

# REVIVAL: EXTRAORDINARY CONVERSIONS AND RESTORATION

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To talk about revival is to talk superlatives, for revival is Christianity taken to a heightened intensity. God never does more for His church than when He revitalises her with the breath of heaven. In the midst of the years He “makes known” (Habakkuk 3:2). We then experience more of His grace and power than at other times.

## **Defined**

This serves to remind us of what revival is. We can define it like this: “When ordinary spiritual conditions are intensified to the *extraordinary*.” Hence the title of this article. We are not talking about a difference in *kind* from the norm; rather a difference in *degree* – although a very great degree. In revival God pours out the Holy Spirit and phenomenal results follow.

One outcome of revival is the extraordinary conversions wrought, and the exceptional recovery of things that have declined in the church. So that the chief benefits are vast numbers brought into the church, and the church itself raised up to new heights of blessedness.

## **Begins in the church**

Before we come to these two aspects, let us remind ourselves that revival does not actually *begin* with these. They are more the *effects and fruits*. Revival begins in the church itself, because only what already lives is revived. Thus the Psalmist cries, “Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?” (Psalm 85:6) – it begins with the people of God. When the church has seriously declined, God fills her with new life and vigour. In addition, this extends to those outside who are moved to seek salvation. In Acts 2, the revival at Pentecost affected the apostles and then the multitude. As M’Cheyne said, “I have often told you that a work of revival in any place almost always begins with the children of God. God ‘pours water on him that is thirsty,’ and then ‘floods upon the dry ground.’” Henry C. Fish agrees,

“Revivals are then seasons when Christians are waked to a more spiritual frame, to more fervent prayer, and to more earnest endeavours to promote the cause of Christ and redemption; and consequent upon this, seasons when the impenitent are aroused to the concerns of the soul and the work of personal religion.”

With these things in mind, let us consider,

## **1. Extraordinary Conversions In Revival**

When a sinner is converted, supernatural power has operated. The three great New Testament analogies are: birth, resurrection and creation (John 3:3; Ephesians 2:1; 2 Corinthians 5:17). These are works only Almighty God can do. They put the conversion of a soul beyond the ability of the individual himself, or of others.

In a time of revival the Lord’s people massively feel that power – and it extends to sinners outside the church (Ephesians 3:20). It comes upon the unconverted and they begin to experience the reality of what Christians believe. This has some extraordinary features,

1] The speed of the work

John Syms, Whitefield’s helper, writing to a friend in New England in 1743, could say, “There are few or no counties in England and Wales where there is not a work begun ... The Gospel in this day may be likened to a fire set to well-dried fuel: it no sooner touches but a flame arises.”

It was the same in 18<sup>th</sup> century America. In that Great Awakening Jonathan Edwards estimated that, "In 2 or 3 years 30,000-40,000 souls were born into the family of heaven in New England, besides great numbers in New York, New Jersey and the more southern provinces."

This news reached Scotland. John Willison of Dundee rejoiced, but in an echo of our own day, lamented, "How rare is conversion work now, in respect of former times." Yet it was not long before M'Culloch of Cambuslang could report 300 and then 500 "savingly brought home to God."

In Ulster in the following century it was the same. An incident comes down to us from Colerain in 1859,

"A schoolboy, under deep conviction of sin, seemed so incapable of continuing his studies that the kindly teacher sent him home in the company of another boy, already converted. On the way home the two boys noticed an empty house and entered it to pray. At last the unhappy boy found peace, and returned immediately to the classroom to tell his teacher, 'I am so happy: I have the Lord Jesus in my heart!' This innocent testimony had its effect on the class, and boy after boy slipped outside. The master, standing on something to look out of the window, observed the boys kneeling in prayer around the schoolyard, each one apart. The master was overcome, so he asked the converted schoolboy to comfort them. Soon the whole school was in strange disorder, and the clergymen were sent for and remained all day dealing with seekers after peace, schoolboys, schoolgirls, teachers and parents and neighbours, the premises being thus occupied until 11.00pm that night."

In the following century, during the Welsh Revival of 1904,05, it was estimated that 100,000 souls were converted. What may take many years to accomplish is wrought in just a few weeks. The Kingdom of God then advances in leaps and bounds.

## 2] The strength and depth of the work

It is believed that Jonathan Edwards popularised the word "revival" when he described an outpouring of the Spirit in Northampton, Massachusetts as a "revival of religion." From first-hand experience He observed,

"The Spirit that is at work, takes off persons' minds from the vanities of the world, and engages them in a *deep* concern about eternal happiness, and puts them upon *earnestly* seeking their salvation, and *convinces* them of the dreadfulfulness of sin, and of their own guilty and miserable state as they are by nature. It awakens men's consciences, and makes them sensible of the dreadfulfulness of God's anger, and causes in them a *great desire* and *earnest care and endeavour* to obtain His favour. It puts them upon a *more diligent* improvement of the means of grace which God has appointed; accompanied with a *greater regard* to the word of God, a desire of hearing and reading it, and of being more conversant with it than they used to be ... It makes persons more sensible of the value of Jesus who was crucified, and their need of him; and that it puts them upon *earnestly seeking* an interest in Him."

