

Theology Matters

Touched By The Fire: Presbyterians and Revival

By Keith Edward Beebe

*St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, Scotland,
Tuesday, March 30, 1596*

As the Holy Spirit pierces their hearts with razor-sharp conviction, John Davidson concludes his message, steps down from the pulpit, and quietly returns to his seat. With downcast eyes and heaviness of heart, the assembled leaders silently reflect upon their lives and ministry. The words they have just heard are true and the magnitude of their sin is undeniable. As the minutes pass, a growing sense of God's presence and holiness intensifies, and a spirit of deep repentance breaks in upon them, disrupting their silence. Suddenly loud sighs and groans reverberate throughout the Cathedral as proud men donning long beards and clerical garb begin to shake uncontrollably in tearful sobbing, melting under profound conviction of their sin. Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by the Spirit, those present during this momentous hour are about to experience a radical reorientation of their lives. In turn, they will then be used by God to carry the torch of revival fire from this place, igniting a blaze that will sweep across the Scottish landscape. Indeed, this 1596 General Assembly will later be remembered as having signaled a new chapter in the life of the Church of Scotland.¹

Keith Beebe is adjunct professor at Whitworth College, Spokane, WA and pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Spokane, WA. (KeithBeebe@compuserve.com)

Undoubtedly, the preceding account might come as a surprise to many Presbyterians, as would the assertion that such experiences were a familiar part of the spiritual terrain of our early Scottish ancestors. What may now seem foreign to the sensibilities and experience of present-day Presbyterians was an integral part of our early spiritual heritage. Our Presbyterian ancestors were no strangers to spiritual revival, nor to the unusual phenomena that often accompanied it. A careful survey of Presbyterian history reveals the central role Presbyterians have played in the revival of evangelical Christianity in the English-speaking world. In fact, a case can be made that the early Church of Scotland, predecessor to our Presbyterian denominations, was virtually birthed and nurtured in a period of intense spiritual awakening. In the years that followed, from the early seventeenth century through the early eighteenth century, movements of Presbyterian revival spread beyond the shores of Scotland, first as Presbyterianism was being established in Ireland, and later as it was exported to the colonies of the New World. Furthermore, throughout the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, revival preaching and experience continued to play a formative role in the spiritual history

Table of Contents

"Touched By the Fire"	p. 1
"Preaching in Revival"	p. 9
Study of the Book of Revelation	p. 15

of our tradition in both Scotland and Ireland, as well as the United States.

A Spark Ignites

The seal of reformer John Calvin depicts a hand holding forth a heart lifted toward heaven and set aflame for God. This image of spiritual fire is quite appropriate in describing the experience of early Presbyterians who, through the renewing influence of Reformed evangelical preaching, were set ablaze for God.

As we examine the spiritual origins of the Presbyterian movement and the role Presbyterians have played in the history of spiritual revival, a number of general observations and affirmations can be made.

First, the Presbyterian Church was birthed in a time of spiritual revival. In fact, the Church of Scotland was the fruit borne of a spiritual awakening taking place in the late 1500's in the hearts of the Scottish people.

Most historical accounts of the Reformation emphasize the social and political aspects of the religious movement spreading throughout Scotland. Granted, the major changes that were sweeping through the Church and culture did have a major impact upon the social and political lives of the people. However, what sometimes is underestimated is the tremendous *spiritual* movement that precipitated the social-political events of that period.

In his book *Scotland Saw His Glory*, W. J. Couper makes the point that,

The Reformation was Scotland's first great religious awakening—an awakening all the more thorough because of the people's deep sleep throughout the preceding centuries. That the movement was a spiritual revival has been obscured by the fact that it was political and ecclesiastical in its outward aspect. Its historians have laid almost exclusive stress upon what can be found in State documents and in the papers and letters of politicians and churchmen. No doubt the movement did consist largely of conferences and negotiations between parties, of the passage of armies, of legislation proposed or actual, and of the devices of statesmen. Discussions about forms of church government and discipline were required, for a new ecclesiastical establishment had to be created. But important as these things are, they did not after all constitute the whole of the Scottish Reformation. Its real history lay deeper....

Continuing with his evaluation of the true nature of the Scottish Reformation, Couper writes:

The Scottish Reformation, however, being all these things was yet more than them all. It was in reality a deep moving of the heart of the nation towards God. The argument might have taken the form of debates on

doctrines, church government, and the method of public worship: the real question at issue was how each human soul could best find God through Jesus Christ.²

John Knox, upon his return to Scotland following his years in Geneva with John Calvin, was impressed by the vitality of faith and passion for Christ that had taken hold of the Scottish people while he was away. In a letter from Dun Castle dated November 4, 1555, Knox wrote to his mother-in-law, who had successfully urged Knox to leave Geneva and return to Scotland to assist in the work of God that was progressing there. In this letter, he writes of his surprising joy and delight in what he had found in his native land, describing, "the fervent thirst of our brethren, night and day sobbing and groaning for the bread of life. If I had not seen it with my eyes in my own country, I could not have believed it...the fervency here doth far exceed all others that I have seen."³

This profound spiritual thirst among the Scottish people created necessary conditions from which sparks of renewal finally erupted and the Scottish Presbyterian Church eventually emerged. Everywhere, especially "over the lowlands of Scotland, the breath of the Spirit of God passed, awakening a nation to newness of life. When Knox returned from Geneva and traversed the lowlands, he found everywhere the fuel gathered, needing only a spark to set it ablaze."⁴

Fanning The Flame

Not only was the Presbyterian tradition birthed in a revival, it was nurtured in revival as well. God's work of awakening persons to their need of the Savior became a continual point of focus for the newly established Scottish Presbyterians, and an integral part of their identity, piety, and practice. Two pastoral leaders in particular, John Welch and Robert Bruce, were instrumental in fanning the flame of evangelical piety within the fledgling Scottish Presbyterian movement.

John Welch

John Welch, the son-in law of John Knox, was widely known for his commitment to regular fasting and prayer. Apparent to many of his contemporaries was the tremendous spiritual power that seemed to flow from significant amounts of time he spent in prayer—as many as eight hours a day—and his practice of rising from bed in the middle of the night to intercede on behalf of Scotland. Welch's burden for the spiritual state of the Scottish Church was strong, providing him with a clear purpose and unwavering commitment to pray unceasingly. Over the course of his lifetime, Welch eventually succumbed to

a great weakness in his knees, caused with his continual kneeling at prayer, by which it came to pass, that though he was able to move his knees, and to walk, yet he was wholly insensible in them, and the

flesh became hard like a sort of horn. But when in the time of his weakness, he was desired to remit somewhat of his excessive painfulness, his answer was, 'He spent his life of God, and therefore it would be spent for him.'⁵

Welch not only spent himself in prayer, but also poured himself into evangelistic labors that reaped "a harvest of converts."⁶ According to one historian, "if his diligence was great, so it is doubted whether his sowing in painfulness or harvest in success was greater, for if either his spiritual experiences in seeking the Lord, or his fruitfulness in converting souls be considered, they will be found unparalleled in Scotland."⁷ Sacrificing considerable personal comforts on behalf of Christ and His Church, he courageously followed God's call to bring the gospel to the most difficult of pastoral settings. Sent by God as a shepherd to some of the darkest spiritual corners of Scotland, Welch persevered for years in parishes riddled with strife, factions, and even bloodshed, attempting with some success to restore the moral and spiritual moorings of the communities he served. Furthermore, his zeal for Christ and love for the Scottish Kirk also brought him into conflict with Scottish King, James VI (James I of England), and eventually led to his deportation to France where he spent his remaining years in exile.

Yet perhaps more important than his ministry endeavors was the spiritual impact Welch made upon several young Scottish pastors. After only two short decades of ministry in Scotland, John Welch left an unmistakable spiritual mark on a future generation of pastors. One of his most notable and fruitful followers, Reverend David Dickson, reflecting later upon his own ministry at Irvine in the 1620's, noted "that the vintage of Irvine was not equal to the gleanings, and not once compared to the harvest in Mr. John Welsh's time, when indeed the gospel had wonderful success in conviction, conversion, and confirmation."⁸ Indeed, several key players in later movements of revival (whose numbers included his own son Josias) pointed to John Welch as a prominent guiding force in their lives and ministries.

