comparing the main works of the eighteenth century revival, and the main works and themes of Wimber's writings—for example, holiness versus God's healing power, forgiveness of sins versus emotional healing, falling on faces versus falling on backs, etc.—*Words, and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism* (London: SPCK, 1996), 172–173, n. 14.

62 *Ibid.*, 66–67.

63 *Ibid.*, 149.

64 London: Cassell, 1998.

65 *Ibid.*, 153.

Although this may seem extreme, a proponent of revivalism connected with the Toronto experiences, has claimed that God may in fact be using such manifestations and experiences in order to connect with a culture which is obsessed with ecstasy. Mark Stibbe writes that, as 'ours is largely a Dionysian culture – a culture of addicts looking for ecstasy – God has chosen to operate during this time of refreshing by permitting many ecstatic phenomena – such as shaking, fainting, falling over, weeping, laughing, roaring, and generally drunken behaviour.'⁶⁶ Stibbe claims that there are historical precedents for this, where phenomena in the revivals of Whitefield and Wesley mirrored the contemporary English obsession with drink and drunkenness.⁶⁷

To return to Percy's analysis, his constant danger in both works is of grave reductionism – of discussing the way in which power works amongst various outpourings of the Spirit, yet hardly considering the possible work God may have done. In this way, his analysis of revival falls into the same traps that snared Sargant.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, we must be ready to admit and acknowledge the many ways, sociologically, psychologically and culturally, in which revival can be and is used.

Deficient Eschatology?

Apart from being potentially abusive of power, concentration on revival (again, whether classical reformed or contemporary charismatic) can divert attention from the very ordinary business of being a Christian. The desire to have the future now is also a cultural hall mark. This hope has merely been transplanted into the modern church. Ordinary Christian life becomes a second best, whereas the real business, the revival, is something that is coming. The danger of always looking for something more is persistent. Although much of Martyn Percy's analysis of revivalism may be contentious, perhaps his most perceptive observation concerns the long-term effects of modern revivalism. Lacking a thought out systematic doctrine (a point which is now more commonly open to challenge⁶⁹) Percy observes that without a worked out view of the economic Trinity, revivalism can be lost without a 'coping stone' to hold the building together. What this means is that 'revivalism is constantly open to the vagaries of "charismatic weather":

66 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, 84–5.

67 Lloyd Pietersen provides a convincing critique of both Stibbe's lack of analysis of the church, and Stibbe's failure to disentangle cultural accommodation from cultural engagement – 'Ecstatic Phenomena for an Ecstatic Culture?', in Pietersen, ed., *The Mark of the Spirit?*, 7–32.

68 Although Percy admits that the issues of considering what is going on at a revival meeting are complex, such an admission and opening up of the question comes disappointingly late in his analysis – *Words, Wonders and Power*, 147.

69 See the claim of Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, xi, and the volume by Smail, Walker and Wright, *Charismatic Renewal: The Search for a Theology* (London: SPCK, 1993).

every time there is a "latter rain" (e.g., the Toronto Blessing), the body divides against itself on grounds of authority, the interpretation of experience, or other factors. Renewal over erosion, sometimes severe, is a constant factor in this type of experiential religion.⁷⁰

Some forms of revival/revivalism talk may also be due to an over-realised eschatology. The culture that demands everything now also demands every spiritual experience now. While this cannot surely apply to all who talk of revival, neglecting the Biblical tension between the now and the not-yet may lead to an expectation that all the not-yet should be now.

Revival and Preaching

David Norrington sees a danger of revivalist rhetoric (of the more traditional kind). He observes that regular sermons are seen as characteristic of revivals. If sermons are absent, spirituality and Christian growth is impoverished. If great preaching is present, then revival must be imminent.⁷¹ Despite the ecclesiastical agenda of Norrington's thesis in criticising the place given to preaching in the church, he is right to observe that such a causal link is both simplistic and naïve (for great sermons are often given when revival does not occur!). Presupposing that sermons are not the best, the only, nor the biblical way of teaching, Norrington argues that 'just as the sermon can be a channel for the work of the Spirit in conversion, so it can be an aid to fossilisation if continued as the principal method of teaching and growth. Such fossilisation has often occurred in the aftermath of revivals (for a variety of reasons) and the results can be seen today in many British churches which experienced revival in the nineteenth century.'⁷² Norrington is to some extent caricaturing the expectations put on preaching, and much can be said in its defence.⁷³ Yet the point remains that a danger in the traditional model of revival is that after a period of revival, ill-informed Christians can depend on the particular methods which God used at a particular time, without recognising that these on their own will not restore revival (and thus mistakenly slip into revivalism).

Revivals and Anti-Intellectualism

Mark Noll implicates revivalism in anti-intellectualism.⁷⁴ This arises from the charge that concentration on revival leaves the Christian distracted and unable to concentrate on other issues. Although Jonathan

70 Percy, *Power and the Church*, 196.

71 Norrington, D., *To Preach or Not to Preach* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 96–7.

72 *Ibid.*, 101.

73 See the volume of essays edited by Chris Green and David Jackman, *When God's Voice Is Heard* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).

