

Semănătorul (The Sower)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 3, Number 2.

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel University of Oradea, and International Contributors, April 2023.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”: An essay on some aspects of the history of revival¹

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Abstract

This article focuses upon the theme of revival in the history of the church. It highlights first the deep interest of Calvin and Edwards in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and how their influence was deeply felt among the Puritans. Three examples of revival are given, namely, in France; in the seventeenth century; the English and Scottish Puritans, Calvin's spiritual children, also experienced revival first-hand; the Elim Evangelistic Band, which developed into the Elim Pentecostal Churches, begun in Ulster in 1915 and soon spread to other parts of the British Isles. In the 1920s it experienced a massive period of revival growth under the leadership of George Jeffreys (1889–1962). Here we learn of the variety as to how God sends revival, using different instruments. The article discusses the following facts about revival and gives examples. Genuine revival is not something that can be created. Revival comes from God. In times of revival, the Spirit primarily uses the Word of God to powerfully impact people. In revival the Holy Spirit's activity is an exalting of the Saviour—a Christ-centred event.

Key Words Revival, the Puritans, the Elim Pentecostal Churches, God-sent revival, the power of the word, Exalting Christ.

¹ This article has appeared on the author's Substack: <https://michael-azadag-haykin.substack.com/>; February 26, 2023.

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“There is no subject which is of greater importance to the Christian church
at the present time than that of revival. It should be the theme of
our constant meditation, preaching and prayers.”

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Revival in the Reformed tradition

One of the key means by which God has brought about a renewal of interest in Reformed teaching and doctrine over the past forty years has been the British Westminster Conference (formerly known as the Puritan Conference). Organized in the 1950s by, among others, Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J.I. Packer, this conference, which still meets annually in December, has played a vital role in awakening evangelicals to the riches of Puritan and Reformed theology. For many years it was customary for Lloyd-Jones to give the final address of the conference. The first of such addresses was the one that he gave in 1959 entitled “Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey.”³ Lloyd-Jones began his address by defining revival as “an experience in the life of the church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work.” These extraordinary movements of the Spirit consist first of all, he stated, in the “enlivening and quickening and awakening of lethargic, sleeping, almost moribund church members” and then in “the conversion of masses of people who hitherto have been outside in indifference and in sin.”⁴ Lloyd-Jones went on to illustrate his definition of revival from the history of the church and from Scripture, and to show that “the history of the progress and development of the church is largely a history of revivals, ... these mighty exceptional effusions of the Spirit of God.” Now, what is so striking about Lloyd-Jones’ survey of revival from the history of the church is how large a place revivals have occupied in the Reformed tradition. In fact, Lloyd-Jones asserts that one of the main reasons why revivals have not been prominent in this century is due to the fact that the final half of the nineteenth century witnessed a

³ For the full address, see D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors: Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959–1978* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1–23.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans*, 1–2.

widespread turning away from Reformed theology which continued unabated until the late 1940s.⁵

To those acquainted with the history of Calvinism these assertions by Lloyd-Jones should not be a surprise. For example, a fascination with the work of the Spirit lies at the very core of that English strand of Calvinism, namely, Puritanism. This late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century movement sought to reform the Church of England and, failing to do so, splintered into a variety of denominations, such as English Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Particular (i.e., Calvinistic) and General (i.e., Arminian) Baptist.⁶ Whatever else the Puritans may have been—social, political, and ecclesiastical Reformers—they were primarily men and women intensely passionate about piety and Christian experience. By and large united in their Calvinism, the Puritans believed that every aspect of their spiritual lives came from the work of the Holy Spirit. They had inherited from the continental Reformers of the sixteenth century, and from John Calvin (1506–64) in particular, “a constant and even distinctive concern” with the person and work of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), the distinguished American Presbyterian theologian, can actually speak of Calvin as pre-eminently “the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ Of his Puritan heirs and their interest in the Spirit Warfield has this to say:

The formulation of the doctrine of the work of the Spirit waited for the Reformation and for Calvin, and ... the further working out of the details of this doctrine and its enrichment by the profound study of Christian minds and meditation of Christian hearts has come down from Calvin only to the Puritans ... it is only the truth to say that Puritan thought was almost entirely occupied

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans*, 4–5.

⁶ Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 53–65, esp. 60; Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans. An Anthology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), xi–xiv; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 37–38.

⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, “The Holy Spirit,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980): 61. See also the detailed discussion by Garth B. Wilson, “Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed Tradition: A Critical Overview,” in George Vandervelde, ed., *The Holy Spirit: Renewing and Empowering Presence* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1989), 57–62.