Robert Bruce

Another key player who stirred the embers of Scottish spirituality was a pastor named Robert Bruce who, like John Welch, possessed powerful gifts in the areas of prayer, evangelism and spiritual leadership. A successor to John Knox at the Kirk in Edinburgh in the 1590's, Bruce was considered "a great wrestler, who had more than ordinary familiarity with his Master."⁹ It was Bruce's practice to wrestle aloud with God before attempting to preach to the people. On one occasion, a passerby walking near his place of prayer reported that an unseen Someone must be in the room with Bruce, as Bruce was overheard insisting repeatedly that "he would not—he could not—go, unless he came with him."¹⁰

Evidently his times in prayer contributed to his effectiveness in preaching. As historian Kirkton described

him, "He made always an earthquake upon his hearers, and rarely preached but to a weeping auditory."¹¹ According to another chronicler,

There were none in his time, who preached with such evidence of the power of the Spirit; and no man had more seals of his ministry...he spoke with such authority and weight as became the oracles of the living God; so that some of the most stout-hearted of his hearers were ordinarily made to tremble, and by having the door, which had formerly been shut against Jesus Christ, as by an irresistible power broken open, and the secrets of their hearts made manifest, they oftentimes went away under deep conviction. He had a very majestic countenance; in prayer he was short, especially when in public, but every word or sentence he spoke was as a bolt shot from heaven.¹²

Bruce's influence on future generations was particularly evident as he raised up and shaped an emerging generation of Presbyterian pastors. John Livingston, one of Bruce's most influential disciples who later became a leader of revivals in Scotland and Ireland, once remarked: "Mr. Robert Bruce I several times heard, and in my opinion never man spake with greater power since the apostles days."¹³

Robert Bruce, along with John Welch, seemed to set the stage for the revivals that were to arise as Scotland approached a new century.

The Fire Spreads

Although not extinguished entirely, as the 1500's were drawing to a close, some of the spiritual fire generated in Scotland by the preaching of Bruce and Welch began to die down. Clearly what was needed was a more widespread, general outpouring of the Spirit if the Presbyterian movement was to flourish. Signs that such revival was on its way were observed at the 1596 General Assembly in Edinburgh (as briefly described in the opening paragraph of this article). The impact of that General Assembly upon the wider church was considerable, as ministers carried their repentant hearts and spiritual passion back to their synods and parishes. As an early historian of the period later affirmed, 1596 was

a remarkable yeere to the Kirk of Scotland, both for the beginning and for the end of it. The Kirk of Scotland was now come to her perfectioun, and the greatest puritie that she ever atteaned unto, both in doctrine and discipline, so that her beautie was admirable to foraigne kirks. The assemblies of the sancts were never so glorious, nor profitable to everie one of the true members thereof than in the beginning of this yeere.¹⁴

By the end of the sixteenth century and into the next, a vital faith in Jesus Christ—accompanied by dynamic operations of the Holy Spirit—had become the very

hallmark of the Presbyterian movement. As Westerkamp affirms, "This dependence upon the Holy Spirit's moving within individual souls and the resulting religious emphasis upon emotionally charged piety had dominated Scottish Christianity since the early seventeenth century."¹⁵

Revival at Irvine and Stewarton

One of the notable instances of this emotionally charged piety was found in the revival at Irvine and Stewarton. Signs of an impending outbreak first emerged through the preaching of Irvine pastor David Dickson, one of the new generation of Presbyterian preachers who had been influenced by Bruce and Welch. While initially appearing as a local phenomenon, the ensuing revival soon attracted people from nearby Stewarton and throughout the region, who came not only to experience Dickson's preaching during Sunday communions, but his Monday (market-day) teachings as well. An account of Dickson's ministry describes what transpired:

People under exercise and soul concern, came from every place about Irvine and attended upon his sermons, and the most eminent and serious Christians from all corners of the church, came and joined with him at his communions, which were indeed times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. Yea, not a few came from distant places and settled in Irvine, that they might be under his ministry....¹⁶

The Kirk O' Shotts revival

A rather dramatic outbreak of spiritual revival, something akin to a spiritual lightning bolt, erupted one day toward the conclusion of a "solemn communion" in the Presbyterian parish of Shotts. On June 21, 1630, as pastor John Livingston was concluding his churchyard communion message, the atmosphere took on a dramatic change, so that "there was so convincing an appearance of God, and down-pouring of the Spirit, even in an extraordinary way....with a strange unusual motion on the hearers."¹⁷ As Livingston fixed his gaze upon the crowded churchyard, he beheld a sight that would be remembered for centuries to come. Nearly five hundred of the people present had "a discernible change wrought upon them, of whom most proved lively Christians afterwards."¹⁸ This dramatic outpouring seemed to have been a singular event, albeit with continuing results; its short-lived demonstrations came and went in a day, while its long-term impact endured. In his memoirs, he would later affirm: "The only day in all my life, wherein I found most of the presence of God in my preaching, was on a Monday after the communion, preaching at the churchyard of Shotts, June 21, 1630."¹⁹

Later to be known as the "Kirk o' Shotts Revival," this unusually abrupt outpouring of the Holy Spirit soon took a prominent place in the annals of Scottish Presbyterian history. Many who were present on that occasion "could date either their conversion, or some remarkable confirmation in their case, from that day."²⁰ The sudden

eruption in that westside churchyard made an impact all throughout the countryside. Many a person marveled at this sovereign inbreaking of the Spirit's presence. Even Robert Bruce, admired by Livingston since his youth, was providentially present on the occasion and allowed to taste some of the good fruit of his ministry decades earlier.²¹

Fire Across The Water: Presbyterians in Ireland

The revival tradition of Presbyterians continued to spread as they traveled across the channel to Ireland, where they established what would eventually become the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Although already present in Ulster by 1613, Presbyterianism had not made any significant evangelistic impact there until a band of revival preachers, influenced by the ministries of Robert Bruce and John Welch, arrived from Scotland sometime about 1624. By 1625, a spiritual awakening began to take hold in the hearts of the Irish people such that large groups gathered together for the preaching of the Word and the sacrament of Communion, initially centered in the Six-Mile-Water area of Antrim. At these gatherings,

The hearers came from all directions. These meetings began with a sermon on Thursday evening, continued with sermons all day Friday--three in the winter months and four during the summer. The ministers used this time for general consultation among themselves concerning the administrative as well as the spiritual affairs of their congregations. Although Irish church historians described these meetings as the forerunner to presbyteries, their greater importance lay in the constant attendance of hundreds of people gathering to hear the gospel preached and to pray for twenty-four hours at a stretch.²²

By 1630, the young pastors conducting these meetings were joined by others, whose ranks included John Livingston (of Shotts fame) and Josias Welch (son of John), who had left the work in Scotland to assist with the awakening in Ireland. Before too long, the evangelical preaching of these young Presbyterians had attracted and awakened large crowds of people. As the "Six-Mile Water revival" gained momentum its influence spread beyond the counties of Antrim and Down, where in some locations a prayer meeting might last from three to five days, with thousands of people in attendance.

Some of the same dramatic manifestations seen in Scotland (i.e. swooning, panting, weeping, shouting, and others) were witnessed in the Irish revivals.

Whatever else might be said of this work, the Six-Mile-Water revival that broke out in Antrim under the leadership of men like Robert Blair and John Livingston is "recognized by Irish church historians as the beginning of the Irish Presbyterian Church..."²³ This revival, along with the others it ignited, continued to burn until around

1633 when many of the key leaders were eventually deposed.

