

# God's agenda – revival or survival?

## 1 – REVIVAL

**A**mongst those who love God and are troubled by our spiritual state, the big question for several generations has been, "When will the Lord send revival?" To be more precise, since Charles Finney in the nineteenth century the question has more often been, "What must we do to bring revival?" Finney saw such blessing from God as the inevitable result of fulfilling spiritual conditions. As a result, much thinking about revival parallels that on subjects like healing: pull the right spiritual levers and God is bound to act.

I gained an interest in revival initially through the preaching of such men as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and through meeting people like Roy Hession and Bill Butler, who had been involved in the East African Revival. Some of us started a prayer meeting for revival at my previous church, and fasted weekly for a year without even having read Charles Finney!

But part of PT's message over the years has been to deny the claims of various Charismatic leaders that revival is imminent, and to stress that it can never come without repentance. In this, perhaps, we have echoed that great man of God A W Tozer, who said, rather provocatively:

*It is my considered opinion that under the present circumstances we do not want revival at all. A widespread revival of the kind of Christianity we know today might prove to be a moral tragedy from which we would not recover in a hundred years.<sup>1</sup>*

Now, it appears, there is a sea-change in the spiritual state of Britain. Since the 9/11 events, many of us believe that a judgment from God has finally come. Believers are beginning to feel the stirrings of persecution as the last of our Christian heritage is systematically eradicated, and perhaps that presages

Are we being protected from 'revival'?

**Jon Garvey** challenges a traditional longing – from Scripture and history



Revival — Graham or Edwards-style? Let God choose the method

a purification of Christ's Church. So revival is once more moving up the agenda.

### Red herring

**B**ut I have begun to wonder if the question of revival is even the right question. Is the whole issue actually a red herring?

I have several reasons for thinking this way. The first is biblical. 'Revival', as it is used today, is not actually a scriptural term. We should always be uneasy when we make a priority of something that is not a priority in Scripture. Many of the *components* of revival are Bible priorities – repentance, faith, holiness, the Holy Spirit – but the thing itself is not.

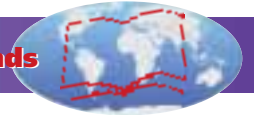
My second reason is an examination of the history of revival. It seems to me that our understanding of revival comes, ultimately, from the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. This great movement of God, largely under Whitefield and Wesley in Britain, and Whitefield and Edwards in America, set the gold standard by which later revivals, like that in Wales in 1904 and the Hebrides in 1949, are judged. That is why proponents of the "Toronto Blessing" used, or misused, Jonathan Edwards' writings for support.

What happened in the Great Awakening is also read back into earlier events like the Reformation, or even applied to biblical events such as Judah's national reform under Josiah.

### Similar – but different

**B**ut though all these events demonstrate the hand of God, there are as many differences between them as similarities. In Wesley's time, Evangelical Christianity had been virtually suffocated by a rationalistic

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state religion which consciously denied the heart's role in faith. The Enlightenment was at its height, and the establishment distrusted religious feelings. Small wonder that when ordinary people heard the Gospel of a living relationship with Jesus, preached with fervour, they soaked it up like blotting paper. The problems that accompanied the revival (carefully documented by Edwards<sup>ii</sup>) reflect this – emotional extremes, belittling of doctrine and the tendency for unconverted people to jump on the bandwagon. The fact that God provided a leadership who were not only fervent but theologically educated may explain why the Awakening had such lasting fruits.

By contrast, the Welsh revival of 1904 reached into a non-conformist community which was evangelical but succumbing to liberalism. Its leader, Evan Roberts, consciously spread a "Pentecostal" experience of the Holy Spirit, albeit linked to a Gospel of repentance. Fervour he had aplenty, but his concern for biblical truth was subservient to "the presence of the spirit". He did not leave a strong legacy of scriptural teaching, and observers found that the beneficial results had, to a considerable extent, dissipated within twenty years. It may be noted that the National Press had a significant role in this revival – a point we may forget. Just as people later went to Toronto already expecting that the Spirit would manifest himself through animal noises, many attended Evan Roberts' meetings primed by tabloid headlines that informed them what manifestations they could expect to experience<sup>iii</sup>.

The Hebrides Revival affected a far smaller number of individuals. If revival is a large-scale turning to God, then what happened in 1949 sits loose to the description.

### Other ways

**T**he third reason to be less focused on revival is that it can blind us to God's working mightily in other ways. Few would describe Billy Graham as a leader of revival. Yet it is said that Graham has preached to more people than anyone else in history. Millions have come forward at his rallies, and follow-up studies have shown that a good percentage have kept on with the Lord, prob-

ably as great as the proportion who have persevered after revivals.

So which is the greater work of the Spirit? A brief revival in sparsely populated islands, or the lifelong ministry of a Billy Graham? I rejoice in both, but would pray at least as much for God to raise up a new Billy Graham as to repeat the Hebrides revival. Dick Lucas, formerly of St Helens, Bishopsgate, points out that biblical faith is immensely more widespread and influential today than it was half a century ago. That is not to be complacent about our faults, but to recognise God's blessing. It happened not through great revivals but through the faithful ministry of, initially, a handful of men like Lloyd-Jones and John Stott – not to mention Lucas himself.

### God's discretion

**M**y last reason is that I believe Charles Finney was actually *wrong* to say that revival is bound to come if our spiritual state and our prayers are right. Scripture doesn't actually say so, so we can only look at history to see if such rules apply, and it seems to me that the phenomenon we call revival (which in any case, as I have said, actually covers a multitude of different phenomena) is used by the Lord completely at his own discretion. It is one of his many tools – just as he used European Imperialism to empower World Mission, a major earthquake to quicken faith in Armenia, or the persecution of pastors to grow his Kingdom in China. We should be praying that God's Kingdom comes, for forgiveness and healing – not for revival *per se*. Jesus commanded such prayers, and so we will see them answered.

Having suggested that God's mind is less fixed on revival than many of his servants, in the second article, I will suggest positively what I believe the Lord's great concern is for these times. You'll see from the overall title that this comes under the heading of "Survival", which sounds a bit negative, if not desperate. But it's not – it's about Spiritual warfare – the defeat of Satan, and the victory of supernatural faith.

<sup>i</sup> A W Tozer, *Leaning into the Wind*, Bromley STL, 1985, p.18

<sup>ii</sup> J Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*

<sup>iii</sup> E Evans, *The Welsh Revival of 1904*, Evangelical Press of Wales, 1969, p.36

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