

The Welsh Revival A SALUTARY STORY OF REVIVAL¹

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Here is the news from Wales, read by an Australian without a Welsh accent.

During the spring of 1904 a young Welshman named Evan Roberts was repeatedly awakened at 1 am and met with God until 5 am. The Welsh revival followed with churches packed for prayer meetings. In one gathering, Pastor Joseph Jenkins asked for testimonies. A young girl, Florrie Evans, a believer only a few days, rose and with trembling voice said simply; "I love Jesus with all my heart". People were deeply affected and a powerful spiritual awakening that brought 100,000 people to Christ had begun.

On November 7th, 1904 Moriah Chapel was filled to capacity for a prayer meeting that lasted until 3:00 a.m. Soul winning spread through the coalmines. Profane swearing stopped. Even the miners' horses were puzzled when their masters stopped cursing.

The Times added that 'the religious revival in Wales continues ... with unabated zeal.' Huge crowds were attending the meetings. Bible verses covered the doors down in the coalmines. 'At Swansea the Poor Law guardians ... dealt with revival cases in which people ... have taken their parents from the workhouse. The Welsh revival movement has shown no sign of flagging ...' *The Times* pointed out on January 10th. "Entire congregations were on their knees in fervent prayer and "for the first time there was not a single case of drunkenness at the Swansea Petty Sessions."

On January 11th, *The Times* noted that David Lloyd-George, who later became the British Prime Minister, said the Welsh revival gave hope, "that at the next election Wales would declare with no uncertain sound against the corruption in high places which handed over the destiny of the people to the horrible brewing interest..." Lloyd-George even saw one of his political rallies taken over by the Welsh revival.

¹ Presented at the New Creation Summer school, Victor Harbor, 12 January 2012

He was impressed as a young girl prayed in the presence of 2,000 people. He said in one town the tavern sold only 9 cents worth of liquor drinks on Saturday night!

The Times observed; "The whole population had been suddenly stirred by a common impulse. Religion had become the absorbing interest of their lives, they gathered at crowded services for six and eight hours at a time. Political meetings and football matches were postponed ... quarrels between trade-union workmen and non-unionists had been made up... At Glyn-Neath a feud had existed for 10 or 12 years between the two Independent chapels, but during the past week united services have been held in both chapels, and the ministers have shaken hands before the congregations."

Coal miners crowded into prayer meetings that lasted till 3:00 a.m. and then washed, ate breakfast and returned to work. Many drunkards confessed their sins and received Christ. According to the *London Times* of February 2nd, 1905; due to the Welsh revival many men abandoned dens of iniquity. Employers noticed a great improvement in the work produced by their employees. A judge named Sir Marchant Williams said that his work was much lighter especially regarding drunkenness and related offenses.

What is Revival?

Theologian J I Packer: God's quickening visitation of His people, touching their hearts and deepening His work of grace; corporate, enlivening individuals, not in isolation but together. 'Revival' as a noun is not found in Bible; **verbs**, meaning 'to live'. Psalm 85: 6, *Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?* & the prayer in Habakkuk 3: 2, ie. Bring into life and reality the salvation you have promised in word and vision; 'Revival' is not of Biblical origin but we use it for convenience. Pioneer theologian of revival was Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), who said 'the surprising work of God'; is a cyclical view of revival as work of grace under God's sovereignty and occurs periodically, like breaking of successive waves'. Edwards' use signified effusion or outpouring of the Spirit. Revivals come unheralded and the Awakening in 1740 was described; 'it broke upon the slumbering churches like a thunderbolt rushing out of a clear blue sky. Records of the cessation of revivals

enforce the same lesson. God initiates revival by stirring up prayer for it; Satan seeks to counterfeit and corrupt it into heretical and antinomian fanaticism at every stage'.

Danger; Charles Finney(1792-1875), with his Arminian – Pelagian preaching and theology sought to change Edwards' forms into laws for revival meaning simply that the church's praying, repenting and seeking God guaranteed an outpouring of the HS in revival blessing like the farmer's sowing and caring for his paddock guarantees a crop. Such ideas of the church paying the price in passionate prayer and penitence to stir God's will into revival action has been popular in evangelical piety since Finney's day, although the results have not been commensurate with such seeking.

