

Introduction

by J. Vyrnwy Morgan

The sermon explores the nature, history, and significance of revivals in Christian faith, emphasizing the need for genuine transformation over mere emotional experiences.

Scripture: Proverbs 14:15, Matthew 7:15, Acts 17:11, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Ephesians 5:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Hebrews 5:14, 1 John 4:1, 1 John 4:6

Topics: "Revival History", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

J. Vyrnwy Morgan delves into the history and impact of revivals, emphasizing the need for discernment in evaluating their authenticity and lasting effects. He explores the various types of revivals in Wales, highlighting key figures and their contributions to spiritual awakenings. The sermon touches on the evolution of theological views, from puritanic legalism to a focus on character and conduct, and the shift in emphasis from fear-based inducements to repentance to a deeper understanding of righteousness and retribution. Through historical accounts and reflections, the sermon challenges traditional perceptions and encourages a more critical examination of religious experiences.

Transcript

THE appearance of such a work may necessitate an apology, for the reason that the field has already been well covered, both by amateurs of literature, and by men who claim to be experts in this branch of religious experience. But the ground which this book covers is entirely new. The book is intended to fill a want which is both general and persistent; but so strong is the power of sectarian prejudice in the Principality, that those who are endowed with the capacity to deal with this phase of the Revival seem to lack the requisite courage.

The title of the volume should not be taken as implying any hostility to revivals. Criticism is the science of discrimination, and it is the science upon which this essay is based. Under certain obvious moral conditions, the influence of an evangelical revival must be good. To the man who has been leading a careless, worldly life, it is a means of grace, for it brings home to his mind a realization of the spiritual nature with which he has been endowed. But above all, being insensible to, and apparently dead in sin, his conscience is quickened, and he is brought within the range of God's saving power. It is historically true that all forms of religion are subject to fluctuations of feeling. Memories of revivals are found even among races which we would class as non-civilized and non-Christian. Knud Rasmussen, of the Danish Literary Expedition, was born and brought up in Greenland, and he has an intimate knowledge of the

manners, legends, and religious beliefs of the Eskimo. These people have not yet arrived at our conception of God; but they have their religion as we have ours, and they believe in the existence of certain supernatural forces. Knud Rasmussen describes a revival in Greenland; and the curious thing about it is, that it won over the local Christian catechist to the native faith of the Eskimo. The leaders were Habakkuk and Mary Magdalene, a married couple who had passed through great sorrow. They claimed, like the Welsh revivalist of 1904--5, to have seen visions, and to have had heavenly dreams. The Eskimo also sang hymns, wept, and were seized with spasms of longing for eternal life. Habakkuk would declare that one of their number had gained salvation, and even go to the length of mentioning his name; then the assembly would manifest its joy and gratitude.

Here is a part of his description: "When one or other of the disciples, without any reason whatever, wanted to weep, the whole gathering would break out into a terrible crying. And when suddenly some person in the assembly threw himself down on his face, and began to laugh, all the rest did the same. And sometimes they would laugh till one would think they could never be serious again. When Habakkuk was holding his discourses on eternal life, the assembly would sometimes be seized with such a longing for eternal life that they would begin to jump up and down where they sat. Then suddenly Habakkuk would stop his oration, mention a name, and say that such and such a one had now entered on the right way; and immediately all the men would rush out of the house, seize their guns, and fire a salute, that they might hear in heaven how men rejoiced at so great salvation. Sometimes they would go up to the churchyard, too, take each other by the hand, form circles round the graves, and sing hymns for the dead."

Jonathan Edwards and Theodore Parker, Savonarola and St. Francis of Assisi, differed widely in their theological views; but they were all revivalists. To them had been given power to startle the people out of their conventional moods, and to convince them of the necessity for a real personal conviction and experience. They were bold in their utterances, direct in their appeals, and unflinching in their denunciations of great national evils. They commended to their own generation the loftiest ethical conceptions, and these conceptions they vitalized by their commanding presence, and the influence of their own heroic spirits, with the result that old-fashioned truths assumed fresh complexions, and religion itself appeared as if clothed with a new garment. They prayed and preached, and something happened. The pious routine of moral mediocrity was broken up; men who had been content with an easy faith were stirred out of their apathy, and sent forth in the power of the Spirit to work for the coming of the Kingdom. Conflicts and innovations were inevitable, and, in some instances, charges of sensationalism; but these reformers were not sensationalists. Sentiment they had, and in abundance, but no sentimentality. They were true knights of the Holy Ghost, obedient to the heavenly impulse, and to the imperious demand of duty, at whatever cost and sacrifice. Great denominations have been built upon revivals; they have given birth to spiritual ideals and an impetus to the formation of systems of education that have lifted principalities, states and continents out of their ignorance and ineptitude, and put them on their feet.

