

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE 1859 REVIVAL IN IRELAND (1)

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Introduction

In the British evangelical church world and elsewhere, revival is often seen as the cure for all the church's ills, the essence of true religion and the thing above all else for which believers should pray and work. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the prince of British evangelicals, has said that the only hope of the church in our day is revival.¹

The present day attitude toward revival has been shaped by the teaching of prominent evangelical leaders such as Lloyd-Jones but also by an overly sentimental view of past revivals in different parts of the United Kingdom, including the 1859 revival in Scotland, the 1859 and 1904 revivals in Wales and the 1859 revival in Ireland. The latter is our concern here.

In Northern Ireland, the revival of 1859 is viewed as the high water mark of religion in that province and the year 2009 marks the 150 anniversary of that event. The Northern Ireland Assembly has already passed a motion to mark this anniversary:

Resolved: That this Assembly notes that 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival; acknowledges the positive contribution made by the Revival to society; recognises that the positive impact of the Revival is still felt today; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark this anniversary during 2009 (4 November, 2008).

Most analysis and history of the 1859 revival in Ireland simply assumes that the revival was a work of God and is entirely uncritical. This was generally true of contemporary accounts and is even more the case today as the revival is remembered with a great deal of sentiment and longing for some such similar movement. Ian Paisley's history of the revival is a good example. Not one criticism of the revival, not one word of caution, is to be found in his book.² Some other books, all of which

¹Eifion Evans, *The Welsh Revival of 1904* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1969), p. 5.

uncritically extol the revival as a work of God, are John Weir, *Heaven Came Down: The 1859 Revival* (Belfast, 1860); John Carson, *God's River in Spate: The Story of the Religious Awakening of Ulster in 1859* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1958); Alfred Russell Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859* (Belfast: Mid-Antrim Historical Group, 1994).

There were some contemporary criticisms of the revival, however. Not all viewed it as a work of God's Spirit. Especially two books were published that were critical of many aspects of the revival, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859* (Belfast: Alexander Mayne, 1866) by William Hamilton³ and *Year of Delusion* by Isaac Nelson (Belfast: "The Advertiser," 1861). The latter book was published as a response to William Gibson's *The Year of Grace*, the most popular and oft-reprinted contemporary account of the revival.⁴ The book by Hamilton is the more sober and biblical critique of the revival, but both books give quite a different picture than that which exists today in the hearts and minds of evangelicals in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. It is our belief that any critical study of the revival will do the same.

A Brief History of the 1859 Revival

By most accounts the revival began in the Ballymena area of Northern Ireland, in the villages of Kells and Connor. Four men, Jeremiah Meneely, James McQuilkin, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace, all new converts, began meeting for prayer and Bible study in the old schoolhouse near Kells (now a dwelling). These meetings began in 1857 and continued through December of 1858, still confined to the Kells and Connor area. Jeremiah Meneely was appointed the preacher of the group and as the meetings grew they were held in cottages and even in the open air.

Through others who attended these meetings, the revival spread to the village of Ahoghill to the west of Ballymena, where the physical strikings and prostrations that were such a noteworthy part of the revival began. From Ahoghill, the revival spread to Rasharkin to the north of Ballymena, to Ballymena itself and ultimately throughout the province and even into parts of what is now the Republic of Ireland,

²Ian Paisley, *The "Fifty-Nine" Revival* (Belfast: Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, 1959).

³Republished in 1993 by the Covenant Reformed Fellowship of Ballymena, Northern Ireland and available from the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (7 Lislunnan Road, Kells, Ballymena, Northern Ireland, BT42 3NR) for £5 (inc. P&P).

⁴William Gibson, *The Year of Grace: A History of the Ulster Revival of 1859* (Belfast: C. Aitchison, 1860).

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including counties Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal⁵ and the provinces of Leinster and Munster. Other revivals, loosely connected with the revival in Ulster began also in Wales and in Scotland.

Already in May of 1859, the Ahoghill Presbytery reported to the Synod of Ballymena and Coleraine,

that wild, wicked and godless characters, whom no human power could remodel, are now to be seen sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in their right minds. This is the case, not just in solitary instances, but in hundreds, not merely with the young just initiated into a course of sin, but with the old, confirmed in their sinful habits.⁶

The Ulster revival was especially strong in the areas of Ballymena, Coleraine and Belfast. Meetings began to be held in churches as well as in the open air, while not only the people but the ministers of nearly every denomination, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Congregational and many others, were caught up in the excitement. As the revival spread various “manifestations” began and they too spread until they became an integral part, even the main feature, of the revival.

