

7. Effects Of The Revival In Aberdare

~Other Speakers M-R: David Matthews:

OUR LARGE ABERDARE churches soon came into the spiritual gulf stream. With the concurrence of the leaders of the town churches and their devoted minister, now in the presence of the Lord, the huge buildings separated for worship were thrown open. Into these churches surged endless crowds. Enthusiasm was contagious. How well it was that at that time there were men of God occupying the pulpits of the large churches! They willingly cooperated with every suggestion for promoting the revival, even to leading the way into the thick of the fight.

Vested interests were aroused to opposition when they discovered that their ill-gotten gains were imperiled. Was it not so in the case of the great Diana in Ephesus long ago, when Asia felt the impact of Paul's ministry? James Griffiths, Silyn Evans, George Williams—these were outstanding in their advocacy and support of this movement in the town and in their churches. Silyn Evans was pastor of one of the largest Congregational churches in Wales and was held in high esteem by all denominations. Bouyant and youthful in spirit he always was, but at the time of this revival, he seemed to be endowed with seven times his wonted energy. A similar tribute can honestly be paid to James Griffiths whose church was always full, if not crowded, in ordinary circumstances. Although the people did attend their churches on the Lord's Day, the weeknight services were neglected. It was reported that of a church which could boast of hundreds of names upon its register, barely a dozen persons would be at the week-night meetings.

What a quick transformation! Mr. Griffiths acted with supreme wisdom under what must have been difficult circumstances. He had under his care scores of young souls, newly quickened by the Holy Spirit. They were so overjoyed with this new-found experience of divine grace that they could not contain themselves. They felt that they must express their feelings in hymns, prayer, or testimony. The old formal way of worship seemed utterly impossible. For three months Mr. Griffiths hardly preached at all, much as he loved to preach. He knew that many of the older members of his congregation were impatient of this seeming irregularity, although they refrained from expressing adverse criticisms lest they turn some "out of the way." But the revival went on! We saw that church, with an estimated seating capacity of a thousand people, crammed to suffocation on weeknights with souls crying for mercy. The pastor—I was one of the dead members of that church—acted with supreme wisdom. Careful lest he should "quench the Spirit" in these young hearts, yet mindful of his sacred obligations to other members of his flock, he evidenced spiritual sagacity and guided us with endless patience. Time and again, we saw young men and women led into the vestry, helpless under the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a nerve-wracking experience for the pastor, but his well-balanced mind never faltered. Strange and unprecedented as these scenes undoubtedly were, Mr. Griffiths carried himself with Christian dignity.

Another great champion of the revival was Mother Shepherd of the Salvation Army, heroine of many revival campaigns, a proven soldier of Jesus Christ.

Her name was fragrant in Aberdare—had been for over a quarter of a century. Wherever she went, she carried with her a radiance that was not of earth. This mighty awakening that came to cheer her in her later years found her alert and waiting. She threw herself into the movement with characteristic zest. She reveled in it. In previous days, she had been a member of the Booth household, a nursemaid in the home, assisting Mrs. Booth in the rearing of the famous family. When the General decided to invade South Wales, Mother Shepherd was chosen to lead the assault on Aberdare. What a leader she was! the whole town—nay, the whole valley—was shaken out of its lethargy. She must have been one of the "hidden ones" who had agitated at the throne of God for a manifestation of divine power in saving grace. Her keen spiritual senses would have revealed to her that our beloved people, submerged in religion, in the vast majority of cases were devoid of any inner experience of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Our religion was like Gideon's fleece without the saturating dew. When the heavenly influences came, infusing our churches with new life and vigor, she literally danced with joy, as David did long ago.

This is an appropriate place to pay tribute to Mother Shepherd's memory. After my conversion, of which I will write more later, a habit clung tenaciously to me. It would have wrought irreparable damage to my work in the Master's vineyard had not this consecrated soul courageously taken me to task regarding it. She did it so effectually that there was no need for a repetition. It was painful—very painful. With infinite dexterity, she wielded God's Word, cutting out a tumor that was paralyzing my Christian witness. In January, 1905 the work was done, and after forty-three years, I recall that experience with gratitude to God. Well done, faithful soldier of Jesus Christ! This is deliberately acknowledged, in spite of the fact that it left a scar which the passage of years has not been able to eradicate.