J.I. Packer; "More recently the idea has become current that revival, meaning powerful Christianity as exhibited in Acts, is a permanent norm for the church, and will automatically be continuous where obstacles to it (unbelief, misbelief, apathy, sin) are removed and right goals are aimed at. This, too, assumes an Arminian concept of God".

Geoffrey Bingham; "Revival is an indispensable *must* for our age. The many efforts of our age to renew the church and to stimulate it to proclaim the living good news of God in Jesus Christ ... have not radically and dramatically changed our churches & nations".

Stuart Piggin, In revival God is central, not humanity. Revival is waking up to the reality that God is the centre of the universe, not us, and that we are created for his glory – that we have not created God for our own comfort. Revival brings home to us that we must be like God – holy. We must not make a god after our own image – that is idolatry.

What revival is not. -- Revival is not an organized series of evangelistic meetings for conversion, similar to the Billy Graham Crusades. Revival does bring people to conversion; but Revival is restoring and renewing spiritual life; a sovereign act of God but God's sovereignty must never be an excuse for our laziness.

The Need for Discernment in Revival & Evangelism

British Historian Iain Murray has warned about Fanaticism; it produces controversy and divisions among Christians. One effect of genuine revival is to provoke opposition from those who are self-satisfied and unbelieving, nominal Christians. But worse disruption is caused if the devil can distract true Christians into opposing one another and fanaticism is a fertile means of bringing this about. When emotionalism and wrong zeal are being identified with true Christianity it is necessary for discerning leaders to sound a warning against the danger. This will lead the promoters of excesses to defend themselves and their actions. The result will be that instead of a revival going forward, a spirit of strife and debate gains entrance and spreads among churches.

A view of the Welsh Revival

At the turn of the 19th century, many in Wales evidenced a great yearning for revival because of its low spiritual condition, loss of power in the pulpit, low attendances at prayer meetings, decline in Bible reading and family worship. Much prayer for outpouring of Holy Spirit; many leaders were convinced that only divine intervention could save Wales from terrible spiritual collapse. It was a time of Liberal theology and Arminian evangelicalism, particularly through influence of Charles Finney, former lawyer, dramatic conversion; introduced 'new measures' – anxious seat, protracted meetings, allowing women to pray in public – stressed human ability to repent and create new hearts. Therefore a lack of doctrinal strength, unlike their forebears; and ignorance by ministers of revival history in Calvinistic Methodism of George Whitefield and 1859 Welsh revival. One of the most striking things about the 1904-5 Revival was the comparative absence of teaching. One minister who remembered the awakening of 1859 observed, 'it was for the Atonement they gave thanks in '59, but now they give thanks for their own pleasant feeling'.

Iain Murray² has written that; 'excess and even some fanaticism is common enough in revivals. What proved tragic in Wales was that the best-known figure in the revival was chiefly responsible for what went wrong. So closely was he identified with the excess in the public

² I M, *Pentecost Today*, 150-169

mind that no one could be critical of him without seeming to be an opponent the work of God.

From November 1904 Welsh newspapers canonised Evan Roberts as 'the revivalist'. The *Western Mail* of Cardiff was certain that the work began with Roberts at Moriah Chapel, Loughor, and took the credit for being the first to announce it that year. In reality, the revival began in places where Roberts had no influence and at least two months before that date. A young man, scarcely two months into studies as a candidate for the Calvinistic Methodist ministry, Evan Roberts provided more dramatic copy for the press than regular ministers of the churches. In October 1904 he was an unknown student; by December of the same year his name was known around the world. Press interest was heightened by the unusual claims about Roberts' meetings. Any thought of his lack of training and preparation was overshadowed by his insistence that everything 'in his meetings must be under the direct control of the Spirit. No one is to lead except the Holy Spirit'. 'God's supervision, he assured the people, included the very words he used in prayer'.

