

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php

Reformation
&
Revival

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 1, No. 2 • Spring 1992

This I tell you, brother, you can't have one, you can't have none, you can't have one without the other." That is what a popular song of the 1950s taught us about love and marriage. Such was the consensus of public morality before a generation arose that feared marriage without love so much that it pursued love without marriage. Marriage was characterized merely as "ink stains dried upon some lines." Clearly, the biblical pattern is that sexual expressions of love appropriately reflect God's design and character only in the marriage relationship; just as clearly, marriage should not be dull, uninteresting, and similar to endured servanthood, but should be filled with self-sacrifice, commitment, personal development, passion, and unity. In man-woman relationships, sexual love and marriage necessarily involve each other; neither is defined totally in terms of the other, but the essence of neither is complete without the other.

So it is with revival and reformation; when individuals pursue one without proper appreciation for and attention to the other, the results can be very ugly. Though these two must go together, we must, in my opinion, define them separately and be able to discern their distinctive characteristics. A clear grasp of the tendencies of each when separated from the other can be a great aid in seeing clearly just what kind of illness has invaded the body. With care we can help assure a prescription which does not underdose the thing most needed. The relation of reformation and revival to the growth of the church must also concern us.

A Definition of Reformation

Reformation is the recovery of biblical truth which leads to the purifying of one's theology. It involves a rediscovery of the Bible as the judge and guide of all thought and action, corrects errors in interpretation, gives precision, coherence, and courage to doctrinal confession, and gives form

and energy to the corporate worship of the Triune God. Though it should be an ongoing enterprise in all churches and in the body of Christ throughout the world, the most poignant displays of reformation come at times of great theological, moral, spiritual, and ecclesiological declension in the church.

A Biblical Paradigm of Reformation

The recovery of the ark from the Philistines gave great joy to David and the house of Israel. Their first effort to restore it, however, ended in the disastrous death of Ussah (2 Sam. 6:7). The ark had been moved improperly and the warning of death for such action was carried out (Num. 4:15, 19, 20). The project of moving the ark was abandoned for about three months. Then, David moved it as God had instructed (2 Sam. 6:13). In addition to David's remarkable exuberance, the ark's recovery led to a series of prominent spiritual advances. David desired to build a house for the ark (7:2). His effort to seek guidance in this from the prophet Nathan prompted one of the most intensely gracious encounters between God and man in all of Scripture. God told David, "And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (7:16).

This great promise is followed by a great moment of true worship (7:27-29). All of this arose from reformation, the recovery of a basic biblical truth.

Under the reign of Josiah, the book of the law was discovered in the house of the Lord. Upon hearing it read, Josiah "tore his clothes" and inquired of the Lord because it was clear to him that the people had not "listened to the words of this book." Josiah learned from the prophetess Huldah that God's wrath was against the people of Judah, but that because his "heart was tender" and he humbled himself before the Lord when he heard what was spoken

against them, he would be gathered to his fathers before the day of God's wrath came. From that time Josiah engaged in extensive reforms in accordance with the book of the law. He eliminated the vessels, figures, priests, places, and practices of idolatry in Judah and even destroyed the high places in the cities of Samaria. He removed all mediums and spiritists and reinstated the Passover "as it is written in the book of the covenant" (2 Kgs. 23:21). All of this he did in order that he might "confirm the words of the law which were written in the Book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord" (v. 24). Josiah experienced personal reformation and revival, and brought corporate reformation to Israel. Before his time there was no king like him who "turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him" (v. 25).

Josiah heard the word of God and responded with personal repentance and a concerted effort to conform all the areas of Israel's life for which he was responsible to that word.

The Historical Framework of Reformation

We have mentioned that reformation confronts a situation of moral, spiritual, ecclesiological, and theological decline and/or error. We come now to ask, "How are these problems of reformation to be tackled?" Attempts to bring reformation through treating the moral, spiritual, and ecclesiological dimensions while ignoring the theological issues always fall short. The Middle Ages saw many attempts at reformation. Moral reformation became the concern of a variety of churchmen and involved a series of monastic reforms combined with powerful preaching. The Franciscans sought reformation and conversion of heretics through an example of austere morality and fervent preaching. Ximenes de Cisneros (d. 1517) banished over 2,000

immoral monks from Spain and used the Spanish Inquisition to enforce an ascetic morality on the clergy.

In the sixteenth century, members of the Oratory of Divine Love sought the moral reform of their own lives and of those around them. Their research into the morals of the clergy led to the extensive moral reform that resulted from the Council of Trent later on. Erasmus, the great humanist scholar, invested his great powers in ridiculing the morals of the clergy and even supported Luther's attack upon the bellies of the monks. None of these served to give the needed reformation to the church but only made Romanism more prevailing than ever.

The Middle Ages saw several efforts at spiritual reform. The Apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore promised freedom from the *bondage* of the external form of the church. This would be characterized by an "eternal gospel" that went beyond that introduced by the life and work of Christ. The new age of the Spirit would be ushered in by contemplative monks. Although he advocated no revolutionary tactics, his view of history was condemned because it did not view the Roman Catholic Church as the final perfect form of the city of God. The principle of poverty espoused by the Observant Franciscans highlighted spiritual ministry and eschewed the covetous spirit enhanced by ownership of private property. The principle was declared heretical in a series of bulls by Pope John XXII (1316-34), officially ending the grasp for God through instituted poverty. Mysticism continued this quest for God. Mystics desired a suprarational union with God. Their fervor transcended the mechanical operations of the sacramental system and sought participation in the mysterious event of transubstantiation. A quest for the deification of the creature, which they believed to be inexplicable to normal powers of knowledge and will, motivated their intense spiritual exercises. Whether it was a mysticism that pursued the absolute conformity of the will and of

human desire to Christ, or a mysticism that sought union of being with God Himself, the goal of the various types was to abolish autonomous personal consciousness and to become aware of nothing but the existence and will of God.

While giving extraordinary individuals some sense of transcendence for a few blissful moments, mysticism had little chance or desire to challenge the theological structure of the church. The theology of mystical experience differed only generically from orthodox Roman Catholicism and therefore neither challenged nor denied its salvation doctrine. In reality its formative doctrinal assumptions were antithetical to the reformation that was truly needed. Mysticism, being semi-Pelagian in its view of man and teaching justification through increasing godlikeness, was actually a practice that was quite consistent with the whole sacramental system and its attendant errors.

