
Revival and Revivalism

Richard Davies

This year has seen the publication of Iain H Murray's latest historical study, subtitled 'The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858'. The careful detail contained in its 455 pages are helpfully summarised here, clearly demonstrating that the events of that period have had a considerable influence on subsequent evangelical church life throughout the world. The book is published by the Banner of Truth and costs £12.95.

In his introduction Murray provides us with nine quotations about revival and it is clear from these that revivals played a significant part in the formation of many American churches. Writing in 1832, Joel Hawes, the minister of the First Congregational Church, Hartford, Connecticut, could say: "The church of which I am pastor, like most of the early churches of New England, was planted in the spirit of revivals. . . Revivals of religion have always been held in high esteem by the church". By the second half of the nineteenth century this view had changed. A season of *revival* had become *revival meetings*. People were no longer surprised by a revival, it could be worked up and a number of preachers became known as revivalists. Revivalism had arrived. In his book **HOLDING THE FORT - Studies in Victorian Revivalism**, John Kent wrote: "American revivalism began as a method of obtaining (at least in appearance) the external signs of conviction, repentance and rebirth".

The first chapter of Murray's book deals with **Samuel Davies and the Meaning of Revival**. Davies not only had a powerful ministry, he also greatly influenced others, both in America and Britain. Davies, a 'Free-born Briton' of Welsh descent had an extremely useful ministry, even though he died at a young age (37 years). Murray paints a good picture of Davies' life, emphasising his spiritual experiences and usefulness. His was a revival ministry. Davies' basic beliefs regarding the nature of revival were clear and orthodox; revival is the work of the Holy Spirit. Both regeneration and the faith that springs from it are the gifts of God. Human depravity, Christ's divinity and atonement were truths he clearly proclaimed. The different degrees of success that gospel preachers experienced showed the sovereignty of God in salvation. Revival was different in degree, not in kind, from the regular experience of the church. He repudiated the claim that revivals restored miraculous gifts. Davies was convinced that a sense of the presence of God was always evident during times of revival. People became awed, solemnised and marked by humility.

A number of key Christian men at this time were acquainted with each other. **Chapter Two, entitled Princeton and the First Fruits of a Glorious Plan** deals with these men. The New Brunswick Presbytery, which had prepared Samuel Davies for ministry, also prepared John Rodgers, Robert Smith and Samuel Finley; all men of extraordinary ability and influence. However, even this influence was exceeded by the **greatest** institution to which it gave rise - Nassau Hall, the College of New Jersey, established in 1756 at Princeton. The ethos of the College was clearly established by the **great** presidents who

served it, namely, Dickinson, Burr, Edwards, Davies, Finley and in 1768 John Witherspoon was brought over from Scotland. In the 1760's the College itself experienced revival. A number of eminent men were sent out from the College - John McMillan, James Power, Joseph Smith and Thaddeus Dod. Between 1781 and 1787 all these men experienced revival in their congregations. Their influence was great, they founded schools and taught and trained men for the ministry, particularly for a missionary ministry.

Chapter Three is entitled **Glory in Virginia**. The 1770's and 1780's were two decades of real blessing in Virginia which was not confined to any one denomination and which produced great results, not least of which was the unity expressed by believers.

Those who benefited most at this time were the Presbyterians. Murray deals with this in Chapter Four, entitled **When Theology Took Fire**. Presbyterianism was transformed from being a church 'sound in doctrine but deficient in experience' into one much closer to the New Testament norm.

In 1787 a number of people were concerned for their church and nation's spiritual condition. Prayer meetings were held. At the beginning of 1788 there was a general awakening in Prince Edward, Cumberland and Charlotte counties. The awakening lasted a long time in some places, eg Briery, where it continued until 1831. The revival had many effects:-

1. the spread of the gospel to other areas,
2. a whole generation of younger men called to the work of the gospel ministry,
3. a gospel unity,
4. prayer restored to its rightful place,
5. fervent charity came to be expected of all Christians,
6. a return to Biblical standards of church membership, where a profession of faith must be accompanied by a changed lifestyle,
7. a demonstration that the usefulness of a church is bound up in her spirituality and unity.