⁸ B.B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God” in Samuel G. Craig, ed., *Calvin and Augustine* (Repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980) 107. See also his “John Calvin: The Man and His Work” and “John Calvin the Theologian,” in Craig, ed., *Calvin and Augustine*, 21, 487.

with loving study of the work of the Holy Spirit, and found its highest expression in dogmatico-practical expositions of the several aspects of it.⁹

The new covenant gift of the Holy Spirit

One of the heirs of this pneumatological tradition was Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), whom Martyn Lloyd-Jones has described as “pre-eminently the theologian of Revival.”¹⁰ It was Edwards, who once stated:

The sum of the blessings Christ sought by what He did and suffered in the work of redemption, was the Holy Spirit ... the Holy Spirit, in His indwelling, his influences and fruits, is the sum of all grace, holiness, comfort and joy, or in one word, of all the Spiritual good Christ purchased for men in this world: and is also the sum of all perfection, glory and joy, that He purchased for them in another world.¹¹

Edwards rightly discerned that none of God the Father’s plan of salvation nor the Lord Jesus’ actual work of redemption would have been realized if it was not for the gift and outpouring of the Spirit. It is to the Holy Spirit that God the Father and God the Son have entrusted the utterly indispensable work of applying the cross-work of Christ to sinners, both individually and corporately. The era initiated at Pentecost, when Christ gave the Holy Spirit in all of his fullness and power, is one to which the Old Testament longingly looked forward.¹² And it is one in which the Spirit of God is powerfully at work. To use the words of Titus 3:6, the Holy Spirit has been “poured out on us [that is, believers] *richly* through

⁹ B.B. Warfield, “Introductory Note” to Abraham Kuypers, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (1900, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), xxxv, xxviii.

¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival” in his *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 361. In the words of J.I. Packer, Edwards’ theology of revival “is, perhaps, the most important single contribution that Edwards has to make to evangelical thinking today” (*A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990], 316). See also the remarks in this regard by R. E. Davies, *I Will Pour Out My Spirit: A History and Theology of Revivals and Evangelical Awakenings* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Monarch Publications, 1992), 26: “No one who studies the topic of revival will dispute the statement that Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century American preacher and writer, is the classic theologian on the subject.”

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *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, pursuant to Scripture-Promises and Prophecies concerning the Last Time*, ed. Stephen J. Stein in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1977), 5:320.

¹² See, e.g., Isaiah 44:1–2; Joel 2:28–32; Ezekiel 36:25–27; and Zechariah 12:10.

Jesus Christ, our Saviour” (*italics added*). This is a truth to which all Christians should be able to heartily assent.

There have been and are differences among Christian thinkers with regard to some aspects of the Spirit’s work, in particular, whether or not what theologians have historically called the “extraordinary” gifts of the Holy Spirit continue beyond the Apostolic era. Jonathan Edwards, for instance, was confident that these gifts were given only in certain biblical periods and especially in the apostolic era “to reveal the mind and will of God before the canon of the Scripture was complete” and to help establish the fledgling church.¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, on the other hand, who was a very keen admirer of Edwards, was equally confident that the gifts have continued to be given throughout the history of the Church.¹⁴ Despite such differences, albeit not unimportant, both would have agreed that the new covenant era is one in which the rich work of the Holy Spirit is all-pervasive.

Among these rich new-covenant works of the Spirit are the following:¹⁵

The Holy Spirit is the one who floods the heart of the sinner with God’s love for him or her.¹⁶

It is only the Spirit who can make alive sinners dead in sin and fill their hearts with the conviction that “Jesus is Lord.”¹⁷

It is the Spirit who comes to indwell the heart of such sinners and makes them holy temples of the living God.¹⁸

It is the Spirit who is the seal of the salvation of believers and so the guarantee of their future in the glory to come.¹⁹

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1989), 8:149–154.

¹⁴ See his argument in Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Baptism and Gifts of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996). For a discussion of the gifts of the Spirit and revival, see also Stuart Piggins, *Firestorm of the Lord: The History of Prospects for Revival in the Church and the World* (Carlisle, Cumbria; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 83–96.

¹⁵ For the list that follows, I am partly indebted to Max Turner, “‘Revival’ in the New Testament” in Andrew Walker and Kristin Aune, *On Revival: A Critical Examination* (Carlisle, Cumbria; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 16–17.

¹⁶ Romans 5:5.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:16–17.

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; Ephesians 4:30.

It is the Spirit gives believers the boldness to come into presence of the awesome and almighty maker of heaven and earth and call him “Dear Father.”²⁰

Indeed, it is the Spirit who undergirds and empowers the entirety of the Christian’s spiritual life. For this very reason the Apostle urges believers in Galatians 5:25, “since we live by the Spirit”—that is, since they have been given spiritual life by the Spirit—“let us keep in step with the Spirit”—that is, let them live lives characterized by genuine spirituality and holiness.