Ecclesiological reform showed its greatest ardor during the periods of the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1309-78), when the popes resided in Avignon, and in the time of papal schism (1378-1415), when two or three popes ruled at the same time. The churchmen who sought to bring about the reform were known as the conciliarists. They advocated the power of general councils over the pope by appealing to the testimony of Scripture and history. Their actions relieved the embarrassment caused by the Captivity and the schism but also gained a deserved notoriety by burning John Huss at the stake. No theological change appeared on their agenda for they were quite certain that none was needed.

The Axe to the Root

When reformation came, however, it came through the substantial alteration of strategic doctrines. Calvin gave credit to Luther "who held forth a torch to light us into the way of salvation." In particular, "those heads of doctrine in

which the truth of our religion” and the legitimate worship of God and “those in which the salvation of men are (*sic*) comprehended, were in a great measure obsolete” when Luther appeared.¹ Luther’s concerns did not terminate with moral or ecclesiological issues, though he was involved with both; but he went right to the heart of the theological issues that kept sinners turned in upon themselves and thus far away from the free mercy and justifying righteousness of Christ.

The doctrine of justification was *central*. This doctrine was defined by Luther’s biblical insistence that faith not be viewed as meritorious in any sense. Fallen man can only sin. He can contribute nothing to his right standing before a holy God, nor can he prepare himself for such in any way. These truths constitute, as Calvin would later say, “the first stage in the way to salvation, when the sinner, overwhelmed and prostrated, despairs of all carnal aid.”² Only when the sinner sees himself in hell is he led to find hope in the completed work of Christ alone. Calvin would call this the “second stage,” and he spoke of it passionately.

Luther’s doctrine of the bondage of the will not only was biblical, but gave theological coherence to the necessity of imputed righteousness being the sole source of our just standing before God. In his 1525 debate with Erasmus, Luther named this the “essential issue . . . the hinge on which all turns.” Calvin spoke in unison with Luther on this issue. If all hinges on something outside of man, immediately a controversy arises with reference to “the freedom and powers of the will.” If one has any ability to serve God acceptably, then he is not saved only by the merit of Christ but will attribute part to himself. Their “opponents” maintained, in spite of holding the doctrine of original sin, that “the powers of man are only weakened, not wholly depraved.”³ The grace of Christ, therefore, aiding him, the sinner has something “from himself which he is able to

contribute.” The reformers maintained that the sinner “possesses no ability whatever to act aright.”⁴

These teachings called for an alteration of the Roman system from its roots; they made Luther at odds with the entire theological world. Had he submitted to the authority of tradition and popes he could have forgotten all about these doctrines. But he had no choice. He found no reason to trust anything but Scripture as the final and infallible authority in these matters. His hours of laborious study and contemplation had branded on his conscience these truths, and he considered it safer to be killed by the powers of this world than to live by having failed to confess God’s truth.

All the major reformers agreed in these essentials. “The Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God,” as Zwingli would call it, stood as the *formal* principle of the Reformation. The completed work of Christ issuing in an absolutely gratuitous salvation through the imputation of His doing and His dying was referred to as the *material* principle of the reformation. Man’s sinful condition made necessary a unilateral omnipotent work of God which rendered salvation a reality that was selective, certain, and effectual. These truths, under God, were used to bring reformation and resulted in a variety of church forms, each seeking to reflect the implications of these truths as clearly as possible.

A Definition of Revival

Revival is the application of reformation truth to human experience. It occurs in one person at a time and may cause individuals to be spiritually isolated from the world around them. It may also appear on a relatively massive scale, thus radically altering the spiritual face of an entire church, community, or nation. Normally, therefore, revival involves three things: the presence of reformation doctrine, either preached, read, or otherwise known; the experiential application of that doctrine accompanied by loving but careful

investigation of that experience; and the extension of such an experience to a large number of people.

A Biblical Paradigm of Revival

Most of the awakenings in Scripture appear to be a combination of reformation and revival because, as mentioned previously, it is always difficult to separate the two. The reality of their being separated at times, however, is seen in some of the addresses to the churches in the Revelation. Thyatira appears to be a church with good experience (Rev. 2:19) but with a shallow and imperceptive doctrinal base (2:20). They were in need of reformation; the Lord, however, condescends to their weakness and requires only that they hold in purity the truth that they did know (2:24-25). The church at Ephesus, on the other hand (2:1-7), appears to be doctrinally sound but in need of increased affection for the truths they already know. They are able to examine and expose those who falsely claim to be apostles (2:2) and persevere under persecution while affirming the truth about Christ (2:3). The admonition they receive, however, is one for increased love. "You have left your first love." Here we see a case of the essential truths being in place and even prompting discretion and courage; yet beyond abiding by the truth of God, they need a resurgence of love for the God of truth.

First Corinthians 9:23-10:6 contemplates the possibility of understanding and preaching the gospel, and even manifesting the external gifts of an apostle, or being the beneficiary of the powerful and godly leadership of one like Moses and still falling short of genuine conversion. In 9:23 the apostle indicates that his zeal for the gospel is not only that he might win those to whom he witnesses, but that he might partake of its blessings himself. In verses 24-27 he exegetes verse 23 and shows that he continually pursued conformity to the gospel so that he would not be disapproved, failing

the test in the end.

Christian experience, though entirely dependent on the internal, efficacious working of the Spirit of God, also is entirely dependent on the full involvement of the heart, soul, and strength of the person. When asked if only a few would be saved, Jesus plainly answered, "Strive (or agonize) to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). In a sense the answer is, "Yes, only a few will be saved; but only because the many desire the glory of the *end* of salvation and not the cross of the *way* of salvation."

Entering and staying in the way of salvation is revival. It is a sovereign work of God utterly dependent upon His power and grace that engages, enlivens, and expands all the capacities of the sinner who embraces Christ's redemptive work and enjoys the glory of the Lord.