Many new churches were formed in the 1790's. A large number of these churches drew up statements of principles which were practical in nature. Preachers were changed, added to their orthodoxy were eloquence, power, usefulness and authority. Murray sums up what happened in the closing words of the chapter:

The Great Revival taught the Presbyterian churches that orthodoxy and correct preaching, indispensable though they are, are not enough. Authority, tenderness, compassion, pity - these must be given in larger measure from heaven, and when they are it can truly be said that theology has taken fire.

The Age of the Second Great Awakening is the title and theme of Chapter Five. The American War of Independence emphasised the rejection of established authority. What was true politically also revealed itself in spiritual and moral realms. There was a development of anti-Christian literature. Thomas Paine, with his *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason* was at the forefront of this. The Bible was widely rejected, Christian faith and influence ebbed, and church growth was slow. Controversies occupied the attention of the churches. Secession took place, eg the Methodist Episcopal Church saw a 25% fall in membership. Whereas in the years 1790-1800 the U S population rose by 32%, church

membership only rose by 12.6%.

This sad situation was soon to be transformed. By 1816 many Americans considered themselves to be living in “the age of Bibles and missionaries”. Fairfield County Baptist Society in Connecticut could report: “The atheism of Voltaire and his associates is gone down, almost with their dust to the grave. The blasphemies of Paine are remembered only to be abhorred”. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the churches revitalized and multiplied in an extraordinary manner. In 1835 revival broke out which lasted for between 25 and 30 years, spread over a large geographical area and affected Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Methodist and Episcopalian churches.

Not much is known about this Second Great Awakening, possibly due to the fact that the churches were too busy to spend time recording what was taking place. Yet, membership figures for the period speak for themselves - between 1800 and 1810 Presbyterian membership grew from 70,000 to 100,000, while Baptist membership grew from 95,000 to 160,000. In the years 1801-1809 the Methodist Episcopal Church saw the following growth in successive years: 7,980; 13,860; 17,336; 9,064; 6,811; 10,625; 14,020; 7,405 and 11,043. This saw an increase in membership of 167.8% whilst the population had only increased by 36.4%.

There were no special means used to promote this awakening. The churches relied on preaching and prayer, recognising that it is in God’s sovereignty to bless. An extraordinary degree of blessing attended the normal means of grace, and upon the same preachers who had been faithfully labouring for years. The 1790’s saw a growing concern among Christians to pray. The Congregationalists and Baptists united “in supplications that God would avert his judgements; prevent the spread of error and iniquity - and pour out his Spirit in plentiful effusions on our guilty land”. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church called for “solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer”. The Methodists also emphasised the same duty at this period.

A surge of evangelical and interdenominational activity arose from the awakening. Local missionary societies were formed in Connecticut (1798) and Massachusetts (1799). In 1810 the American Board of Foreign Missions was formed. This sent out its first missionaries to Calcutta in 1812 and by 1821 had sent out 81 missionaries. The Baptist Churches in 1814 and the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1819 followed suit with their own foreign missionary societies. 1816 saw the formation of the American Bible Society and in 1825 the American Tract Society. A great deal of evangelism took place - Sunday School Unions, work amongst black people, monthly magazines and societies for educational or humane objectives. A profound impression was made on centres of learning. Here was an awakening which cannot be explained away as mere emotion.

How did this all come about? Edward Griffin wrote in 1832 ‘The means employed in these revivals have been but two - the clear presentation of divine truth and prayer: nothing to work upon the passions but sober, solemn truth, presented, as far as possible, in its most interesting attitudes, and closely applied to the conscience. The meetings have been still and orderly, with no other sign of emotion in the hearers than the solemn look and the silent tear’. The Rev John B Preston of Rupert, Vermont, wrote: “Our prayer meetings were crowded, and solemn to an amazing degree. No emotions more violent than shedding of tears, and no appearance of wildness and disorder occurred”.