Three examples of revival

Prominent among these new-covenant works has been what has been variously termed “revival,” “awakening” or “renewal.” Three examples will help us to understand something of the variety of what we are thinking about here.

If one looks at the massive advance of the gospel in Europe during the time of the Reformation this advance can be adequately explained only in terms of spiritual revival. Take France as an example. From small beginnings in the 1520s when a handful of men and women in France embraced the Evangelical faith, the numbers grew and grew year by year. It has been estimated that by the time of John Calvin’s death in 1564 there were roughly 1,200 Calvinistic congregations in the country with around two million members, which was about a tenth of France’s population.²¹ And the emergence of these congregations occurred in the space of less than fifty years! The French Reformation was like a mighty river that completely altered the landscape of the history of France.

In the seventeenth century, the English and Scottish Puritans, Calvin’s spiritual children, also knew revival first-hand. These revivals, though, were far smaller than that at the time of the French Reformation, and certainly not the nation-wide revival for which the Puritans longed and laboured.²² At a celebration of the Lord’s Supper at Shotts near Glasgow on Sunday, June 20, 1630, for example, the service was attended by such a rich sense of the presence of God that at the conclusion of worship, instead of retiring to bed, folk continued together in prayer and devotion throughout the night. God had so presenced himself with them that they were unable to part without further thanksgiving and praise. A

²⁰ Galatians 4:6.

²¹ Mark Greengrass, *The French Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1987), 43.

²² For good discussions of revival during the Puritan era, see Iain Murray, “The Puritans and Revival Christianity,” *The Banner of Truth* 72 (September 1969): 9–19; Packer, “Puritanism as a Movement of Revival” in his *Quest for Godliness*, 35–48; Davies, *I Will Pour Out My Spirit*, 63–68.

Monday preaching service was therefore arranged, and a young man called John Livingstone (1603–1672), chaplain to the Countess of Wigton, was persuaded to be the preacher.

Livingstone had spent the previous night in prayer. Alone in the fields, at eight or nine in the morning, he was so overcome with a sense of his unworthiness (particularly as so many choice ministers and experienced Christians were present) that he thought he would slip away quietly. He had actually gone some way and was almost out of sight of the church when the words “Was I ever a barren wilderness or a land of darkness?” were so impressed upon his heart that he felt bound to return and preach. What was to ensue was a most remarkable demonstration of the power and the grace of God under the preaching of his Word. Livingstone preached for about an hour and a half upon Ezekiel 36:25–26:

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh (KJV).

His sermon was drawing to a close when a heavy shower of rain caused people in the churchyard to cover themselves hastily with their cloaks. This prompted the preacher to continue:

If a few drops of rain so discompose you, how discomposed would you be, how full of horror and despair, if God should deal with you as you deserve? And God will deal thus with all the finally impenitent. God might justly rain fire and brimstone upon you, as he did upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain. But, for ever blessed be his name! the door of mercy still stands open for such as you are. The Son of God, by tabernacling in our nature, and obeying and suffering in it, is the only refuge and covert from the storm of divine wrath due to us for sin. His merits and mediation alone are the screen from that storm, and none but those who come to Christ just as they are, empty of everything, and take the offered mercy at his hand, will have the benefit of this shelter.²³

Livingstone continued preaching in such a vein for another hour or so, experiencing, in his words, “such liberty and melting of heart, as I never had the

²³ Cited “Revival Snapshots: Kirk of Shotts,” *Evangelical Times* 31, no.6 (June 1997): 16.

like in public all my lifetime.” It was later estimated that close to five hundred individuals were converted as a result of that single sermon.²⁴

History does not record another day like this one in Livingstone’s ministry. Unlike the mighty river of the French Reformation, here the revival was more like a small rivulet that impacted but a small area geographically. Yet, like the French Reformation, it brought the life-giving water of the Spirit to thirsty and needy souls.

A third example comes from the denominational body in the United Kingdom known as the Elim Evangelistic Band, later called Elim Pentecostal Churches. It had begun in Ulster in 1915 and soon spread to other parts of the British Isles. In the 1920s it experienced a massive period of revival growth under the leadership of George Jeffreys (1889–1962), a Welshman who was converted at the beginning of the Welsh Revival of 1904–1905.²⁵ In 1930, what began as a series of evangelistic meetings in Birmingham soon mushroomed into genuine revival. The meetings had begun in Ebenezer Chapel, which could seat 1,200. That was soon filled and a move was made to the town hall that could seat 3,000. This venue also was soon filled and a skating rink, which could seat 8,000, was requisitioned. Finally, the size of the crowds coming to the meetings required a move to Bingley Hall that could seat 15,000. In all, 90 meetings were held and over 10,000 converts recorded. In the space of seventeen years, the number of Elim churches grew from 15 in 1920 to 233 in 1937. The powerful impact of Jeffreys’ ministry can be partly accounted for by various social reasons, but there is no doubt that the Spirit of God was also powerfully at work among this Christian community in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶

It is surely evident from these three examples that genuine revivals can vary considerably one from one another. Reasons for this fact are not hard to find. Movements of spiritual renewal never occur in an historical vacuum. There are distinct cultural, social and economic factors that influence these revivals, and thus help to make them unique works of God. Moreover, Christians in these various movements of revival differ in temperament and experience, which creates further differences between the revivals. John Calvin, David Livingstone, Jonathan

²⁴ Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England’s Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24–25.

