

Revivals And Church History :: The Role of Preaching in Revival -Penhearow

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The Role of Preaching in Revival

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the famous British expositor who ministered at Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years (1938–1968), spent a lifetime investigating revivals. He concluded that preaching has played a central role in the history of revival:

As that is true in the beginning as described by the book of Acts, it was also after the Reformation. Luther, Calvin, Knox, Latimer, Ridley—all these men were great preachers. In the seventeenth century you had exactly the same thing—the great Puritan preachers and others. And in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, the Wesleys, Rowland and Harris were all great preachers. It was an era of great preaching. Whenever you get Reformation and Revival this is always and inevitably the result.¹

Preaching is God's holy instrument to shake nations, transform communities and shape lives for God and eternity. This is clearly seen in redemptive history and throughout church history.

What is Revival?

“Revival” is the act of restoring life to someone who once lived, but has died. God answers Elijah's prayer to “revive” or return life to a child who, once alive, was now dead (1 Kn. 17:22). In Ezra 9:9 the word “revive” is applied to the restoration of Jerusalem after the devastation and destruction of the city by the Babylonians. While there was once life in the city, the city lay dead and in ruins until: “... He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins...” The reviving and restoration of God's people is vividly seen when the prophet Ezekiel is taken to the valley of dry bones that once housed life but now lie dead. Upon these dead dry bones, God breathes anew, “reviving” them through the life giving power of the Holy Spirit.

While revival is primarily centered around God's people, the church, true revival reaches beyond the boundaries of the existing church to enlarge the kingdom of God and revolutionize society.² How we need this today when so many of our churches are cold and indifferent, and our culture increasingly decadent!

Anointed Preaching is Due to the Spirit of God

God has often used anointed preaching as an instrument to usher in great revivals. Anointed preaching is the spoken word transformed into the living Word the message delivered by human lips given power by the Holy Spirit. God uses anointed preaching to reveal Himself, to proclaim His truth, to overcome the powers of darkness, and to be an effective call unto salvation. In a genuine revival, the preacher finds his own mind captured by the Word of God, his own heart burning for the glory of God, and his own life irrevocably dedicated to preaching and proclaiming the wonders of God.

Anointed Preaching is Expository Preaching

While God has been pleased to use a number of preaching styles, I am convinced that expository preaching is biblical preaching and therefore most effectively carries the full power of the Word of God. What is expository preaching? As Haddon W. Robinson defines it:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.³

We honour the Spirit of God when we break open His Word entrusted to us and unleash its dynamic power into the hearts and lives of God's precious people. We strive to use the Scriptures as the sole means by which to proclaim God's thoughts and revelation of Himself, for the simple reason that the Scriptures themselves promise to reveal to us the living power of God. As the writer to the Hebrews declares:

For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

I am convinced that expository preaching is the God-given means for envisioning, energizing, equipping and enlarging the church of Christ. Expository preaching gives power and authority to the preacher, for it is based not on his word or opinion, but God's.

Anointed Preaching is Christocentric

Expository preaching is fundamentally Christocentric because the Scriptures themselves are focused on Christ. We stand with Paul when he declares to the Corinthians that, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Co. 1:23). Such preaching is exemplified in the life of C.H. Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. He pointedly declares:

The sermon that does not lead to Christ, or of which Jesus Christ is not the top and the bottom is a sort of sermon that will make the devils in hell laugh, but might make the angels of God weep.⁴

It is this willingness or unwillingness to let the Scriptures speak through us which characterizes the success or failure of our calling as preachers of the Word. The Bible describes the role of a preacher in vivid metaphors: the preacher is God's herald, God's farmer, God's steward, God's shepherd and God's ambassador. John Stott puts it well:

Thus good news has been given to the herald to proclaim; good seed to the farmer to sow, and good food for the steward to dispense, while good pasture is available for the shepherd to lead his flock there. Similarly, the ambassador does not pursue his own policy but his country's, and the workman cuts a way for 'the word of truth,' not for his own word. It is impressive that in all of these New Testament metaphors the preacher is the servant under someone else's authority, and not the communicator of someone else's word.⁵

Preaching and Revival in the O.T.

