

The History of Revival in Wales in the 19 Century

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon explores the history of revivals in Wales in the 19th century, highlighting the characteristics and significance of each revival.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 119:126, Isaiah 57:15, Joel 2:28-29, Matthew 18:20, Acts 2:17, Romans 12:11, Ephesians 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 5:16

Topics: "Revival", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan recounts the remarkable history of revivals in 19th century Wales, illustrating how each revival shared common traits and influenced one another. He highlights the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, as seen in the experiences of Richard Williams and the village of Beddgelert, where prayer and worship ignited a profound spiritual awakening. Morgan emphasizes the cyclical nature of these revivals, occurring every decade, and the deep longing for spiritual renewal that permeated the Welsh people. He notes the impact of various societal issues, such as temperance and fear during cholera outbreaks, which spurred many to seek God. Ultimately, Morgan conveys a sense of hope and expectation for future revivals, reflecting on the prophetic words of those who sensed a coming move of God.

Transcript

During the 19th century, there were several revivals in Wales. A brief sketch of the more remarkable of these will show how certain traits appeared in each of the revivals as if transmitted to one another by a hereditary law.

Many know the story of the village of Beddgelert and the valley of Gwynant. In a farmhouse in the valley one Sunday in August 1817, a humble man named Richard Williams was expected to preach. He came, but the congregation was small. John Elias, a famous minister, was preaching that day at Tremadoc, and his fame had, in spite of the distance, reduced the number in the audience almost to the lowest point.

There was also a hardness in the atmosphere that made the discouraged preacher's task still more difficult. The people who were present envied those who had gone to hear John Elias. They sat before Richard Williams, but their ears were at Tremadoc. He struggled through the lesson and prayer and then began to preach.

Somewhere in the midst of that sermon, the inexplicable happened. Preacher and congregation were transformed. The humble "exhorter" was transformed into a prophet of the Most High, and the house was filled with the Pentecostal cry of awakened souls. On that Sabbath evening, men said awe-stricken: "We never have seen anything like this." Within five weeks of that day, there was scarcely a house in the valley where the breath of prayer had not filled it.

It reached the village of Beddgelert in its own way. On a Sunday in September, a class of young girls was reading the crucifixion chapter in John's gospel. The teacher was a young woman who was devout and earnest. As they read the story verse by verse in turn, something came into the narrative unfelt before. Silent tears stole down the cheek of each reader, and a sense of awe took them one and all. At the close of the schoolday, one of the male teachers was reviewing the catechism with the students when his own spirit suddenly took fire in warning the young people against some local fair of evil repute.

A line out of a Welsh hymn seemed to possess him, "God's grasp is the surest," and as he repeated it more than once, the feeling that had melted and awed the young women's class affected the whole school. Not many days after, the chapel had become the scene of convictions and conversions: "Some were praying for pardon, kneeling on the floor of the pew. Others were uttering praise for God's mercy, while some were marching to and fro, singing with their whole soul the song of deliverance."

It was a season of rejoicing. One day later, a group of hay makers were in the field when one of their number started singing a hymn to himself. Another caught it up, and another, until the whole band of hay makers, forgetful for a while of their toil, became a band of praying, singing worshipers. This revival continued with intensity for three or four years, and its influence on the Snowdon district has been carried on to this day [1904]. An old survivor of this revival, being asked whether he could recall any signs preceding this revival, replied that he could remember nothing "except that the air for months seemed full of brotherly kindness and love."

Some 12 months previous to the Beddgelert incident, William Williams of Wern was preaching on the work of the Holy Spirit in Dolyddelen, which is on the other side of Snowdon from Beddgelert. In the course of his remarks, he said:

What if you were to consent to have Him save the whole of this parish? How can you have Him? Well, hold prayer-meetings through the whole parish. Go from house to house--to every house that will open its door. Make it the burden of every prayer that God should come here to save. If God has not come by the time you have gone through the parish once, go through it again; but if you are in earnest in your prayers, you shall not go through half the parish before God has come to you.

The seed was sown, but apparently it took no root except in the heart of one unlikely soul. Among those attracted to hear the famous preacher was an old, irreligious woman who lived by herself. She was accustomed to use the light of a candle in her cottage, so the next morning she bought two special candles to be ready when the prayer meeting came to her house. But the weary months passed and no prayer meeting called at her lowly door.

At last, she went to the shop where she had purchased the two wax candles and asked diffidently, "When is the prayer meeting coming to my house?" The storekeeper replied, "Prayer meeting at your house! What prayer meeting?" "The prayer-meeting which Mr. Williams of Wern said was to go from house to house," the woman retorted. The shopkeeper felt rebuked but answered off-handedly, "Oh, they care very little what anybody says." She said, "Well, indeed, I bought two candles nearly a year ago, and have gone

to bed many a time in the dark, leaving them unburnt, lest the meeting should come and find me without a candle."