In both Scotland and Ireland, it was the lively worship (made up of passionate preaching and celebration of the Lord's Supper) and evangelical piety of these spiritual revivals that characterized the religious experience of early Presbyterians. Although numerous political and ecclesiastical battles would also consume much of their time and energy, the foundational issues of greatest concern to these early Presbyterians were *spiritual*. And it was because of these spiritual concerns that they fought such a determined battle to retain their religious freedom. As Westerkamp affirms,

the impact of this era upon Presbyterianism goes beyond an increase of power and authority accorded to the established church, back to the new centrality of piety itself. Simply put, the people were interested in attending religious services, and the services they wanted to attend were revivalist. Such rituals involved massive numbers of participants collected indoors and out; they lasted for several days, sometimes as long as two weeks. Individuals responded openly and emotionally to provocative preaching and prayers, seeking the ultimate goal of conversion. Lay participation was encouraged during these services, as well as in the general spiritual life of the parish, and this was a power that the laity were loath to relinquish.²⁴

Flames from a Distant Fire: Revival in the New World

The prospect of religious freedom to pursue their evangelical convictions in the New World held great appeal and promise to the persecuted Scots-Irish Presbyterians. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a number had migrated to the American colonies, bringing their distinctive piety with them. By the 1720's, the flow of Scots-Irish immigrants to the New World had grown steadily. Along with leaders from the Puritan and pietistic movements, these Presbyterian transplants to the New World brought with them a strong religious fervency that helped set the stage for a major spiritual awakening.

According to church historian William Warren Sweet, "It is an interesting fact that most of the great American revival movements have come largely through Presbyterianism..."²⁵ Contrary to their image as stoic formalists, the Scots-Irish and their lively religion were at the forefront of an intense movement of spiritual awakening that swept through the middle colonies during the Great Awakening. Making the connection between the piety of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians and the spiritual awakenings in the New World, Westerkamp notes that

The Great Awakening in the middle colonies represented neither innovative religious behavior nor a

statement of challenge to the establishment. Rather, that revivalism, first observed in the colonies at this time, was actually part of the Scots-Irish religiosity, a tradition that flourished under the encouragement afforded the colonial ministers. Its importance was attested by the jealousy with which the Scots-Irish guarded their revivalism. It cannot be coincidental that outbreaks of revivalism in Pennsylvania and New Jersey followed directly after large-scale migration from Ireland, nor that the awakening spread to Virginia and the Carolina back country during the years when the Scots-Irish moved south.²⁶

Furthermore, these Scots-Irish Presbyterians, most notably William Tennent (who had migrated from the Antrim region of Ireland) and his sons of the "Log College" so nurtured and promoted this general movement of revival that it gained even greater momentum. According to Maxson, in *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies*

The itinerating evangelists that set the country on fire were, for the most part, Scotch-Irishmen. They were the ministers of the New Brunswick presbytery, the nucleus of which had been fostered by Domine Frelinghuysen, and members of other presbyteries who held close relations with this group. These evangelists were, with very few exceptions, graduates of the Log College, established by the elder Tennent at Neshaminy. This was the New Brunswick or radical New Side party....²⁷

Confirming this important point, Westerkamp states that

If the Presbyterian clergy had not supported the revival, of course, the Great Awakening would not have swept the middle colonies with such speed. George Whitefield's successes, though numerous, were fleeting; usually only in congregations supported by New Light ministers did the revival flourish....For decades the Scots-Irish people had tried to bring their church back to the original reformation tradition. In the middle colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Presbyterian clergy had finally returned to that revivalism as a hundred years of religious experience burst forth in one glorious sweeping movement.²⁸

The Tennents

"William Tennent," according to Dr. C.A. Briggs, 'was one of the greatest of the trophies won by Presbyterianism from Episcopacy in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.' Webster, the conservative Presbyterian historian, concedes that 'to William Tennent, above all others, is owing the propriety and enlargement of the Presbyterian Church.'²⁹

Although newly ordained into Presbyterian ministry when he arrived from the Old World, William Tennent, Sr. had been no stranger to the Presbyterian preaching and piety. From the days of his youth in Ireland, Tennent had

crossed paths with people and places greatly touched by the Spirit's fire. Born in Ireland in 1703 to Scottish parents, and educated in Edinburgh,³⁰ young William had been brought into direct contact with some of the most prominent spiritual leaders of his day, most of whom were Presbyterians. He had developed deep friendships with leading Presbyterian evangelicals who were contending for the spiritual future of that nation.³¹ Graduating from the University of Edinburgh at a time when the banished Presbyterian pastors had just regained access to their pulpits, it is unlikely that he would have spent his years there without his heart being significantly impacted by the highly-charged Scottish Reformed faith. Undoubtedly, both his studies and his acquaintances in the cradle of Presbyterianism had shown him the powerful impact that spiritual awakenings have upon a people, for this was Scotland's heritage.

More probable an influence was his father-in-law, Gilbert Kennedy, a well-known leader of the Presbyterian movement in Ulster. Having married into the family of this strong leader gave Tennent a first-hand view of the religious and political struggles these Irish reformers experienced as they sought God's reviving influence upon that nation. Yet he also witnessed the spiritual fervor these same leaders exhibited in the heat of their daily struggles. Although initially ordained in 1704 into the official Anglican Church of Ireland, William's sentiments clearly leaned toward the more evangelically-minded Presbyterians who had first established a vital presence in his native Ulster in the early 1600's. (His "non-conformist" sentiments could have been the reason why he never served in a parish while ordained in the Church of Ireland.)³²

Yet, what might have impacted young William the most was his knowledge that God's glory had once shone brightly throughout Ulster, particularly in his own region of Antrim. Like Scotland in the early 1600's, Ireland had been impacted by historical outpourings of the Holy Spirit. His own area of Antrim had been the scene of one of the greatest revivals ever to hit the British Isles, the famous "Six-Mile-Water Revival" of 1625. That revival, going strong through 1633, had left an indelible mark upon the landscape of Irish religion, and had firmly established an evangelical Presbyterian witness on the island. And while both Scotland and Ireland had seen the movements wane over the years, the memory and effects of those spiritual awakenings had not been lost in the hearts of Presbyterians in Ulster. Fire from the embers of these early Presbyterian revivals had ignited in the heart of William Tennent, and he eventually carried that fire, along with his young family, to the New World. Upon his arrival, he applied for admission into the Synod of Philadelphia of the Presbyterian Church, a newly-established denomination merely twelve years old that was more in line with his evangelical convictions.

Through his establishment of the "Log College," Tennent trained and equipped a handful of young pastors—

including his own sons Gilbert, John, Charles, and William Jr.—for a ministry of revival preaching. While his efforts were embraced by many, Tennent's Log College became a source of contention for others, its emphasis and influence later resulting in a painful division amongst the Presbyterians, many of whom were uncomfortable with the passionate spirit that emanated from its students. Opponents asserted that Tennent's theology and practices were not Presbyterian, nor Calvinistic. Some even claimed that these "New Lights" (a derisive title given to the Log College group) were outside the realm of true Christendom.³³ Yet, the emphasis and preaching of the Tennent party was actually very consistent with the historic Presbyterianism of Scotland and Ireland in the early 1600's—of the great leaders like David Dickson and John Livingston, and Robert Blair—who had been so instrumental in the life of the Presbyterian movement during its formative years. In fact, one historian later affirms that "Northern Ireland had been Presbyterianized by preaching of the same order," and that "the views and practices of the Log College men were, accordingly, nothing new or unusual in either Scottish Presbyterianism or English Puritanism."³⁴

The transatlantic connection between Scots-Irish revivalism and the Great Awakening sweeping through the colonies was further strengthened, ironically, by the ministry of Anglican evangelist George Whitefield. Through his close association with the Tennent party, Whitefield's theology took on a distinctly "Calvinized" flavor, making him more palatable to the average Presbyterian. Furthermore his growing acceptance by Presbyterians opened doors for his evangelistic efforts throughout the colonies, and eventually opened the way in 1742 for him to assist in the spiritual revival that had erupted in the Church of Scotland.

Sharing The Fire

When news of the American revival eventually made its way to the British Isles, the reports caught the attention of several Presbyterian clergy in Scotland who had been praying and laboring to see such awakenings in their own parishes. By February of 1742, the first reports of revival from within Scotland began to circulate, beginning with an outpouring on the tiny parish of Cambuslang (under the leadership of Reverend William M'Culloch) that spread to Kilsyth (with Reverend James Robe) and beyond. Later that same year, George Whitefield was invited by the clergy of the Scottish kirk to assist in the revival efforts, resulting in a dramatic acceleration and spread of the revival movement and touching tens-of-thousands of lives. As was characteristic with the Scottish revivals of the 1600's, as well as the American awakenings, these revival events were focused primarily upon the preaching of God's Word and the sacrament of holy communion.