²⁵ N.A.D. Scotland, “Jeffreys, Stephen...and George” in Timothy Larsen, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 331–332.

²⁶ Andrew Walker and Neil Hudson, “George Jeffreys, Revivalist and Reformer” in Walker and Aune, *On Revival*, 137–156.

Edwards, George Jefferys were all leaders in periods of spiritual renewal and advance and yet in many ways they were very different individuals. One should also note that the living God delights in variety and never quite repeats himself. This is quite evident in the realm of the natural world and is equally true in the realm of church history, and especially in this matter of revival.²⁷

Four characteristics of revival

Yet, for all this, there are *some* recurring characteristics in all revivals, whatever their historical setting and whoever the leadership involved. Let us look at a number of these characteristics as they occur in the following definition of revival by the Australian historian Stuart Piggin.

Revival is a sovereign work of God the Father, consisting of a powerful intensification by Jesus of the Holy Spirit's normal activity of testifying to the Saviour, accentuating the doctrines of grace, and convicting, converting, regenerating, sanctifying and empowering large numbers of people at the same time, and is therefore a community experience.²⁸

In what follows we focus on three marks of genuine revival that Piggin notes in this definition and add a fourth that comes from observations made by Jonathan Edwards, whom Piggin—following Martyn Lloyd-Jones—describes in his book as “the church’s theologian of revival *par excellence*.”²⁹

Revival is a work of God in which God takes the initiative and presences himself in power and glory.

In times of revival, according to Jonathan Edwards, the Spirit primarily uses the Word of God to powerfully impact people.³⁰

Revival is a powerful intensification by Jesus of the Holy Spirit's normal activity of convicting, converting, regenerating, sanctifying and empowering.

²⁷ James I. Packer, “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People” in his *Serving the People of God, The Collected Shorter Writings of J.I. Packer*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998), 77. See Jonathan Edwards’ statement regarding variety within the 1734–1735 Northampton revival in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, ed. C.C. Goen in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1972), 4:185–186.

²⁸ Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, 11.

²⁹ Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, 25.

³⁰ See Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, ed. Goen, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 4:253–254.

Revival involves also a powerful intensification of the Holy Spirit's normal activity of testifying to the Saviour—in other words, revival is a Christ-centred event.

“Rend the heavens and come down”

First of all, genuine revival is not something that can be created by the people of God. They may recognize their need of it, but they can no more make it than they can create wind and fire. In Piggin's words, “Revival is an *outburst* of God's power; it is not a conglomerate of mere human energies.”³¹ Revival must thus be distinguished from evangelism or evangelistic campaigns or various strategies to bring about church growth. Such are vital and useful in extending the kingdom of God, but they are not revival. We who are Western Evangelicals especially need to be reminded of this truth, for if there is one thing that has characterized Western Evangelicalism, especially that in North America, it has been a pragmatic attitude of “we can do it”—“if it is broken, we can fix it.” This is so evident when it comes to the matter of revival, where, as Ian Stackhouse, the Leading Pastor in the King's Church, Amersham, England, has astutely put it, we have hankered after “the latest and the novel [strategies] with which to effect revival,” but all to no avail.³²

Genuine revival, on the other hand, being God's work, comes down from above. And when God brings it, there is no mistaking it. He speaks and there is life. He speaks and the earth and the heavens are shaken. Then is answered that great prayer of Isaiah in Isaiah 64:1-3:

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,

that the mountains might quake at your presence—

as when fire kindles brushwood

and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,

and that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome things that we did not look for,

you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

³¹ Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, 14.

³² Ian Stackhouse, “Revivalism, Faddism and the Gospel” in Walker and Aune, *On Revival*, 239–251.

In the New Testament era—a period of revival as well as a paradigm for revival—one sees the impact of this awesome presencing of God in a passage like 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, where Paul writes:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Or consider the revival that took place in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1734 and 1735, when Jonathan Edwards was pastoring the Congregationalist work in the town. At that time the fact that God is always present and human beings completely known to him was brought home to the mind and heart with inescapable force. Thus, Edwards could write in his *Faithful Narrative*: “in the spring and summer following, *anno* 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God.”³³ Edwards proceeded to detail some of the consequences of this awareness.