Thomas Charles of Bala, preaching in October 1791, said, "about 9 or 10 o'clock at night there was nothing to be heard from one end of the town to the other, but the cries and groans of people in distress of soul. And the very same night, a spirit of deep conviction, and serious concern fell upon whole congregations ... in the course of the following week, we had nothing but prayer meetings, and general concern about spiritual things swallowed up all other concerns."

Such profound conviction of sin was often followed by corresponding ecstasies of joy in the Holy Ghost, as assurance of salvation filled the hearts of the convicted. Then was it found that "those who have struck the deepest note of penitence can reach the highest note of praise."

We have known some of these things in measure - *any* amount is precious. However, in revival they rocket to an extraordinary degree. The Lord then reminds us of how supernatural, overwhelming and glorious true religion is – and that we should pray that we might know these things in our day.

### 3] The solemnity of the work

In revival, the felt presence of God is an aweful reality. It cannot be otherwise. Then people are like Jacob, “And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

In the Welsh Revival of 1859, a prayer meeting in a meadow was attended by 18,000 people. They called it “The most remarkable ever held in S. Wales.” Some led in prayer. Then two minutes silent prayer, “With bowed heads and streaming eyes the thousands responded, and the solemn and intense silence of those moments was as full of eloquence as any episode ... A few minutes later, Thomas John ... walked in a field nearby lost in reverie. A friend stopped him, and said, ‘What a glorious sight that was, when the thousands were engaged in silent prayer ... Did you ever see anything like it, Mr. John?’ He answered solemnly, ‘I didn’t see one of them: I saw *no one but God*. I am going home,’ he said suddenly. ‘How terrible is this place! It is too terrible for me. My flesh is too weak to bear this weight of glory...’”

The local newspaper reported “a pervading and overwhelming solemnity, convincing even the most stoical that eternal realities had come into intimate contact with the men and women present.” Similar events happened in North Wales, with some 700 having been converted. In those days when people were undergoing a saving change, they were spoken of as “becoming serious.”

Emphasising this aspect is important because nowadays we hear claims of revival. And curiously, the supposed proof is happiness and even laughter. This was clearly the criterion in Westminster Chapel in 1995, “As Rodney Howard-Browne ministered, people ‘fell to the floor laughing:’ one man, hitherto a staid banker, ‘literally rolled back and forth behind the pulpit, laughing his head off.’” Many would say the stark difference is merely down to the different eras; we would say it is down to the others being real and this being a sham.

## **2. Extraordinary Restoration In Revival**

This aspect of our subject is not as straightforward as it seems. On the surface, what follows a revival must mean only lasting benefits for the kingdom of God. This is true, but it needs qualification. To see this, let us consider some main epochs of revival.

### 1] The Reformation.

Described as the greatest revival since Pentecost, its unique character was a recovery of biblical truth. God gave to men a rediscovery of gospel doctrine, and a Bible in English (now printed for the first time). It was the recovery too, of the Gospel church and scriptural worship, like the Old Testament revivals and restorations in Hezekiah’s and Josiah’s time. The Puritan era in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries built upon this foundation. The good lasted for generations. In our own time since the 1950s the UK has enjoyed some recovery of our reformation and Puritan heritage, and it continues to this day.

### 2] Other periods.

Here is a different story. Not all God-sent revivals were characterised by the recovery of sound doctrine and practice. The Lord is sometimes pleased to revive in spite of what prevails at the time. We can see this if we contrast two revivals in Wales: the 1859 and the 1904.

#### a] The 1859 Welsh Revival.

Many churches in Wales were Calvinistic Methodist. Its founders in the previous century were Howell Harris and Daniel Rowlands. These churches were confessionally Calvinistic, because the denomination had its “Confession of Faith” (1823) similar to the Westminster Confession. Even the

more Arminian denominations were strongly evangelical and sought to weigh their practices by the Scriptures.

This undoubtedly affected the character of the revival for good. Eifion Evans tells us that although prayer was pre-eminent,

“At no time during the revival, however, were the prayer meetings allowed to replace or exclude the preaching of the Word. The experiences of the revival were thus tempered with a sound knowledge of the truth, and many undesirable excesses and errors were thereby avoided. Indeed, it was the insistence of David Morgan, and the other leading ministers engaged in the work, on preaching, that delivered the movement from ... spurious manifestations” (*Revival comes to Wales*).

b) The 1904,05 Welsh Revival.

By then, theological liberalism had blighted the churches. German Higher Criticism had infected the ministerial colleges, and the men sent to pulpits, and through them the people. It even affected the Sunday Schools. The doctrinal heritage of Calvinistic Methodism and heart religion had declined, along with much of its life and power.