The Historical Framework

The historical standard to which all revivals of religion must be compared is, in my opinion, the First Great Awakening in America. This is not because it was necessarily the purest of all revivals, nor the most powerful; but it had at its heart Jonathan Edwards, preacher, theologian, philosopher, spiritual psychologist, and religious critic. Not only was he one of its major participants but also its most careful analyst. From his first-hand observations of the phenomena, his understanding of human spirituality, and careful theological application, he developed a body of divinity pertaining specifically to human experience in revival. He was very positive toward revival, but careful to state clearly the distinctives that marked a movement as the work of God. Just as clearly he discussed a number of other factors which often accompanied deep spiritual movements which detractors often used to seek to discredit the entire work. To each of these Edwards responded that "tis no argument

that the work in general is not the work of the Spirit of God. That there are some counterfeits, is no argument that nothing is true.”

Several tensions always are present in the interaction between sinful man and holy God. These become most exaggerated in a time of revival. Maintaining the truth on both sides of the tension is the peculiar stewardship of revival leaders. Edwards sought to do this on several fronts. First, he preached careful and detailed doctrinal messages on the major themes of the Reformation while carefully crafting pungent application to personal responsibility and experience. Second, Edwards showed great leniency toward a large number of unusual manifestations, but allowed nothing to deter him from insisting on the true distinguishing traits of a work of God’s Spirit. Third, he pressed the urgency of a sinner’s obligation to immediate repentance and faith, but would never assist the sinner in gaining comfort too quickly by omitting any truth of the gospel of redemption. Fourth, Edwards and his contemporaries took no measure designed strictly to increase the number of respondents, but were nevertheless interested in growth as an evidence of a genuine and unusually powerful working of God’s Spirit.

Doctrinal Experiential Preaching

The series of messages under which the first movements of revival began to occur in Northampton were elaborate theological expositions of the doctrine of justification by faith. Determined to defend the biblical teaching from Arminian perversions of the truth, Edwards went into great detail on the relationship between repentance and faith, how faith is best suited to be the means through which Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. He defended this detailed doctrinal preaching as entirely appropriate in light of the nature of the subject and the dangers of the times.

It is so in most of the great doctrines of Christianity that are looked upon as first principles of the Christian faith, that though they contain something that is easy, yet they also contain great mysteries; and there is room for progress in the knowledge of them, and doubtless will be to the end of the world. But it is unreasonable to expect that this progress should be made in the knowledge of things that are high and mysterious without accurate distinction and close application of thought and it is also unreasonable to think that this doctrine, of the justification of a sinner by a mediator, should be without mysteries. We all own it to be a matter of pure revelation, above the light of natural reason, and that it is what the infinite wisdom of God revealed in the gospel mainly appears in, that He hath found out such a way of reconciliation of which neither men nor angels could have thought. And after all, shall we expect that this way, when found out and declared, shall contain nothing but what is obvious to the most cursory and superficial view, and may be fully and clearly comprehended without some diligence, accuracy, and careful distinction.⁵

At the close of the sermon Edwards again asserted that no Christian should content himself “without some clear and distinct understanding in this point.”⁶ He concludes with six important applications of the discussion which show that the distinctions do not consist “only in punctilios of small consequence” but that the opposite scheme leads men to “trust in their own righteousness for justification, which is a thing fatal to the soul.”⁷

George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, though not as turgidly philosophical in their presentations, were just as determined theologically. Whitefield, in “The Lord Our Righteousness,” defends the deity of Christ against both Arians and Socinians, and gives a thorough exposition of the necessity of Christ’s righteousness in His human nature,

both passive and active obedience, and of that righteousness being imputed to us. He then defends the doctrine of imputation against many objections and closes with urgent appeals to all classes and ages to receive the Lord as their righteousness.

Equally doctrinal were William, Gilbert, and John Tennent as well as Samuel Blair. Messages on the justice of God, divine wisdom, regeneration, predestination, God's sovereignty and human striving were regularly preached. In closing his message "The Justice of God," Gilbert Tennent made the following application:

In fine, let us labour to imitate the justice and righteousness of God, by seeking the righteousness of Christ to our justification, in the manner before expressed; also by seeking the inherent righteousness, which it pleased God at first to implant in our natures by creation (Eccl. vii. 29), which we have lost by sin. I say, let us fervently and frequently cry to God by humble supplications, in the name of Christ, that He would be pleased to implant or infuse into our souls, by regeneration, the habits or principles of that righteousness; and, having the same implanted, let us exercise them in our whole practice.⁸

Clear doctrine forcefully preached undergirded the fervent appeal and application so characteristic of the First Great Awakening.

Necessary Traits, Indifferent Phenomena

In his classic work, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, Edwards discusses nine factors "that are no evidences that a work that is wrought amongst a people, is not the work of the Spirit of God." Among these matters, which should not in themselves discredit a movement in general, are many an interesting idea. That it is unusual and

extraordinary is no mark against it as long as it does not contradict those distinguishing marks that are necessary. God in times past has "wrought in such a manner as to surprise both men and angels," and in the future will do the same. Nor do extraordinary effects such as groans, outcries, agonies of body, etc., give cause for a work to be judged one way or another. In fact, Edwards reasons, men under extraordinary stress from conviction should be expected to act so. Just two months prior to composing his work, Edwards had preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and he had seen physical effects of great stress. Evidently harsh criticism had come his way for that message, but Edwards was determined to argue both for the legitimacy of the sermon and the appropriateness of such responses.

If we should suppose that a person saw himself hanging over a great pit, full of fierce and glowing flames, by a thread that he knew to be very weak, and not sufficient long to bear his weight, and knew that multitudes had been in such circumstances before, and that most of them had fallen and perished; and saw nothing within reach, that he could take hold of to save him; what distress would he be in? *Now, this minute*, he should be swallowed up in these dreadful flames? . . . or held over it in the hand of God, who at the same time they see to be exceedingly provoked? . . . no wonder that they cry out in their misery.⁹

Edwards treats numerous other problems, including doctrinal error, scandalous lives of some who profess to be converted, errors in judgment and delusions of Satan, the conversion of others being used as examples, that it causes a "great ado," that it makes great impressions of people's imaginations, and that preaching focuses on the terrors of God's law. None of these discredit the work, none are

necessary as distinguishing marks, and all may be expected to appear in such a movement as the revival seemed to be.