The revival went on in Aberdare and vicinity until its impact was felt far and wide. Into the lodging houses went the groups to sing and pray, exhorting and encouraging the most abandoned to "come to Jesus." Kneeling among these people they prayed for their salvation with agony. Early on Sunday mornings these places were assailed with a divine urgency that was incredible. Weaklings were turned to giants. Young women, beautifully dressed, knelt with vagabonds of the road who had casually turned in for a night's lodging. They pleaded with them to "turn from the error of their ways" to Christ, "the new and living way." These people listened with cynical indifference. Perhaps they were stupefied by the unusual manifestation of unaffected concern—a new experience. Yet the witness was courageously given in burning words. As these young people knelt on dirty, dusty floors, surrounded by banana skins, orange peelings, cigarette butts, newspaper scraps, hardened toast-rinds and egg shells, praying for these callous wanderers, the unkempt room seemed to be filled with the glory of God.

They visited homes also and cottage meetings became the vogue. If there was a home nearby whose occupants were indifferent to heaven's claims, permission was sought to hold services there. In this way, the influence of the revival was felt in the poorest dwellings. How those neglected homesteads rang with glad songs of praise where blasphemy and cursing had been the order of the day—yea, and night also—for years! Monetary assistance was promptly given to dress neglected children and feed half-starved families. Eternity alone will reveal the effect of those gatherings. We know even now that the unusual proceedings wrought such a change in some homes and neighborhoods that all one could do was to exclaim, "What hath God wrought"

These things were accomplished through spiritual novices—"things that are not, to bring to nought things that are." Instances are known to me of rent-books in arrears, and shop-books burdened with very old debts—some, indeed, had been crossed out as irredeemable by the storekeeper—completely cleared by these youthful workers. They reveled in doing exploits. Reflecting upon this phase of the work, I am inclined to doubt the wisdom of such conduct, since unrenewed human nature is usually tempted to take advantage of extravagant Christian emotion. Although that fact became patent to keen observers, the young converts were blissfully unconscious of any meanness on the part of the people. It was love-work to them, and love never feels any burden when on active service for the King of kings.

Aberdare theater-going dropped markedly. Theater-fans, scarcely ever missing a single play, found their interest waning perceptibly. A sensational change was apparent. But why this "right about face"? It was not the result of thunderous denunciations by some preacher. Neither was it in consequence of anyone aggressively demanding the giving up of such carnal pursuits. By the good hand of God upon us, we were mercifully delivered from the unwelcome ministrations of cranks propagating pet theories that would have produced confusion. It was the undemonstrative voice of the Holy Spirit quietly influencing daily conduct, turning thought into new channels, producing the instantaneous results that no other power could have accomplished.

This was not the exclusive experience of any one locality. City, town, and village throughout Wales felt the same. Newspaper reports told the world how talented actors and actresses failed to draw the crowds.

Foolish jests about the revival, indulged in by comedians, not only fell flat but aroused indignation. There was no denying the fact that the stage had lost its glamour, the theater its attractiveness, the play its entertainment value. The gifted, often world-famous, performers failed to charm people. It must have been a heart-breaking experience to be compelled to face huge auditoriums with only half the seats occupied.

Another strange effect produced by this revival was the power it wielded over the hearts and voices of some of the leading vocalists in Wales. Many of them, still remembered, went from place to place thrilling the multitudes with their inspiring songs, without the least trace of professionalism manifested in their performance. They sang in other days because they could sing. But now they sang because they could not help singing. They refrained from using the productions of the great composers of the past and contented themselves with singing the simple gospel songs of the revival days. "Where Are the Nine" and the "Ninety and Nine" were favorites.