By the end of 1742, it was clear to contemporary historians, both Scottish and American alike, that revival

had become a transatlantic phenomenon. This transatlantic connection was keenly felt by revival leaders on both shores, and became a point of mutual encouragement and support. This is readily apparent from the correspondence exchanged between Scottish pastors and the leadership of the colonial Awakening.

Perhaps most surprising is the support and encouragement solicited by Jonathan Edwards from the Scottish clergy as the revival in New England began to decline. The distressing reports and anguished sentiments in correspondence from Edwards about the developments in New England soon prompted the Scottish clergy to propose spiritual countermeasures to preempt a similar decline in Scotland. Initiating a plan called a “Concert For United Prayer,” the Presbyterian leaders urged all Christians to join together at specified times for focused, intentional prayer for revival. Starting on a small scale, this prayer initiative grew to become a widespread movement, eventually reaching the attention of Jonathan Edwards, who swiftly promoted and publicized the endeavor in a lengthy tract with an equally lengthy title: *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People, In Extraordinary Prayer, For the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth.*³⁵

Fire in the West

The strong connection between Scots-Irish piety and revival in the New World continued into the nineteenth century, evidenced most clearly as the Second Great Awakening spread west to Kentucky and Tennessee through the influence of Presbyterian preachers like James McGready. The forms and phenomena characteristic of these frontier revivals—even some of the more unusual types—were, once again, heavily influenced and fashioned after the traditions of Scottish Presbyterianism. Rather than being unique “inventions” of the American frontier preachers, the camp meeting practices—the remote, open-air meetings, the passionate evangelistic preaching, the protracted Communion, the emotionally-charged atmosphere—took their cues from the traditions passed down to them from the early Scots-Irish immigrants. Such input from these Presbyterians shaped a whole genre of American religious practice.

The Fire Continues to Burn

Well into the nineteenth century, the revival spirituality of Scots-Irish Presbyterianism, both in content and in form, continued to play a major role in shaping both American religious customs and the spiritual climate in Scotland.

In America, the controversial theology and innovative practices of Presbyterian evangelist Charles Grandison Finney took a prominent place in the revival tradition during the early part of the century. Meanwhile, across the ocean in Scotland the revival tradition continued as well,

most notably repeated in Kilsyth and spreading to Dundee and beyond through the ministries of William Chalmers Burns and Robert Murray McCheyne.³⁶

The willingness of Presbyterians to both embrace and endorse a tradition of praying and preaching toward spiritual revival is evidenced as late as the 1850’s in the Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly. In the 1857 *Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within the Bounds of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, we read the following description:

Another and the last evidence, that we cite, of an increasing vigor and efficiency in our denomination is, the intense longing, breathed through all the Narratives for a general, glorious outpouring of the Spirit. The past year has not been one which may be characterized as a year of revivals, although many churches in many Presbyteries have been greatly quickened, and some have been favored with spiritual influences of extraordinary power.... ‘This longing for revivals we cannot but consider a cheering indication of the noblest life. Next to a state of actual revival is the sense of its need, and the struggle to attain it at any sacrifice of treasure, toil, or time. We trust that the period is not distant, when this state of actual, general, glorious revival shall be ours....’³⁷

By the following year, the General Assembly was reporting that:

The meeting of the present Assembly occurs in the midst of what has been very properly styled ‘The great Awakening.’ In this remarkable work of grace, our own Church has shared, and is sharing, largely; so that, with gratitude and rejoicing, we mention it as the chief feature of the Narrative. The members of the Assembly have come from scenes of revival, to mingle in a revival progressing in the place of meeting. This wave of blessing is rolling over the land. Already it has reached every Presbytery within our bounds; and there is scarcely a church that has not felt, in some degree, its cheering influence. One of our largest Presbyteries says: ‘...There is not, within our bounds, a single church in which tokens of the divine presence have not been distinctly seen; although in several there has been no general awakening and turning to God. In many, the work has been one of unwonted power.’

Describing how the revival fire had ignited and spread throughout the nation, the report remarked:

This Pentecostal season manifested itself at an early period of the present year, in a remarkable degree, in the city of New York. This great heart of the country now became the fountain of religious life, sending out its currents to the extremities. Its influence spread most rapidly. Individuals from the east and the west, from the north and the south, came to this business

centre, and, like the men of old who visited Jerusalem, they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and returned home to kindle the sacred flame at their own altars, and in the places where they dwelt, until the holy fire was lighted in almost every city and village of the land, where it is still burning more or less brightly.

We do not attribute this revival to any one human instrumentality. It is most manifestly the work of God. 'This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.' One of the most carefully prepared Presbyterian Narratives says: 'No cause of sufficient power for the production of such results was visible. No Edwards of resistless force in argument; no Whitefield of commanding eloquence; no Summerfield or McCheyne of impassioned feeling, was raised up to be the herald of the Lord. The more we study this work, the more deeply is the truth impressed upon our minds, *This is the work of God.*'³⁸

© 2000 Keith Edward Beebe

¹ See David Calderwood. *The True History of the Church of Scotland, 1678.* (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971). pp.315-17.

² Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory. (A Compilation of Materials Gathered From The Work of W.J. Couper)* pp. 11-13.

³ Knox. David Laing, ed. *Works.* iv.(*Letter from Knox to Mrs. Bowes, 4 Nov. 1555*) Edinburgh: James Thin. pp.217-218.

⁴ Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory.* p. 52.

⁵ John Gillies. *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of Success of the Gospel and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It.* Originally published in Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulz, 1754. Reprinted in Fairfield, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981. p. 169.

⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt. *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals In The Early Modern Period.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). p. 24. (*Quoting seventeenth century historian James Kirkton.*)

⁷ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 168.

⁸ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

⁹ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* (Article on Robert Bruce from the Presbyterian Review, July 1843, quoting Robert Fleming in *Fulfilling of the Scripture*) p.179.

¹⁰ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* (Article on Robert Bruce from the Presbyterian Review, July 1843) p. 179.

¹¹ Rev. James Munro. "Lecture IX: Encouragements from the History of the Church under the Old and under the New Testament Dispensations, to expect, pray and labour for the Revival of Religion." *The Revival of Religion: Addresses by Scottish Evangelical Leaders delivered in Glasgow in 1840.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984)

¹² Howie. *Scots Worthies.* p. 150.

¹³ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 171.

¹⁴ Roberts. *Scotland Saw His Glory. (Quoting Calderwood, History Of Church of Scotland, 1678. p. 323)* pp. 97-98.

¹⁵ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 86.

¹⁶ Gillies. *Historical Collections. (From Wodrow's Preface to Dickson's Truth's Victory over Error.)* p. 198.

¹⁷ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

¹⁸ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

¹⁹ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p.198.

²⁰ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* pp. 198.

²¹ Schmidt. *Holy Fairs.* p. 22.

²² Westerkamp. *Triumph.* pp. 24-25.

²³ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 16.

²⁴ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 42.

²⁵ William Warren Sweet. *Religion On The American Frontier. 1783-1840.* Vol. II, *The Presbyterians.* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964). pp. 83-84.

²⁶ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p.14.

²⁷ Charles Hartshorn Maxson. *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies.* Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1958.

²⁸ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* pp.212-13.

²⁹ Maxson. *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies.*

³⁰ James B. Bennett. "'Love To Christ'--Gilbert Tenment, Presbyterian Reunion, and a Sacramental Sermon." *American Presbyterians (Journal of Presbyterian History).* Volume 71, Number 2, Summer 1993. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1993) p. 77.

³¹ George Whitefield. *George Whitefield's Journals. Journal Five, in the period of August 1739-January 1740.* (London: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1960) p.344.

³² Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier. *The Presbyterians.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) p. 230.

³³ Leonard J. Trinterud. *The Forming Of An American Tradition: A Re-Examination Of Colonial Presbyterianism.* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949) p.169.

³⁴ Trinterud. *American Tradition.* p.170.

³⁵ In his preface, Edwards credited the Scottish Presbyterians for initiating this worldwide movement. The "Concert of Prayer" movement continues today.