Using the fourth chapter of 1 John as his text, Edwards established five things as essential in a work of God's Spirit. First, a true work of the Spirit raises the "esteem of Jesus that was born of the Virgin, and was crucified without the gates of Jerusalem; and seems more to confirm and establish their minds in the truth of what the gospel declares to us of His being the Son of God, and the Saviour of men."¹⁰ Second, it operates against the interests of Satan's kingdom, against sin and men's worldly lusts. Third, men are established in a greater regard for the Holy Scriptures "in their truth and divinity." Satan has ever "shewn a mortal spite and hatred towards that Holy Book," and therefore "hates every word in it" and would never raise one's affection to it. Fourth, the Spirit operates as a Spirit of truth, a Spirit that shows people the uniqueness and holiness of God and that they must die and that very soon, and "that they must give account of themselves to God; and convinces them that they are helpless in themselves; and confirms them in other things that are agreeable to sound doctrine," that is a Spirit of truth. Fifth, the spirit that generates love to God and man is the Spirit of God. Edwards developed this further in a section in which he treated specific objections. The next year, 1742, saw his *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England*. Again Edwards affirmed that it was a glorious work of God, argued that all should promote the work, defended its promoters against false charges, spoke of things that should be corrected or avoided, and gave specific suggestions as to what positive things would contribute to the work.

In all of this, prompted by the growing controversy with Charles Chauncey, Edwards developed his understanding concerning the importance of the affections. Wherever true

religion is, there are "vigorous exercises of the inclination and will towards divine objects." These exercises are "no other than the affections of the soul."

He does not think that all affections, however, are "saving affections and experiences," but warns against "those manifold fair shows, and glistening appearances, by which they are counterfeited." Part IV of *Some Thoughts* delineates things that should be corrected or avoided in promoting this work. "That masterpiece of all the devil's works, was to improve the indiscreet zeal of Christians, to drive them into those three extremes of enthusiasm, superstition, and severity towards opposers; which should be enough for an everlasting warning to the Christian church."¹¹

Revivals will never last long, he contended, until we learn to distinguish between the true and the false and become settled "wherein true religion does consist," so we will know clearly and distinctly "what we ought to contend for."¹²

A Careful Urgency

Matters of the soul's salvation were of paramount urgency to Edwards, and he sought to make them so to all men. In "Pressing into the Kingdom," preached in the first wave of awakening in Northampton, he urged sinners to use all the energy they have to seek to take the kingdom of God by storm. A person pressing into the kingdom does not stop at any cross that may be put in his way. "They are so set for salvation, that those things by which others are discouraged, and stopped, and turned back do not stop them, but they press through them." The gain is so great and the loss is so immeasurable that "Persons ought to be so resolved for heaven, that if by any means they can obtain, they will obtain."¹³ Similar exhortations filled the sermon "Ruth's Resolution." The lost were urged to look to the example of their family and friends who were being converted and not to rest until they themselves were the recipients of saving grace.

When Edwards described the awakening, he spoke of those who were “made sensible that their slack and dull way of seeking would never like to attain their purpose, and so have been roused up to a greater violence for the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁴

Even with all this arousing of sinners to press into the kingdom, Edwards still insisted that “God has obligated Himself to no one either by justice or promise no matter how hard one may strive as long as he has no ‘true repentance’ begun in him.” Edwards believed “that if I had taught those that came to me under trouble any other doctrine, I should have taken a most direct course utterly to have undone them.”

If the extreme of despair appeared, Edwards just as surely reminded the seeker of the “infinite and all-sufficient mercy of God in Christ.” In this way both fear and hope were duly mixed and “proportioned to preserve their minds in a just medium between the two extremes of self-flattery and despondence.”¹⁶

Joy in Success

The great attention given to the theological issue did not make the promoters of the Awakening oblivious to the numbers that were being converted. In his preface to the 1737 English edition of *Faithful Narrative*, Isaac Watts emphasizes that “such illustrious success” arose from God’s honoring the preaching of Reformation doctrine. He spoke of how easy it will be for the Lord to spread His “dominion from sea to sea” and to awaken “whole countries of stupid and sleeping sinners.” One day the obedient subjects of Jesus shall be as “numerous as the spires of grass in a meadow newly mown.”¹⁷

In the *Narrative* Edwards, though not “pretending to be able to determine how many have lately been the subjects of such mercy,” nevertheless hoped that “more than 300

souls were savingly brought home to Christ.” He even enumerated the breakdown in ages because “it has been heretofore rarely heard of, that any were converted past middle age.” These converting influences came to young and old alike with more than 50 of those converted being above 40 years old. Of those, 20 were above 50, 10 were above 60 and 2 above 70. The very young also were “savingly wrought upon.” Thirty between 2 and 14 years of age, 2 between 9 and 10, and, remarkably, one 4 years of age. So unusual was this last one, Phoebe Bartlett, that Edwards records a detailed description of her spiritual pilgrimage.

The Second Great Awakening in New England, ca. 1799 - 1805, had a heavy dose of Edwardsean preaching and similar narratives of the events and spiritual state preceding and accompanying the revival. *The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* of November, 1803, carried a 22 column report on a spiritual awakening in Lebanon, New York. The pastor describes a 15-year decline in the vitality of the church until, in September, 1801, “but 11 male members remained,” though towns surrounding them were recipients of “revivals of religion.” A change in the state of mind of the people began, however, after a day on which “two discourses were preached on the miseries of hell.” Soon several remarkable conversions occurred, including some who had been outwardly friendly to religion, some “leading characters in the town,” and some who were energetic enemies of religion. Meetings in the pastor’s home swelled beyond his walls until above 500 were meeting in one of the town halls. Several of the schools of the town were “solemnized,” and many students and some teachers were hopefully converted. This came about through the use of the means that had been used for the 15 years of the period of decline.

There was no uncommon providence, nor any new means made use of in the beginning of the revival but the same kind

of providences with which the people were before visited, and the same truths which they before heard made a very different impression. None can, therefore, rationally attribute the awakening to anything short of the power of Him who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will.¹⁸

After narrating the events of two periods of revival and before delineating the specific “means made use of by the Lord to impress the minds of sinners,” the reporter spoke of the number of those converted and their age and relative social condition.