He also embraced the conviction that God was by-passing the regular teaching ministry without any idea that fanatics had often claimed the same thing before. It was an American (so-called) 'revivalist' of the nineteenth century who said, 'God is going to save the masses in his own way. He has told the ministers to stand on one side and let him have a turn'. -- Many others now took up the same cry and letters by so-called 'prophets' soon appeared in the press with assertions: 'Preaching has failed as a saving agency for a long time ... God is now going to save sinners for a while without the pulpit'. As a result of this popular idea; 'Sunday after Sunday, ministers appeared, not in their pulpit, but in the midst of an officiating people, silent, or taking part as one of the others'. Later commentators have criticised ministers for accepting this procedure but often they were forced to do so. There were many instances of ministers being interrupted and 'drowned out' by singing or praying as they attempted to speak. Such interruptions were commonly encouraged by Roberts who would tell the people, 'If God calls on you to give out a hymn, or to pray, or to give testimony, do it'. ---

Such exhortation seems innocent enough but once the idea took hold that the revival meetings were under the direct control of the Holy Spirit, then an excited congregation could scarcely be stopped if speaking, singing and praying went on simultaneously. All the participants, it was assumed, were being 'prompted' by God. If some found all this disturbing, the press gave the impression that the majority found such departures from the traditional very welcome: 'the setting aside of formal worship and of the usual preaching was the sign that a new age had dawned'.

However, we need to understand that Evan Roberts was not the author of the Welsh Revival, the initiator was HS. Roberts was a popular figure according to the Press and public but beginnings occurred two years before November 1904. – Also two years before Wales, rural NSW Illawarra area more than 2.5 thousand conversions. Drinking clubs, dancing salons lost grip; pit ponies in mines stopped work as they couldn't understand instructions minus bad language. ³ -- In Wales, there were many others used apart from Roberts. The movement did not depend on money, organisation, advertising; no paid newspaper advertisements or other paid advertising, no publicity, no hired halls no salaries. At times Roberts sat among people silent and praying and left without saying a word. Not revival through preaching but supernatural.

Wonderful praying and singing but no organ or instruments. Revival for YP, of prayer, soul winning, personal experience. Impossible to trace beginnings of revival. Scene had been dark with bar rooms flourishing, football, cock-fighting, prize fights, pigeon flying, betting and gambling supreme; now fire ignited and spread.

Who was Evan Roberts? Born 1878, a miner's son, went into the mines to work aged 12 then worked as a blacksmith. He attended Calvinistic Methodist Church & had a passion to preach. Aged 26 entered preparatory school at Newcastle Emlyn to prepare for College exams. He had prayed for 13 years for visitation of HS. Planned to start school in spring of 1904 and went to evangelistic convention in September 1904 with others singing and praising for 7 pm service. Roberts broke down at close of service when the

³ S. Piggin, *Spirit of a Nation*, 39

preacher Seth Joshua prayed, “Bend us, O Lord”. Roberts cried “Bend me, O Lord”. Roberts described, “I fell on my knees with my arms over the seat in front of me and the tears flowed freely as I cried ‘Bend me, Bend me, Bend me, Bend us; perspiration poured down my face and tears streamed; audience sang ‘I am coming, coming Lord, to Thee’. Now a great burden came upon me for the salvation of lost souls’. Evan Roberts believed God would give 100,000 souls. He never returned to the school and went home to lead YP meetings at Moriah Church. ⁴ He spoke for the first time on what he considered as four essential conditions for revival.

1; Is there any sin in your past that you have not confessed to God? On your knees at once. Your past must be put away and yourself cleansed. **2;** Is there anything in your life that is doubtful – anything you cannot decide whether it is good or evil. Away with it. There must not be a cloud between you and God. Have you forgiven everybody, everybody, everybody? If not, don’t expect forgiveness for your own sins. You won’t get it. **3;** Do what the Spirit prompts you to do. Obedience – prompt, implicit, unquestioning obedience to the Spirit. **4;** A public confession of Christ as your Saviour, linked with frequent orders to stand up. --- **Is this the Sovereign grace of God or Arminian human instruction and manipulation?** --- Following a strong evangelistic message **A W Tozer**, rather than give an appeal, said; Don’t stand or come to the front and cry – go home and live it out.