Several persons have had so great a sense of the glory of God, and excellency of Christ, that nature and life has seemed almost to sink under it; and in all probability, if God had showed them a little more of himself, it would have dissolved their frame.³⁴

Closer in time, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, experienced a season of revival on the campus during March of 1970. Dr. Jack Gray, professor of missions, later recalled how “God was so mightily present we could all but touch him. It was awesome ... We were meeting God in all his majesty.”³⁵ Another who was there during this awakening on the Southwestern campus was a student by the name of Henry Liginfelter, who remembered that on one occasion the “Holy Spirit’s presence was overpowering. Everybody was just bent over the pews, praying and confessing.”³⁶

This awareness of God’s presence in revival deepens humility, kills innate pride, and renders the church more God-centred. In a word: in genuine revival the Lord focuses attention on himself.

³³ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, ed. Goen, Works, 4:151.

³⁴ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, ed. Goen, Works, 4:182.

³⁵ Cited Timothy K. Beougher, “Times of Refreshing: The Revival of 1970 at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary” in his and Alvin Reid, ed., *Evangelism for a Changing World: Essays in honor of Roy Fish* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1995), 221.

³⁶ Cited Beougher, “Times of Refreshing,” 221.

“Sharper than any two-edged sword”

The New Testament era—when the longing of the Old Testament for the outpouring of the Spirit was realized—can be rightly seen as a time of revival.³⁷ During it, the Word of God was central to the Spirit’s work. On the day of Pentecost, for instance, after Peter had proclaimed God’s Word, we read that his hearers were “cut to the heart”³⁸—God’s Word humbled them and brought them under deep conviction. In a similar vein, the writer of Hebrews, thinking of the way that God lays bare the human heart, can say:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.³⁹

The link between the sentences here needs to be noted. It is by his Word that God lays bare the hearts of men and women and children. Yet again, the Apostle Paul asks the Thessalonian Church to pray that “the word of the Lord may run swiftly” and overcome all opposition.⁴⁰

In the latter days of the Puritan era in the seventeenth century, when spiritual lethargy was beginning to grip far too many Puritan congregations, a noted English Presbyterian, John Howe (1630–1705), preached a series of fifteen sermons in 1678 on Ezekiel 39:29.⁴¹ Unless the Spirit is poured forth, Howe asserted, then preaching, or the right form of church government, or even the power to do miracles, would be unable to heal the inner decay that was becoming evident in orthodox Puritan congregations.⁴² “We are dead, the Spirit of God is retiring, retired in a very great degree ... even from Christian assemblies,” Howe bluntly declared.⁴³ But Howe predicted that a better day was coming. On that day, he went on:

³⁷ Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, 37.

³⁸ Acts 2:37.

³⁹ Hebrews 4:12–13.

⁴⁰ 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2.

⁴¹ “Neither will I hide my face any more from them: for I have poured out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God” (KJV). See John Howe, *The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest Before the End of Time, by a Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit in The Works of the Rev. John Howe, M.A.* (London: Frederick Westley; A.H. Davis, 1832), 562–607. Though preached in 1678, these sermons were not actually published until 1725.

⁴² Howe, *Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit* in his *Works*, 603–604.

⁴³ Howe, *Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit* in his *Works*, 604.

when the Spirit shall be poured forth plentifully, ... I believe you will hear much other kind of sermons, or they will, who shall live to such a time, than you are wont to do now-a-days; souls will surely be dealt withal at another kind of rate. It is plain, too sadly plain, there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us; we do not know how to speak living sense [i.e. felt reality] unto souls, how to get within you; our words die in our mouths, or drop and die between you and us. We even faint, when we speak; long experienced unsuccessfulness makes us despond; we speak not as persons that hope to prevail ... When such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here signified ... [ministers] shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurements, than we now find we can.⁴⁴

This text bears witness to the fact that in times of spiritual revival, the word of God and its truths are ardently treasured, heeded, and central to the revival.

And so it proved when revival came in the following century in the 1730s. Jonathan Edwards said of the Northampton revival of 1734–1735 that while “God was so remarkably present amongst us by his Spirit, there was no book so delighted in as the Bible.”⁴⁵ He gave the example of a seventy-year-old woman converted during this awakening:

Reading in the New Testament concerning Christ’s sufferings for sinners, seemed to be astonished at what she read, as at a thing that was real and very wonderful, but quite new to her, insomuch that at first, before she had time to turn her thoughts, she wondered within herself, that she had never heard of it before; but then immediately recollected herself, and thought she had often heard of it, and read it, but never till now saw it as a thing real.⁴⁶

As J.I. Packer notes, in times of revival, the “sense of God’s presence imparts new authority to his truth. The message of Scripture which previously was making only a superficial impact, if that, now searches its hearers and readers to the depth of their being.”⁴⁷

Another excellent illustration of the vital necessity of the Word in revival can be found in a revival that took place in Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Welsh Revival of 1904–1905. There is no doubt that this revival had a profound

⁴⁴ Howe, *Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit* in his *Works*, 575. For the explanation of “living sense” as “felt reality,” I am indebted to J.I. Packer, *God In Our Midst. Seeking and Receiving Ongoing Revival* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1987), 33.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, ed. Goen, *Works*, 4:184.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, ed. Goen, *Works*, 4:181.

