

'The Reformation and Revival Fellowship' movement

by Geoff Thomas

The history of the 'Reformation and Revival Fellowship' was outlined in a fascinating way by the Rev James Wood at the annual Conference of the Fellowship this November. Mr Wood wasn't present at the very first residential conference, but in 1956 he went to the third conference in the High Leigh Conference Centre, the year in which he graduated from the London Bible College. The organisation at that time had been in existence for about twenty years. The 1930's were dark days, with the rise of Hitler and Fascism, Communism spreading over Russia and Eastern Europe, unemployment, the General Strike, hunger marches, and widespread poverty. Also they were dark days spiritually, and though there was relatively high attendance in churches there was a low level of theological and spiritual life within the denominations. So in the 1930's a group of Baptist ministers met for prayer for new life and a revival of love for God in their own hearts. The Rev. Theo Bamber of Rye Lane Baptist Church, Peckham, was the prime mover in this, in association with Geoff King of the East London Tabernacle, and other ministers such as Angus MacMillan, Ernest G. Rudman, Leslie Lyall and Hugh Butt, joined later by Stanley Voke. They met to study together and pray. The Baptist Revival Fellowship came out of this. The leaders were Baptist Union men, including some on the Council of the BU, and none from the much smaller Strict Baptists.

Theo Bamber, the guiding force, was a fine preacher and he reformed the Rye Lane church and members went from that congregation onto the mission field. The Holy Spirit was upon his ministry; he was bold and forthright, and was hated by the liberals. Other Fellowships for Revival also came into being, notably the Methodists under Roland Lamb's leadership along with JHJ Barker and a few others. They shared the conviction that God must revive the denomination. The Congregationalists also had a similar fellowship, and the Anglicans too had something similar based in St Paul's Portman Square, under Colin Kerr. There was a similar burden they all shared for the spread of the evangelical faith, a growing spirit of prayer, and that the estranged masses in the United Kingdom should be won for Christ.

The Baptist Revival Fellowship was the strongest, and it is the only one to have endured. The ministers who led it wanted others to know of their concerns, so they began a series of meetings in London. The first rally was held in Bloomsbury Baptist church, the prestigious denominational congregation in the centre of London. Its minister, Townsley Lord, was flabbergasted to see the church building full. This successful meeting spawned others. At the close of the first meeting Theo Bamber challenged the members of the congregation to stand up if they wanted God to be Lord over their lives. Slowly various people throughout the whole congregation got to their feet, until finally all were standing. We don't believe in the invitation system, but there had been something moving and thoughtful about that response. Other meetings were arranged, always well attended, and Theo M Bamber generally spoke.

After the war ended the Fellowship and its meetings continued. Finally it was felt that a residential day conference would be advantageous. So in 1954 a conference on revival was held at the High

Leigh centre with Duncan Campbell fresh from the Lewis revival as the main speaker. It was a very 'atmospheric' occasion and he spoke with great passion. Leaflets were distributed with names of men who led the BRF in different parts of the country. Conferences and local meetings were held. The prayer fraternals were significant for many younger ministers who were bringing the evangelical faith into churches that had had the old liberal message for several generations. They felt they were part of a new movement of Word and Spirit raised up by God. The Fellowship grew to well over 1,000 at that time, 1,400 is a figure that people mention. In the 1960's there were 350 or so present at the annual conference and it moved to Derbyshire to its present destination at Swanwick.

The certainty and reliability of the Word of God was one central plank of the Fellowship. They were assured that God's work in revival could not be done in any way other than by the preaching of the Bible. Such speakers as Ernest Kevan, and Leith Samuel were invited, with Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones coming on many occasions. He was at his very best in such ministers' conferences as the one at Bala and the BRF. Two of his three unforgettable addresses on Romans 14:17 (the kingdom of God not being meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit), can now be read in the ultimate volume of his series of studies on the epistle to the Romans which the Banner of Truth has just published. On the nights he preached them to the BRF Conference the hearers felt they were being swept up to glory. There were also prayer times after someone had opened the Scriptures and the conference members knew a liberty of earnest intercession.

Then the BRF Bulletin began to be published and Theo Bamber again wrote most of its articles. There were gatherings for prayer advertised, and it kept conservative men in the denomination in contact with one another over the years. There were ecclesiastical issues raised within the Baptist Union and they impacted the Fellowship's supporters. There was the accreditation of Bible College students who had not gone through any of the 7 or 8 denominational seminaries of the BU. The ecumenical movement created a number of issues, and booklets were written on the World Council of Churches. In the 1960's David Pawson, Ron Luland and David Kingdon wrote a booklet entitled 'Liberty in the Lord' on the ecumenical theme.