The woman's words struck home with the shopkeeper, and he reported the incident to the church. They responded by starting the prayer meetings, and the preacher's prophecy was fulfilled. It would be almost enough to say of this revival that it brought to Christ, among other men of note, one of the most eloquent of all the preachers of Wales, John Jones of Taly Sarn, "the people's preacher," as he was affectionately called.

The years of 1829, 1839, 1849, 1859--revivals began in these four years in such rhythmical order, with a decade between each, that they almost produced a mild superstition in Wales. When 1869 passed, and then 1879, without any striking recurrence, there was on the part of many a real disappointment.

The first of these four revivals spread far and wide. It was accompanied by a good deal of physical manifestations of joy: shouting, leaping, and dancing--so much so as to make their English counterparts worried about the good name of religion. There is a tradition that Rowland Hill was sent from England to Wales in order to encourage sobriety but was so captivated by what was happening that he forgot to deliver his reproof.

It is certain that the reports of these scenes are more extreme than what really happened. Religious gossip is as loose as any other gossip. That there were many extravagances we may believe, but even if they somewhat marred the effect of the revival, still much occurred that was very valuable. The contemporary records in the magazines of the day provide ample evidence of a deep and lasting revival.

A temperance movement preceded the revival of 1839. The first advocates of total abstinence were not only subjected to violent attacks in the press and on the platform but were literally persecuted. In Montgomeryshire some even tasted the cup of martyrdom. In the wake of this, or parallel with it, came a religious renaissance. Unlike 1829, this movement did not begin with manifestations of joy but with intense, silent somberness. One unique feature of this revival was that very few of those added to the church ever left to return to the world.

The revival in 1849 was largely in response to the cholera scare. It bore the taint of fear. Thousands hurried into the churches, particularly in population centers like Glamorganshire. However, because many who came had no root, they withered away in too many instances. Still, it is certified that many brought in through fear remained to learn the truth in love, and went on to live lives of faithful service.

The revival of 1859-60 was worldwide, taking Wales on its way. It had already accomplished great things in America when a Wesleyan Methodist preacher, the Rev. Humphrey Jones, returned home to his native village in Wales--Tre'rddol, North Cardiganshire. He began to hold mission services in this little village early in 1858.

Like many revivals, this revival began in a sequestered area where it was nursed along for weeks among the silence of the hills. The fire spread from hamlet to hamlet, and for months was only a report to the larger towns. Jones found a comrade in the Rev. David Morgan, who was a Calvinistic Methodist preacher. They preached prayer, practiced prayer, and seemed to compel it.

Interestingly, there was no special gift in either of these men that marked them out for the work that God had called them to do. Jones' health eventually broke down, and Morgan returned to the rank of ordinary

preachers after this season of blessing. However, during the revival, they swept every audience into prayer. The churches of all denominations were moved to the core. Very few districts were left unvisited by the power of God, and the revival produced a blessing that lasts in the memory of the Welsh national consciousness.

I cannot pretend to have attempted more than to point out in this series of memorable dates and episodes the arches of the bridge spanning the gulf of the generations. These accounts prove the proneness of Wales to revival.

It is not too much to say that an air of wistfulness pervades the land at almost all times--either in memory of a past revival or in prospect of a coming revival. It is either a charmed memory or else it is a sorrowing, deepening appeal: "It is time for Thee, Lord, to work: for they have made void Thy law" (Psalm 119:126).

This wistfulness, on occasions, becomes almost, if not altogether, prophetic. Some four years before the height of the present revival of 1904, a saintly old man on his deathbed remarked that a mighty revival would visit the land before long: "And mark my words, it will come this time from the south; the former came from the direction of the north [referring to 1859-1860], but the next will be from the south." This was his interpretation of a vision he had seen of white horses traveling northward from the south.

Similarly, one evening in August, 1904, I was returning home from a service in a village chapel. Suddenly, my companion made a remarkable statement: "Do you know, I think we are very near something very wonderful? Some great things are going to happen in the churches very soon!" He could not explain to me why he cherished this assured hope. He felt it, he said. I was interested and moved at the time, but much more so when the first news of the revival came three months later.

Finally, the late Dean Howell published a kind of New Year's epistle to the nation in 1903. In it he dwelt solemnly on the fact that either a revival must come soon or else the nation would turn its back on God. He predicted that Wales was about to pass through a chill and wasting period of spiritual indifference and defeat unless God in His mercy visited them with His presence.

"Take note," he wrote. "If I knew this to be my last message to my fellow countrymen before I am summoned to judgment, this is what I would say--the chief need of my beloved nation at this moment is a spiritual revival through a powerful outpouring of the Holy Ghost." He died January 15th just as his letter was being read by the nation and only months before revival once again came to Wales.

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