

Reflections on the Welsh Revival

by **Graham Hind**

Scripture is full of counsel about the importance of remembering - something specially needful in an age that seems determined to abandon history. Deuteronomy 32:7 says, 'Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father; and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you'.

Psalms 105 begins with the words, 'Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples!' The psalm declares that God remembers his covenant with us — so we also should remember. 'Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered' (v.5).

The prophets also emphasised the need to remember what God had done in the past: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls' (Jeremiah 6:16).

Wondrous works

It is not, therefore, backward looking, antiquarian or out of touch with present reality to recall that 100 years ago the Lord did a great work among his people. This work occurred primarily in Wales but spread to other places, and many were wonderfully saved.

These are the wondrous works of God and must be made known. We do so in gratitude and to the glory of God.

That said, it is not just a matter of remembering and moving on. It is sad that we have to look back a whole century to see revival on this scale in the British Isles.

Things have happened since — a 'forgotten revival' took place in East Anglia and north-east Scotland in 1921, and there were the revivals in Lewis in the late 1930's, the late 1940's and the early 1950.

In addition there have surely been many times when local churches have known a special work of the Spirit of God and seen a period of growth both in spiritual life and numbers.

Going back to the early 1950's there was clearly a work of the Holy Spirit in many places in Wales and England. It did not earn the name 'revival' but was certainly significant and had lasting effects.

The period has not been well documented but there is a flavour of it in *The first fifty years* by Noel Gibbard (Bryntirion Press, 2002) which tells the story of the Evangelical Movement of Wales.

Spiritual condition

Nevertheless, the sadness remains for those who love the Lord and his people and long to see his glory demonstrated in revival. It is not for nothing that Isaiah cries out, 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence!' (64:1).

The prophet reflects on the pitiful spiritual condition of the people and sees the presence of God as the only answer, even though the people are sinful and unprepared. Isaiah pleads with God because he knows that only he can fill the void: 'But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

'Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people' (Isaiah 64:8-9).

How much more do we need the presence of God in this special way now, when decline is so obvious in the church and society at large!

How can those who know something of the history of God's wonderful deeds here in the UK, be anything but disturbed by the spread of irreverent worship and the trivialization of the great truths of Scripture within evangelical churches today?

Deceitful teachings

It was precisely these things, though in a less virulent form, that were afflicting the churches in Wales and elsewhere in the years prior to 1904. Many ministers had absorbed the deceitful teachings of 'higher criticism' and had lost their confidence in the Bible as the Word of God.

But the revival renewed a focus on the sinfulness of men and women and their desperate need of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. Some, like Seth Joshua and others in the Welsh Calvinistic 'Forward Movement', had not succumbed to the modern trends and had not lost their focus — but for them also the revival brought welcome blessing.

Ministers themselves were converted and there were many evidences of the power of God in meetings, in homes and in the workplace. But even those who love revival still debate the true extent of conversions to Christ and their effect on society — the danger is to adopt an exaggerated and romantic view of the revival that does not accord with the facts.

Nevertheless, even the most cautious scholar has to admit that the 1904 revival was a tremendous work, explicable only in terms of divine intervention.

Questions

Do we not need such an intervention from the living God now? There is no excuse, of course, for idleness in the work of the gospel. We cannot just sit back and wait for revival. There should be zeal and passion as we seek to draw the lost to the Lord Jesus Christ. But while we work there should surely be longing prayer for God to 'rend the heavens and come down'.

The plea that God would 'do it again' inevitably raises questions. There are well-known accounts from the 1904 revival of undesirable events. Many of these incidents relate to the ministry of Evan Roberts and cannot be ignored.

For example, imagine for a moment that you are walking in your home town and meet a friend who attends a different chapel to your own, one where there is a series of special meetings being held. Your conversation turns to the meetings and he tells you that many people were converted the previous night.

You ask how that was, and he explains that the visiting evangelist went among the congregation asking people if they believed. On being told, 'No, I would like to believe but I can't. Pray for me', the preacher would ask the audience to join him in the following prayer.