Revivals have played a heavier part in the history of Wales and of America than of any other country; and the general record of revivals among both people shows an unmistakable change of character during the last fifty years. It would be interesting, and probably a revelation, to the Christian people of this age if they had access to the diaries kept by those who lived in the days of our grandparents, or if they perused the records of religious controversies of half a century ago-- controversies full of malignant passion, in which men argued concerning the abode of the lost, the kind and degree of suffering to which the victims were being subjected, the people who were then on their way to that dark region, and the nature of the punishment awaiting them.

There are men now living who remember the frenzies, quakings, contortions and extravagances of revivalists of the extreme type, and the lurid details of the life in hell which they gave. One would imagine they had been there on a tour of inspection, so minute and exact were their delineations. By these means they sought to deter their countrymen from vice. They spoke of huge cauldrons full of boiling lead and brimstone, to be poured over newcomers as the ceremony of welcoming them to the society of the lost.

They elaborated the horror by describing the doings of horned and cloven-footed demons, who goaded their victims around circles, up and down steep heights, simply for the gratification of their hatred and to augment the joys of the redeemed. It is not surprising that men sobbed aloud and women fainted. There is an old and a weird fresco in a certain parish church in England. Over the chancel arch is a picture representing the doom of the lost. Agile demons with pitchforks are shoving poor wretches down the throat of an awful monster.

Judging by their expressions, they do not seem to like it; but the monster appears quite satisfied. He has room for all of them in his capacious maw. Being over the chancel arch, the fresco is continually in sight. What a nice thing for young children to look at every Sunday! Weather stains mercifully obliterated the worst of it after a while, and would have got rid of it all; but the restorer -- the ecclesiologist--put in an appearance; and he brought it back in all its hideousness.

What does it signify? It shows how men have taken the figurative language of the Bible and translated it into the grossest materialism. In the same manner they have taken the mere symbols of heaven for heaven itself. Their interpretation is absolutely literal. To them heaven is a cubic city, where there are harping symphonies and a charm of endless praise. Confucius had a better notion of heaven: "Heaven," said he, "is a principle." Whichcote, the eminent theologian, declared two centuries ago, that heaven was a "temper."

In Browning's poems heaven is described as a state of beneficent activity, a constant growth into the image of God. Caricatures were not countenanced by the greatest Christian fathers or the canonized saints of the Mediaval Church. To the glory of God, and the credit of human nature, be it said, we have moved a long way from the literal, material, legal and Latin days. There are a sporadic few "orthodox" men who still retain their belief in the Calvinistic horrors of hell, and of heaven as a pagoda of jewels; but the vast majority of intelligent Christians have long since renounced such travesties.

Christ had to face this same foe of literalism. It lay in wait for Him at every turn, and at last had His blood. The only instances in which He blazed in wrath were those when He came into contact with the Pharisees who stood for literalism with its painful and intolerable details.

Canon Farrar's 'Eternal Hope' did much to discredit this puritanic legalism in the eyes of cultured and progressive men. For months after its publication, he lived amid a hailstorm of anathemas; but he saw victory before he saw death. Henry Ward Beecher was also instrumental in changing the style of thinking among preachers and laymen. The fear of hell is no longer held out as an inducement to repentance and holy living. Not that there is any attempt to question the reality of retribution. There is a sense of righteousness in every man; and every man knows and acknowledges that unrighteousness brings punishment. The law is neither arbitrary nor unnatural, and works here and now. The doctrine of retribution stands. But the notion of a material hell is gone, never to return; for though the world was once narrow, it will not be narrow again. There has been a change of emphasis. It used to be on hell: it is now on character; it used to be on wrath: it is now on conduct.

But what is a revival? By revival we mean an awakening among the people to their spiritual state, a renewed and more active attention to religion. Such an awakening is often accompanied by great exhilaration, and the exhilaration is often mistaken for the thing itself. Wherever there is a genuine revival, there is a change of habits among those who are affected by it. The more lasting the change, the greater its reality. Mere spasms of emotion and temporary excitement, even when they result in thousands of conversions, do not necessarily imply a revival. One has to distinguish between what is false and what is real, between the superficial and the lasting. The criterion by which we are to judge is the permanent effect.

The Principality of Wales is by no means a stranger to Revivals, some local and others national in character and dimensions. It is somewhat difficult to furnish the exact number and dates of such Revivals. A brief survey of the most noted of them will suffice.

1st, Vicar Prichard's at Llandovery and district, between 1620 and 1630, which helped to bring about the publication of the first popular edition of the Welsh Bible. It was full of fervour and of song (see "Canwyll y Cymry"), and brought about a better moral condition of the people locally.

2nd, Calvinistic Methodist Revival (Howell Harris's) from about 1740 on. This was more spiritual and general in character than that of Vicar Prichard's.