³⁶ For more detail, see Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory.* pp. 269-79, and Andrew Bonar, ed. *Memoirs of McCheyne: Including His Letters and Messages.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947).

³⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America: With An Appendix. A.D. 1857. (Appendix. I. Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within The Bounds of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America.)* New York: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1857. p.418.

³⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America: With An Appendix. A.D. 1858. (Appendix. I. Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within The Bounds of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America.)* New York: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1858. pp.610-11.

You Can Help!

Let us know if you would like multiple copies of *Theology Matters* mailed to your church.

Send us names of individuals that you would like to have receive *Theology Matters*.

Continue to support PFFM with your prayers and donations.

We need your help in order for this vital ministry to continue!

Preaching in Revival

By Philip W. Keevil

This article is adapted from *Preaching in Revival*. It is reprinted with permission, University Press of America, 1999.

E. M. Bounds quotes Principal Lindsay, who wrote

The history of the Church flows on from one time of revival to another, and whether we take the awakenings in the old catholic, the medieval, or the modern church, these have always been the work of men specially gifted with the power of seeing and declaring the secrets of the deepest Christian life, and the effect of their work has always been proportionate to the spiritual receptivity of the generation they have spoken to.¹

Harold Bosely is right when he says that preaching is, “one of the oldest forms of witnessing in the history of the Hebrew/Christian tradition.”² It is a unique enterprise. Sometimes it is compared to other forms of communication, such as the speculations of philosophers, or the rhetoric of politicians. But, Christian rhetoric in the mouths of Christian preachers has little in common with these other forms of communication. There are similarities, for preaching is communication; but, it is a unique kind of communication, associated with a uniquely divine enterprise. If the task of preaching is to be understood at all, it must be from the perspective of that divine dimension.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ remains the “raison d’être” for all preaching communication. It is also the anointing of the Spirit of Jesus that makes homiletical communication effective. At the same time, the act of preaching must not be removed from the context of the world in which the Word is preached. There is a social dimension to Christian preaching. After all, the Church’s dialogue with the world is reflected, or should be reflected in its pulpit. It is evident from a cursory glance of preaching that the content, manner, and form changes from age to age and from culture to culture.

Above all, preaching is central to the history of revival in every age. It has always been and will remain “the cutting edge of a growing church.”³ Whatever our analysis may be of Finney and his notorious “means to revive,” it cannot be denied that preaching is *the chief means* for awakening and converting sinners. It is “the hammer and

anvil” for the shaping of broken lives and the saving of a needy world.

The theme of all revival preaching is “the Word of God.” A brief examination of revival sermons will demonstrate how the text was more than a starting point for a religious discourse. The Word of God written has always been a “pillar of cloud and fire.” The history of revival is marked by a high view of Holy Scripture as God’s Word to world and Church—the transcript of divine revelation and the key to the heart of God.⁴

Zeal has also been characteristic of revival preaching. “Every method was assayed,” writes Gillis, “to reclaim men from error, and bring them to the acknowledgment of the truth.” He adds, “The teachers of the primitive Church preached boldly, and prayed heartily, for the reformation of mankind.”⁵

Elements of Revival Preaching

In the introduction to his book *Seasons of Refreshing* Keith Hardman identifies six elements to the preaching associated with seasons of awakening. First, is the proposition that all are sinners. The revival preacher preaches the fall. He shows how the human condition is radically corrupted by a sin nature hostile to the gospel and the claims of Christ. He shows how the human personality is defined by a fundamental alienation from God.

Second, is the proposition that as sinners we are all spiritually lost. Not one sinner is more lost than another, which means conversely that no sinner is less lost than another. A great gulf exists between us and our Creator, and in this circumstance of life we are without hope. Our human condition qualifies us for eternal separation from the Holy One.

Third, “we cannot save ourselves from the just wrath of this holy God.” Preaching associated with revival invariably emphasizes not only the drastic plight of the human condition, but the utter inability of fallen people to rescue themselves. We are not merely depraved in every part of our being, we are also without strength. We are weak and helpless, incapable of doing anything to make ourselves righteous or reconcile ourselves to a God we have injured with our iniquities.

Philip W. Keevil, D. Min. is pastor of Woodland Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA. His book is Preaching in Revival, University Press of America, 1999.

Fourth, it is Christ alone who is able to save us from this condition, and He does so through His work upon the cross. The Lord Jesus Christ is not *a* way to God. He is not one route to the divine. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one will ever come to the Father other than through His accomplishments on Calvary. In Him, God reconciled the world to Himself, not imputing our trespasses to us. God united our sins to His Son, and dealt with them in Him. Jesus' death was more than an example of human nobility, or strength through weakness; it was atonement, an offering, whereby redemption was obtained for broken and lost sinners.

Fifth, "God will forgive, cleanse, and renew a person who confesses his sins and receives Christ as Savior and Lord." This is the application of redemption. The preacher must show how the work Jesus accomplished on the cross deals with the problem of human sin. It provides cleansing. It cleans and sanctifies. It not only makes us right with God, it makes us feel right. Forgiveness is a release, and as Hardman says, "God is more ready to forgive than humans are to be forgiven."

Sixth, such forgiveness is complete and total. The price for all of our sins was paid by the Son of God, and He bore it all. All our iniquities converged on Him and nothing was left unatoned for. By believing in Him His accomplishments are applied to us and His righteousness becomes ours.⁶

Connections Between Preaching and Revival

One of the first clear and unambiguous connections between preaching and revival was the remarkable ministry of John Chrysostom, who left six hundred sermons to posterity. He was a spell-binding orator who often preached for two hours, holding his congregation in silent awe. This was not merely due to the culture or the capacity of the people for careful listening. Caesarius of Arles could not hold an audience for more than fifteen minutes; and, poor old Origen, that great heretic of the Alexandrian school, continually complained of the lack of attention to his sermons by those who came to hear him.⁷ Yet, revival broke out in connection with the ministry of the silver-tongued orator, Chrysostom, which led to enormous crowds gathering to hear him preach. The effect of his words was of such a kind that it provoked a violent response from the imperial court of the Emperor Arcadius.⁸

The thirteenth century saw the rise of preachers of repentance like Francis of Assisi, again a ministry associated with a season of awakening. In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries St. Vincent Ferrer delivered thousands of sermons to enormous numbers. His emphasis was the expectation of Christ's return, with a call to vigilance and faith in the cross.

Preaching, however, has not always been in good repair. As Gordon J. Murray points out, in the first decades of the

sixteenth century it had reached an all-time low in the churches of England. "The contents of Scripture were unknown to the bulk of the population," and England's clergy neglected preaching as an "impossible exercise." By the accession of Elizabeth, changes had occurred in the political culture that were so dramatic that Parliament was forced to adopt laws to manage and control them.⁹

The Puritan era was associated with a social transformation that can only be described as revolutionary. It transformed an entire socio-political and cultural order. It produced parliamentary democracy and economic reform, favoring the poor. It made England a more equitable society. However, as Peter Lewis puts it, "the real...Puritan revolution was bloodless, spiritual and verbal." Indeed, it was the pulpit that proved to be the "mightiest assault on world, flesh and devil." More was accomplished through the earnest exhortations of Thomas Goodwin than through the blood-stained swords of Cromwell's Roundheads. Peter Lewis writes,

From the despised prophesyings of Elizabeth's lay to the hounded conventicles of Restoration England the Puritan preaching was a power in the land. It was by turns tolerated, encouraged and opposed; it was applauded, refuted and mocked; it was venerated and it was blasphemed—but it could not be, and never was, ignored.

Lewis contends that the popularity it had among the proletariat was due to the fact it made religion the "possession of the poor." The Puritan preachers did not present a heavenly inheritance that was "far away" and removed from the plight of this world's difficulties and pains. They presented the first fruits of an inheritance which could be enjoyed in the here and now. Heaven could be enjoyed on earth. Canaan could be possessed by the people of God in this life, at least to a measure. The puritan pastors exhorted their peoples to "boldly claim all its territories."