Man once complained to Asahel Nettleton; ‘I cannot get along with the doctrine of predestination’. Nettleton replied tersely; ‘Then get along without it’.⁵

Welsh minister Rev Sidney Green now living in Adelaide: ‘The role of Evan Roberts in the Welsh revival was anything but conventional. Often he would simply lead the people in prayer or read the Scriptures. Then at other times he sat silent, while, one after another, people confessed their sins or gave testimony of Christ’s victory and power. There were also glorious times of worship which lasted literally hours. Roberts merely gave humble instruction from time to time and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

⁴ E. Cairns, *An Endless Line of Splendour*, 196 & James A Stewart *Invasion of Wales by the Spirit*, Revival Literature, NC

⁵ IM, 74

Sadly, the intense experience and continuing ministry took its toll on Roberts. He became nervous and would sometimes be abrupt or rude to people in public meetings. He openly rebuked leaders and congregations alike. He broke down and withdrew from public meetings. Accusation and criticism followed and further physical and emotional breakdown ensued. He fell into a deep depression and in the spring of 1906 he was invited to convalesce at Jessie Penn-Lewis' home in Leicester. --- He stayed at the home for eight years and it seems he was the prisoner of a powerful and domineering woman. Nothing much is known of the reclusive years that followed. He died at the age of 72 in 1951. ---

He admitted preaching about the Cross but 'self had the upper hand'.

We need to remember that a time of revival, however genuine is the time for watchfulness. The most prosperous season in a Church is one of dangerous exposure. The mount is the place to become giddy. Beware of all efforts to kindle excitement.

What is the Biblical answer?

Do you know that all your sins are forgiven by Jesus Christ? Salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone and He alone is our life, we have no life of our own? We abide in Christ and His holy love means we obey Him as Lord only by grace with every fibre of our being? With all our mistakes and shortcomings we are His Bride being prepared by the Spirit for His wedding.

What about Revival in our day? Two vital emphases; prayer and preaching.

PRAYER: We don't put our hopes in the quantity of prayer as if that will bring revival but in our God and Father who is the prime mover. Start with how we think of God rather than our needs; Lord's prayer: Matthew 6: 9, Our Father who is holy. We begin with the Name which assures us of who He is.

PREACHING: Martyn Lloyd-Jones claimed that any preaching which soothes, comforts and pleases those who have never been brought to fear God, nor to seek His mercy, is not preaching which the Spirit of God will own ... present day preaching does not even annoy men and women, but leaves them precisely where they were, without a ruffle and without the slightest disturbance ... The church is regarded as a sort of dispensary where drugs and soothing mixtures are distributed and in which everyone should be eased and comforted... Before men and women can be converted they must be convicted of sin by the HS.⁶

C H Spurgeon: 'In the beginning, the preacher's business is not to convert men, but the very reverse. It is idle to attempt to heal those who are not wounded, to attempt to clothe those who have never been stripped, and to make those rich who have never realized their poverty'.⁷

Someone exclaims; but I preach the Cross, isn't that sufficient for conversion and revival? -- How do you preach the Cross? ---

Geoffrey Bingham; "Deficient preaching of the Cross is dangerous. Where God is not seen to have accomplished **all** in Christ, then any act of 'repentance' or 'acceptance' of Christ will seem to have arisen from man's side. Instead of the cross breaking us down, the **gifts** of faith and repentance make the **acts** of faith and repentance therefore mandatory, we will think we have done something. We will always carry a deficient view of the total grace of God. His love will be equally deficient. The way is again opened for 'works' to maintain his justification or salvation, and instead of them springing from the response of love-in-forgiveness they will tend to be offered as satisfaction for forgiveness. I believe this is one of the reasons for the incipient apathy and lethargy in the church".⁸

SUMMATION: Following unusual proceedings in a service of 1,200 men, Roberts sat silent in the pulpit for two hours. Following examination, the medical diagnosis signed by four doctors was that Roberts was 'mentally and physically sound but suffering from the

⁶ Iain Murray, *ML-J the First Forty Years*, 206

⁷ CHS, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 44, 421 & Murray 206

⁸ GCB, *Return to the Dynamic*, 2

effects of overwork, and we consider advisable that he should have a period of rest.' Spasmodic meetings in Wales were to follow until his last mission in the summer of 1906, but something had happened to Roberts from which he was not to recover fully. Doctors advised him never to preach again and from 1906 until his death, forty-five years later, he passed into shadows. There is no reason to doubt that Evan Roberts was a sincere Christian who was borne along by currents beyond his control or understanding. The press had created expectations of him which were unsustainable, and the Welsh press had turned Roberts into 'a public idol'.