⁴⁷ Packer, “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People,” 78.

impact upon Wales. It is estimated that around 100,000 were converted during the revival that saw entire communities transformed almost overnight. Philip Eveson, the Principal of London Theological Seminary, notes, for example, that the managers of the numerous coal pits in Wales “reported increased coal output and swearing diminished so much that the old pit ponies were disorientated.”⁴⁸ Moreover, it attracted world-wide interest from places as far away as here in Canada, South Africa, and India. Among the key leaders used by God in this revival was Evan Roberts (1878–1951),⁴⁹ who undoubtedly was a key catalyst in this work of the Spirit. As the revival progressed, though, Roberts preached less and less, and allowed the various meetings to be made up of singing and testimonies. While the latter are undoubtedly good, even greater good would have been achieved if Roberts had preached more and grounded the converts solidly in the Word.⁵⁰ As Josh Moody, senior pastor of the historic College Church in Wheaton, has rightly noted: “The effectiveness of a revival, and its long-lasting fruit or otherwise, depends massively on the already existing biblical fuel, and what kind of biblical fuel is added to the fire.”⁵¹

“He will convict the world concerning sin”

The Farewell Discourse of John 14–16 contains some of the richest pneumatological teaching in the New Testament. Among the things that our Lord teaches about the Spirit is that when he comes in Pentecostal power he would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement.”⁵² Not surprisingly, in light of the awareness of God’s holy presence and the teaching of his Word, genuine revivals normally include a profound sensitivity to sin, a “deep awareness of what things are sinful and how sinful we ourselves are.”⁵³ Packer has rightly noted: “No upsurge of religious interest or excitement merits the name of renewal if there is no deep sense of sin at its heart. God’s coming [near], and the consequent impact of his Word, makes Christians much more sensitive to sin than

⁴⁸ Philip Eveson, “The 1904–1905 Welsh Revival,” *Grace Magazine* (February 2004): 4.

⁴⁹ For two brief studies of his life, see D.D. Morgan, “Roberts, Evan” in Larsen, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, 554–556, and Catrin Alsop, “Evan Roberts,” *Grace Magazine* (February 2004): 5–6.

⁵⁰ Eveson, “1904–1905 Welsh Revival,” 5; Alsop, “Evan Roberts,” 6.

⁵¹ Josh Moody, “Revival” (Facebook post, February 15, 2023).

⁵² John 16:8.

⁵³ Packer, “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People,” 78.

they previously were: consciences become tender and a profound humbling takes place.”⁵⁴ As American historian Richard Lovelace rightly observes:

Christians whose spiritual lives are grounded and nurtured only on self-esteem and positive thinking, without a vision of the depth of sin, are going to be lacking in depth, reality and humility. Spirituality is imported by the Holy Spirit, and since he is “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17), he cannot dwell in fullness where there is only partial openness to truth. If we cannot face the bad news about the depth of sin and the height of holiness, we cannot fully grasp the good news of salvation and the transformed life in Christ.⁵⁵

Indeed, Jonathan Edwards, thinking about what constitutes genuine revival, was not slow to place sensitivity to sin as one of the marks about an authentic work of the Spirit.

If we see persons made sensible of the dreadful nature of sin, and of the displeasure of God against it, and of their own miserable condition as they are in themselves by reason of sin, and earnestly concerned for their eternal salvation, and sensible of their need of God’s pity and help, and engaged to seek it in the use of the means that God has appointed, we may certainly conclude that it is from the Spirit of God.⁵⁶

And George Whitefield (1714–1770), whose remarkable preaching of the Word was used by God to bring multitudes on both sides of the Atlantic to a genuine conversion, could state: “If you have never felt the weight of ... sin, do not call yourselves Christians.”⁵⁷

Consider, for example, the case of Robert Robinson (1735–1790), best known today as the author of the hymn “Come, Thou Fount of every blessing.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Packer, “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People,” 79. In the New Testament era we see this sensitivity to sin in such passages as the following: Acts 2:37–38; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Titus 3:3–7.

⁵⁵ Richard F. Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life: A Guidebook for Spiritual Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 70.

⁵⁶ Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, ed. Goen, Works, 4:252–253.

⁵⁷ Cited Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, 152.