3rd, The same Revival in 1762, breaking out with new vigour and fierceness. The chief feature of this one was singing. It was called "Y Diwygiad Mawr" ("The Great Revival"), and was more democratic than the previous one, which was led and conducted by Church of England clergy and adherents. The prime figures in this great Revival were ordinary people from among all dissenters.

4th, A theological Revival, 1785-87. It was an effort against Arminianism, Arianism and Unitarianism. In this the Baptists were to the front.

5th, A missionary Revival, 1790-94, which was more or less influenced by the 'zeitgeist' of the French Revolution.

6th, A practical Revival, 1806-9. This was John Elias's, and specially touching children and the Sunday School.

7th, In 1811-14 a Revival characterized by the rejoicing and jumping of some of the late eighteenth-century Revivals.

8th, In 1814-15, Christmas Evans's, a theological and spiritual Revival.

9th, The "Beddgelert" Revival, 1817-22, local in its effect, but intense and spiritual.

10th, The great rejoicing Revival of 1828-30.

11th, In 1831-2, the most solemn of all, and the most sudden in its outbreak, the leader of which was John Elias.

12th, In 1839-42, a quiet, peaceful and very practical Revival, owing to the preaching of the Rev. John Jones of Talsarn, a celebrated Calvinistic Methodist minister. This revival was instrumental in producing a healthier atmosphere both in morals and in theology.

13th, The Cholera Revival, 1849-50, noted for its fierceness, the number of its backsliders and the suddenness with which they lapsed after the disappearance of the pestilence.

15th, The "'59 Revival," 1858-60, more general in its scope and effect.

In the interval between 1859 and 1904, Wales locally witnessed many Revivals from time to time. In 1875 the Revs. John Richard Hughes and Richard Owen, both of Anglesey, were prominent revivalists. In the then populous districts of Rhymney, Brynmawr and other parts of Monmouthshire, there was a strong Revival wave between 1875 and 1877, and these two noted Evangelists had a leading hand in it. Some of the points of difference between this Revival and that of 1904 were, that the former was of shorter duration, and among adults and old people, and that special attention was given to preaching.

It was local in its application; but in intensity of feeling, number of converts, open-air gatherings, courage, sincerity and passion for the salvation of sinners (having regard to its area), it compared well with the Revival of 1904. Attention has been called to the Rev. Richard Owen, who figured in the year 1884. He was during his short day one of the most genuine, powerful and God-sent Revivalists that Wales ever witnessed. He was of an original and independent turn of mind, and would have no dealings with parasites, committees and organizations.

He was a committee in himself, going from place to place, with his own Revival tent, which was filled each night to overflowing. His preaching was so powerful that stalwart and hardened sinners groaned and wept. In many respects he made people think of Elijah in the Old Testament and John the Baptist in the New, heralding the coming of the Saviour to the world. The Revival of 1904 had no Richard Owen. It was a Revival, not of man, but of men. With regard to the character and results of the Welsh Revival of 1904 various opinions are entertained.

To some it was a period of fanatical excitement and emotional excess. To others it was an unadulterated blessing. A few, while deprecating its methods, contortions and irregularities, believed it was a means of grace. Books have been compiled by good and sincere men purporting to give a true account of this religious upheaval; but they wrote during the storm and stress of the movement, and at a time when they were carried away by the excitement of the moment. It was impossible for them to write dispassionately, or even without prejudice.

Much has happened since. The bell of time peals out a reversal of many an approbation and many a condemnation. Nothing has yet been written, and no book has yet been published, of much historical value. What has been said does not supply a correct account of the origin of the revival, its feeders and mediums, and its ultimate effect upon Church life, upon the habits and morality of the communities, or upon the ideas of the people--as to what constitutes conversion and what salvation signifies.

It is impossible for those who live at any particular epoch to observe and to understand its essential features as they can be observed and understood by those who come later. But so strong is the trust in tradition that men naturally resent any attempt, however honest and well-founded, to examine the justice of a popular verdict. The man who seeks to interfere with settled opinions is a good subject for suspicion. Sir Walter Scott did something towards reinstating Claverhouse in public esteem, and to gain recognition for his better attributes, but he undertook by no means an easy task.

Democracy does not hold the scales of justice even; it often belittles virtues and canonizes principles that are questionable. During the Revival we had the declared verdict, the accepted formula and the catching

epithet. They appealed to the passion of the hour; they were quoted with approval from the pulpit and the pew, they were reproduced in the press and perpetuated in books. There was no attempt at a discriminating analysis. Many were the victims of ignorance and hysteria. There is much that is collateral and modifying in its effect to be said concerning the Revival of 1904-5, and in the interest of truth and posterity it should be said.

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