

## Editorial

# Say: Shibboleth!

There are, in this world, certain things which are beyond contention. No-one, for instance, would contend against the existence of the Sun, and the moon, or of life, growth, or the principles of, say, Euclidean Geometry. All such things philosophers call “givens”. That is to say, they are present in the fabric of reality, and it is impossible to remove them, and stupid, even dangerous to ignore them. “Given”, indeed, by the majestic hand of our Creator.

Reader, say “Shibboleth”! Say: “Revival”!

To the modern evangelical and Calvinistic world, the concept, at least, if not the actual experience of “revival” is a *spiritual* “given”, a veritable fundamental “shibboleth” by which spiritual life is to be evaluated. Generations of believers have come, and gone, and each has handed down to its successor this mystical torch.... “Revival”! The very notion has become imbued with an inviolable sacro-sanctity such that, to dare to question it, or to demand analysis of it, is to invite even vituperative criticism from most quarters. Indeed, to question the notion of revival in the religious world of today is like challenging the existence of the Sun in the sky, so far has “revival” become embedded in the modern evangelical psyche. A whole religious culture thus manifests itself, with its own unique literature, customs and concepts, vocabulary, history (even, it has to be said, “folk-lore”), and names of “revivalists” have super-authoritative currency in the parlance of these ecclesiastical environs.....names like Whitefield, Wesley, Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, Finney, Billy Bray, Evan Roberts, Brownlow North, McCheyne..... The lore of their “mighty” work gets handed down the generations as a set of paradigms by which all churches and Christian individuals are measured. “Ah! We need another revival like that.....we need another Spurgeon.....another Wesley....” Such are the longings ubiquitously voiced in the Evangelical, and Calvinistic world of today.<sup>1</sup>

Revival! Yea..... “Shibboleth”! The “Given”.

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<sup>1</sup> One only has to view the shelves in any Evangelical bookshop to see the manifest tendency that majors on revival. Over the last 40 years the Banner of Truth, a Calvinistic publisher, has produced a number of weighty tomes on the topic of revival, such as William B. Sprague’s “*Lectures on Revivals*”, the enormous “*Historical Accounts of Revivals*” by Gillies, Thomas Phillips on “*The Welsh Revival of 1859*”, “*Revivals of Religion*” being a reprint of certain various Scottish writers of the 19th century,

But what is "revival"? There can be few alive today can ever remember a "revival",<sup>2</sup> so that really we are dependent on written testimony alone. There are no video-clips of Spurgeon preaching, no recordings of Whitefield in the full cry of his oratorical glory. No camera News-reels showing the effects of the "Great Awakening" on the multitudes that attended upon it. And even centenarians in Wales today could, at best, give but childhood impressions of the last of the long traditions of revivals in that land, it being now 92 years since the last forceful outbreaks of the fervent phenomena stormed across the Principality.

So what is "revival"? A modern authority, the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, insisted that there is today a "great need of revival in the churches", and that "this is surely the only real hope;" and that revival is in essence a "visitation from on high",<sup>3</sup> indeed, "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit".<sup>4</sup> Yet, the good Doctor also said that "I trust it is not necessary for me to define and describe the word 'revival'".<sup>5</sup> As if, (although he nor any of his hearers were first hand witnesses of any revival), it was plain enough what constituted such. But ML-J had to rely on the written records of former revivals, like the rest of us. Now the problem is, that if we are forced to encounter it only through the written testimonies of former generations, then the answer to that question is not so simple as ML-J makes out. For even the giant worthies of those former generations had difficulties in this respect, and as it happens, they wrote of their difficulties, quite extensively, in fact. One might find this difficult to believe today, simply because the vast mass of literature saturating the market on this subject concentrates almost 100% on delivering an up-beat evaluation. But what of the old worthies? Of them, if anyone could answer the question, and say to us, via his written testimony, "this, *this* is revival..." then Jonathan Edwards is that man. For he preached through revivals, pastored through revivals, fellow-shipped with Whitefield, observed and studied revivals of such a magnitude that he became fully convinced that the dawn of the millenium had arrived. (He was a post-millennialist). Not for nothing have church historians denominated those revivals Edwards lived through as: "The Great Awakening". But Edwards had cause to re-

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"Jonathan Edwards on Revival", Arthur Fawcett on "*The Cambuslang Revival*", and Iain Murray's exhaustive tome: "*Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*". On top of this the BOT have majored on biographical works of the great "revivalists", viz.: 2 volumes on Whitefield, two biographies of Spurgeon, biographies of Jonathan Edwards, Asahel Nettleton, R. M. McCheyne, Howell Harris, Daniel Rowland, John Elias, and many others.

<sup>2</sup> A "revival" broke out in certain limited quarters of East Anglia in the 1920's, and via the coastal fishing industry there having contacts in Scotland, I understand that there was a limited spread of the phenomena to fishing ports on the Aberdonian coast. Any eyewitnesses to this must, of course be octogenarians if still alive today, even if they were but 10 year-olds at the time of witnessing the events.

<sup>3</sup> D.M. Lloyd-Jones: Foreword to: "*The Welsh Revival of 1904*" by Eifion Evans; London, The Evangelical Press 1969. See pages 5 and 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D.M. Lloyd-Jones: "*William Williams and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism*", paper read to the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference in London in 1968, printed in "*The Puritans, their Origins and Successors*;" Edinburgh:BOT 1987. pages 202-203.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones: *Op.Cit.* p. 202.

evaluate his whole experience in those revivals.....his later, and maturer written testimony carrying the tone of a largely disillusioned man. Not for nothing did he write such treatises as "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God", and more disturbingly, "The Religious Affections". We are indebted to Allen Baird in this issue of the British Reformed Journal for writing us a reassessment of Edwards and the Great Awakening. It is at once a thesis that will raise eyebrows, and set one thinking.

A hundred years and more after Edwards, we encounter a giant theologian like Charles Hodge, who from his vantage point at Princeton Seminary in the 19th century lived through, experienced, observed, and analysed "revivals". The results of his sanctified wisdom on the subject are disturbing, and are also presented herewith in this issue.

Then, to come up to date, there is the respected Iain H.Murray, of the Banner of Truth. A fervent believer and advocate of "revivals", he has found it necessary to write a massive tome entitled "*Revivals and Revivalism: the Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858*", in which he endeavours to establish what exactly is the true character of a revival. In this, we feel, he goes seriously astray, with serious ramifications for Reformed doctrine, and accordingly we present a telling and extensive review of his book by our American friend, Mr. Marc Carpenter.

It is eye-opening too, to analyse the teaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this topic, and compare it to the Bible. This we do in the final article, and therein we also draw attention to the idiosyncratic spiritual life endemic to such phenomena as manifest in various places such as Scotland, America, and Ireland.

As this topic is controversial, we invite letters from our readers concerning these matters. It is of serious import. Should we be seeking and praying for revival at this time, or should we be "reforming", in the light of the Word of God, that is to say, repenting of our sins, reforming our personal spiritual lives, reforming our ecclesiastical fellowship and worship, our witness to the World, and our whole motives for so doing ?

So what of this "given", this "Shibboleth", this purportedly intrinsic and necessary feature of true Christian religion, if the very experts, including those who claimed to have experienced it first hand, find it difficult to define? Is "revival" a truly Biblical phenomena? And is our modern looking in hope for, and praying for, another revival, nothing more than wasted spiritual energy spent on pursuing an ecclesiological phantom?

These are the questions we have set out to explore in this issue. We only ask the reader to come with an open mind.

Yea.....say: "Shibboleth"? Say.... "revival"?