Reference must be made to names of Emlyn Davies and his no less famous brother, Arthur Davies, both of Cefn, North Wales. Before the revival, the former had had a brilliant Academy training in London, at the Royal College. His name was well known throughout Wales. Obedient to the urge of the Holy Spirit, he went all over the country, singing at revival campaigns, and thus placed unreservedly his great gifts at the disposal of Christ, the Head of the Church.

Arthur Davies must have sung hundreds into the kingdom. For some years he accompanied John McNeil all over the British Isles. The experience gained became invaluable to him in the sphere into which God called him in later years. What a magnificent voice he possessed! There were "ingots of gold" in that throat!. Yet he laid all at the foot of the cross, deeming it a greater honor to be a humble preacher of the gospel than to obtain fame and wealth before the footlights. After preaching, his face stained with tears, he would often close in holy rhapsody by singing, "Pass It On," or "Jesus, Oh How Sweet the Name." On numerous occasions to my certain knowledge, worshipers in Gilgal, Porthcawl, where Mr. Davies ministered for thirteen years, left the church with tear-dimmed eyes, held spellbound by the sermon and the song of a deeply spiritual servant of Jesus Christ. The revival did a great work in his soul.

And the world of sport? Even here the great awakening had made its influence felt. In one village the entire football team disbanded because its members had been converted. Another village reported that their team had been weakened because some of its number had resigned—the revival had engulfed them. Newspaper men announced that this was a common occurrence all over the country.

In Aberdare, both soccer and rugby shared honors in popular estimation. But the winter of the revival proved difficult and some of the matches had to be canceled. In some cases, fixtures had to be changed. Public interest had been reduced to a minimum, a condition which produced disappointing effects on the organizers, and especially on the gate receipts. One does not gloat over the fact that healthy physical exercise becomes deranged when its domain is invaded. Sports, or at least physical exercises, are as essential to the body as Christian means of grace are to the spirit. Man needs both. But when revival is abroad, men and women may be pardoned if they become unusually engrossed in pursuit of the latter, since the majority of people give it so little consideration in ordinary times. Both sacred and secular history prove that a glorious outpouring of the Spirit of God can so completely change the current of human thought as to make men and women almost unrecognizable to their companions of former days.

Did not Mr. Moody's visit to the British Isles change the course of cricket history in those days? We are all conversant with the story of the glorious "Cambridge Seven," all famous in the world of sports; they surrendered themselves to the will and work of Christ, venturing out into the world's most difficult mission field of those days (China) in order that "by all means they might save some." The undoubted sincerity and reckless abandon of the Studd family will always be remembered with profound gratitude to God. Something of that nature, although not to that extent, was witnessed in Wales, for the same purpose in all generations.

Dance halls in many places were completely deserted. Young women abandoned the fascinating pastime that had bewitched them for years. They deliberately cut up the expensive frocks of which they had once been so proud, thus making sure that they would not succumb to any luring temptations. One such young woman, well known to me, had such a baptism of power that she became outstanding as a witness for the Lord. Whenever and wherever she participated in revival services, she reminded one of Catherine Booth, mother of the Salvation Army. Many similar cases could be mentioned. It could be said of many of them as the Psalmist spoke of Israel: "Though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold." How well did they know it! They mounted on the silver wings of redemption, and were covered with the "golden feathers" of divine righteousness.

Impromptu open-air services were held by these liberated souls in the market place, the city square, or the street corner, where they testified "with fear and trembling" of what the Lord had done for them. Sometimes they would go into the railway station and after securing the tickets for a certain destination, crowd the railway compartments, singing, sometimes praying, at other times witnessing to fellow travelers.

Such "uncontrolled fanaticism," as the cold critic would describe it, could not always pass unchallenged. Some of these young recruits knew what it was to be cursed to the face and even spat upon, as they diligently, though perhaps unwisely, endeavored to win souls for Christ. They made tactical blunders. What else could be expected? Bitter experience taught them later that consuming zeal should be tempered by discretion.