The language was intentionally vivid, as is evident from an excerpt of a sermon preached by Robert Barnes, Prior of the Augustinian House at Cambridge. He preached on the privileges of belonging to Jesus Christ and having Him as Savior:

therewith to give unto all that repent and believe, all his goods: that is to say, his life wherewith he swallowed and devoured up death; his righteousness, wherewith he banished sin; his salvation, wherewith he overcame eternal damnation. Now can the wretched man that knoweth himself to be wrapped in sin, and in danger to death and hell hear no more joyous a thing, than such glad and comfortable tidings of Christ.¹⁰

The method of these preachers was to begin with the law. They would move from the condemnation it brought upon sin to the free offer of the gospel in the grace of God. The

preaching associated with revival in the Puritan period was also doctrinal. They opened the Scriptures, and expounded the meaning of the Word systematically and carefully. They opened “the mystery of Christ,” to quote Richard Sibbes. They did not merely preach the message of Christ; they argued from the Scriptures who Christ was and is, what He came to accomplish, and what His accomplishments meant for those who believed in them.

Their preaching strongly emphasized application. Indeed, this was one of their major characteristics. The Puritans were physicians of the soul. They are unsurpassed in this regard. They sought to show the interest believers in Jesus have in the One in whom they have believed. Sibbes described preachers as “friends of the bridegroom,” who are match-makers, seeking to bring the Savior together with those He came to save. So they opened the riches of Christ, and showed their usefulness to each and every state and station before them. They appealed to people to repent and believe the gospel. They urged people to flee from the wrath to come. They pleaded with people to find mercy and grace in the arms of a loving Savior. Every sermon was a long appeal for decision and for conversion.

The eighteenth century was filled with revival blessing and with preaching associated with it. When John Wesley was promoted to glory, he left behind his books, his clergyman's gown, and his abused reputation. He lived his life and conducted his ministry driven by the thought of life's brevity, the momentous challenge to win the lost, and the need to resist all forms of procrastination in this regard. As a result, he marched through his years of preaching pleading, exhorting, beseeching, and urging repentance, conversion and a holy walk with God. He left a legacy of congregations that vibrated with renewed spiritual life.

When Wesley preached, power descended on those who heard. It was quite common for hundreds of people to suddenly come under the influence of the Holy Spirit. What we read of Cornelius in the tenth chapter of the book of *Acts* was written of those to whom Wesley preached. As he proclaimed the gospel of Christ the Spirit fell upon those who heard the Word. His sermons consisted of strong appeals to conversion, beginning with the call to repent. He insisted he could not preach love and grace unless he first preached law and wrath. It became a paradigm for his sermons, especially those preached in the open fields. He was gripped by the conviction that like the ancient prophets of Israel he would be held accountable for the eternal destiny of those to whom he proclaimed the Word of God.

He also preached that the call of the gospel included the invitation to live the holy life. A methodical approach to Christian piety was the backdrop to his doctrine of sanctification, and it became a part of his legacy. This was one of the areas where he diverged from the theology of his friend George Whitefield.

Whitefield's ministry was earnest, practical and fearless. It evoked the “remarkable exhibitions of bodily excitement” we have referred to earlier. People often “cried out, fainted and were torn with convulsions.”¹¹ Indeed, his preaching shook the world and the church, both of which it affected permanently.

J. C. Ryle described George Whitefield as “chief and first among the English reformers of the eighteenth century.”¹² Given the fact that he wrote no books, except for the sermons he left behind, founded no great movement (there is no Whitefieldian Church), but simply preached guileless and pointed sermons, it is quite amazing that his legacy is as extensive as it is. Indeed, his powerful and gifted sermons helped turn a loosely connected confederation of states into a unified nation prepared for independence.

Like others of his contemporaries, he came under assault for enthusiasm and zeal. He bore the reproach revival inevitably brings upon those used of God to initiate, promote, or extend it. At the same time, people like Ben Franklin spoke of the remarkable change his preaching brought to the city Philadelphia.¹³

Whitefield's sermons were filled with doctrine. He was a deliberately theological preacher. He preached the doctrines of the gospel with a direct simplicity, as well as with great conviction. He preached the necessity of regeneration, justification by faith alone, and the finished work of Jesus Christ. He was a Calvinist and so he preached the sovereign, distinguishing grace of God as the only antecedent for gospel blessing.

He preached as a dying man to dying men. His sermons are filled with urgency. He presented to his audiences the holiness of God, and urged them to consider their dreadful and lost condition in the light of it. He would plead with people to flee from the wrath to come into the arms of a glorious and all-sufficient Savior! Unlike the preaching of the nineteenth century these men did not follow their sermons with altar calls; their sermons were altar calls! He was an aggressive evangelist, who did not wait for souls to come to him, but went out after them. He sought the lost as his Savior before him. “He dived into holes and corners after sinners. He hunted out ignorance and vice wherever they could be found.”¹⁴

It is a fact that no preacher in England has ever succeeded in arresting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland, and America. His popularity never waned. It was as great at the end of his day as it was at the beginning. Wherever he preached, men would leave their workshop and employments to gather around him, and hear like those who heard for eternity. This of itself is a great fact. To command the ear of the masses for a

quarter of a century, and to be preaching incessantly the whole time, is an evidence of no common power.¹⁵

Charles Finney is associated with fiery emotion, and for good reason, his homiletical method was much more dependent on the Puritan tradition of lineal argument. He even built his sermons as a lawyer builds his case. For example:

The first point to be established, under the fourth head of this discourse, is, that impenitent sinners hate God. I shall pursue the same method, appeal to the same sources for proof, and go into the same field and gather facts to establish the truth of this position that I did in proof of the position that men do not love God. My appeal is to the well known laws of mind, as they are seen to develop themselves in the transactions of every day.¹⁶

While he advocated the use of common-life illustrations, his sermons betray a distinctively expository style, with their “carefully arranged and numbered forms of argument.”¹⁷

In 1875 D. L. Moody was “charming his audiences with a style more like that of a lay exhorter.”¹⁸ This may well be because he was a lay-exhorter! However, the great evangelist also represented a marked departure from Charles Finney who preceded him. One of the distinctives in his method was his Bible reading. Sandra S. Sizer writes, “It consisted of choosing a topic....then with the aid of a popular concordance finding all the Biblical references which bore on the topic.” She says he would “synthesize” Scriptures into “a coherent and evangelical interpretation.” This would be followed by the chief feature of his style— anecdotes taken from daily life, usually revolving around the home and the family.

Moody stood in the tradition of folk preaching. Sizer writes,

He preached only from very brief notes, which served as little more than cues to Scripture references or anecdotes he already knew well. He sometimes took on the highly excited style of a folk preacher. One of Goodspeed's informants reported that “many times he suffers under very strong emotions, and his thoughts come so fast, and sometimes in such confused forms, that he is wholly unable to find relief in words” and other accounts mention the rapid tempo of his preaching.

Moody's language was often “rhythmically repetitive” and “formulaic.” He would string words together so that they ran on as verses interspersed with anecdotal prose.¹⁹

While Americans may think immediately of Finney and Moody when they hear the word revival, most British evangelicals will think of the name Charles H. Spurgeon. Few other preachers have had a greater impact on the way

we think of preaching in revival than the “boy preacher of the Fens.”²⁰ In his teens Spurgeon preached two or three times a day. He would seek God for his subjects and texts. After receiving them he would meditate upon them for his own soul's comfort—he writes, “Not in the professional style of a regular sermon-maker, but feasting upon it for myself.”

Spurgeon's sermons were marked by a vivid use of metaphor and simile. He spoke in the language of the ordinary man of the street. He used anecdotes, quoted noted persons, and abounded in humor. Spurgeon spoke directly to the people, which is one of the reasons they flocked to hear him. He was also dependent on the Spirit to an unusual degree.

It would be folly to try and develop any pattern or structure, form or fashion to the preaching that might be calculated to evoke and initiate revival in the church. Indeed, what is form? In the final analysis, whether a man reads a manuscript like Edwards, or preaches with fiery rhetoric like Whitefield it is not the form that is ultimately determinative of the effect. Of course, it is also the case that a long and boring sermon, delivered in a monotone voice is more likely to put a congregation to sleep rather than awaken it from sleep. God can use such preaching to bring revival, of course. After all, He opened the Red Sea. However, the sovereignty of God should never be an excuse for bad preaching, anymore than it provides cover for churches who fail to evangelize. There are hindrances to revival, and sometimes they include the preaching.