'Send the Holy Spirit now, for Jesus Christ's sake, Amen'. This prayer would be repeated about a dozen times by all present, at which the would-be convert would suddenly rise and declare in triumph, 'Thank God, I have now received salvation. Never again will I walk in the way of sinners'. This declaration created fresh excitement, and the congregation sang joyfully.¹

Behind locked doors

You hear of another meeting involving the same evangelist. Following a Sunday evening service, from about 9.30pm onwards, the evangelist went from seat to seat asking each person if they were willing to stand up and confess Jesus Christ.

Most were, but not all. By 11.00pm the evangelist was back at the front and people who had children with them, or responsibilities at home, departed.

About fifty people remained. The evangelist ordered the doors locked — no one was to come or go — and then announced, 'We are not going to leave this meeting tonight till the Holy Spirit is poured out. I want each one of you to pray this short prayer, "O Lord, send the Holy Spirit now, for Jesus Christ's sake".'

Everyone prayed the prayer in turn, after which the evangelist announced that the Holy Spirit had not come. The whole process was repeated, but again 'the Holy Spirit had not come'.

Then the evangelist said that no one was leaving until the Holy Spirit had descended, and so the prayer was started again. This time a young woman broke out in tears and someone else was sighing and weeping. So the evangelist announced, 'That's it; the Holy Spirit has come', and the meeting closed about 2.00 or 3.00am.²

Importance of history

Events of this kind depart dangerously from scriptural principles and are in themselves undesirable. No sensible evangelical Christian is going to pray for things like this to be repeated! How then shall we respond to them?

Firstly, these things underline the importance of history. Jonathan Edwards, who saw the wonderful work of God in the eighteenth century and rejoiced in it, wrote his Treatise on the religious affections to examine what was true and what was false in revival.

His experiences and reflections are valuable to us because there has seldom been a work of God that has not exhibited some undesirable features. Even in the white heat of the early church, a husband and wife stepped forward to give generously to the Lord — or so it seemed. Many must have rejoiced to see it, but Ananias and Sapphira were not moved by the Spirit of God.

Who would not rejoice to see an occult leader repent and be baptised as the power of God swept through his region? But in truth Simon had to be told, 'You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God!' (Acts 8:21).

So we may conclude that some aspects of a revival are undesirable. But that does not alter the fact that God is at work. Peter did not rebuke Simon then turn to Philip and say that the work in Samaria was flawed and therefore not of God!

Secondly, many of the questions about the 1904 revival revolve around Evan Roberts and the meetings associated with him. Some have even called it 'the Evan Roberts revival', not realising that this focus on one man was largely a product of newspaper reports.

Then, as now, the media needed a 'star' and they found it in Roberts. But we must be careful. Evan Roberts may be the best-known figure of the period, and he certainly made mistakes. But there is no evidence that he set out to make a name for himself or ever saw himself as more important than others.

It was not his fault that the work of many fine men and women of God was obscured because they were not so much in the news.

Unorthodox means

Thirdly, we must not forget that the Lord often uses unorthodox means to bring in his people. Many solidly Reformed churches have members who trace their conversion to Christ to a Billy Graham crusade, Spring Harvest or something similar!

To deny that thousands were truly saved in 1904-05 is to fly in the face of history and authentic church records. The Lord has his ways and we must take care not to despise his work.

We must be careful not to resist revival because it does not fit our own theological pattern.

In this writer's opinion such a danger is already present. There are Reformed churches today which have sound theology but no heart to PREACH the gospel of Christ to the lost. They put no effort into children's work and their evangelistic outreach is negligible.

But God, who can cause the stones to praise him, may yet choose to work in such neighbourhoods — through others who do not always fulfil our theological expectations. It is possible to be theologically correct and yet not open to the work of God.

May he preserve us from such a thing and use us for his glory.

Graham Hind

References

¹. From Voices from the Welsh Revival by Brynmor P Jones, Evangelical Press of Wales 1995, p.36. The account, from the Llanelli Mercury of 17 November 1904, is of a meeting at Bryn-teg, Loughor. The evangelist is Evan Roberts.

². Ibid. p.31. A personal account by John Penry of a meeting at Moriah, Loughor, 5 November 1904.