There were reports of over 100,000 converts in Ulster, somewhat less than a tenth of the total population of the province. The Presbyterian church alone is supposed to have seen an increase of 10,000 communicants in the years following the revival.⁷ Along with the large number of conversions, there were reported large decreases in Sabbath desecration, profanity, drunkenness, prostitution and other crimes, and an enormous increase in the establishment of Sunday schools and in attendance at these Sunday schools and at the worship services of the churches. Reports of crowds numbering in thousands are common in accounts of the revival. In some areas, new churches had to be built and new congregations formed to accommodate the large crowds now in attendance.

Without further examination, these results would seem to indicate that the revival was indeed a work of God’s Spirit, but the fact is that these results were temporary, often little more than “a flash in the pan.” By 1865 or 1866, a mere six or

⁵These three counties are part of the province of Ulster, but have been, since 1921, part of the Republic of Ireland, while the remaining six counties of Ulster now make up what is known as Northern Ireland.

⁶*Ballymena Observer* (28 May, 1859), as quoted in Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, p. 62.

⁷General Assembly Minutes, 1860, p. 866, as quoted in Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, p. 189.

seven years after the revival, the situation was much the same as it had been before the revival or worse. Especially in the areas of worship and doctrine, the revival affected the churches in a way that was not good and even contributed to a subsequent decline in religion in the province. This we shall see when we take a closer look at the revival and its consequences.

The revival excitement itself died out in some areas very quickly, in just a few months, but outbreaks of revival continued through the year 1859 and into 1860. By the end of 1860, they had largely died out throughout Ulster, so that at the Synod of Belfast in 1861, the Down Presbytery reported that “the peculiarities of the Revival have passed away.”⁸ Short-lived in duration, but not in the memories of evangelicals who still hail it as “the quickening breath of the mighty Spirit of God” and as “unquenchable fire from heaven which set all Ulster ablaze for God.”⁹

Characteristics of the Revival

There were a number of things that, though they were not unique to the 1859 revival, nevertheless, formed a certain impression in the minds of the people and became synonymous with the revival. These included strikings, prostrations, “revival” meetings, what are known today as the giving of testimonies, and along with these a strong de-emphasis on the reading and preaching of God’s Word and on traditional worship. At the time little was done to judge these matters in the light of Scripture or to stop what was unbiblical, and little analysis of them is made today. No book on the revival, however, fails to mention the strikings and prostrations and very few are in any way critical of them, though they were for the most part unbiblical. Hamilton describes these strikings thus:

The people assemble as already referred to, devotional exercises are engaged in, but that which is especially looked to is the addresses and prayers of the “converts.” During these addresses and prayers, or toward the close of the meeting, individuals of the audience become so affected that some fall apparently powerless (prostrated, as it is called), others scream as though in great distress, but do not fall; others, again, are not so deeply affected. Thus there are degrees in the

⁸Synod of Belfast Minutes, 1861, as quoted in Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, p. 201.

⁹Paisley, *The “Fifty-Nine” Revival*, pp. 204, 17.

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intensity and duration of this influence, but we comprehend all in the one term “stricken.”¹⁰

There is some question as to how wide-spread these physical manifestations were. A contemporary account, apparently trying to downplay these manifestations, actually suggests that they were quite common:

Of those awakened, not more than one in seven have [sic] suffered anything like the bodily prostration, trance or convulsion which the small minority have experienced.¹¹

There are indications as well that they did not appear where they were disapproved or forbidden, and evidence also that they were one of the first symptoms of the revival to die out and disappear, but all agree that they were a notable part of the revival. They affected men, women and children and often appeared at the end of revival meetings. As part of these striking and prostrations, contemporary accounts describe trance-like sleep accompanied by visions,¹² loss of consciousness,¹³ swooning or fainting,¹⁴ temporary paralysis,¹⁵ long-lasting bodily weakness,¹⁶ extreme distress or “overwhelming mental anguish,”¹⁷ uncontrolled writhing and trembling, even convulsions,¹⁸ rolling on the ground in distress,¹⁹ “the occasional suspension of the bodily powers, as indicated by the loss of speech, sight, and hearing,”²⁰ tearing out of hair,²¹ experience of choking sensations,²² miracles of healing,²³ even of several women with “marks,” that is, words and symbols, appearing on arms and breasts.²⁴

¹⁰Hamilton, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, p. 8.