One hundred and ten have been added to the church, about thirty more, we hope, have passed from death to life, and seventy-three have been baptized, in the course of the revival. Ninety-nine were received into the church in the compass of one year, sixty-four of which were received in the compass of two months.¹⁹

“It is visible,” said the reporter, “that God hath acted as a sovereign, having mercy on whom He would have mercy.” The greatest number of the people converted were between the ages of 15 and 40. The oldest was 55 and the youngest about 11. Most conversions came from families who were accustomed to public worship, though some came from those quite apart from former church influences. One whole family of five was converted and another of six. In one family, believing parents saw ten children converted.

In describing the means made use of, virtually the whole account focuses on the reactions of people to the sermons and the opening of their minds to the reception of different aspects of traditional Protestant theology. Great distress for sin, genuine perceptions of the justness of hell, and deep remorse for wasted time and opportunities, were succeeded by satisfaction that God is sovereign, that He has a purpose,

that He will display His mercy in the salvation of as many as He sees proper, and that He will cause all things to advance to His glory. They experience a change of mind in regard to God and His law and begin to love His law because it is holy, and love and adore Christ for His person and the marvelous sufficiency of His work. “They are sensible of new views, new aims, new aversions, and new delights.”

Numbers who were not only inveterate, but open opposers of the doctrine of election, now not only acknowledge its truth, but say if it were not true, they should not have the least hope of heaven. And I know of none who have obtained hopes in this awakening, who have not embraced the Calvinistic system of doctrines.²⁰

The revival mentioned above, though greatly focused on religious experience, was characterized by “remarkable regularity and order,” but the *Magazine* did not hesitate to report meetings in which more physical effects were in evidence. One “Religious Intelligence,” reported from Austinburgh, New-Connecticut, speaks of those who “lost bodily strength” and others, three, who were “fallen down together at the door.” Some who began to boast of infidel principles “were struck at that time, and one person fell.” Three little girls “fell on the ground and lost their bodily strength.” Both awakened sinners and Christians were “thus affected under a sense of divine truth.”²¹

Nothing is more obvious in these reports than the combination of many things which through the remainder of the nineteenth century increased in rarity.

1. Theology and experience flourished together. Careful and uncompromising attention to precise doctrinal matters undergirded the inception and continuance of deep religious experience.
2. There was a healthy and joyful interest in the numbers

affected by the revival, including their sociological description, but without the least hint that the movements came from anything more or less than the gracious disposal of a sovereign God.

3. Personal religious perceptions and testimonies were sought and encouraged, but also were examined closely in light of Scripture.

4. Awakenings marked by "regularity and order" as well as those in which people were impressed in an "extraordinary manner," were seen as coming from the same God and the same truths but into different social situations and different levels of maturity in personality. A movement was not deemed genuine or spurious solely on the basis of external affectations.

The pressures of apparent conflict between these respective sets of factors could not be held together much longer. Jonathan Edwards devoted his life to maintaining doctrinal and experiential equilibrium, both in how one carried on revival and in how one subsequently evaluated revival. Humpty Dumpty was soon to break, however, and none was able, and very few even willing, to put him together again.

The Necessity of Unity

An Analogy

Reformation is truth, revival is love. Truth without love oppresses, mocks, and eventually decapitates everything else. In the process, it loses itself because it is fearsome and not beautiful. It eliminates the context in which it can be communicated. "Speak the truth in love," we are admonished, and the Psalmist teaches us that "Lovingkindness and truth go before Thee" (Ps. 89:14). Of the descendants of David, God says, "I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him, nor deal falsely in My faithful-

ness" (Ps. 89:32-33 NASB). In His lovingkindness God establishes a way to redeem the covenant people without enervating the full impact of His truth. If we understand all mysteries and have all knowledge but do not have love we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). Truth itself is lovely; it is worth being loved because of its moral and aesthetic excellence. It can make its home, therefore, in a congenial way only in those who approve of and enjoy it for its excellence and loveliness. And if they enjoy truth because it is excellent and lovely, they themselves will live in love. Truth without love ceases to be truth because it excludes from itself the sum of all moral perfection.

Love without truth melts into formlessness; it is goal-less motivation and duty-less sentiment. A love which remains insensitive to the necessity of truth eliminates its own essence. Love does not take into account a wrong suffered, but this spirit of forgiveness assumes a standard of right, or it could never realize that a wrong had been done. Truthless love would have no joy, for love rejoices in the truth. No matter how much supposed love one may exert, without truth it is only a damning affection. Those who perish do not receive the love of the truth (1 Thess. 2:10), but are given up to believe a lie. Those who are chosen to salvation, however, find deliverance through belief in the truth. If not exactly synonymous, belief in the truth and love of the truth are nonetheless indivisible.

In the same way, the church can become an empty shell, or a whitewashed sepulchre, when it seeks expansion at the expense of careful attention to reformation and revival. Growth in the church in both size and effectiveness is of major importance in Scripture and history. The book of Acts documents the increase in the size of churches and the geographical expansion of the gospel. Paul's zeal was to "preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named," but in places destitute of the word of truth. Enormous

thanksgiving welled up in his spirit when he heard of the faith spreading "in all the world . . . constantly bearing fruit and increasing" (Col. 1:6).

The increase of numbers in itself, however, did not signal a healthy situation. Others who imitated gospel preachers were able to draw large numbers after themselves so that Paul and John and Peter had to warn against them (e.g., 1 Tim. 6:3-5). They "went astray from the truth" and led others after them. They introduced "destructive heresies" and did not abide in the "teaching of Christ." Among their heresies were false teaching about the character of God (2 Pet. 2:1), creation (1 Tim. 4:3-5), the person of Christ (1 John 4:2-3), the work of Christ (Gal. 2:21), justification by faith (Galatians, Phil. 3), resurrection (1 Cor. 15; 2 Tim. 2:18), and the second coming (2 Pet. 3).