⁵⁸ On the life of Robinson, see especially Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired. The Story of Robert Robinson Cambridge Nonconformist* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955); L.G. Champion, “Robert Robinson: A Pastor In Cambridge,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 31 (1985–1986): 241–246; Len Addicott, “Introduction” to his, L. G. Champion, and K.A.C. Parsons, *Church Book: St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge 1720–1832* ([London]: Baptist Historical Society, 1991), viii–xviii.

I am well aware that Robinson’s theological convictions in his final days have been the subject of considerable discussion and disagreement. There are reports that he questioned the doctrine of

Robinson was brought under deep conviction of sin when he went to hear Whitefield preach in 1752. When Robinson first went to hear Whitefield, his motivation in going was an odd one to say the least. On Sunday morning, May 24, 1752, he and some friends were out looking for some amusement when they came across an aged woman who claimed to be a fortune-teller. After they had gotten her thoroughly drunk on what was probably cheap gin, they proceeded to have her tell their fortunes. When it came to Robinson, the woman predicted that he would live to see his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren growing up around him.

Now, what had started as something of a lark was taken quite seriously by Robinson as he made his way home later that day. When he was alone, he thought that if he were indeed to live to such a ripe age, he would probably end up being a burden to his family. There were in those days no such things as social security or welfare. What then could he do? Well, he thought, one way for those who are older to make themselves liked by their grandchildren is to have a good stock of stories to draw upon to entertain them. He thus determined there and then to fill his mind with knowledge and “everything that is rare and wonderful,” which, when he was old, would stand him in good stead and cause him, so he reasoned, to “be respected rather than neglected.”⁵⁹

As his first acquisition, he decided to experience one of Whitefield’s sermons. He went to hear him, though, as he later told the famous preacher, with feelings of pity for “the folly of the preacher” and “the infatuation of the hearers”—those “poor deluded Methodists,”—and of abhorrence for Whitefield’s doctrine.⁶⁰ Whitefield was preaching that evening at the Tabernacle, his meeting-house in Moorfields, London. His text was Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist’s stern rebuke of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” When, according to Robinson:

the Trinity, for instance. On the other hand, however, one of his oldest friends, Coxe Feary (1759–1822) pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist work in Bluntisham, Huntingdonshire, recorded a conversation that he had with Robinson but a month before the latter’s death in 1790. Robinson affirmed that when it came to the doctrine of the Trinity he was neither a Unitarian nor an Arian. “My soul rests its whole hope of salvation,” he solemnly told Feary, “on the atonement of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God.” (Joseph Belcher, “Note *” in his ed., *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* [1845, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988], II, 223–224).

⁵⁹ Andrew Fuller, “Anecdote,” *The Evangelical Magazine* 2 (1794): 72–73. Fuller had received this account of Robinson’s conversion from Robinson himself. The story was written under the name of “Gaius,” the pen-name that Fuller regularly used.

⁶⁰ Robert Robinson, Letter to George Whitefield, May 10, 1758, in William Robinson, ed., *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge* (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 166–167.

Mr. Whitefield described the Sadducean character; this did not touch me, I thought myself as good a Christian as any man in England. From this he went to that of the Pharisees. He described their exterior decency, but observed that the poison of the viper rankled in their hearts. This rather shook me. At length, in the course of his sermon, he abruptly broke off; paused for a few moments; then burst into a flood of tears; lifted up his hands and eyes, and exclaimed, “O my hearers! the wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come!” These words sunk into my heart, like lead in the waters. I wept, and when the sermon was ended, retired alone. For days and weeks I could think of little else. Those awful words would follow me, wherever I went, “The wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come”!⁶¹

For over three years Robinson was haunted by these words and Whitefield’s sermon. He regularly attended the preaching at the Tabernacle, and found himself “cut down for sin” and “groaning for deliverance.” Eventually on Tuesday, December 10, 1755, “after having tasted the pains of rebirth,” Robinson “found full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”⁶² Robinson eventually went on to pastor St. Andrew’s Street Baptist Church in Cambridge, where he became one of the best colloquial preachers of the day. About two and a half years after his profession of faith Robinson wrote a hymn long treasured by God’s people: “Come, Thou Fount of every blessing.” It appears to have been written to commemorate what God did for him when he saved him.

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount; I’m fixed upon it,
Mount of God’s unchanging love.

⁶¹ Fuller, “Anecdote,” 73.

⁶² Robinson, Letter to George Whitefield in Robinson, ed., *Select Works*, 167; William Robinson, “Memoir [of Robert Robinson]” in his ed., *Select Works*, xv–xvi, footnote.

...Oh! to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.⁶³

“He will glorify me”

Although the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in times of revival, it is Christ who is central and spoken about and glorified. As Jesus told his disciples about the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, “he will glorify me.”⁶⁴ In these words there is set forth what J.I. Packer has rightly called the “Holy Spirit’s distinctive new covenant role,” namely, “directing all attention away from himself to Christ” and making sure that Christ is “known, loved, honoured, praised and [has the] preeminence in everything.”⁶⁵ This is so utterly central to the New Testament.

