



THE 18TH CENTURY WESLEYAN REVIVAL: AN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PRAYER FOR REVIVAL TODAY

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There has been so much written about the Wesleyan revival of the 18th Century. How do you encapsulate a movement that grew to 100,000 strong, re-evangelised much of England of that time, and altered the social and moral fabric of society, all within half a century? Stories centre on the life of one man, John Wesley, yet the revival was more than about him; for it caught up a generation of awakened and emboldened Christians in the purposes of God, and a movement which could not be contained within the structures of the church. Methodists around the world live in the heritage of the Wesleyan revival, and Christians of all streams who pray for revival live in the awareness of the importance of this as a model of what God can do in and amongst a people.

The term 'revival' is a treasured part of evangelical spirituality, yet is itself an ambiguous word. I choose not to use it as simply describing stories of religious enthusiasm, but as conveying a move of the Holy Spirit in a particular time and place, which elicited a particular response from the people of that time. Indeed, the eye witness accounts of revival tend to use phrases like 'God turned up', 'God came among us', 'God's power fell on us'. There is something profound at work in times of revival, yet not two revival occurrences are the same. Neither, for that matter, do all revivals carry the same weight of significance. Some are localised outbreaks of the work of the Spirit, confined to a small community and lasting no more than

a few weeks or months. The Wesleyan revival of the 18th Century however draws much attention, because the scale of the move of the Spirit was so much more widespread and long lasting. In our modern context, many reading this article may well be praying that God would visit us in a similarly powerful dimension as did Wesley and his contemporaries. Three aspects of the work of the Spirit in that period of time amongst the Methodists correspond to facets of the Spirit's work in scripture: He comes to us as a river of life; as the wind from heaven and as a flaming fire.

THE RIVER OF GOD

Jesus described the work of the Spirit as like wells and streams of living water inside us; Ezekiel's prophecy of God's future work among us speaks of a great river of life flowing from the temple. The early Methodists experienced the revival as though being swept up in a mighty river of God. For one thing, it brought life to his people. Wesley and his friends were living for a few years or more in a search for a living experience of their salvation; their Holy Club meetings were for sincere and searching Christians. When, one by one, they broke through into an assurance of faith, there was great joy and a release into new songs of praise and fresh motivation for sharing the gospel.

Subsequently, the Spirit brought a new relevancy for the Christian message in the nation. A population which had considered the church mainly irrelevant

for their context of social change and industrial revolution were now presented with a potent message of Jesus Christ, an offer of sins forgiven and preached urgently by the revivalists, not in churches, but in fields and public spaces for the common person.

Thirdly, the Spirit created a surge in the expression of the kingdom of God in 18th Century England. Accessible religion had come to the working class industrial new towns of England; family and community life was strengthened with Methodist societies at their heart; people were empowered to create social change and relief of poverty. Scores of lay people were trained for ministry in their local congregation and became equipped as voices of hope and mobilisers of others from lower socioeconomic classes of society.

The river of the Spirit so often does all this in experiences of revival. What could happen in our day if the Spirit moved again through his people and our nation as a mighty river of life?

THE WIND OF GOD

Jesus illustrated that the moving of the Spirit in a person's life was like unpredictable wind; the disciples in the Upper Room at Pentecost experienced the violent wind from heaven which thrust them out from their secret prayer place into the public centre of Jerusalem life. The wind of God speaks to us about three things in the Wesleyan revival. It shows that God's work in revival was

sovereign and yet occurred amongst those most hungry for him. John Wesley in his mission journey to America was a failure and also a miserable victim of a storm. Three years later, he was a willing and fervent participant in the wind of the Spirit blowing seeds of the gospel across England. The praying Methodists who longed for something new of God encountered him in power; the staid and satisfied clergy of the church of England were passed by.



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Secondly it shows that the revival of the 18th Century had common marks and yet was highly contextualised. It is for good reason that the revival became known as a 'Great Awakening', because it touched Britain, central Europe and America. The wind of the Spirit, blowing first in the Moravian movement in Germany, swept through England and similarly through the American colonies. There was something deep and sovereign about the breadth and depth of the revival. It had the same transforming gospel message, yet it was contextualised in different ways. In England, the new religious fervour combined with the rising of Christian led social action projects brought a moral and mediating influence upon the ruling powers of society. It helped prevent a revolution. Yet in the American colonies the revival, led by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, became a formative spiritual event in an emerging national consciousness, and gave spiritual meaning and connectedness to the struggle for independence; it helped form a revolution.

Thirdly, the revival was trans-local and ecumenical. Some revivals just touch a locality and a neighbourhood, yet this Great Awakening was an international affair. It threw leaders of different

theological positions into a melting pot with each other - Puritan Edwards, Calvinist Whitfield and Arminian Wesley. The renewing aspect of the revival was both outside the established church yet also welcomed by individuals within that same church. That is not to say there were no fallouts, and of course the founding of a new Methodist denomination, but there was an ecumenical thread at its heart which is a hallmark of the Spirit who loves to break down walls which divide us. Yes, God's revival winds are sovereign affairs, but they most often occur amongst those most hungry for him. Are we open to any way in which God wants to blow upon us and through us today? Are we ready for him to break down walls and create a genuine new opportunity for a harvest of faith in our land?

THE FIRE OF GOD

John the Baptist referred to Jesus' coming ministry as one who would baptise in the Holy Spirit and fire. On the day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus received tongues of flame and tongues of ecstatic witness. What does the flame of the Spirit illustrate of early Methodism? For one thing the Methodists in their day were not afraid of enthusiasm. Whereas the ministry from the pulpits of the parish churches was dry and intellectual, the ministry of the Wesleyan preachers was full of the Spirit's unction and was all about heartfelt religion. Wesley was a man who started a movement by setting himself on fire so that others could see him burn.

Moreover, the work of revival in 18th Century England was clearly about the power of the Holy Spirit confirming the message of the gospel. Wesley's journals are scattered about with the impact of God's manifest presence in meetings and preaching gatherings; people fell down under the Spirit, they experienced sudden conviction of sin, they broke through into wonderful testimonies of their assurance of faith. In short the flame of revival was abroad in the land among the Methodists.

Thirdly, the work of the Spirit was one which refined and reformed. The Methodists, in their class meetings and bands, looked for changed lives, demonstrated by a new piety, greater love and a higher morality. To be thoroughly converted meant to stop drinking; to look after one's family; to bring in an honest wage and to be empowered as a force for good in

one's community. Even Wesley's focus on perfection was grounded in the desire for people to become all they could be for God. It was pure motives, pure love that was his focus of sanctification, which was a growth experience, fleshed out over a lifetime. The reforming effect of the revival was simply that such spiritual vigour and intentional discipleship amongst so many people, could not be contained within the established church. Much has been made about Wesley's organisational genius in the gradual emergence of a new denomination. Yet it was the central thrust of early Methodism as a disciple making movement which made it such an effective force. Times of revival are rarely containable within existing structures; it is the new wine and old wineskins again. Or, to return to the river analogy, streams of renewal often cut out new channels in which to flow, before gradually finding their way back into the existing river bed further down the line.

The Spirit of God works often in an intense way during revival. As the very flame of love, he awakens a response of love for Jesus and a new passion in our faith. As he moves in power, signs and wonder do occur, whether we are used to them or like them or not. And he takes us deeper in a refining of our faith, and a reforming of what we are used to in ways of being church. Are we open today to our Christian communities being baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire? Are we willing to become a fiery disciple making movement if he chooses to use us in that way in our nation?

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