There are certain characteristics which emerge from the study of sermons preached during seasons of revival. The sermon that brings revival will usually be pointed. It will be clear and transparent. It will ordinarily be delivered with intensity and passion. Of course, we must be careful here. Passion does not necessarily imply a loud, demonstrative, or thunderous style. Dr. Haddon Robinson is one of the most powerful preachers in America today. He preaches conversationally to great effect. The same could be said of the Pentecostal preacher Rev. Jack Hayford. Passion is not about style or physical demeanor. Revival preaching is associated with that anointing of the Holy Spirit without which all passion and intensity is merely feigned religious sentiment. Language carries its own intensity and its own power.

In the case of acting, a performance is only great to the extent that more is going on inside the actor than is visible to the audience. The same is true for preaching. In a conversational style more is felt by the preacher than is heard from the preacher. However, it is that felt-intensity grace uses to awaken the unconverted, along with those who are asleep in Zion.

Revival preaching will be orthodox. It will proclaim and defend the truth. It will be an exposition of the Word.

Illustrations will illustrate and not detract from the truth proclaimed. It will also be filled with power.

Revival preaching will be bathed in prayer. Prayer is the energy of true effectual preaching, and without it the sermon is nothing more than words spoken into the air. Prayer is essential for both preacher and people. When both are prepared through prayer, an atmosphere is created conducive to expectations of blessing. The reformed synthesis of Word and Spirit means that without the Spirit, the Word is a dead letter.

When thinking of preaching in revival there can be no greater model than Peter on the day of Pentecost. For many centuries that remarkable sermon preached by that unremarkable man has remained the model for earnest preaching. In his book *The Tongue of Fire* William Arthur reminds us how Peter's Pentecostal sermon was an unwelcomed message addressed to an unfavorable audience. This is one of the things that made it so remarkable, and which sets it apart as a paradigm for effective preaching in every age. If a sermon could be effectively preached in first century Jerusalem, under the shadow of the cross, there is no environment that can be considered inconducive to gospel preaching. Arthur writes, "Such is the power of utterance given him, that he produces an effect, the like of which had never been known before in the history of mankind."

Arthur regards the Pentecostal sermon of the Apostle Peter as the "first example of prophesying in the New Testament sense." He defines prophesying as "not the limited sense of foretelling, but the more comprehensive sense of delivering a message from God, under the impulse of the Spirit of God, and by His aid." In that sense, he argues, prophesying has continued, given the "double advantage of ascertained truth to declare—truth which his own understanding has received, which he can enforce by citing the Word of God—and of aid direct from the Spirit in uttering it."

While the identification of the prophetic gift with preaching raises serious exegetical problems, the powerful effect the proclaimed Word of God can have on unbelievers is unquestionable. When delivered in the power of the Spirit, the effect witnessed in Christian assemblies during times of revival is similar to that which Paul describes in the fourteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians. William Arthur uses that same passage to illustrate what happens when the Word of God is proclaimed under the anointing of the Spirit of God. An individual without faith enters an assembly where other people are speaking under the influence of the Spirit. Words, he says, convey ideas, "and those ideas are accompanied by a strange power which pierces, lays open, and searches his heart." What he feels, says Arthur, is that God has "found him out." It is as though someone related all his sins to the speaker.

An unaccountable impression of God's presence, of a message, a warning, a call from God, sinks down into his soul. He feels, as he never felt before, God is in this place, and, falling down upon his face, forgetful of all appearances, and heedless of consequences, periling his temporal peace, and exposing himself to every manner of remark, he worships, in bitterness of penitence, an offended but a forgiving God.²¹

Arthur defines preaching as

that gift through which the whole of man's nature works in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, the intellect illuminated with divine light, the moral powers quickened by divine feeling, and the physical organs speaking with divine power.²²

The preaching gift, he says, not only has utility and "universal application," but was permanent, and is needed as much for the conversion of sinners as for the edifying of saints. He then says:

If the preaching of the gospel is to exercise a great power over mankind, it must be either by enlisting extraordinary men or by the endowing of ordinary men with extraordinary power. It does often happen that men whose eloquence would affect and sway, whatever might have been their theme, give all their talents to the gospel; yet in such cases it ever proves that the religious impression produced upon mankind is never regulated by the brilliancy or natural force of the eloquence, but always by the extent to which the preacher endowed with that indescribable something commonly called the unction...of the Spirit. It often happens that a man, in whose natural gifts nothing extraordinary can be discovered, produces moral effects which, for depth at the moment, and for permanency, are totally disproportionate to his natural powers.²³

Arthur points out that on the day of Pentecost, "Christianity faced the world, a new religion and a poor one." It was, he says, without its own history, priesthood, college, or patron. The Church stood against well-established religious and political systems and ingrained "moral habits." All she had were two sacraments, "and a tongue of fire." That tongue of fire, he says, "burned her way through innumerable forms of opposition." This is both the gift of God, and the Church's chief weapon against her foes. Arthur writes that when any preacher, "in critical circumstances, is enabled to declare and magnify the truth, we are told that he does so being filled with the Holy Ghost."²⁴

If preaching is to be effectual in revival it must never be divorced from our experience of the presence of God. This is critical if we wish to experience revival through our preaching. Scripture consistently affirms that when God manifests His presence in a special way to His people quite extraordinary things happen. Indeed, this

experience of the presence of God gives preaching the unique quality it has during these seasons of revival.

C. R. Vaughn showed in the last century how God is often said to come in judgment upon a land, or in peace and love to comfort His people. It is preaching which makes the difference. God can judge a people by giving them terrible preaching. When the people of God abuse their preachers there is no reason to believe they will continue to enjoy richness in the Word. There is every reason to expect the ordinance of preaching will become a thing of the past. On the other hand, when God is preparing to bless a people with revival He sends them great preachers, marked by the anointing and equipping of the Spirit of God.

“No ordinance,” writes Vaughn, “has any effective spiritual power, except as the Spirit gives it.” What was true for this nineteenth-century theologian is true for us also. Revival is in the air when the people of God gather to worship a God they expect will meet with them in order to speak to them.²⁵ Indeed, it is as the preaching of the Word raises such expectations and fulfills them, that a sense of God's felt presence intensifies the normal and regular influences of the Spirit to the heights of revival blessing. Karl Barth helpfully observes that:

there can be no doubt that the revivals and quickenings continually granted to the preaching and theology of the community have had their basis, not so much in the bearers of the great names which have come down to us in Church history....but...in the community from which they sprang.²⁶

In other words, these great preaching events, leading to large numbers of awakened sinners and comforted saints, took place in the context of a work of grace which was occurring in the community out of which the preaching came.

A cursory glance at the history of revivals will lead inevitably to the conclusion that those ministries that flourished during seasons of great religious awakening were characterized chiefly by unusual spiritual authority. Jonathan Edwards, whose famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*, is often referred to as an example of such preaching, read every word of his sermon, lifting his manuscript up before blood-shot eyes. We know that his preaching did not just entertain the erudite and sophisticated academics of his times, but rather that some of his listeners were so affected by the Word he preached that they fell to the ground, gripped by fear in the presence of a wronged God. Undoubtedly, the effect of this man's preaching was due to the authority given him by the Spirit of God.