Not only teachers but listeners sought to escape the truth claims of the gospel. In some places they stoned or imprisoned ministers of the gospel and other believers. In other situations, strangely enough, they did not work overtly to destroy the church, but sought the church community as a haven for their egocentrism. Paul had encountered some who loved flattering words and would pay dearly to hear them. And there were preachers enough ready to be prostituted to such a task. Paul's confidence as one "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" who spoke not "as pleasing men, but God" alienated those who liked to buy their sermons (1 Thess. 2:4-6). Paul's description of a preacher who held "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9), embodied little attraction for those who wanted approval, fun, and comfort from their religion instead of repentance, cross, and truth. Those who resisted sound teaching were zealous to employ acceptable teachers in order to confirm them in their own moral propensities

(2 Tim. 4:3). Church growth not built on the truth is spurious, and all systems which can cause growth apart from the truth should be feared.

The New Testament church also addressed the issue of experiential problems. The doctrine of grace was turned into lasciviousness on more than one occasion. (2 Pet. 2:19; Rom. 6:1; 1 John 3:1-6) Doctrinal correctness was mistaken for saving faith (Jas. 2:19, 20). The spiritual issue involved in these errors is the subject matter of Jesus' interview with Nicodemus. Jesus said that spiritual life cannot be reduced to a mental comprehension in which proper conclusions are drawn from miraculous signs. More is involved than speculative knowledge. The new birth gives not only rational clarity to the things of the kingdom of God, but a genuine sense of the beauty and loveliness of them. Subjects of the new birth, along with John the Baptist, rejoice when they hear the Bridegroom's voice and say, "This joy of mine has been made full. He must increase but I must decrease."

All the evidences and proofs which may convince a person that Christianity is right will not change the heart to embrace Christ as lovely and desirable. Only the light that comes from God Himself does that. Even believing the Bible to be true falls short of true saving faith. Now, evidences can be compelling, and the Bible certainly is truth, and true faith should have both elements as part of its makeup. But they are often present, as in demons, without salvation. Archibald Alexander records the testimony of a military student who recalls his attitude toward the Bible when he was in school.

. . . I was furnished with a Bible and with the injunction to read it often and make it the rule of my life. Like most other youths, however, I kept it in my trunk; and I blush while I say it, I do not believe that during the whole time I was there, four years, I took it out to read more than six times. . . . How strange the aversion to that good Book, and how general this

antipathy in the thoughtless around us! I must confess, however, that though my aversion to it was strong, I had a firm belief in its truth, and though, in such a body of young men, I could not but now and then hear an effort on the part of one or another around me to convince himself of its untruth, yet I must say that I never could get rid of the fear of God in my heart, or of the firm conviction of the truth of His Word.²²

Many more than this nineteenth-century soldier have believed the Bible to be true and, in addition, have known much of its contents, but have been devoid of saving faith. This person eventually experienced a remarkable conversion; many with equal or more plentiful opportunities do not.

In his recent speech accepting the award for “Humanist of the Year,” Ted Turner tells of a sad pilgrimage filled with excitable revivalistic biblicism resulting in many an external decision, but without any accompanying change of heart, or alteration of affection. Taken to Sunday School as a boy and sent to a Presbyterian preparatory school from grades seven through twelve, Turner developed a keen sense of the reality of eternal punishment. At age 17 he decided to be a missionary so he could “go out there and find the poor souls that aren’t subjected to all this good religion,” and that “don’t know they’re gonna go to hell and spend the rest of eternity there.” During this time he says that religion was pounded into him so much that he “was saved at least seven or eight times.” A lengthy illness of his sister, from which she died in spite of his prayers, led Turner to doubt either the power or the goodness of God. He thought, “I’m not sure that I want any part of this.” He began to lose his faith, and the more he lost it the better he felt. Eventually he rejected the Christian doctrines of sin and atonement. “Weird, man, I’m telling you,” is his contemporary evaluation of those central doctrines. “What’s wrong

with saying that we’re basically good?” he asks. “Nobody has to die on the cross for us, with blood sacrifice.”²³

Without analyzing his falling before the most fundamental and ancient of the philosophical issues, or his rejection of the only system that confronts it squarely and gives rationale and hope in its face, or his terrible doctrinal misperceptions, it is clear that Turner never had a change of heart to see his sin, the infinite excellence of God, and the justice of God in all His judgments. Sin, innate and voluntary, blinds us to the beauties and wisdom of God’s redemptive activity. Only one thing can make us see it.

Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” At that point all the evidences collapse into an intuitive and compelling sense of the beauty of knowing God. This goes beyond, though connected with, the mental apprehension of how the death and resurrection of Christ give perfect harmony to the attributes of holiness, justice, righteousness, and truth and the works of mercy, grace, reconciliation, and redemption. It all resolves into the response of faith—a resignation of all hope in one’s self, an affirmation of the justice of God in His verdict of “guilty” on sinners, a confidence in Christ’s ability and willingness to save, and an embracing of Christ’s work and way for sinners.

Historical Ambivalence: Reformation and Revival

The controversies of the First Great Awakening caused great wariness on the part of the next generation of revival promoters and observers. Genuinely concerned that true doctrine find full exposition in revival preaching and that “discriminating discourses” clearly distinguishing true religion from every counterfeit be at the heart of public exposition and private counsel, these leaders had virtually no

toleration for “enthusiasm.” Bennet Tyler, a leader of the New England portion of the Second Great Awakening, was pleased that the “fanaticism and delusion which succeeded the [revival] in the days of Whitefield and Edwards” did not mar the one of which he was a part. Tyler spoke of “temporary excitements, which, like a tornado, sweep through the community, and leave desolation behind them,” and believed that “all religious excitement is injurious, which is not the result of clear apprehensions of Divine truth.” The preachers preached the doctrines of grace and had no fears that “the preaching of these doctrines would hinder the progress of a revival.” They insisted on the utter sovereignty of God, justification by faith, the necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and that the heart of man was enmity against God; but just as clearly “demolished all their vain excuses, and pressed upon them with great plainness, the duty of immediate repentance.” When converted, the people saw from their own experience “the truth of all the great fundamental doctrines of the gospel.” Tyler called on all who loved Zion to pray unceasingly “that pure revivals may increase in number and power, till the whole world shall be converted to Christ.”²⁴

Though Tyler’s view, for the most part, achieves great balance between doctrine and experience, his level of toleration for variety of experience was low. He greatly preferred sameness. In observing the evenness of the fruit of the revival, Tyler remarked that the preachers preached the same doctrines and adopted the same measures.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the blessing of God on their labors, should produce the same results. True religion, indeed, is the same everywhere and at all times, and when the same means are used to promote it, we are to expect that its manifestations will be essentially the same.²⁵

The resistance to injudicious excitement is so great that even variety in experience becomes suspect. Gone is the

power of Edwards’s flexibility in which he speaks of “*the manner of persons being wrought upon*; and here there is a *vast variety*, perhaps as manifold as the subjects of the operation; but yet in many things there is a *great analogy* in all.”²⁶ Tyler expected predictability in the work of God; Edwards said we should be prepared for the “surprising.”

