

# The Role of Preaching in Revival

by Brian H. Edwards

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*The role of preaching in revival is to bring people to repentance and faith through the power of the Word of God and the centrality of the cross of Christ.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 29:20, Psalm 119:105, Isaiah 55:11, Acts 2:36, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 10:10, Hebrews 4:12

**Topics:** "Revival Preaching", "The Cross"

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## Description

Brian H. Edwards emphasizes the power of preaching in revival times, highlighting that it may not always be graceful or eloquent, but it is always impactful and real, leading to life-changing experiences. He discusses the preaching styles of historical figures like Asahel Nettleton and Duncan Campbell, focusing on their bold and urgent delivery that gripped the hearts of listeners. Edwards underscores the importance of revival preaching being centered on the Word of God, with a strong emphasis on the Cross of Christ, as seen in historical revivals like the ones in Wales and New England. He stresses the hunger, respect, and submission to God's Word that characterize true revival, calling for a return to powerful preaching that places Christ at the center of sermons and worship.

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## Transcript

Preaching in revival times is not always graceful or polished, or even eloquent, but it is always powerful. By this word "powerful," I do not mean only that it changes lives, though it does that, but that the sermons are real and felt by the congregation.

The preaching of Asahel Nettleton in America from the 1830s onwards was described as "vigorous and bold." He was never "graceful" as a preacher, but his plain, outspoken and serious ministry gripped the hearts and minds of his listeners. His biographer comments simply: "His hearers tended to forget about the speaker and become engrossed in his message . . . [the sermons] were eminently scriptural and plain, and made men feel that they were the men addressed, and not their neighbors."

When Paul came to Corinth, some considered that his eloquence, or lack of it, "amount[ed] to nothing" (2 Cor. 10:10), but both his message and his preaching were "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:4); that was revival preaching.

In revival, congregations do not discuss a man's style or eloquence; in fact, they do not even debate the content; they are moved to action. Revival preaching has a power and an authority that bring the Word of

God like a hammer to the heart and conscience. This is exactly what is absent from most of our preaching today.

The men who preach in revival are unafraid and urgent, and the description of Duncan Campbell as a preacher shows how seriously they take their task: "There was nothing complicated about Duncan's preaching. It was fearless and uncompromising. He exposed sin in its ugliness and dwelt at length on the consequences of living and dying without Christ. With a penetrating gaze on the congregation, and perspiration streaming down his face, he set before men and women the way of life and the way of death. It was a solemn thought to him that the eternity of his hearers might turn upon his faithfulness. He was standing before his fellow men in Christ's stead and could be neither perfunctory nor formal."

When revival came to Beddgelert in Wales in 1817, "one of the outstanding characteristics," writes Henry Hughes, "was that the preaching of the gospel had a prominent, indeed a predominant place in it . . . . It was preaching which had the leading part in this revival."

In 1859 the wind of the Spirit was blowing powerfully through many parts of Britain, and especially through Wales. Prayer meetings were given new life and thousands poured into the times of early morning prayer. However, nothing was allowed to interfere with the preaching--not even the times of prayer. David Morgan insisted upon the centrality of the preaching and, in this way, many extremes and excesses were avoided.

Rhys Bevan Jones admits that this was not so much the case in the 1904 revival. Certainly there was an "intense hunger for the Word, and the awakened ones could not tolerate anything but the Word," but frequently the ministers felt unable to preach: "Indeed, to cease preaching, at that time, seemed to many the natural thing to do." This was undoubtedly one of the weaknesses of the 1904 revival in Wales. Though thousands were saved, and the fire of revival in Wales spread all over the world, its failure to survive long, and the disproportionate number of those who fell away, was in large measure due to the fact that in many areas preaching was neglected.

R. B. Jones commented thirty years later that this lack of preaching in the later ministry of Evan Roberts was a vital loss: "Indeed it is not too much to say that, when the human leader could no longer speak his characteristic, vital message, his work entered upon a new phase. The Word of God is not only pure but also purifying. Its giving forth, whether in reading, preaching, or teaching, has a vital effect upon a meeting's atmosphere and success, for it lays an effectual check upon any elements therein that may be carnal."

Where preaching is neglected in revival, how-ever "spiritual" the reason, dangerous excess and error will be lurking. Preaching was central in the New Testament, and the church in any age dare not depart from that mandate.

It is this emphasis upon living, vital, and urgent preaching, together with the people's confidence in Scripture and love for it, that produces such a powerful force in revival.

Preaching in revival is not dry theory, but a living and powerful force. Few people are able to leave the sermon unmoved; they may be furious or converted, and even those who are neither are impressed by the power of God.

In his diary, Whitefield describes the scene at Olney in Buckinghamshire in 1839: "Though it rained all the time, yet the people stood very attentive and patient. All, I really believe, felt, as well as heard the Word,

and one was so pricked in the heart, and convinced of sin, that I scarce ever saw the like instance. The Word of God is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword."

As a result of this kind of living preaching, people love to hear the sermon. It is no longer the plague to be endured once a week, or the butt of cheap jokes; on the contrary, the sermon becomes central in the activity and worship of the church.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne commented upon the attention of the people to the Word of God in 1839: "I have observed at such times an awful and breathless stillness pervading the assembly; each hearer bent forward in the posture of rapt attention."

