

A Plantation Revival

by Keith Malcomson

The sermon explores the historical context and spiritual revival in Ireland during the Plantation period, highlighting the role of godly ministers and the challenges they faced.

Scripture: Psalm 85:6, Proverbs 16:9, Matthew 5:10, Acts 2:1, 1 Peter 4:12

Topics: "Church History", "Revival Movement"

Description

Keith Malcomson reflects on the history of the Reformation in Ireland, highlighting the initial failures and struggles faced in bringing about religious reform. Despite challenges, a revival began in 1626 through the ministry of James Glendinning in Oldstone, leading to a spread of spiritual awakening across different parishes. The revival movement was marked by powerful preaching, conviction of sin, and a deep fear of God among the people. Despite intense persecution and hardships, the work of God continued to thrive, laying a strong foundation for Evangelicalism in Northern Ireland today.

Transcript

The Reformation which came to Ireland in 1530 was a failure or at least unsuccessful in its goals. There was no national prophet to arise and reform. No man who could speak the language of the people who was willing to lead the way. Only a few ministers were settled in the land and they generally were not up to the great task of reform. In the North the population was greatly reduced through internal wars under Elizabeth's reign, which resulted in leaving it as something of a wasteland. By the time of the beginning of the Plantation in 1610 under James things were at low ebb in the nation.

When James came to the English throne in 1603 it was with a determination to cause the puritans of England and the covenanters in Scotland to submit to his headship of the church and to conform them to a church ritual very similar to Romanism, or else to drive them from the land. This would eventually disturb the nest of a number of godly ministers in England who were some of the first pioneers to head for the new world of America on board the May Flower in 1620 in search of religious freedom.

Once the plantation began a great many came from Scotland and settled in the north and east of the province Irish province of Ulster. A lesser number came from England and settled in the west and south of the province. One minister said these were mostly "the scum of both nations" many were fleeing debt and legal justice. There was little fear of God in them or in those that already inhabited the land. "Iniquity abounded, contention, fighting, murder, thieving, adultery etc."

In the years following this initial plantation the people seemed to flock in from Scotland to inhabit the land. Yet God followed them when they fled from Him. Amongst them were some of the godliest ministers of the Church of Scotland who came seeking to labour for eternal souls and for a pure church. James again implemented extreme pressure on the church in Scotland to conform to his own wishes. Those godly ministers who would not do so were turned out of their churches. The first Presbyterian minister that we have record of to arrive amongst these new inhabitants was Edward Brice who came in 1613. Over the following years several such godly ministers laboured amongst this people.

James Glendinning

The first signs of revival came in about 1626 through the ministry of an eccentric but popular local man called James Glendinning in Oldstone near Antrim. He came to Ireland in 1622 and was originally stationed at Carrickfergus but another minister, Robert Blair, seeing his limitations advised him to take a smaller charge and encouraged him to deal more plainly and directly with the hearts and conscience of the people by preaching with conviction, for it was such preaching that God had greatly blessed in Scotland. And so he moved to Oldstone where in the midst of a godless people he began to preach the law of God, the wrath of God and the judgement of God against sin. Almost immediately he was transformed into a powerful preacher, "having a great voice and vehement delivery." The people were struck with conviction of sin and began to cry out to God. Some of the worst sinners who cared not for man nor God and who with the sword would put the whole market town in array were soon slain with conviction of sin. One man came to the meetings to cause trouble but was taken captive by the Word. A great multitude had no power to resist the Word of God and now feared to sin.

The Spread of Revival

At times a dozen in one day would be carried out of the meetings who had been struck down as if dead and were fast bound under the spirit of bondage. The local minister at Antrim John Ridge (who was an old English Puritan), recognising that an awakening was coming to great multitudes of the people organized other godly ministers like Cunningham, Hamilton and Blair to come to Antrim where they would preach all day by turn to the spiritual good of the people. Robert Blair in his early days of preaching was commended by an old minister for his eloquence and polish but pointed out to him that the one thing he lacked was the Spirit of God. After that he always sought to preach by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. This work of revival spread into several other parishes with each of these ministers becoming the instrument of this revival movement in his own area. Edward Brice (who was the first Scots minister to come to Ireland in 1613), Josias Welch (the grandson of Knox and son of John Welch) and several others joined them in this labour in other communities.

Monthly Meeting

Again John Ridge suggested another meeting on the first Friday of each month for all those ministers involved in this awakening that they might pray together and sit in conference in order to strengthen each other and their people in the work of God. On the Thursday night the ministers would meet in conference, the Friday would be spent in prayer, fasting and public preaching and this could continue till the Sunday. There were 9 parishes within a 20 mile radius which had godly revived ministers. Each of these parishes would hold two communions a year and two or three of the ministers would preach and almost all the awakened people from each parish would gather in. This work that had spread in Antrim and Down now spread throughout the whole land, God was pouring out His Spirit. There was such a great harvest of

souls that some felt that such had not been seen since the days of Pentecost.

It was in 1630 that John Livingston came to labour in Ireland. Just earlier that year after he had spent a night of fervently laying hold of God in prayer God sent revival under his preaching in the churchyard in Shotts. As he preached that one message about 500 souls were saved. Now he saw a great work for God in Killenchie, Ireland and joined these other ministers in a spirit of unity, prayer and revival finding no jealousy amongst them. At just one of these gatherings in 1632 some 1500 people gathered. This revival carried on in like manner until 1634.

Tested by Fire

But this work was not left unhindered. The old Episcopal bishops worked hard to stop it. Blair, Livingston and others were put out of their pulpits and had to flee back to Scotland. When Welch was put out of his church he continued preaching at his home where crowds would gather inside and out to hear God's Word. Cunningham then took up the strain of the heightened labour and visited the different churches preaching and exhorting until he too was put out of the country in 1636. The people met in secret to pray and held conventicles out in the countryside. The tide of persecution began to arise.

The "Black Oath" was introduced in order to bring individuals under civil and religious bondage. Many were imprisoned; one Ministers wife was imprisoned for three years. Some fled to the woods and caves and still others returned to Scotland. Very soon all these named ministers had either fled the country or were dead.

During the 1641 massacre when at least 10'000 people were massacred, 30 Presbyterian ministers were killed, some of which were nailed to their church doors. One Minister called Thomas Murray was crucified between two other men. Last of all came a plague which wiped out thousands across the land. But by the grace of God the church which had been planted and established in Revival survived all of this and remained.

Today Northern Ireland is one of the most Evangelical countries in Europe not to mention that within a 50km radius of the centre of Belfast it has the greatest amount of Evangelical churches in the world. This foundation was laid in the 1626.

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