Others showed this same resistance to “excitements.” Henry Davis, president of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, reminded his contemporaries of the excesses of James Davenport. These, he argued, should warn how prone we are to “mistake the wild and ungovernable emotions of the animal nature, for the operation of the Holy Spirit.”²⁷ Archibald Alexander advises, “All means and measures which produce a high degree of excitement, or a great commotion of the passions, should be avoided.” (What would he have said about *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*?) Alexander continues, “Religion does not consist in these violent emotions, nor is it promoted by them; and when they subside, a wretched state of deadness is sure to succeed.”²⁸

Samuel Miller reminds us that the Reformation had its “Carloststadt,” who acted the turbulent part; the Great Awakening had its Davenport, who gave unrestrained liberty to his own fanaticism and encouraged the same in others. The early nineteenth century saw the birth of the camp meeting on the frontier, which not only produced “strong excitement” but various kinds of heresy, “a confusion scarcely describable,” and other “deplorable irregularities.” Soon Charles Finney, initially approving such excitement, initiated revival by New Measures. Miller criticizes Finney’s “anxious bench” as of a kind with camp meetings and gives a very negative evaluation of both.

In fine, I suppose the truth concerning both “camp-meetings,” and “anxious seats” to be about this: That however useful

they may have *really* been in a few cases, of very peculiar character; and however they may have *appeared* to some honest but ardent minds, to operate favorably in a still greater number of cases, yet, as means of stated and promiscuous use, or in fact, as means to be *used at all*, unless in very special circumstances, they are eminently adapted to generate favoritism; to give a taste for ostentatious display in the service of the sanctuary; to favor the rapid multiplication of superficial, ignorant, untrained professors of religion; and to prepare the way for almost every species of disorder.²⁹

Ashbel Green perhaps summarizes the view of this group best when he discussed errors and abuses to be avoided. After a long list of the injurious practices of New Measures revivalists, Green stated, "New Measure men reproach us with being enemies to revivals, but they are themselves the greatest real enemies to those displays of God's special mercy, that they ever have." Their activities, since they are identified with the cause of revival, serve only as a reproach to their real progress. "Now, if the world is to be converted to God by revivals of religion," which Green fully believed and thought to be evident to any reflecting mind, "those who abuse and pervert revivals, whatever may be their pretensions or intentions, are really opposing the plan and purposes of God." Because so much is at stake, Green favored opposing these men "openly, and without fear or hesitation, and the sooner it is done after their operations have commenced, the better."³⁰

Reformation—Yes: Revival—?

Increasingly, this class of revival supporters became so cautious about the possibility of abuses that they seemed on occasion to yearn for a situation that never called for the necessity of an extraordinary work of God. Archibald

Alexander contemplated a situation in which there would be a "continuous lively state of piety; and an unceasing progress in the conversion of the impenitent." Then such increasing prosperity would be the case "that revivals shall no longer be needed," or perhaps it could be referred to as a state of perpetual revival. Alexander Proudfit preferred catechizing as a means of maintaining spiritual vitality and regularity of conversion. It is best adapted to support the regular order of the church without resorting to "extra or protracted" meetings.³¹

This sort of hesitance merged with outright resistance in the person of John W. Nevin. The colleague of the great Philip Schaff at Mercersburg, Nevin fired one of the most formidable shots in the battle against the New Measures introduced by Charles Finney. Nevin's intent was stated clearly: "The very design of the inquiry now proposed, is to show that the "anxious bench," and the system to which it belongs, have no claim to be considered either salutary or safe, in the service of religion." All the arguments in favor of the system based on its supposed effects Nevin considered as worthy of no confidence whatever.³²

He likened it to quackery, a "pretension to an inward virtue or power, which is not possessed in fact, on the ground of a mere show of strength which such virtue or power is supposed to include." There are quacks in every name and shape, lawyers, statesmen, doctors, teachers, gentlemen, and religionists. Simon Magus he considered the "prototype and prince of evangelical quacks. This system will cure nothing at all but will rather be the refuge of weakness and the resort of quacks, a worm at the root of the ministry, a milldew on the face of congregations and churches whose blighting presence threatens the perfection of any fruit."³³

The "anxious bench" creates a false issue for the conscience, unsettles true seriousness, usurps the place of the

cross, substitutes actions, decisions, commitments, for true repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In short, it is in contrast to Nevin's understanding of a true biblical ministry which he calls "the system of the *Catechism*." The two systems involve two different theories of religion; they are antagonistic to each other.³⁴ The catechism stands for the regular teaching ministry of the church, consistent doctrinal preaching, and the biblical use of the sacraments. By this means, true Christian experience with fruit unto holiness may be expected. The other system "has much to answer for, in the occasion it has given, and is giving still, for the name of God to be blasphemed, and for the sacred cause of revivals to be vilified and opposed."³⁵

Herman Hanko, a contemporary theologian also in the tradition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* has taken Nevin's view one step further and rejected the concept of revival totally.³⁶ He views the superfluous manifestations which have accompanied various revivals through history as the essence of revival. He sees the theology of Wesley, Finney, and, in my opinion, a wrongly-described Puritan theology, as foundational to revival. He considers the Puritans "wrong, desperately wrong, in their conception of Christian experience." Hanko believes revival also leads unalterably to Roman Catholic mysticism and the charismatic movement. In his opinion it has a wrong view of conversion and of the covenant. He affirms that "The children of the church are covenant children, themselves already regenerated. In their lives conversion is a daily turning from sin and turning to God in humble repentance." Revival theology mocks this concept, he contends, and substitutes an unbiblical emphasis on crisis prompted by the preaching of the law, conviction of sin, preparatory grace, and an eventual "closing with Christ." Therefore, "revival is wrong. Revival is contrary to the Scriptures. Revival is at odds with the Reformed faith. To pray for revival is to go against the will of God and is to

grieve the Holy Spirit." This illustrates how difficult it has become, both for pro- and anti-revivalists, to separate the incidental from the essential. This difficulty leads many simply to quit trying.³⁶