The leading figure in the 1904 revival was Evan Roberts, a ministerial candidate who left his theological training for prayer and direct communications from the Holy Spirit. While we can understand his rejecting unbelieving scholarship, he appeared to reject more when he declared, “our fathers, thank God for them, were saintly men, but were gloomy and melancholy. They had got into a groove, and we must get out of it!” This was clearly a break with a much better past.

Instead of reverent worship and preaching, Roberts led (or, it seemed, “let happen”) revival meetings dominated by praying, testimonies, exhortation, high emotion, singing, and the prominent role of young women. People dubbed him “The new Howell Harris,” yet there was clearly a discontinuity with the theology and practices of 1859.

These unscriptural novelties had an effect upon the longer-term consequences of the revival. In the 1904,05 “singing revival” more converts fell away than in previous awakenings: as high as 20%. According to Brian Edwards, “Men like R.B. Jones taught the people, and saved the 1904 Revival in Wales from greater losses, once it had ended.” If we compare this with the 1859 revival, one estimate says that 19 out of every 20 converts maintained their profession.

Because sound teaching did not shape 1904,05 there were sown the seeds of future deviations from orthodoxy - the Higher Life Keswick teaching, Pentecostalism (Roberts insisted the baptism of the Holy Spirit was prerequisite for revival), and the Charismatic Movement. And it did not turn the tide of liberalism - it soon recovered when the revival receded.

Therefore, what is restored through revival often depends upon what prevailed at the time. The Lord revives His people, and saves sinners, in the midst of much that is wrong. Sometimes the effect is to restart things that will trouble the church for generations to come. A heaven-sent awakening will not necessarily bring a recovery of all that is best in the churches of Christ; neither will it cure all our troubles. It may bring new ones in its wake. Wisdom means we must view these things in the longer term.

An obvious lesson from this is that *reformation* is as important as revival. We must work to ensure that all things in God’s church are “commanded” things (Matthew 28:20) and not things without scriptural warrant. Like Elijah, who “repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down,” we can then hope for fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:30,38) upon a good foundation. If the Lord is pleased to visit His church and a needy world, we will have prepared His way faithfully and we will have served future generations also.

However, ideally, revival *can* also restore many godly practices Christians had let slip. It results in unspeakable gain to the churches of Christ.

3] Some examples of the lasting benefits.

a] Repentance and restitution.

An incident from the Korean Revival of 1906 illustrates this, "At (a) prayer meeting one worshipper after another rose, confessed his sins, and then fell to his knees again, weeping and begging God for forgiveness. Employees confessed their sins to their employers and vice versa. Elders of the Church asked their ministers for forgiveness. The ministers made their peace with one another, repenting of their petty jealousies. All sins were confessed, not only sins of commission, but the sins of the tongue and the mind as well."

There is an overwhelming desire to be right with the Lord and with other people. Restitution is made because as Luther said, "The best evidence of repentance is reformation."

b] The Sabbath sanctified.

Commenting on the revival in Scotland in his day, M'Cheyne said, "The Sabbath is observed now with *greater* reverence than it used to be! and there seems far more of a solemn awe upon the minds of men than formerly ... There is far more solemnity in the house of God."

c] Worship.

What worship in Spirit and in truth then! We have yet to see what would happen to the present scene, where Christians often equate Spirit-empowered worship with emotionalism and the use of unauthorised paraphernalia. If the Lord should suddenly come to His temple, would not the cry be heard, "Take these things hence" (John 2:16)? And instead of arm-waving and clapping we would be down on our faces.

d] Holiness and zeal.

1904 is the nearest major revival to our time. No one now is alive now who can remember it first-hand, but more than thirty years after one such lady said, "The fire is still burning in my heart some seventy years later." Compared with this personal reviving, anything else almost seems like backsliding.

e] Regard for the Word.

Jonathan Edwards in his *Authentic Narrative* wrote,

"While God was so remarkably present amongst us by His Spirit, there was no book so delightful as the Bible; especially the Book of Psalms, the Prophecy of Isaiah, and the New Testament. Some, by reason of their love to God's word, at times have been wonderfully delighted and affected at the sight of a Bible; and then, also, there was no time so prized as the Lord's day, and no place in this world so desired as God's house ... This work of God had also a good effect to unite the people's affections much to their minister."

We could also mention the good effect upon society for generations to come, and that would make an article on its own. But let us now close with this thought: the Lord does not love His people any less in the day of small things. In fact, He may appreciate our faithfulness even more. It is so much harder now, and He knows. However, let us in His strength continue faithfully, and pray that we may live to see the breaking of a better day. And if not, to lay foundations the Lord will be pleased to use and own "when He is come," and when the ordinary will again become the *extraordinary*.

"And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in" (Isaiah 58:12).

