

Falling under the Spirit?

The record of history

by Greg Gordon

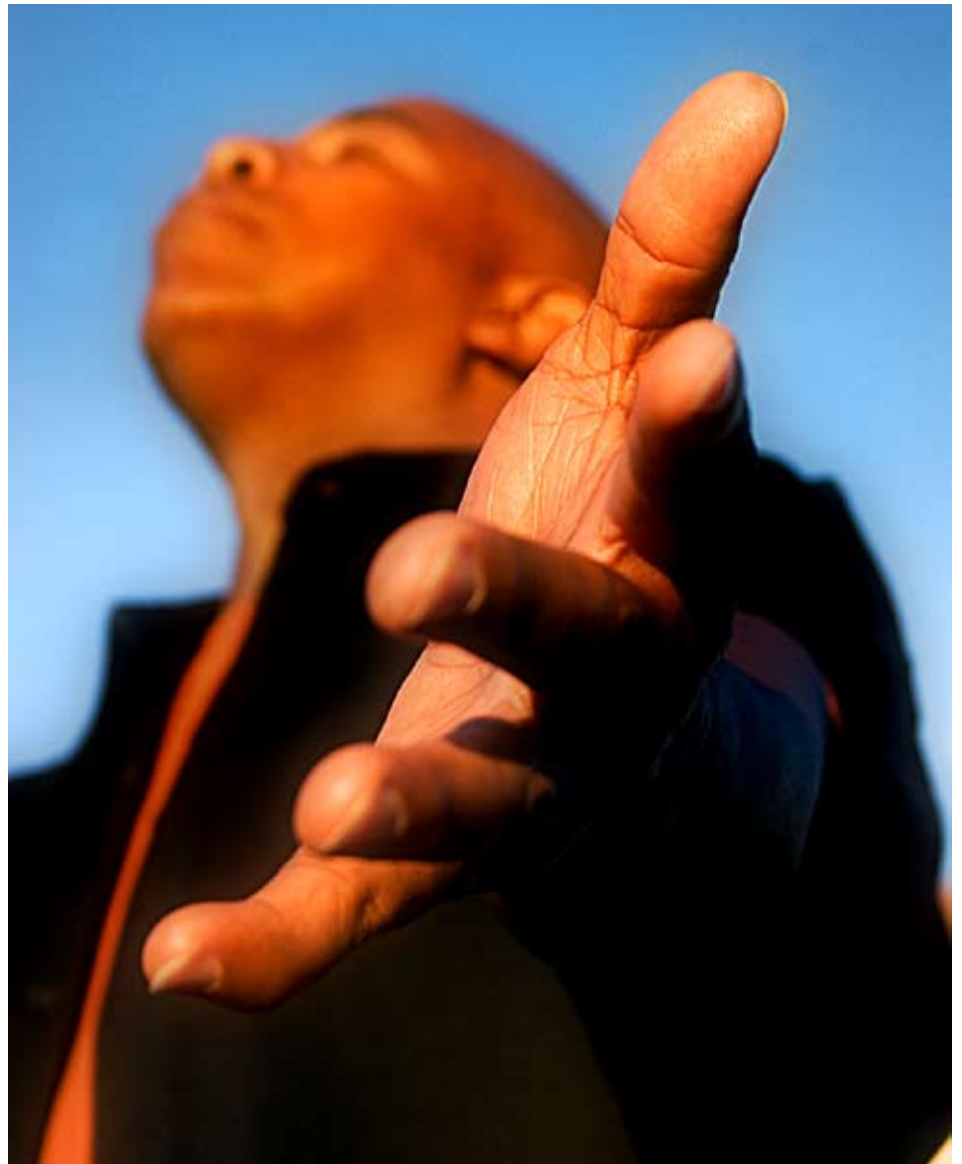
TIMES of revival bring forth many exuberant and prevailing experiences on the soul and body of men. During these times the phenomena that are involved can be easily seen as something that is extreme and not proper. By looking at the history of revivals we see clearly that phenomena such as “falling under” and being “smitten down” was simply a response to the extreme conviction upon the souls of men.

True revival preaching often brought forth much strong exhortation and pleading concerning the sinfulness of men and the holiness of God. Any sinner or carnal Christian who heard this preaching would have these types of manifestations because of the deep work of God in conviction and guilt upon the conscience. In modern-day churches, preaching that produces conviction, or shows the lost sinner the condemned state he is in, is considered by most to be legalistic! To bring forth the “terrors of the law” is a thing from the past and isn’t considered relevant anymore.

It is hoped simply through reading these various accounts from past revivals that the reader will realise the true reason for the “experience” of falling under in the Spirit of God. This type of discernment and study is required in our day of perverted and dubious workings of false spirits and doctrines of devils.

The counterfeit has been alongside the truth since the beginning. I give this example from the 1623 Ulster revival:

“There were now many converts in all the congregations and satan, observing the prosperity of the Gospel amongst them, set himself to perplex them by discrediting the work of God in their hearts. This he did by a counterfeit of the operation of the Holy Spirit on several people at Lochlarne, whom he caused to cry out during public wor-



ship, and some of them were affected with convulsive pangs.

“The number of people thus affected increased daily, and at first the ministers and people pitied them, hoping that the Holy Spirit was at work with them. But when they had spoken to them, and found that they did not discover any sense of their sinful state or any longing after a Saviour, the minister of the place wrote to his brethren, inviting them to come and examine the matter, who when they had spoken with them saw that it was a mere delusion of the destroyer.

“The next Sabbath, an ignorant person in Mr Blair’s congregation made a noise, but immediately, says Mr Blair, ‘I was assisted to rebuke that lying spirit which disturbed the worship of God, and I charged the same in the name and authority of Jesus Christ,

not to molest that congregation; and through God’s mercy we met with no more of that sort.’”