In the Old Testament we find that revival always begins with a message from God which is publicly explained to, and publicly received by, the people. We see an example of this as God's grace sends Jonah to Nineveh, the capital of the cruel Assyrian Empire, to warn them of their sinful state. The reluctant prophet is sent to preach, and as he does the heavens open and the fire of revival falls. The entire city of 120,000 idol worshippers are convicted of sin and totally transformed!

Another example of anointed preaching occurs when Jehoshaphat is crowned king of Judah. He seeks the Lord with all his heart and pulls down the idols from the high places. He then mobilizes and sends out the leaders and the Levites as itinerant preacher/teachers: "So they taught in Judah... they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people. And the fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah..." (2Ch. 17:9f). Through preaching the windows of heaven are opened upon many hearts and lives, even overflowing to the other nations!

Another instance of revival takes place when, as his first act as the King of Judah, Hezekiah reopens the temple and summons the Levites and preaches to them (2Ch. 29:5ff.)! Revival breaks out! The Levites respond immediately to the Word and sanctify themselves, and once again the worship of Yahweh is revived. The response of the people is so great that the Levites cannot cope with the sacrifices of the people which are being offered (2Ch.29:34). The revival spreads as couriers are sent throughout Judah and Israel to proclaim the King's call to repentance (2Ch.30:6ff). The response is a great turning back to God in worship and adoration.

Preaching and Revival in the N.T.

The examples we find in the Old Testament are totally eclipsed by those in the New Testament. The call and commandment to publicly proclaim the Kingdom of God is the final message which Jesus leaves with the disciples, and this sets the stage for the revival of the Gentiles and the explosive growth of the New Testament church.

The Gospels open with the preaching of John the Baptist, who is in one sense the last of the Old Testament prophets, and after the manner of the Old Testament prophets, proclaims God's coming judgement and the need for repentance, pointing the people toward the coming Messiah (Lk. 3:3 ff).

Jesus' own ministry is characterized by authoritative teaching:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives ... to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:18f.).

After Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, the heavens are opened and the fire falls at Pentecost. Clothed in the Spirit of God, Peter roars as a lion as he preaches the gospel of Christ. His first sermon is a glorious exposition of redemptive history and a beautiful revelation of Christ. The heavens open, the fire falls and three thousand souls are added to the Book of life. The book of Acts records the further advance of the gospel and churches springing into life through the power of the preached Word (Acts 8:4ff, 14:15, 16:10, 17:3)

Preaching and Revival in History

While it would be impossible to examine all of the works of the Spirit which could legitimately be called "revival" in history, there are nonetheless specific periods in time and specific ministries which stand out. (On this, see also the article on Jonathan Edwards.)

George Whitefield (1714-1770)

George Whitefield was an itinerant evangelist of great eloquence and power. He preached to multitudes in England, Scotland,

land, Wales and America. Whitefield's preaching was clearly anointed by God, since the fires of revival were lit wherever Whitefield preached. One of the many surviving anecdotes from Whitefield's ministry involves his preaching among the miners in Bristol, who at that time were treated like animals and had little in the way of food or warmth. Thousands of these men gathered around Whitefield when he came to preach, a sea of coal-blackened faces arrayed before him. But when the preaching began, the Spirit of God moved. The miners were pierced to the heart in hearing of the love and mercy of God. As they began to weep, white lines appeared on their faces as tears cut burrows down their cheeks. Many came to Christ that day, as the heavens were opened in response to the preaching of God's Word.⁶

Another time Whitefield was preaching, again in the open air to many thousands of people. They overflowed to the many fields that surrounded him. As he was preaching, the Spirit of God once again moved. Hearts were melted into tears, and the crowd began to cry out in conviction of sin. Many were moved to scribble on pieces of paper the question, "What must I do to be saved?" So overwhelming was the response that at the conclusion of the meeting hundreds of notes had been passed over the heads of the crowd to Whitefield's feet!

Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844)

Asahel Nettleton was unlike many itinerant evangelists in his day. He was drawn to the small churches where no one else wanted to go. He would arrive and spend months preaching and proclaiming the main doctrines of Scripture. Often the fire would fall, the church would be transformed, and the pews would be filled to overflowing, then Nettleton would move on. Brian Edwards records comments on Nettleton's preaching: "Asahel Nettleton.... was never 'graceful' as a preacher, but plain, outspoken and serious ministry gripped the hearts and minds of his listeners." ⁷ Revival preaching is not always eloquent, but revival preaching is always powerful!

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

Spurgeon was an anointed preacher who took a struggling church of around 100 in London, England and through the ministry of God's Word transformed it into the 5,000 strong Metropolitan Tabernacle. As a young man standing in the pulpit of the newly build Tabernacle his first sermon reveals his yearning and holy expectation of revival:

Let God send the fire of His Spirit here, and the minister will be more and more lost in his Master... Let God send down the fire and the biggest sinners in the neighbourhood will be converted; those who live in dens of infamy will be changed; the drunkard will forsake his cup, the swearer will repent of his blasphemy, the debauched will leave their lusts Dry bones be raised and clothed afresh, And hearts of stone be turned to flesh.⁸

The Welsh revivals of 1859 & 1904

The Welsh revivals are important to us because they show what happens when biblical preaching is at the centre of a revival and what happens when it is not.

David Morgan was a mediocre preacher who, one morning in 1859, woke up with an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. His mind became alert to the things of God in a new dynamic way. His preaching became anointed and the windows of heaven were opened to him. In response to this movement of God, revival soon swept through Wales.

We may learn something from an examination of David Morgan's sense of priorities in his ministry. Morgan insisted on the centrality of preaching. Even the prayer meeting would be put on hold if the time encroached upon the preaching of the Word. Morgan was rightly convinced that without the centrality of preaching the revival would fade out or become corrupted with emotional excesses as reported in some previous revivals. Eifion Evans, writing about the 1859 revival, sets forth many concerns expressed by the 19th century Welsh preachers if preaching were to be anything other than front and centre in revival:

It is a man-made revival; the chief instrument in it are not persons of weight or character; women and children are the subjects of it; it is mere excitement and enthusiasm, and although many persons of disreputable conduct seem to be for the present changed, yet, when the excitement ceases, they will return to their former habits, and their end will be worse than their beginning... it will be said the noise, the confusion, the loud and long prayers and singing, with various excess of feeling, and extravagance of language, these are most offensive ... The 'converts' ... will ere long be 'perverts'. They will go back, betraying religion and bring disgrace on the whole movement.⁹

The Welsh preachers saw preaching as both the vanguard and the safeguard to revival. Morgan continued to spread the revival flame for two years. Then one morning he awoke to find the presence and the power mysteriously withdrawn.

In 1904 God used prayer meetings to bring the fire of revival back to Wales. Hundreds were converted, churches were filled and thousands flocked to the prayer meetings. But because the pastors stood back, this revival lacked preaching to spread it and sustain it, and sadly it soon faded away.

Conclusion

We see in the Scriptures that great movements of God's Spirit have always been inaugurated by or accompanied by a public proclamation of God's own message. This message has sometimes been a prophetic one of warning and a call for repentance; it has sometimes been an evangelistic message of Good News and of an invitation to reconciliation. As we look back at the great movements of the Spirit of God down through history, we see precisely this that God anoints the preaching of His own word, for the glory of His name. For us to bypass the Scriptures or the preaching of the Scriptures is to say individually or collectively that we can tell others about God more than God has told us about Himself, and to rely upon our understanding rather than God's own revelation.

It is appropriate to conclude with the words of three men who were faithful to proclaim God's word.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones:

I would say without any hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the Church, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also.¹⁰

Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His churches.¹¹

Dr. John Greeves:

The pulpit is the altar where the fire falls on Mount Carmel. The pulpit is the heart beat of the gospel proclamation. As the pulpit goes so goes the churches.... As the pulpit goes so goes the hearts of men in our generation.... The pulpit is the front line of the spiritual battle that is waged in every generation and in every culture.¹²

May our generation follow in the preaching tradition of those who have gone before us. May it please Almighty God to let the revival fire fall!