But the fundamental problem was a spiritual one which lay in the assumption that God was giving powers - especially prophetic ones - which were visible proofs of his presence and work. Roberts believed this so intensely that when the possibility arose that his condition was caused by emotional overload rather than by the Holy Spirit, a nervous breakdown was almost inevitable.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who later treated Roberts medically, believed that Roberts crossed line from the spiritual to the psychic and it was this which led to breakdown from which he never recovered.⁹

It was not that he had 'tricked' others, he himself had been misled. There was wonderful revival but it did not last, for the Bible was largely ignored, visions and new revelations were paramount, church elders and ministers were condemned as heretics if they did not yield and conform to new methods; spiritual leaders were often ignored. Church leaders surrendered control to novices and the inexperienced out of fear of stopping the revival. A few years after the revival Evan Roberts came to see that 'the bold claims he had made in the past, were enough proof that he had been deceived ... from now on he would distrust mystical experiences'.¹⁰ Roberts grew more and more discouraged as he saw some groups of converts following after cults in which they barked at the devil, danced and swooned, or followed healers or prophetesses.¹¹

⁹ Address at 1970 Ministers Conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales

¹⁰ IM, *Pentecost – Today*, 163 ref. to Jones, *Life of Roberts*, 173

¹¹ Ibid, 165, ref. Jones, 158

There is a tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility; Ezekiel 36: 25 – 27 & Lamentations 5: 1 – 22.

These are times when we are thirsty and hungry and easily succumb into junk theology and user-friendly worship which appeals to our sensual appetites. Man-made systems, even using prayer and scripture to try and impress God lead to legalism, pietism and fake performance. Reaction against low spiritual existence, liberal theology, antinomianism, kindergarten pulpit utterances, opposed with a strong replacement on the need for prayer, Bible reading, church attendance is understandable; but such emphases do not maintain spirituality. Even when the Spirit moves amongst the churches and renewed life is evident, people will seek to continue a revival by human effort. Any of these spiritual exercises may emanate from guilt motivation and engender spiritual pride. There is no formula or Scriptural principle or methodology apart from the Spirit of God and he cannot be conscripted or prayed into human action.

GOD ALONE IS SOVEREIGN.

The Spirit (wind) blows where He wills ... From our dry bones we dimly hear William Cowper's hymn: *Where is the blessedness I knew When first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view Of Jesus and his word?* Ezekiel 18: 30 – 32

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Iain Murray: Should revival be granted in our day the following lesson are vital:

(i) Everything possible should be done to avoid mere excitement and to maintain normal routines. Late night church meetings and near-sleepless nights commonly lead to a loss of judgment as well as to exhaustion. If people are in a state of audible distress during a service, or in a physical condition disturbing to others, it is possible for their condition to be reproduced in others simply by the operation of sympathy or hysteria. Ministers need to discountenance any such spread of emotion both by giving no credence to the idea that these cases are special instances of God's work

and by arranging for the removal from the service of any whose feelings cannot be restrained.

(ii) Unpopular though it may be, the first appearances of wildfire need to be resisted. Fear of doing this lest it should be 'opposing the Spirit' has often prepared the way for situations which pass beyond control and bring great discredit upon the gospel.

(iii) Great care and caution is needed in any co-operation between churches and the news-media.

(iv) The Bible as our only infallible means of knowing mind of God has to control both practice and spirit. 'A revival that is not founded on Bible truth is a blaze of pine shavings, and will end in smoke.'¹²

¹² | Murray, 169; re Theodore Cuyler, *How to be a Pastor*, 92,3