

Bending The Church to Save the World: The Welsh Revival of 1904

Wales Before 1904

Wales has seen the hand of God move powerfully in Revival many times. The last widespread revival in 1854 had brought 100 000 into the Kingdom. Since then scattered outpourings had led to the conversion of a 100 here or 200 there, but nothing to touch the nation as a whole. At this time the nature of the Christianity being practiced was beginning to change. The publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, the rise of Liberalism and the "Higher Criticism" had combined to weaken confidence in the Bible as the Word of God. The church was becoming less relevant in everyday life as men and women looked to science to answer their problems. The church responded by departing from its teaching of the cross and offering a Gospel that was man-centered.

Evangelism, in the technical sense of outreach, had... been conveniently departmentalized. It was no longer looked upon as the function of the local congregation, but rather as the responsibility of a denominational committee. The vision of perishing souls seemed relevant only to the far-away citadels of paganism. The church at large failed to see that judgment would have to begin with the house of God nearer at hand(1).

There were within the churches those who remembered how God had moved in the past. When Revival came it was because their prayers and labors.

Evan Roberts - God's Chosen Instrument

God delights to use the 'weak' things of the world to fulfill his purposes. Perhaps it was for this reason that He chose Evan Roberts, a former miner and blacksmith with little theological background, but with a heart to see souls saved. Roberts had a thirst for spiritual things from an early age. The story is often told of how he would take his Bible down the mine to read it during rest periods. One day there was an explosion that took the lives of five of his fellow workers. Roberts narrowly escaped death, but the flames scorched the pages of the Bible he was reading. Later, when the revival came, pictures of Evan Robert's scorched Bible were sent around the world - epitomizing the fire that had fallen on Wales.

I will pass over the exact details of how Evan Robert's was first touched by the Spirit at a meeting in 1904. It was upon his return to his home church that he asked permission to hold a meeting for the young people in the fellowship. The following account is given of one of these early meetings:

Slowly and quietly - for it must be emphasised that fluency of speech had never been a marked characteristic of his - he spoke of the deep things of God and Christ, the hours passing quite unobserved, while tears coursed uninterruptedly over the cheeks of his listeners. People passing by the church commented freely and wonderingly upon the unusual spectacle of lights burning in full blaze at

such an hour.... Inside the building strange things were happening. Young men and women who had never been known to speak openly of any experience of saving grace stood and testified fearlessly. Others were bowed in prayer. Some sang the hymns of Zion. Tears, sobs, and songs of praise were intermingled, continuing until near midnight. The happy throng dispersed in all directions... Next day the village was agog.

When Mr. Roberts arrived for the pre-arranged service next evening, the chapel was besieged with curious worshippers, hardly knowing what would transpire.... When it became known that some of the outstanding characters of the neighborhood had been converted after withstanding gospel appeals of eminent preachers for a lifetime, and that these were declaring new-found joy and faith without shame or fear, the excitement became tense. Rumours sped far and wide. Down in the bowels of the earth, miners not only discussed the services but actually sang boisterously the grand old hymns taught them in their childhood and almost forgotten through sin.(2)

News of dramatic conversions, confession of sin, and songs of joy spread rapidly. Wherever Roberts went the Holy Spirit brought deep conviction of sin and a new spiritual dimension into the lives of formerly cold church-goers. Roberts was not an expository preacher and his method was prayer and exhortation, leading to a moving of the Holy Spirit bringing deep conviction. The meetings went on for many hours - often for more than 10 without a break. People lost all sense of time and churches were so full that crowds gathered outside until they could somehow squeeze their way in. The remarkable thing was that once the Revival had started it was not limited to where Roberts was speaking. Others "caught the fire" and the Spirit moved throughout Wales in great power.

After only a few months Peter Price, a successful minister started to criticize Robert's for the emotionalism that his meetings were generating. Most believe that there is some truth in Price's comment, but agree that his motive was that of jealousy. His comments brought to an end Robert's part in the Revival, and contributed eventually to his nervous breakdown.

The Effects of the Revival

It is difficult for us to comprehend the degree to which the Revival changed every aspect of the lives of those it touched. There was a dramatic decline in drunkenness, bars were deserted as each night the churches were packed with worshippers.