Kentucky was the fastest growing frontier state in America, and **Kentucky 1800** is the title and theme of Chapter Six. In 1792 it had become the fifteenth state of the Union.

Population growth was far greater than church growth and there was a lack of Christian influence. Within the churches there was little spiritual vision, the quality of leadership was poor and too much energy was spent in internal controversy. During the 1790's new ministers moved to the state from Virginia and North Carolina. These men were of a high spiritual calibre, fervent workers, whose labour was blessed of God. During 1800 revival was general across the state.

1800 - 1801 saw the birth of a new phenomenon - the *camp meeting* which originated amongst the Presbyterians in their outdoor communion services. Whilst only a comparatively small number took communion, thousands would attend the preaching services. Thousands came to faith and lives were transformed. These converts were marked by a praying spirit, conviction of sin, a warm view of the love of God, love of souls, reformed morals, family worship and the necessity of sanctification.

There is another side to the revival in Kentucky. So much attention has been given to it that, for some, the work has been discredited in terms of excess and emotionalism. This was **The Emergence of Revivalism** and Murray deals with this in Chapter Seven. Revivals are bound to be attended by emotional excitement. Fanaticism enters when physical effects, or strength of emotion, are seen as proof of God's activity. Falling now became common and some ministers were completely uncritical of what was happening. Emotionalism, 'twitchings', 'jerks' and 'dancing' was normative in some places. While some ministers sought to exercise a degree of control through the preaching of the Word, others saw no need for preaching. In these circles visions, dreams and prophecies abounded.

In 1803 the Presbyterian Synod sought to deal with these abuses. However the advocates of fanaticism and emotionalism left to form a presbytery of their own and Presbyterianism was shattered by division. It was only the Methodists who were not distracted by such internal divisions. They benefited greatly from this revival and the camp meeting came to be associated with the Methodists. The Methodists were opposed to the orthodox Calvinism that prevailed in the other churches and, as a result, the Christian scene came to be marked by schism and wild enthusiasm.

In Chapter Eight, Murray provides us with portraits of **Five Leaders in the Northeast**. These five men are: Edwin Dorr Griffin, Asahel Nettleton, Lyman Beecher, Edward Payson and Gardiner Spring. All these men experienced revival in their ministries and illustrate important lessons for today, such as the clear difference between knowing revival and being a revivalist and the need for wisdom in handling enquirers. These men also spent much time with Christ. Spiritual usefulness and a close walk with God went together in their lives.

In Chapter Nine, Murray deals with **New Measures and Old Revivals**. By 1812 there is evidence of the *altar call* coming into use in Missouri. The State of New Jersey was blessed by revival in the years 1815-1821. In 1821 an important figure became a communicant member of the Presbyterian Church in Adams, New York State; his name was *Charles Grandison Finney*. Almost immediately he began studying for the Christian ministry and in December 1823 he was licensed by the presbytery and ordained in June 1824. For two years he was a frontier missionary and in 1825 he moved to Utica in Oneida County. Here revival was experienced up until 1827. Finney became prominent

but was soon engaged in controversy. He met twice with Asahel Nettleton but was deaf to Nettleton's advice and warnings. The controversy soon became public and the churches of the Mohawk Valley, from Utica to Troy, were caught up in it. In July 1827 a week long convention of ministers was held in an attempt to heal divisions. However, it did not succeed.

The controversy between Finney and Nettleton concerned the *new measures* Finney used in an attempt to promote revival. In fact these measures - an encouragement of physical response to preaching; women speaking in worship; long meetings - all came from practices that some Methodist churches were using. At the heart of the matter was the doctrine of conversion. Finney's teaching differed from that of other Presbyterian ministers but it took a while for this to be seen. He held to Arminian views, believing that people could be persuaded to come to regeneration and that no act of God was required. Finney recognised the newness of what he taught. In 1835 he wrote: "The truth is, that very little of the Gospel has come out upon the world, for these hundreds of years, without being clogged and obscured by false theology". What arrogance and ignorance of history! Finney denied that times of revival "come unpredictably, spontaneously, and sovereignly". With Finney, Pelagianism came in as a flood.

