

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN REVIVAL

Martyn Lloyd-Jones defined revival as “an experience in the life of the Church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work. He does that work, primarily, amongst the members of the Church; it is a reviving of the believers. You cannot revive something that has never had life, so revival, by definition, is first of all an enlivening and quickening and awakening of lethargic, sleeping, almost moribund Church members.” He went on to describe a sudden work of the Spirit that “comes upon them and they are brought into a new and more profound awareness of the truths that they had previously held intellectually, and perhaps at a deeper level too.” Such a work brings humility, conviction of sin, and terror at any notion of self-sufficiency. “Many of them feel that they had never been Christians. And then they come to see the great salvation of God in all its glory and to feel its power.” This quickening and enlivening power brings prayer. Also, “new power comes into the preaching of the ministers, and the result of this is that large numbers who were previously outside the Church are converted and brought in.”¹

In W. B. Sprague’s *Lectures on Revival*, he noted that he gave these lectures to his congregation to “vindicate the cause of genuine revivals of religion; and in doing this . . . to distinguish between a genuine revival and a spurious excitement.” He began by defining

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey,” in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors: Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959–1978* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 1–23.

religion in general and showed how the Christian religion fits that pattern but with peculiar distinctives.

Religion consists in a conformity of heart and life to the will of God. It consists in a principle of obedience implanted in the soul, and in the operation of that principle in the conduct. Religion is substantially the same in all worlds; though the religion of a sinner is modified, in some respects, by his peculiar character and condition. In common with the religion of the angels, it consists in love to God—to his law, to his government, to his service; but in distinction from that, it consists in repentance; faith in the merits of a crucified Saviour; resignation under trials; opposition to spiritual enemies. Moreover, religion in the angels is an inherent principle; it begins with their existence; but in the human heart it is something superinduced by the operation of the Spirit of God. Wherever there exists a cordial belief of God's truth, and submission of the will to his authority, and the graces of the heart shine forth in the virtues of the life, there is true religion.²

Sprague then gave a brief definition supported by an extended analysis. "Now, if such be the nature of religion," he surmised, "you will readily perceive in what consists a *revival* of religion. It is a revival of scriptural knowledge; of vital piety; of practical obedience." He went on to defend the use of the word, revival, when it included in its meaning the element of conversion. "The term," he noted, "is to be applied in a general sense, to denote the improved religious state of a congregation, or of some other community. And it is moreover applicable, in a strict sense, to the condition of Christians, who, at such a season, are in a greater or less degree revived; and whose increased zeal is usually rendered instrumental of the conversion of sinners." He then summarized

² W. B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958 [first published 1832]), 6–7.

his observation into an expanded definition: “Wherever then you see religion rising up from a state of comparative depression to a tone of increased vigor and strength; wherever you see professing Christians becoming more faithful to their obligations, and behold the strength of the church increased by fresh accession of piety from the world; *There* is a state of things which you need not hesitate to denominate a revival of religion.”³

In his introductory chapter to *Revival and Revivalism*, Iain Murray posits two historical phenomena concerning this subject. One was present in American evangelicalism from about 1620 through 1858—this period he views as the period of revival. The second dominates the last of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century—this period he calls revivalism. After that, as Murray puts it, “the opinion became widespread that such revivals did more harm to the churches than they did good. In the outcome, revival was for many years a discredited subject and the study of it fell into abeyance.”⁴ He also looks at the historiography of revival.

One historical method seeks to discern the difference between those two approaches to revival. A second type of history does not discern any distinctive difference but sees all the phenomena of revival culture as the same. A third and more recent approach sees all so-called revival as explicable in purely sociological terms. Among these histories are the ones written by Bernard Weisberger (*They Gathered at the River*) and William McLoughlin (*Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*).

Murray’s thesis, in light of these other approaches to revival, sought a more carefully developed integration of belief and skepticism, based on an acceptance of the reality of truly Holy Spirit-wrought revival as well as the reality of contrived, humanly generated excitements and religious confidence based on false

³ Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, 7–8.

⁴ Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), xviii.

doctrine. He stated his thesis this way: "American history was shaped by the Spirit of God in revivals of the same kind as launched the early church into a pagan world." Before 1858, a univocal understanding of revival sounded clearly by the untrained preachers of the frontier and those trained in Eastern universities. Murray argued that these men were "equally opposed to what was merely emotional, contrived or manipulated. They believed that strict adherence to Scripture is the only guard against what may be wrongly claimed as the work of God's Spirit." They saw within some aspects of revival the tendencies to revivalism "long before it became a respected part of evangelicalism, and they would have had no problem in agreeing with the criticism which has since discredited it."⁵

More recently, Jon Butler has argued in *Awash in a Sea of Faith* that the Great Awakening did not occur but might be thought of as "an interpretive fiction and as an American equivalent of the Roman Empire's Donation of Constantine."⁶ Earlier he had written "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," in which he called the Great Awakening merely a "short-lived Calvinist revival in New England during the 1740's." It became a grandiose idea with massive historiographical power through the work of Joseph Tracy's *The Great Awakening*, written in 1845 to establish a pattern of divine visitations in the history of American Christianity. Frank Lambert also believed that the Great Awakening was a historical fiction, but a fiction invented on the spot, not a century later. Lambert wrote,

Revivals are not timeless universals; they are historically contingent. They are cultural formations constructed by persons who believe in and expect periodical outpourings of divine grace that supersede the ordinary means of salvation found in the Christian church. The

⁵ Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, xx.

⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 165.

eighteenth-century Great Awakening was the creation of a particular group of evangelicals who viewed themselves as, first, discoverers of a “Work of God” and, second, instruments in promoting that work. They preached with fervor and prayed with expectation for an effusion of God’s Spirit. When scores of men and women came under “conviction” for their sins and seemed to undergo “conversion,” the revivalists declared the existence of revival. Then, they spread the news of local awakenings from community to community inspiring similar occurrences throughout America. By the early 1740’s, the revivalists, viewing events from the inside—that is, as active participants within a revival culture—declared that an extraordinary Work of God had overspread America.⁷

Lambert then crafts a story from the variety of publications of the day, driving his point that the “revival” is the conglomerate product of all the publicity, self-promotion, newspaper accounts, journals, periodical magazines, correspondence (including localized, inter-colonial, and trans-Atlantic), theologically driven historical analysis, and personal testimonies. From this interesting conglomeration of texts, Lambert infers that the Great Awakening was a literary promotion in which the defenders of the movement were able to overwhelm its opposers in affirming the genuineness and substantiality of the movement on a grand scale.

However, Lambert points to the “contestation” as evidence that the reality was only literary and not undeniably substantive. “Every assertion promoters advanced met with a counterassertion argued with logic as convincing and evidence as compelling.”⁸ Lambert drew three conclusions. “First, the colonial American revival was both regional and intercolonial.” It happened in two areas prone

⁷ Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

⁸ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 252.

to revival expectation and rich in revival tradition. The progenitors knew how to “pray down” as well as “preach up” a revival. This event became known throughout the colonies with only sporadic movements outside the two areas of New England and the Middle Colonies. Second, “the Great Awakening was a religious invention.” In other words, it was a “fabrication,” developed by the use of means that were expected to produce it, and then given reality by reporting the success of the means. “Third, the Great Awakening was a contested event, part of a colonial culture war.” Some saw it only as “rank enthusiasm” generated among the “vulgar masses.”⁹

This generated a war of interpretation and counterinterpretation about the revival and its effects. Jonathan Edwards, according to Lambert, became moderate in his estimations of the extent of it, but still asserted its genuineness in many cases. Thomas Prince, in *Christian History*, believed that his own accounts had not done full justice to the extent of it but had only given a “specimen of the wondrous Work of God which has been in the midst of these years.”¹⁰

My own view will gradually unfold in the flow of this historical narrative. I do, however, want to set forth a major assumption about this issue and then attempt some definitions. I believe that reformation and revival go together. One is preparatory and the other executes. One establishes truth and the other breathes life into it. Michael McClymond generally endorses this observation in stating, “There is no way to disentangle the descriptions of revival experiences from Christian ideas and teachings.” After a description of Finney’s experience of justification by faith, he made the general judgment, “This sort of interplay between doctrine and experience, cognitive content and affective response, is common in the narratives within the documentary history.”¹¹

⁹ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 253–256.

¹⁰ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 257.

¹¹ Michael McClymond, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), Vol. 1, xx–xxi.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones rejected the idea that reformation had any *necessary* connection as a prerequisite to revival. He believed that connection lapsed into “Arminian terminology and thinking,” and was “to deny the fundamental tenet of the Reformed position.” He went on to say, “If you truly believe in the sovereignty of God, you must believe that whatever the state of the Church, God can send revival.” He illustrated it by showing that the apologetic efforts of Butler, Warburton, and others did not effect any rescue of the church from its destitution in the opening decades of the eighteenth century. He pointed to the preaching of Whitefield, who “received his baptism of power” in 1737 before he adopted Calvinism as a theological system, and to the Wesleys, whom God used mightily in reviving large segments of the Church of England in spite of theological muddleheadedness in some vital areas.¹²

I have questions about the accuracy of the good doctor’s thinking in this matter.

Reformation and revival follow the Puritan pattern of preparation and conversion. Just as the mind must be fitted with certain perceptions and perspectives on human existence, sin, and destiny and certain views of God’s law, holiness, and mercy before faith can come, so revival assumes some degree of fitness—conformity of mind—to pivotal truths conformed to the Spirit’s work of glorifying Christ. In a very distilled fashion, Hebrews, in its discussion of faith, shows this connection clearly in pointing to Enoch as a man of faith, based on the biblical assertion that he “pleased God” (Gen. 5:24, LXX; in Hebrew “walked with God”) by saying, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Certain spheres of cognition are necessary as ordained means for the infusion of faith. This is why Peter tied Christian faith, growth, and zeal to the operation of the Spirit through the Word, specifically the preached gospel:

¹² Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, 15.