In one of the populous valleys... young men and women walked in procession through the streets, singing hymns and visiting public houses to invite.. [those inside] to come to the revival. Many of the places were completely deserted and others had their trade depleted... In one such drinking place there was one solitary customer sitting gloomily alone.... Suddenly the evening air was rent with the jubilant voices of happy songsters, just outside the door. So infuriated were the man and woman in charge at the audacity of these zealous youths that they picked up some of the empty ale-pots... and flung them recklessly among the happy throng. Disgusted with the conduct of his host and hostess, the solitary figure... rose from his seat, joined the enthusiastic processionists, then went with them to the church, there to surrender to Christ!(3)

The bars were not the only places to be emptied. Dance halls, theaters, and football matches all saw a dramatic decline in attendance. The courts and jails were deserted and the police found themselves without any work to do. The story is told of policemen who closed their station and formed a choir to sing at the Revival meetings. Long-standing debts were repaid, church and family feuds were healed and a new unity of purpose was felt across the

denominational divides.

Perhaps the most dramatic change that took place was that worked in the hearts of the miners. Coal mining is far from the romantic occupation it is often portrayed as. These men did back-breaking toil in cramped conditions with the constant threat of roof-collapse and explosive gases. Yet when the Holy Spirit touched them, He transformed their lives to such a degree that the pit-ponies could no longer understand instructions given to them, so accustomed had they become to receiving blows and being sworn at! The men worked with a renewed vigor that set production figures souring. When work was done they would hurry home for a quick meal and a bath and then be off to the chapel until the early hours of the morning, singing hymns as they went!

There was a new excitement about eternal things. Family devotions and public prayer meetings were started and continued regularly for years. The sales of Bibles increased to such a degree that the shops sold their entire stocks. Everywhere there was a new spirit of prayer and an urgency to preach the Gospel. The effects of the Revival were not confined to the Principality. Reports of the events in Wales were distributed internationally in newspaper and magazine reports and the Holy Spirit repeated what He had done in Wales from America to Australia.

Notable among the 150 000 estimated converts of the Revival are George & Stephen Jeffrey's who later went on to found the Elim Movement, and David Powell Williams, the founder of the Apostolic Pentecostal church. It is also worth mentioning its effect on Rees Howells, intercessor and founder of the Bible College of Wales and David Lloyd George, who later became the British Prime Minister. The results of the Revival cannot be measured by the countless chapels that lie deserted on the Welsh hills today, but in the multitude of changed men and women who went on to effect the course of the twentieth century under the guidance of the Almighty.(4)

Lessons From the Welsh Revival For Today

The Pentecostal nature of the Revival of 1904 is undeniable. Although he restricted the use of tongues because they could so easily be misunderstood, Robert's himself often exercised the gift of a word of knowledge during the meetings. His emphasis was constantly on the baptism in the Spirit. The form of the services remind us strongly of the pattern of those described in the New Testament letters. It is small wonder then that an estimated 20% of the 150 000 saved in Wales became dissatisfied with the traditional churches and joined the newly formed Pentecostal Fellowships.

It is important to learn from the mistakes made during the Revival. Roberts was no expositor of the Word, and this was a weakness that was passed on to the new converts, who relied heavily on emotion and not upon Scripture. In a sense the revival was based upon the preaching of a previous generation of ministers and Sunday School teachers, whose efforts finally bore fruit in 1904. When the Revival began to decline the established churches found it difficult to disciple the new converts, which is what they desperately needed.(5) We need to seriously question whether our church is in a position to cope with thousands of new

converts, before we ask God for Revival. Dare we ask for a Revival when we cannot care for the new spiritual children?

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References

- (1) Eifion Evans, *The Welsh Revival of 1904*. (London: Evangelical Press, 1969), 33-34.
- (2) David Matthews, *I Saw The Welsh Revival*. (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 22-23.
- (3) Matthews, 43.
- (4) Evans, 160.
- (5) Norman Grubb, *Rees Howells, Intercessor*, 1952. (Fort Washington, Penn.: CLC, 1983), 33-34.

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Their address is:

Bryntirion, Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan, CF31 4DX
Phone: 01656 655886
Fax: 01656 656095.