Of those days in Madras in the 1940s, one who was a leader through it all comments: "I tell you, God's Word came alive to us then." The evidence of this is clearly seen in the description of an evening in October 1940, during the monsoon season: "The skies were dark and threatening and we thought it would be necessary to go inside: but a very large crowd had gathered, far more than the church could accommodate, and after prayer, Brother Bakht Singh decided we should carry on in the open.

"Suddenly it began to rain very heavily. He urged the people not to stir, but just to protect their Bibles by putting them under their clothes. He himself continued to preach with his Bible wide open. People just sat on the ground in the pouring rain with rivulets of water running beneath them. Though soaked to the skin they went on listening to God's saving Word. Only after a long time did it stop.

"There were mothers with babies in their arms, yet no one stirred until the meeting was over, and no one was anxious for it to conclude early. For a wind of God was blowing through Madras, and the showers that watered our hearts were showers of blessing."

### Centrality of the Cross

Revival is not only a revival of preaching that is loved by the people and effective in their lives; it is also a revival of preaching in which Christ is at the heart.

In the revival under Hezekiah the blood of the sacrifice was central (2 Chron. 29:20-24). Seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs and seven goats were brought to the temple and they were slain in the prescribed manner. We are told in verse 22: "They slaughtered the bulls, and the priests took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar."

The people had stopped offering sacrifices; they did not feel it was necessary, and could think of better things to do with the meat than simply offer it as a burnt offering. And yet this sacrifice was God's way. And when the Spirit of God came, the sacrifice of the blood offering became central to all their worship. The priests and Levites were once again listened to.

This was God's way of salvation in order to show the people the sinfulness of their sin and the severity of judgment upon sin. They had been taking sin lightly. And, therefore, when God's Spirit came, it was inevitable that the sacrifice of blood should become central once again. They returned to the blood of the covenant, and the covenant sealed by blood.

Christ is our atonement, our covering; again and again the apostles came back to this great theme of the blood of Christ.

The sermons of the apostles were full of Christ. They loved to recount the historical facts of the gospel because they had no doubt that their Christ was the Jesus of history. So they declared that He had been "killed, murdered, put to death, crucified, condemned, raised to life," and so on.

But all this was because of who He was. Christ was "glorified by God, the holy and righteous one, the author of life, Prince and Savior, the Righteous One, Son of Man, Judge of the living and dead." In other words, the historical facts of the life of Jesus, and the implications of these for who He was, were at the very heart of the New Testament gospel. And even though the Jews were offended at it, the apostles did not avoid the issue of the cross and the blood of Christ (Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 2:2).

Whenever we hear or read that the Spirit is at work, we can assess the genuineness of the work by how central the blood of Christ is to the preaching and the worship. And if the cross is central in the preaching and the worship, then it will be central in the lives of the converts.

There are times when, in revival preaching as in any faithful preaching, the law of God must be thundered. But always the message must come back to the cross. Duncan Campbell was often criticized for declaring the wrath of God night after night, but he saw this only as a backdrop to the gospel.

When Jonathan Edwards wrote of the revival in Northampton, New England, in 1733, he described the centrality of Christ and the cross in the lives of the people: "In all companies, on other days, or whatever occasions persons met together, Christ was to be heard of, and seen in the midst of them. Our young people, when they met, were wont to spend the time in talking of the excellency and dying love of Jesus Christ, the glory of the way of salvation, the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God, his glorious work in the conversion of a soul and the truth and certainty of the great things of God's Word."

In one of Count Zinzendorf's letters, he described the kind of preaching that was typical of the Moravian revival in 1727: "Our method in proclaiming salvation is this: To point out to every heart the loving Lamb, who died for us, and although He was the Son of God offered Himself for our sins; never to digress even for a quarter of an hour from the loving Lamb; to name no virtue except in Him; to preach no commandment except faith in Him; no other justification but that He atoned for us; no other sanctification but the privilege to sin no more; no other happiness but to be near Him, to think of Him and do His pleasure; no other self-denial but to be deprived of Him and His blessing; no other calamity but to displease Him; no other life but in Him."

In the same way Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

### Hunger, Respect, and Submission

Powerful preaching is the hallmark of true revival. It is God's greatest and most effective weapon. In times of spiritual decline, the church will resort to all kinds of antics to gain a crowd and stir enthusiasm, some of which will undoubtedly prove successful and a few of which will win souls, but revival shows where God's real interest lies.

In a day when powerful preaching is rare, and even good preaching is scarce, it is inevitable that it will be dismissed. But our response should be to cry to God for such an awakening that will put preaching back in the center of our worship and evangelism, and Christ back in the center of our sermons.

Always in a time of revival there is a hunger and a thirst for what God has to say. We are in the age of "Be your own Bible student." People listen to the sermon and consider that their own opinion is as valuable as that which they hear from the preacher. If they agree, they agree and if they do not, they have every reason not to. But in revival, it is almost always true that there is a respect for God's Word not only written but preached, expounded, and explained.

Jonathan Edwards complained in 1733 that the young people, especially, were very careless and were not interested in listening to what God had to say through their parents or through the ministers of the gospel. But when the Spirit of God came in revival, "The young people declared themselves convinced by what they heard from the pulpit, and were willing of themselves to comply with the counsel that had been given; and it was immediately, and I suppose, almost universally, complied with."

Submission to leadership is a biblical condition of worship, and it runs right through both Old and New Testaments. The description of the Christians in the Acts of the Apostles was that they were dedicated to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). And when revival comes, one of its hallmarks is not independency, but a holy dependence upon Scripture and a respect for those whose task it is to explain and apply it.

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