Then in 1971 the Principal of Manchester Baptist College, Michael Taylor, spoke on 'How Much of a Man is Jesus Christ?' at the annual assembly of the Baptist Union held in Westminster Chapel. "It could not be claimed that he was the Son of God," he said. "We have to stop short of saying unequivocally that he is God." That speech raised a storm in the BU itself. Beasley Murray wanted the Council to disassociate itself from Michael Taylor. The Fellowship itself was in the forefront of this movement which pointed out the tragic consequences of error being allowed to be taught in a seminary of the denomination. The BRF concluding that they could not stay in association with the BU. There were others in the Fellowship who felt they could not separate, but the Fellowship itself did come to that conviction. The BU did nothing about Michael Taylor's views in a discussion about his heresy at a packed session at Westminster Chapel during the following year's Assembly. It concluded merely that the address "caused concern for some". The BU has never rescinded its acceptance of Taylor's views being permitted to be promoted at any BU college or from any BU pulpit.

During these years the Baptist Revival Fellowship became a port in a storm for many, and some of its members set about forming a new association of Baptist churches. A small group of seceding churches did emerge at that time committed to staying together for ten years, and in fact that was its precise duration. In 1972 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle this fellowship of churches was launched with D. Lloyd-Jones speaking from Colossians on the theme that Christ in all things might have the pre-eminence. He preached with a lucidity that made the theme of the deity and glory of Christ clear to the humblest believer and he also silenced the most critical liberal.

Spurgeon spelled out the issue clearly:

For Christians to be linked in association with ministers who do not preach the gospel of Christ is to incur moral guilt.

A Union which can continue irrespective of whether its member churches belong to a common faith is not fulfilling any Scriptural function.

The preservation of a denominational association when it is powerless to discipline heretics cannot be justified in terms of 'Christian unity.'

It is error which breaks the unity of churches, and to remain in a denominational alignment which condones error is to support schism.

In the next years the Methodist Revival Fellowship drifted into a mere charismatic grouping before it disappeared, and the Congregationalist Fellowship also petered out. Reformation, biblical church discipline, secessions and new church groupings became the proper approach to modernism within the denominations, except for the Anglicans, though they did have some conservative seminaries and a measure of independence in their own churches which the Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists lacked. The Pentecostal pressures that were brought to bear on the Methodists were also raised in BRF conferences. Some who came to the BRF were impressed with the charismatic movement and wanted to bring its approach into the annual conference. The praying was affected, and the kind of music they desired to introduce was different, and there were mounting tensions. All this was evident in the Fellowship itself. Before this time they had never known groups meeting privately during the Conferences to promote an agenda, and the strains began to appear. The committee meetings were less united because some men were advocating these convictions. Charismatic men like Arthur Wallis and Campbell McAlpine were invited to speak. Attempts were made to balance the speakers, for example, Lloyd-Jones speaking along with McAlpine at the same conference. But David Pawson was incautious and unguarded in his criticisms of the approach of the more reformed men within the Fellowship. He told the Conference on his last visit that he had visited the Railway Museum on his way to Swanwick and those old trams and steam engines reminded him of the present Conference, all machinery and no life. "That is how the Fellowship is at that time," pronounced Pawson. If the charismatic premises and diagnoses are correct then Pawson was right, but that question continues to be a division to our own day. There were serious

reservations in sections of the Conference. That night Pawson packed his bags and returned home. Herbert Carson took his place preaching the final messages on, "Let this mind be in you ..."

Obviously this kind of arrangement didn't please anyone and Irish Baptists, not enamoured with the charismatic movement, largely stopped attending the Conference. Others ceased for the opposite reasons, choosing to go to the Dales Bible weeks for charismatic worship and teaching. The reformed men felt it was right to continue within the Fellowship, though they maintained excellent links with some of the people who had departed. They were all united in opposing the theology of Michael Taylor. The promotion of the charismatic interpretation of phenomena and feelings resulted in the division of the BRF.

Where is the Fellowship by 2003? Why should it continue? Is it necessary or relevant? The Fellowship is certainly much smaller - 71 people here in 2003 compared to five times that amount in the best attended period. The past struggle which it experienced has had some virtues, the defining of true revival, the growing certainty of the marks of a remarkable work of God, the conviction that the toleration of heresy grieves the life-giving Spirit. It has also brought into focus the abiding need for revival. Some have a longing for God to come, purifying his people and giving his servants an awakening ministry, with power in the pulpit, as God is exalted. That is how we understand God reviving his people 'in the midst of the years.' The BU fight was necessary but a form of distraction from the need for God's blessing to be upon the exaltation of Christ.

There is no need to argue the case that our nation needs revival and reformation. There is sleaze in high places, and corruption in the judiciary. Our nation needs the gospel and its reviving grace. There is hatred of historic Christianity evident in every area of society. There is a desperate need for the dwindling churches to be awakened. Why do we meet to ask God to revive us? Erroll Hulse has listed six reasons but one which he missed was that the Lord is a God who delights to revive and to bring his elect back and pour out his blessings. That is the pattern of the Old Testament. There were judgments and messengers of warning and judgment, and then God delivered the people out of his pity because of their groaning. It is true of church history too as you compare, for example, the rise of Primitive Methodism in the early 19th century under those giants, Bourne, Clowes, the Wedgewoods and their extraordinary camp meetings.

If the Lord is the God who delights to revive his people then we are obliged to seek him, pursuing him and pleading with him to revive us again. What else does the church believe it needs for the future? We ought to give God no rest until he makes his name a praise in all the earth.

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