

# Modern Hostility to Revivals

by Horatius Bonar

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*Horatius Bonar argues against modern hostility to revivals, highlighting their positive impact and the inconsistencies in secular criticisms.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:16, John 15:8, Galatians 5:22

**Topics:** "Spiritual Transformation", "Revival"

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## Description

Horatius Bonar addresses the modern world's hostility towards revivals, arguing that the criticism stems from a misunderstanding and unfair representation of the movement. He highlights the inconsistency of secular society, which condemns religious fervor while celebrating similar emotions in entertainment and politics. Bonar asserts that true revivals lead to positive societal changes, transforming individuals into better citizens and fostering moral improvement. He challenges the critics to recognize the fruits of revival, which align with God's work, and emphasizes that the genuine nature of these movements cannot be undermined by ridicule or misrepresentation.

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## Transcript

The world has condemned "revivals"-not the name merely, but the thing. It speaks out privately, both in conversation and in letters. It speaks out publicly in its newspapers and literary journals. Though some of its organs have been silent, though others have chronicled "revival facts" as items of needful intelligence, yet its leading organs have given verdict against them in warm and insulting language; the verdict, as it is reckoned, of modern intellect and philosophic candour.

Though not so actively intolerant as in last century, the world, under the progress of the nineteenth, is quite as hostile as the eighteenth, and indicates no abatement of malignity. It has not yet summoned the mob to-stone the preacher and scatter the congregation; it has left that to the Romish priest; yet it hints that there is room for the interference of magistracy and police, to protect the sober-minded community from the contagion of a fanaticism, which the world dreads as much as it hates.

The attack has, as yet, been more general than special; individual ministers or others, doers of the work, have been spared. It was not so in the days of Whitefield and his fellows. He

"Stood pilloried on infamy's high stage,

And bore the pelting scorn of half an age;

The very butt of slander, and the blot  
For every dart that malice ever shot.  
The man that mention'd him at once dismiss'd  
All mercy from his lips, and sneer'd and hiss'd;  
His crimes were such as Sodom never knew,  
And perjury stood up to swear all true;  
His aim was mischief, and his zeal presence,  
His speech rebellion against common sense;  
A knave, when tried on honesty's plain rule;  
And when by that of reason, a mere fool.  
The world's best comfort was, his doom was pass'd,  
Die when he might, he must be damn'd at last."

In our day, the hostility has not yet reached this extreme, though, certainly, it is not far from it. Delusion, fanaticism, enthusiasm, insanity, hysterics, and such like, are the words now current regarding the Irish revival, especially in secular newspapers and among worldly men. These, however, are very harmless missiles-projectiles of the old school of warfare, neither of a long range nor very destructive.

The world's peace has been sorely disturbed; and though political, or warlike, or diplomatic disturbances are rather relished as a relief from tedium and routine than disliked as a nuisance; yet disturbance from a religious quarter; disturbance which explodes man's fond theories of self regeneration; disturbance which sinks the political, and the romantic, and the external, and brings up into vivid prominence and breadth the purely spiritual and eternal element; disturbance which condemns the world and the world's ways; disturbance from such a quarter and of such a nature is not a thing which can be tolerated. The disturbers of the peace must take the alternative of being bound or banished. The war-trumpet of Magenta or Solferino, summoning thousands to death and sending sorrow into unnumbered families, is a thing of poetry, and must be celebrated by a hundred pens; the peace-trumpet of Connor and Coleraine, calling the dead to life, and pouring gladness into souls and families and villages without number, is harsh and hateful, the fit object of invective and malignant ridicule.

The world is unjust; and the ground on which it bases its attack indicates the injustice. It looks only at one side of the subject, and deals only with one class of facts. It finds some excitement, some extravagance; and it exhibits these as specimens of the revival. By such arguments the admirers of continental tyranny have always defended themselves and their despotisms, pointing to the extravagances said and done in Great Britain as a conclusive demonstration against liberty. This is injustice. Every subject has its weak side; but it is unjust to present the weak parts as specimens of the whole. Every religious subject has its human side, and there the imperfections of fallen humanity will shew themselves; but it is unjust to argue from the imperfection that all is evil and hollow. Especially is it unjust to isolate these imperfections; and then, having coloured and magnified them, to exhibit them as specimens of religion, and of the doings of

religious men.