During the revival in Cambuslang in 1742 under the ministry of Reverend M’Culloch there were many phenomena that surrounded the revival meetings especially the occurrence of “falling under,” as it was termed in those days. “As to what these young men termed ‘the falling,’ it was a way of speaking among scoffers at the time, occasioned by the bodily distress which, in many instances, accompanied conviction. As a result, the work was much objected to; but when the intimate connection of soul and body is considered, it will not appear surprising that great outward agitation should mark the emotions of a soul fully awakened to the dread realities of judgement and eternity.”

Paris Reidhead, in his sermon *Ten Shekels and a Shirt*, gives two accounts of this phenomenon during times of revival:

“Wesley was a preacher of righteousness who exalted the holiness of God. He would exalt the holiness of God, and the law of God, and the righteousness of God, and the justice of God, and the wisdom of His requirements! And the justice of his wrath and his anger! Then he would turn to sinners and tell them of the enormity of their crimes and their open rebellion and their treason, and their anarchy. And the power of God would so descend upon the company, that on one occasion it is reliably reported that when the people dispersed there were 1 800 people lying on the ground, utterly unconscious!

“Because they had a revelation of the holiness of God, and in the light of that they’d seen the enormity of their sins and God had so penetrated their minds and hearts, they had fallen to the ground!

“It wasn’t only in Wesley’s day; it was also in America. A man by the name of John Wesley Redfield had continuous ministry for three years in and around New Haven, culminating in the great meetings in Yale Ball. The policemen were accustomed, during those days, if they saw someone lying on the ground, to go up and smell his breath. Because if he had alcohol on his breath they’d lock him up; but if he didn’t, he had Redfield’s disease.

Redfield's disease

“And all you needed to do if anyone had Redfield’s disease was just take him into a quiet place and leave him until he came to. Because if they were drunkards, they’d stop drinking, and if they were cruel, they’d stop being cruel, and if they were immoral, they gave up their immorality. If they were thieves, they returned what they had. For as they had seen the holiness of God, and seen the enormity of their sin; the Spirit of God had driven them down into unconsciousness because of the weight of their guilt! And somehow in the overspreading of the power of God, sinners repented of their sin and came savingly to Christ.”

In the Irish Revival 1859 this account of falling under the Spirit was given:

“When the conviction as to its mental process reaches its crisis, the person, through weakness, is unable to sit or stand, and either kneels or lies down. A great number of convicted persons in this town and neighbourhood, and now I believe in all directions in the north where the Revival prevails, are ‘smitten down’ as suddenly and they fall as if nerveless and paralysed and powerless, as if killed instantly by a shotgun.

A wild cry of horror

“They fall with a deep groan, some with a wild cry of horror – the greater number with the intensely earnest plea, ‘Lord Jesus, have mercy on my soul!’ Their whole frame trembles like a leaf, an intolerable weight is felt upon the chest, a choking sensation is experienced and relief from this found only in the loud, urgent prayer for deliverance, usually the bodily distress and mental anguish continue till some degree of confidence in Christ is found. Then the look, the tone, the gestures instantly change.

“The aspect of anguish and despair is changed for that of gratitude, and triumph, and adoration. The language and the looks, and terrible struggles, and loud desperate deprecation, tell convincingly, as the parties themselves declare, that they are in deadly conflict with the old serpent. The perspiration rolls off the anguished victims; their very hair is moistened. Some pass through this exhausting conflict several times; others only once. There is no appetite for food; many will eat nothing for a number of days. They do not sleep, though they may lie down with their eyes shut.”

The Cane Ridge revival of 1801 had many cases of “falling under” in the meetings during that time. The majority of people that experienced these manifestations were the mockers, sinners and those convicted greatly under the power of God showing their sinfulness before a Holy God:

“At its height, about 20 000 were said to have been in attendance. Religious services of praying, singing, exhorting, and preaching were kept up day and night. Physical expressions of the excitement were numerous and sometimes took bizarre forms. The groans and screams of those under conviction

mingled with the shouts of those who had found release and joy. The fear of hell and damnation and the hopelessness of the lost would be followed by the bliss of assured salvation.

“The most common physical experience was ‘falling.’ About 3 000 are said to have been prostrate at the Cane Ridge meeting. Some of the “fallen” were insensible. Others were aware of what was happening about them but were powerless to move. Women and children were the most affected. Yet men were also among ‘the slain.’

“A little later in the course of the revival, hundreds displayed convulsive physical contortions which were known as ‘the jerks.’ Frequently those who came to remonstrate or ridicule were themselves sudden victims. Running, jumping, and trances were common.”

The phenomenon of falling under the power of the Spirit occurred in the revivals of Jonathan Edwards. His assessment was that a person may “fail bodily strength” due to fear of hell and the conviction by the Holy Spirit or due to a “foretaste of heaven.”

R.A. Torrey testified of people falling under the power of God due to conviction of sin. Praying Hyde spoke of the Punjab Prayer Convention of 1906, “We began to pray, and suddenly the great burden of that soul was cast upon us, and the room was filled with sobs and cries for one whom most of us had never seen or heard of before. Strong men lay on the ground groaning in agony for that soul.”

Jonathan Edwards in his book *Religious Affections* gives us some words of wisdom relating to this phenomenon: “A work is not to be judged of by any effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength. The influence people are under is not to be judged one way or other by such effects on the body; and the reason is because the Scripture nowhere gives us any such rule.”

May God gift His Church with supernatural discernment in these last days – hence our Saviour’s words: “Take heed that no man deceive you!” Oh, how we need to see changed lives in response to preaching that brings conviction and contrition. Only God can change a life and make it holy: that is the true litmus test of revival! †