¹¹David Adams, *Revival at Ahoghill* (Belfast, 1859), p. 10, as quoted in Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, p. 82.

¹²Weir, *Heaven Came Down*, p. 85.

¹³Weir, *Heaven Came Down*, p. 145.

¹⁴Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, p. 87.

¹⁵Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, p. 125. He quotes a description of “[some]one stretched arch-like on heels and head for several minutes.”

¹⁶Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, p. 33.

¹⁷Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, pp. 38-39, 85.

¹⁸Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, p. 88.

¹⁹Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, pp. 174-175.

²⁰Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, pp. 122-123, 347-349.

²¹Hamilton, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, p. 33.

²²Carson, *God’s River in Spate*, p. 104.

²³Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, pp. 173-174.

At the time, some ascribed these things to hysteria or even to the influence of the devil. Hamilton says,

And we ask, with trembling, seeing it such a sin to ascribe the work of the Spirit to the evil one, What is it to ascribe the work of the evil one to—we are amazed at the very thought—to the Spirit?²⁵

Most saw them as the work of the Spirit of God. John Carson says, “But one and all of [the] ‘explanations’ of the physical prostrations of the Revival break like the waves on the rock of its gracious results.”²⁶ In other words, the proof that these were indeed the work of the Spirit is that the rest of the revival was obviously the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paisley views them as an essential part of the revival:

Consequently, I conclude that the physical manifestations were a most important part of the work, and that they entered specially into God’s design, and were, in no sense of the word mere accidents of the revival. They were essentials, or God would not have sent them.²⁷

That claim, too, we will examine.

Along with the prostrations, testimonies by those who had been converted were a notable feature of the revival. They were the main feature of the revival meetings, the immediate cause of most of the prostrations and were supposed to be also the means of the conversion of others. A description of a typical meeting is given by a contemporary:

The religious exercises were commenced with singing and prayer, then a short address by the presiding minister, adducing the conversion of Paul as precedent and illustration of the conversions in this great Revival. Three “converts” were then introduced, who each addressed the meeting and prayed. The substance of the addresses was

²⁴Scott, *The Ulster Revival of 1859*, pp. 128-129; Gibson, *The Year of Grace*, pp. 145-147. Most doubted that these were the work of the Spirit, however, since in one case the author of these marks seemed unable to spell the word “Jesus” correctly, spelling it as “Jaesus.”

²⁵Hamilton, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, pp. 285-286.

²⁶Carson, *God’s River in Spate*, p. 106.

²⁷Paisley, *The “Fifty-Nine” Revival*, p. 176.

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their own conversion, what they had seen in the conversion of others, and urging conversion on all ...

When the meeting was about to be concluded, one and another, and I don't know how many, appeared more or less stricken, and were heard crying loudly or sobbing as in a very distressed condition. Meanwhile numbers crowded closely around them, and the scene became one not easily described, to many it would appear utter confusion; but the "converts" and the other friends of the Revival seemed greatly to rejoice in what was going forward. This was evident by their shaking of hands, and expressions such as the good work being an answer to the prayer of faith. The "converts" and others now began to comfort and instruct the distressed ones, the "converts" being regarded, and indeed appearing to regard themselves, as best qualified for that purpose.²⁸

These converts not only attended the meetings but wandered around from town to town, neglecting their business and seeking to spread the revival. Hamilton says, "no sooner do the 'stricken ones find peace,' than they set out to hold meetings and convert others."²⁹ All of which is seen by some as the most important means of spreading the revival and converting sinners:

The personal testimonies of the newly converted lay at the heart of the movement. Mrs. Colville's testimony moved James McQuilken; James McQuilken's testimony moved Jerry Meneely, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace; and the testimonies of those subsequently converted spread the revival all over the whole province.³⁰

Whether this aspect of the revival was in harmony with God's Word remains to be seen.

to be concluded (DV)

²⁸Hamilton, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, pp. 10-11.

²⁹Hamilton, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859*, p. 11.

³⁰Paisley, *The "Fifty-Nine" Revival*, p. 199.