It was precisely in this way that Paine, Voltaire, and the infidels of a former generation attacked the Bible. They took the characters described and events narrated in Scripture, and isolating the bad from the good, they scoffingly proclaimed the former as specimens of a book calling itself divine. They pointed to Noah's drunkenness, and asked, Is this the man that is declared "perfect in his generation?" They pointed to David's fall, and asked, Is this "the man after God's own heart?" They argued against the Bible exactly as our worldly newspapers are arguing against the revival. The argument of both is, that a thing, or a book or an event containing in it decided elements of human frailty and evil, cannot be from God. But if this be valid, then what is there in our world that can claim to be of God? Our earth is swept by storms, convulsed with earthquakes, strewn with death; can it be of God? The flower fades, the tree sheds its leaf, the serpent stings, the tiger devours; can they be the workmanship of God? This body is impregnated with disease and pain, mortality and corruption; can it have come from the hand of God? Were we, then, to argue at large on the same principles on which the world argues as to revivals, we could prove that nothing, on earth at least, is divine.

The world is unfair in the handling of its own argument. Even admitting that the adhering evils are to be the test of the character of the whole work, the evidence as to the existence of these evils, and specially as to their number and magnitude, ought to be fairly taken. The witnesses ought to be competent as well as impartial. This is denied us. The newspaper assailants declare that they must choose their own witnesses, and that no minister or person specially interested in the work, or religious persons generally, can be received as witnesses. In other words, the only testimony to be received is that of men who know nothing of religion, who dislike religious earnestness, and who are prejudiced against revivals. Such witnesses are surely neither competent nor impartial. They are both biased and blinded. We should not count the keeper of a bar a fair witness as to the utility of temperance societies. In determining the nature of the telegraph, we should not call in agriculturists, or lawyers, but men of science, men who know the subject, and who have a real interest in it. In the inquest upon the late explosion in the "Great Eastern," it would not have served the ends of justice or of commerce to have called in the Poet Laureate or the Lord Chancellor of England; still less to have got the testimony of some noted enemy of the ship, and of the company. So, most certainly, the friends rather than the enemies of revivals ought to be examined upon the subject; ministers rather than secular correspondents of newspapers ought to be admitted, if not into the jury, at least into the witness-box. To act otherwise is to treat the subject most unfairly, without regard to the common rules of law, or the common principles of equity. Nothing can be more certain to defeat all fair inquiry, and to produce a false verdict, than the exclusion of those witnesses who understand the subject best, and have been most thoroughly conversant with all the facts of the case, great and small, favourable and adverse.

In its attacks and condemnations the world has been as inconsistent as it is unjust. It does and it applauds the same things in its own circle which it censures among religious men. It condemns the excitement of the revival, yet fosters that of the opera or ball-room. It condemns appeals to the feelings in the pulpit, and sneers at the "fanaticism" of men weeping for sin; yet it pleads for such appeals in the theatre, and records in its journals the impressions produced on such a night, when under such a skilful actor the whole audience was dissolved in tears. It vehemently denounces the late hours of some religious meetings; yet glories in telling that at such and such a party dancing was kept up till sunrise. It condemns the crowds of the open-air meetings, yet carefully registers the crowds at the fair or the race-course, and the thousands that poured in by this train and the other train from north and south.

This is as inconsistent as it is unjust. If excitement be wrong in religion, it must be wrong in everything else. If it be wrong in the things of eternity, it must be much more so in the things of time. If earnestness be fanaticism in religious matters, it must be something worse than fanaticism in worldly matters. If crowds are wrong at the revival-meeting, they must be no less so at the race-course. If it is right for people to feel, and to give utterance to their glad or their sorrowful emotions, in things pertaining to this life, it must be no less right and proper to do the same in things pertaining to that which is to come.

When, then, the world parades certain extravagances in religious movements as condemnatory of the whole work, we say, Physician, heal thyself! Act, O world, upon the same principles you so fervently inculcate on the Church, and then we shall believe you to be sincere. Disband your armies, because vice and intemperance prevail in the ranks. Prohibit commerce, because so many frauds and knaveries have been brought to light among your merchants. Dissolve parliament for ever, because bribes are given, and corruption stains the honour of your elections. Issue a decree against poetry, because songs of impurity abound. Annihilate the liberty of the press, because it is often but another name for licentiousness and libel.