If this is the central thrust of the Spirit’s work in the new covenant era initiated by Pentecost and if, as has been argued, the New Testament is an era of awakening and revival, then one can rightly say that revivals, which witness the intensification of the Spirit’s work, are by nature Christ-centred events. Consider:

Acts 2:14–40 and Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost. It is a Christ-centred sermon. The Holy Spirit is mentioned right at the beginning of the sermon (2:17–18) in the citation from Joel. Then Peter, taking his cue from the conclusion of this citation, which states that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be

⁶³ On this hymn, see the remarks of Erik Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker. A study of the hymns of certain authors who stand in or near the tradition of English Calvinism 1700–1850* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1951), 260–262.

⁶⁴ John 16:14.

⁶⁵ J.I. Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984), 65, 64, 54.

saved,”⁶⁶ preaches Jesus crucified and risen from the dead and seated at the Father’s right hand as Lord and Messiah.

Acts 4:8–12, where Peter and John have been arraigned before the Sanhedrin, and Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” preaches Jesus as the only way of salvation.

Ephesians 5:18–19, which tells us that when believers are filled with the Spirit, they become worshippers of the Lord Jesus, lifting him up in psalm and hymn and Spirit-given song.

The vision in Revelation 4–5 that is given to John of the throne room of heaven, informs us that Christ is declared to be worthy to receive “honour and glory” and thus rightly the object of universal co-adoration with the Father.

The opening verses of the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, where the reader is told that Christ is the object of angelic worship for he is the creator and sustainer of the universe, and indeed he is the very “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.”⁶⁷

The overall tenor of the written products of the revival in the New Testament era. Take, for example, Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Without a doubt this book is Spirit-inspired, and yet there is virtually no mention of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁸ But it is filled with lavish praise of Christ. Christ is set forth as the One who sustains the entire universe and who is preeminent in all of it.⁶⁹ Christ is the “hope of glory.”⁷⁰ And in Christ dwells all the fullness of the deity and all the “treasure of wisdom and knowledge.”⁷¹

To illustrate the ministry of the Spirit in relation to Christ in this present age, Packer rightly talks of the Spirit’s work as “a floodlight ministry.”⁷² The truth of this came home to me a goodly number of years ago in Montreal. I had the privilege for some two and a half decades of teaching at Séminaire Baptiste Évangélique du Québec (SEMBEQ), the French Fellowship Baptist seminary that used to be located on Gouin Boulevard, the longest street in Montreal. The area in which the seminary was located was a very prestigious area of the West Island of Montreal. One summer night when I was teaching there I decided to go for a

⁶⁶ Acts 2:21.

⁶⁷ Hebrews 1:6, 2–3.

⁶⁸ For the one clear reference, see Colossians 1:8.

⁶⁹ Colossians 1:18. Colossians 1:17.

⁷⁰ Colossians 1:27.

⁷¹ Colossians 1:19; 2:9, 3.

⁷² Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit*, 55, 65.

walk in the neighbourhood. I noticed that a good number of the owners of the wealthy homes in the area had strategically placed floodlights around their homes so that passers-by like myself might ooh and aah about their achievements in stone and brick. Now, if instead of focusing on the homes which were lit by the floodlights I had instead concentrated my attention on the floodlight themselves—“Oh, that’s an interesting-looking floodlight; I wonder where they bought it” or “what a lovely light that floodlight is giving; I wonder how powerful it is”—I would have missed the whole meaning and purpose of the floodlights. The owners of the homes had put the floodlights out in front so that I should look at their homes, not at the floodlights, the source of illumination.

So it is with the Spirit’s ministry. He has been sent by God the Father to focus our attention to Christ, to kindle in our hearts an unquenchable love for Christ and for his purposes, and to enable us to reflect faithfully his person and character. The Spirit has not come to primarily speak about himself. He has not been given to us so that we should focus primarily on him and his work. He has come to inhabit these mortal frames so that we should love Christ and adore him, and that we should seek to live each day in obedience to Jesus. How much more true is this in times of spiritual awakening.

The work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in revival has this one indispensable genuine mark then: it is Christ-centred. It is designed to exalt Christ and glorify him in the minds and hearts of men and women, and boys and girls. As the Victorian Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), who knew revival early on in his ministry, once put it:

If we do not make the Lord Jesus glorious; if we do not lift him high in the esteem of men, if we do not labour to make him King of kings, and Lord of lords; we shall not have the Holy Spirit with us. Vain will be rhetoric, music, architecture, energy, and social status: if our one design be not to magnify the Lord Jesus, we shall work alone and work in vain.⁷³

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⁷³ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1891), 64.

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