Chapter Ten entitled **Origins of a Great Division** deals with Finney's forsaking of the Westminster Confession and the divisions this brought about, especially as they were viewed in the Presbyterian Church. Finney's teaching and measures divided many congregations; splits took place, godly ministers were sacked. Finney was himself often responsible for these evils through his criticism of ministers and the nature of his teaching. Soon the divisions escalated from individual congregations and affected whole denominations. The Presbyterians saw years of controversy, culminating in 1838 in a formal split.

In Chapter Eleven, **The Illusion of a New Era**, Murray looks at why and how the new measures managed to change so dramatically the understanding of evangelism and revival in America. One reason was the spirit of the age - an age of activism. The 'American spirit' was born. Successful achievements multiplied. The past paled beside the present and there was a general rejection of all things old. A spirit of innovation was gaining ground, everything seemed to be in motion. Both in the church and in society there was an anti-intellectualism. Important doctrinal distinctions, carefully stated in confessions, were swept aside. A new age of democracy was dawning, and the authority of ministers in expounding Scripture was questioned. Anyone could get a hearing, regardless of their being called or trained.

The argument from apparent success was overwhelming. Numbers seen to be responding were claimed as sufficient evidence for changes in teaching and methods. By his own argument of success, however, Finney's claims are proved false. Joseph Ivor Foot wrote in 1838: "During ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his real converts are comparatively few. It is declared even by himself that 'the great body of them are a disgrace to religion'". In his **LECTURES ON SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**, published in 1851, Finney admits this very point yet by the end of the century Finney's reputation was of one who had introduced revivals to America.

The Presbyterian Church was not the only religious body thrown into turmoil as a result of Finney's ministry. In Chapter Twelve Murray deals with **The Baptists in Transition**. By the end of the nineteenth century the Baptists had lost their spiritual heritage, believing that the years before Finney consisted of hyper-Calvinistic barrenness. One of the major reasons for this was the lack of readily available manuscript evidence of the past. Murray shows the orthodox godliness of many pastors. These men knew rich blessing upon their ministries, yet they were later to be maligned and misrepresented.

In Chapter Thirteen Murray deals with the third era of general revival in America, the years 1857-58. He entitles the chapter **James Waddel Alexander and the New York Awakening of 1857-58**. Murray confined his historical narrative largely to the events which occurred in New York City, as there are more details available regarding this area than in other parts. The revival was preceded by a financial collapse, a great deal of unemployment and widespread bankruptcy. James Alexander wrote "From the very heart of these trials emerged spiritual yearnings, thirstings and supplications after the fountain of living waters". Prayer meetings were started and people took seriously the needs of their souls; there were many conversions. By June 1858, 50,000 conversions were reported in New York and 200,000 across the northeast of America.

The mode of true revival was clearly seen in 1858: "hunger for the Word of God, for prayer and for serious Christian literature; a sense of wonder and profound seriousness; the same work evident in many places at once; joyful praise; readiness to witness; a new energy in practical Christian service; the recovery of family worship and family religion, and an observable raising of the whole moral tone of society".

The final chapter is entitled **Old and New, Past and Future**. Here Murray informs us how the new theology of revival (Finneyism) has had an ongoing influence. Among the consequences mentioned are: the demotion of Scripture from its central place, a loss of interest in doctrinal distinctives, the acceptance of a lay ministry separate from church office, a policy of silence on contentious matters and external acts being confused for an inward spiritual change. Murray traces the confusion that these have caused since the 1850's. Rather than seeing revival as a miracle of God's grace it has now come to be seen as the successful operation of manipulative methods. The book concludes with two appendices entitled *Revivalism in Britain* and *Revivals in the South*.

Murray raises in this book important questions about the nature of salvation and revival. Here is a book that all believers and church leaders will do well to study. It should send us on our knees to God, urging for a visitation of divine power. **Come, Lord Jesus, Come.**

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