74 Noll, M., *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 80–81.

Edwards was a great theologian, he promoted the revival that was to lead American evangelicalism into anti-intellectualism. Yet Carson chides Noll for such a simplistic equation. As well as ignoring the distinction between revivals and revivalism (see above), Noll is in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Unless one were to argue that it is always wrong to support revival, for fear of what it might turn into, this assessment is surely a bit skewed. One might as well argue that it is always wrong to defend loving God with one's mind, for fear of how intellectualism regularly puffs up, while only love builds up.⁷⁵

Having said that, even proponents of revival theology are aware of the anti-intellectual bias within their own movements, and so have to provide an apology for writing a theology of revival.⁷⁶

Yet the defender of revivalist theology may argue back. Expectation of revival is merely looking toward the good things of God. Thus our reflections on revivalism must not be a case of baby and bath water. It need not follow that a heart for revival leads to a minimisation of the things of now. Lloyd-Jones can certainly not be accused of minimising the role of God in today's everyday Christian business. Similarly, the Ichthus group of churches led by Roger Forster, which adopt much of the charismatic talk of revival, have a healthy record of evangelism, social action, etc.

If a sceptic were to conclude that there is neither a biblical prophecy foretelling revival nor a biblical mandate for it as a pattern of church life, is there then any use in holding on to such a term? In fact, what do people mean by special out-pourings of God's Spirit?

Perhaps the use of the term acts as a reminder that history is in God's hands, that he can and does work in ways that are more manifest and more marvellous than we usually expect. Perhaps it encourages and reminds Christians that God is moving history on according to his plan. It is unsurprising that evangelicalism should be so closely yoked with revivalist thinking, whether it is biblical or not. As Melvin Dieter writes,

The evangelical's acceptance of Christ's final commission to his disciples as a mandate for personal witness and world mission reinforces the urgency that characterises revival movements.⁷⁷

Perhaps the idea of revival, even if not biblical in either way it has been used, acts as an ideology that can drive evangelical Christians ever onward.

⁷⁵ Carson, D., *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apolllos, 1996), 483.

⁷⁶ See the preface to Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*.

⁷⁷ Dieter, 'Revivalism', in *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 436.

From this discussion, we may outline at least five of the possible responses to talk of revival.

1. Revival for today is prophesied in the Bible; it is a Biblical phenomena, a historical phenomena, and a useful concept for Christian living and experience.
2. Revival for today is not prophesied in the Bible, but the Bible does exhibit a revival pattern, and thus we are given a mandate to expect revivals, as witnessed in history; revival is therefore a useful concept for Christian living and experience.
3. Revival is neither prophesied for today in the Bible, nor is the pattern of revival found in Scripture, yet it is an observable historical phenomenon, and useful today.
4. Revival is neither prophesied for today in the Bible, nor is the pattern of revival found in Scripture, and as it is not an historically observable phenomena (merely a label attributed by the writers and winners of history), the concept is not useful and dangerous to Christian living.
5. Revival is neither prophesied for today in the Bible, nor is the pattern of revival found in Scripture, and although it is an observable historical phenomenon, it is not a useful concept and dangerous to Christian living.

Implications

In the midst of all this confusion, what should we do? A theology of suspicion can lead down a dangerous road. Lloyd-Jones warns against a theology of the Holy Spirit that precludes such workings of God's grace:

Does our doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and his work, leave any room for revival either in the individual or in the church. . . ? Does our doctrine allow for an outpouring of the Spirit – the 'gale' of the Spirit coming upon us individually and collectively?⁷⁸

Does this imply that we must constantly be seeking revival? In the face of the older view of revivals, Packer asked what should a Christian do. 'If God is sovereign in revival and we cannot extort it from him by any endeavour or technique, what should those who long for revival do? Twiddle their thumbs? Or something more?'⁷⁹ Packer advocated three responses: first, preach and teach the truth (the gospel business); second, prepare Christ's way (clearing away that which would obstruct

78 Lloyd-Jones, M., *The Puritans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 302, quoted in Warner, 141–2.

79 *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 257.

– sin, false teaching, etc.); and, third, pray for revival. Such an action plan must not be at the expense of other normal and vital Christian activities. On the other hand, if we decide that the idea of revival is both unbiblical and unhelpful, our call is to the ordinary (or extraordinary) Christian life, being surprised and joyful when God does bring times of refreshing.

Finally, in the context of looking at revival as a phenomenon affecting groups of people, it must be remembered that many also talk of experiencing personal revival. That is to say: a restoration of a person's faith, an acute awareness of sin, a dedication to the gospel – all these and more are re-awakened by the sovereign act of the Spirit of God in the life of the individual, rather than corporately. Whatever we may conclude concerning corporate revival and revivalism, we should be careful lest we never expect God to do such a work in us.

Abstract

This article examines the historical and contemporary claims concerning revival, and asks whether in fact the term, in its various uses, is an appropriate description of Christian life. After outlining the contemporary fascination with the idea, and attempts made to describe it, a number of issues of description and debate are addressed. While revival may be a term used by historians to describe certain periods, the arguments for its biblical mandate and contemporary relevance are weak. However, such a conclusion must not make the individual or the church lax in seeking authentic Christian experience, and in proclaiming the gospel to each new generation.

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