What was the secret when Whitefield preached Christ to sin-hardened miners in Bristol England, causing their coal-dusted faces to show streaks of white? Two hundred years ago Howell Harris preached throughout the

principality of Wales during the same season of revival. In his diary he could write of “the old authority,” and of its lack. He knew when he had it and when he did not.²⁷

Haddon Robinson is surely correct to insist that “in order of significance the ingredients making up a sermon are thought, arrangement, language, voice and gesture. In priority of impressions, however, the order reverses.” This is especially evident as we study the history of preaching in connection with revivals of religion. “Gesture and voice,” says Robinson:

emerge as the most obvious and determinative. Every empirical study of delivery and its effect on the outcome of a speech or sermon arrives at an identical conclusion: delivery matters a great deal. Not only do the speaker's voice and gestures first strike the audience's senses, but his inflections and actions transmit his feelings and attitudes more accurately than his words.²⁸

Nevertheless, as critical as voice and gesture are in reflecting the affections of the preacher, behind all preaching, associated in any way with religious revival, is the unction and authority of the Spirit. This takes primary place as the antecedent of the blessing. It is undoubtedly the central and most critical observation to make from our study of this matter. What is the unction of the Spirit? As Lloyd-Jones puts it,

It is the Holy Spirit falling upon the preacher in a special manner. It is an access of power. It is God giving power and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it beyond the efforts and endeavors of man to a position in which the preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works....Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.²⁹

1. E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer* (Baker Book House, 1990), 359.
2. Dewitte Holland, et al., *Preaching in American History* (Abington Press, 1969), 17.
3. *Ibid.*, 29.
4. *Ibid.*, 29.
5. John Gillis, *Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 10.
6. Keith J. Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing* (Baker Books, 1994), 17ff.
7. Robert G. Clouse, Richard V. Pierard, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Two Kingdoms, The Church and Culture Through the Ages* (Moody Press, 1993), 102.
8. Williston Walker, *The History of the Christian Church* (Charles Scribner, 11985), 160ff.
9. Gordon J. Murray, “The Preaching of the English Reformers: Preaching and Revival,” *The Westminster Conference*, (1984), 1.
10. Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Carey Publications, 1979), 5.
11. Walker, 599, 602.
12. J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders* (T. Nelson and Sons, 1869), 44.
13. *Ibid.*, 45.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.
15. *Ibid.*, 49.
16. Holland, 156.
17. *Ibid.*

18. Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Tradition* (Temple University Press, 1978), 119.
 19. *Ibid.*, 119, 120.
 20. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*. (Banner of Truth, 1962), 177ff.
 21. William Arthur, *The Tongue of Fire* (The Epworth Press, 1956), 49.
 22. *Ibid.*, 49, 50.
 23. *Ibid.*, 50.
 24. *Ibid.*, 51.

25. C. R. Vaughn, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*,. (Banner of Truth, 1984), 393.
 26. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol., III:4(T. & T. Clark, 1961), 499.
 27. Eric S. Fife, *The Holy Spirit: The Bible and Common Sense* (Kingsway Publications, 1980), 88.
 28. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Baker Book House, 1980), 191ff.
 29. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 93, 305.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 4: The Book of Revelation

Scene 2:

The Suffering of the Church 4:1-8:1

By Rev. Mark Atkinson, The International Church of Warsaw, Poland

The Heavenly Throne Room 4:1 - 11

In the previous scene Jesus was standing at the door and knocking. As this new scene unfolds before him, what is the first thing John sees? The vision of chapter 4 is what stands on the other side of that door where Christ is. To the lukewarm Laodiceans, Christ promised a throne to those who overcame the love of this world's comforts, security and their own self-satisfaction.

After John is taken through the open door, what is the first (and dominant) thing he sees according to v. 2? Who surrounds this one who sits upon the throne? Drawing upon our discussion of symbolic numbers, how should we interpret the symbolism of the twenty-four elders? Who might we presume they represent?

According to v. 2, where exactly is the throne set that John sees? In Old Testament usage there are two *heavens*. One is the region where birds fly. A second is the place from which stars shine. In the New Testament Paul speaks of a third heaven (II Cor. 12:2). It is the region where God is. It is that place where the unseen spiritual realities of our world are revealed. This is the place where John now finds himself. The veil is pulled back and the spiritual realities of creation, those things that are now hidden from our sight, are revealed. John's vision is of a place where good and evil are seen clearly for what they are.

List what John sees according to vs. 2 - 5. John makes reference to *the One* who sits upon the throne. How is he described? The Jews believed that no one could see God. Rather, we see all things through him. How do Psalm 104:2 and I Timothy 6:16 illumine the significance of John's description?

In v. 6, what does John see before the throne? The references to glass and crystal presumably refer to the

purity of the water that stands before the throne. What is the dominant water image of redemption from the Old Testament? What is the dominant water image for redemption from the New Testament? This suggests that the intent of the vision is to say that the pathway to true worship of the one who sits upon the throne is through the waters of redemption.

Read the description of the four living creatures in vs. 6b - 8. Close your eyes and try and imagine the scene. These are not cherubs from a painting by Rubens. They are awesome and terrible creatures. The four creatures¹ are probably best understood as symbols of God's activity in nature: his ceaseless watchfulness over every facet of life. According to v. 8, what are these four creatures saying? How might we understand v. 8 as fulfilling the words of Psalm 50:6?

In vs. 9 - 11 we are given a summary of what is happening in this heavenly realm. In one word, how would you describe what is occurring? Who is at the center? What is creation doing? What are God's people doing? What does this suggest to you about the importance, centrality, and meaningfulness of worship?

If you wish to dig deeper into the significance of worship for us as believers then take the time to go through chapters 4 and 5 listing both the attributes and actions of the twenty-four elders. (You may also wish to look at 7:13). What is their location? How are they attired? What are they doing (esp. 5:5, 11 and 7:13)?

The Meaning of History 5:1 - 7

What does John see is held in the right hand of God according to v. 1? There is writing upon the scroll. Presumably, since the scroll comes from God's hand, then the writing upon it is his as well. Remember, the right hand is the hand of readiness, of action. Note that at this point in the vision, the meaning of the scroll is sealed. What is the question asked by the angel in v. 3? What is the answer? How does John tell us (v. 4) that this answer affects him?

Someone new arrives on the scene. John is told not to despair, but to look again. There in the midst, what does John see? What is the defining attribute of this Lamb² whom John sees? Who should we conclude is this *Lamb*

as though it had been slain? In addition to being described as *the Lamb*, the one whom John now sees is also referred to as the *Lion of... Judah* and the *Root of David*. Theologians speak of the threefold offices of Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King. Do you see a parallel between those three offices and these three descriptions? The number *seven* is repeated three times in v. 6 to describe attributes of the Lamb. Recall that the meaning of the number *seven* can be either perfection and/or totality. We are told that the Lamb has seven horns, seven eyes and seven spirits. What is being said about him in this imagery? (Remember that a horn—think of a rhinoceros—is symbol of strength.)

Most significantly, in v. 7, what does the Lamb do? This tells us that the meaning, significance, and purpose of this scroll, written and handed down by God the Father, will be revealed and unlocked by the Lamb. He will reveal its meaning. If, as I suggest, the scroll is the scroll of history, of God's purpose and plan for creation, then the passing of it from the Father to the Lamb suggests to us that it is the Lamb who will reveal the meaning of the Father's will. It is the Lamb who will read the scroll. It is the Lamb who will unlock the mystery of God's purposes in history.

Worthy is the Lamb 5:8 - 14

As the worshippers declare in John's vision, the Lamb alone is worthy to unseal the scroll handed to him by God. According to vs. 9 - 10, why is he worthy to do so? Note, unlike the powers of this world, the Lamb does not triumph by the sword. How has he triumphed? In 4:11 God is worshipped as creator. According to v. 9 of chapter 5, what is the *reason* for their worship of the Lamb? From the same verse, who are they who offer worship to the Lamb? Look at v. 13; note that both the Father and the Lamb are the objects of the worship of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures. The worship offered to each is equal. They are joined together inextricably in worship.

As we draw this study of chapters 4 and 5 to a close, spend some time in personal worship. Think of the attributes of the Lamb of God that are revealed in these chapters and offer them back to God in prayer and praise.

¹ There are references to these creatures in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1.

² There are twenty-eight references to Jesus Christ as the *Lamb of God* in Revelation.

Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

_____ **Enclosed are names and addresses of people I think would be interested in receiving *Theology Matters*.**

_____ **Yes, I would like to contribute to the work of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry**

Please consider a donation to this important ministry! We urgently need your support!
Donations to PFFM are tax deductible.

Name	Church	Presbytery	
Address	City	State	Zip

**Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, Inc.,
P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249, (540) 552-5325, email (scyre@swva.net)**

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 10249
Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249
Change Service Requested

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION U.S. POSTAGE PAID AUTOMATED MAILING SYSTEM
