

Preaching and Revival

Contributed by Eifion Evans

Historically, there has been a close relationship between preaching and revival. Those revivals that have been the purest and most beneficial have given a preeminent place to the scriptural priority of preaching. In fact, a careful examination of preaching from past revivals reveals that God has been pleased to bless certain kinds of preaching with mighty outpourings of His Spirit.

Experiential PreachingA manifestation of God's presence and power to a preacher's soul often precedes his power in the pulpit. In fact, rarely has effective revival preaching been divorced from the personal spiritual experience of the preacher. Such an experience came to Howell Harris of Wales before he entered on his revivalist activities in 1735:

On June 18, 1735, being in secret prayer, I felt suddenly my heart melting within me like wax before the fire with love to God my Savior. I felt not only love and peace, but also a longing to be dissolved and to be with Christ, and there was a cry in my inmost soul with which I was totally unacquainted before. It was this--"Abba, Father; Abba, Father." I could not help calling God my Father: I knew that I was His child, and that He loved me; my soul being filled and satiated, cried, "It is enough--I am satisfied; give me strength, and I will follow Thee through fire and water." I could now say that I was happy indeed. There was in me a well of water, springing up into everlasting life; yea, the love of God was shed abroad in my heart by the Holy Ghost.

It was this experience of God that motivated Harris's future labors throughout England and Wales. Five years later he was with John Cennick at Swindon, ablaze with the same heavenly flame in his soul--a fire that no degree of persecution could quench. Cennick recorded the incident in this way:

We found a large company assembled in the grove, with whom I sang and prayed, but I was hindered from preaching by a great mob, who made a noise, and played in the midst of the people, and then with guns fired over our heads, holding the muzzles of their pieces so near our faces that we were both black as tinkers with the powder. We were not frightened, but opened our breasts and told them we were ready to lay down our lives for our doctrine, and had nothing against it if their guns were leveled at our hearts. Then they got dust out of the highway and covered us all over, and then sprayed us with an engine, which they filled out of the stinking ditches, till we were just like men in the pillory. But as they sprayed Brother Harris, I spoke to the congregation, and when they turned their engine on me, he preached, and thus they continued until they had spoiled the engine, and then they threw whole buckets of water over us.

Passionate PreachingFor such men, there could only be one overriding, dominating constraint: the love of Christ. George Whitefield--perhaps the greatest preacher of the eighteenth-century awakening in England--makes this abundantly clear in a sermon on John 7:37-39:

O! let me not go back to my Master and say, "Lord, they will not believe my report." Harden no longer your hearts, but open them wide, and let the King of glory enter in; believe me, I am willing to go to prison or death for you, but I am not willing to go to heaven without you. The love of Jesus Christ constrains me to life up my voice like a trumpet; my heart is now full: out of the abundance of the love which I have for your precious and immortal souls, my mouth now speaks; and I could now not only continue my discourse until midnight, but I could speak until I could speak no more. This earnestness and lively expressions of love for the souls of men was a God-given grace. It characterized not only the preaching of Whitefield but also that of many other men useful in revival.

Direct PreachingAnother characteristic of revival preaching has been plainness of speech. Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister in the seventeenth century and author of *The Reformed Pastor*, determined to "preach, not only to a popular auditory, but to the most ignorant part of that auditory." He had learned from experience that preaching with polish and finish may be pleasing to the ear but does not necessarily convince the soul of sin:

The commonness and the greatness of men's necessity commanded me to do anything that I could for their relief, and to bring forth some water to cast upon this fire, though I had not at hand a silver vessel to carry it in, nor thought it the most fit. The plainest words are the most profitable oratory in the weightiest matters. Fineness is for ornament, and delicacy for delight, but they answer not necessity. . . . We are not to stand upon compliment when we run to quench a common fire, nor to call men out to it by an eloquent speech. If we see a man fall into fire or water, we stand not upon mannerliness in plucking him out, but lay hands upon him as we can without delay.

Although fervency and eloquence are special qualities that are often present in revival preaching, they are not put on in the sense in which an advocate uses fervency to plead his case or an actor practices eloquence to enchant his audience. Instead, they issue from the preacher's sense and practice of God's presence. A preacher thus rightly related to God feels an unavoidable compulsion to direct his hearers solely to God's Word. There can be no attempt to substitute human, synthetic ideas for truths revealed in Holy Scripture.

Doctrinal Preaching

The revival preachers of the past were not induced to speculate on obscure points of theology or prophecy. Rather, they kept to the basic doctrines of Scripture. The sum of all their preaching was the fullness of Christ.

During the eighteenth century, the doctrine of regeneration was especially prominent in the preaching of the revival periods. The minister of Hopewell and Amwell in New Jersey preached for six months on the subjects of conviction and conversion before the Holy Spirit's powerful influence descended upon his congregation in May 1739. The same truths were insisted upon to the congregation at New Londonderry before their season of refreshing in 1740.

William McCulloch had been over ten years at Cambuslang before he decided to preach on those subjects "which tend most directly to explain the nature, and prove the necessity of regeneration." This he did for about a year before February 1742, when the truths he had been preaching became a reality in the experience of vast numbers of his congregation. The same was true at Kilsyth under James Robe's ministry at the same time, and at Llangeitho under Daniel Rowland's ministry in 1781. Even as the Holy Spirit in His sovereign choice used certain instruments, so also He signally honored certain doctrines, especially the doctrines of regeneration and justification.

These doctrines were not preached without the closest application being made to the sinner's condition. Whitefield was always careful, as were the Puritans before him, to "press home" with life and vigor, with fervency and urgency, with earnestness and entreaty, the invitation, warning, and commands of Scripture.

The effect of such preaching during revival seasons during the eighteenth century was nothing less than extraordinary. The impact of the message, under the power of the Holy Spirit, transformed entire congregations. The face of society was changed, the standard of morality was raised, the spread of Christ's kingdom was urgently desired, and the name of Christ was held in the highest esteem.

Some of the effects were more powerful and more startling than others and often varied from one place to another.

Under Daniel Rowland's ministry in Wales, the results were remarkable indeed and continued, with greater or lesser intensity, for over fifty years. One contemporary description of the scenes witnessed under his preaching was given by Howell Harris in a letter to Whitefield in 1743:

I was last Sunday at the Ordinance with brother Rowland, where I saw, felt, and heard such things as I can't send any idea of on paper. The power that continues with him is uncommon. Such crying out, heart-breaking groans, silent weeping, and shouts of rejoicing I never saw. Their "Amen's" and crying "Glory in the highest" would inflame your soul. It is very common when he preaches for scores to fall down by the power of the Word, pierced and wounded or overcome by the love of God and the sights of the beauty and excellency of Jesus, and lie on the ground, nature being overcome by the sights and enjoyments given to their heaven-born souls that it can't bear, the spirit almost bursting the house of clay to go to its native home. . . . This is but a very faint idea of it, but what words can express such spiritual things? God has always honored the preaching of His Word. Those who preached God's truth with simplicity in the power of the Holy Spirit have been widely used to the glory of Christ. There is talk sometimes of the "problem of communication," implying that modern man cannot understand the "old" truths of regeneration and justification. However, as the eighteenth-century revival illustrates, it is the energy of the Holy Spirit that has made those truths powerfully effective in the minds and hearts of men and women regardless of their level of education or intelligence.

Conclusion Today we need a fresh conviction of the abiding validity and relevance of preaching as well as a plentiful effusion of the Holy Spirit in revival. We need nothing less than the holy boldness that the disciples received after Pentecost. We need to pray again their prayer: "Grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus" (Acts 4:29-30).

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