What is a revival? Strictly speaking, it is the restoration of life that has been lost, and in this sense it applies only to the Church of God. But used in the more common acceptation, it is the turning of multitudes to God. As conversion is the turning of a soul to God, so a revival is a repetition of this same spiritual process in the case of thousands. It is conversion upon a large scale. It is what occurred under the apostles at Pentecost, when three thousand were converted under one sermon. It is what took place at Corinth, at Thessalonica, and Ephesus, when, under the preaching of the apostles, multitudes believed and turned to the Lord. This is what we mean by a revival. In so far as it corresponds with these Scripture scenes, in so far it is right, and we defend it; in so far as it departs from Scripture precedent, or is inconsistent with Scripture rule, we do not defend it. Let the opponents of revivals meet us here. We are willing to apply this test. Are they? It is an equitable and satisfactory one; they need not fear it, if it is truth they seek.

We can suppose the existence of honest objections to revivals. If they produce immorality, or sow sedition, or foster licentiousness, or are the hot-beds of hypocrisy, then are they worthy of condemnation. But are they such? Have they brought forth these fruits of evil? Have they made men bad citizens, bad masters, bad parents, bad children? Have they turned sober men into drunkards, chaste men into lewd, peaceable men; into riotous, reverential men into blasphemers, loyal men into seditious? Are they crowding or are they thinning our jails? Are they filling or emptying our bars? Are they exciting or are they allaying party spirit? Are they increasing or are they diminishing the calendar of crimes and criminals? Let us answer these questions by citing a few statements. Party spirit has ceased wherever the revival has come, and enemies have embraced each other, so that a Popish judge bears testimony to the wonderful improvement, in this respect, in his own vicinity. The drunken assemblages at weddings and funerals have not only ceased, but been transformed into meetings for praise and prayer: and the brutal scenes of brawling and bloodshed, on such occasions, are no longer heard of. Thousands of drunkards have become sober, thousands of blasphemers have turned from their profanity, the whole moral aspect of families, of villages, of towns, has been altered for the better. Hundreds of Romanists have turned from their superstition; hundreds of Unitarians have owned the Lord Jesus as God; poor, profligate females have turned from their evil courses; bars have been shut up, and inroads made among those whom we are accustomed to call the "masses," such as have not been made by any efforts heretofore.

It would thus appear that the results of the Irish revivals have been good, and not evil; good religiously, morally, socially. Their tendencies are all in the right direction. So that even admitting all that has been said against them, and making full allowance for what are called extravagances, nay, assuming that there has been a mixture of hypocrisy and deception in some cases, a very large balance remains in their favour. They have diminished crime, they have turned drunkenness into sobriety, dishonesty into honesty, brawling into good neighbourhood, hatred into love. Of bad citizens they have made good ones, of bad husbands and wives they have made good ones, of bad masters good ones, of bad parents good ones, of bad children good ones, and of mere formalists in religion they have made devout and fervent worshippers.

These are the results of what has taken place. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Are these the works of Satan? Are these things from beneath or from above? Are they earthly or heavenly? If they be Satan's doings, then is his kingdom divided, and he is fighting against himself.

It is to be noticed, too, that the really religious men who have visited the scenes are all convinced that the work is of God. Their enemies are among the irreligious and profane. The Popish priests are against them. The bar-keepers are against them. The Unitarians are against them. The lovers of pleasure are against them. But these are the things that tell so strongly in their favour.

Manifestly the work is of God, not of man, nor of Satan. God has risen up to do a work in our day worthy of Himself; a glorious work, in which human instruments are set aside, and the Holy Spirit is the great and indisputable worker. A work like this will not easily be overthrown. It will not be put down by scoffing, nor injured by misrepresentation, nor arrested by the hostility either of formal Protestants or angry Romanists. Fling your handfuls of sand into the torrent, ye enemies of Christ; will these arrest its victorious rush? Cast up embankments on the Nile, from Thebes to Alexandria; will these hinder its overflow? Bring your mighty engines to bear upon this divine conflagration that is now blazing through Ulster; will you quench one spark? Send for your Balaams, your lying prophets of the press, ye Balaks of Moab, place them upon every green mountain, from Donegal to Downpatrick, say to them, "Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel;" what can the answer be but, "How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed, how shall I defy whom the Lord hath not defied?"

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/horatius-bonar/modern-hostility-to-revivals/>

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