Doctrinal Dalliance for Revival Results

Charles Finney constructed the New Measures system which gained such energetic opposition. Much of the opposition came because he reduced revival to the "purely philosophical result of the right use of means."³⁷ One fact about the government of God is certain, Finney maintained, and that is that "the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of appropriate means." Included in these means for Finney early in his ministry was "excitement sufficient to break up the dormant moral powers."³⁸ Other excitements can only be counteracted by religious excitements.³⁹

Finney believed that the moral means for revival were not beyond the present capabilities of man in his fallen condition. They simply needed to be awakened; the use of unusual means could do it. He also seemed to deprecate the normal channels of church ministry in favor of his concept of revival. "Better were it for them," he says of children, "if there were no means of grace, no sanctuary, no Bible, no preaching, than to live and die where there is no revival."⁴⁰

A great outcry against this system came from many quarters. In his later years, however, Finney realized that he had placed too little emphasis on the "necessity of divine influence upon the hearts of Christians and of sinners." With admirable candor Finney added, "I am confident that I have sometimes erred in this respect myself," and instead emphasized "the natural ability of sinners to the neglect of showing them the nature and extent of their dependence upon the grace of God and influence of His Spirit."⁴¹

Finney also came to amend his views on "excitements."

In an 1845 letter on revival he addressed this issue in detail. His position is clear in the following passage:

I have sometimes witnessed efforts that were manifestly intended to create as much excitement as possible, and not infrequently have measures been used which seemed to have the tendency to instruct or to subdue the will, or to bring sinners to the point of intelligently closing in with the terms of salvation; but on the contrary, it has seemed to me to beget a sort of infatuation through the power of overwhelming excitement. I cannot believe that this is healthful or at all safe in revivals.⁴²

This does not represent a complete alteration, however, for he still advocated the use of “extra and exciting efforts” to promote revivals, but in the context of wisdom against “indiscretion, and means of an *unnecessarily* agitating and exciting character.” His concern was to use means that would secure attention to the truth, not divert attention from the truth.⁴³

Reticence about Finney in a major part of the evangelical church did not really arise from his introduction of New Measures. In reality the New Measures were but a symptom of a changed theology. Finney did not accept Reformation theology. He rejected penal substitutionary atonement (“It is naturally impossible, as it would require that satisfaction should be made to retributive justice [which] . . . can never be satisfied.”⁴⁴), justification by faith (“The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ’s obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption.”⁴⁵), bondage of the will (“Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is or would be physical, and not moral depravity. [Moral depravity] cannot consist in anything back of choice, and that sustains to choice the relation of a cause.”⁴⁶), and, thus, the necessity of effica-

cious grace. Regeneration was for Finney the alteration of mind due to the influence of truth upon it. This was not mere intellectual belief, for the devils have that, but a purposeful, volitional change of the ultimate preference or choice of the soul.⁴⁷ Finney taught that the sinner changes his heart by changing his mind when given a sufficient amount of convincing truth. Accordingly, he felt that the preaching of those like Edwards, Alexander, et al., was the source of much and ruinous error in the management of revivals.

Sinners have been kept long under conviction, because their spiritual guides withheld those particular truths which at the time above all others they needed to know. They have been perplexed and confounded by abstract doctrines, metaphysical subtleties [sic], absurd exhibitions of the sovereignty of God, inability, physical regeneration and constitutional depravity, until the agonized mind, discouraged and mad from contradiction from the pulpit, and absurdity in conversation, dismissed the subject as altogether incomprehensible, and postponed the performance of duty as impossible.⁴⁸

In the end, Finney was not too experiential and emotional, but too cerebral. He relied too little on altered affections as a foundation for true faith and asserted too plainly the purity and power of the mind of man in religious matters. Nothing lay behind the mind of man as a *cause* of action; not only were sinners commanded to make themselves a new heart, they were entirely capable of doing so. When, in accordance with his own observation, churches affected by his revivals became shallow spiritually, he advocated the doctrine of entire sanctification as a remedy. Ministers formerly open to his approach refused to admit him to preach that doctrine; he, therefore, concluded that they “refused to be searched . . . and the result is that the

Spirit of God has left and is fast leaving them.”⁴⁹

Archibald Alexander was just as passionate about Finney’s assertions as was Finney, in the opposite direction, however. Entire sanctification would never answer the problems of the churches. The problem was not in sanctification but in the initial gospel message.

And here I cannot but remark that among all the preposterous notions which a new and crude theology has poured forth so profusely in our day, there is none more absurd, than that a dead sinner can beget new life in himself. The very idea of a man’s becoming his own father in the spiritual regeneration is as unreasonable as such a supposition in relation to our first birth. Away with all such soul-destroying, God-dishonouring sentiments!⁵⁰

From Alteration to Evacuation

If theology can be fondled and manipulated to submit to the purposes of a revivalist, then perhaps it can be dismissed altogether. A group of revivalists followed in the wake of Finney who placed little importance on distinctive theology as a necessary foundation for revival. Though effective in many ways, an ardent advocate of moral reform, and unique in his presentation, Samuel Porter Jones (1847-1906) is a paradigm of those who minimized theology in quest of what was hoped would be revival. “Oh, that preachers would preach less of doctrine and more of Jesus Christ,” he pled. He could characterize the “little Presbyterian preacher” as standing in his pulpit “preaching about the final perseverance of the saints and the elect, and not half of his gang have anything to persevere on.” The Baptists he painted as “hollering, ‘Water, water,’ and half his crowd going where there is no water.” The Episcopalians ring the changes about apostolic succession when they “better be looking to where they are going than to where they came

from.” Jones felt sorry for the preacher “who has a creed that needs defense.”⁵¹

In reality, Jones’s theology was not non-existent, just ill-formed and exaggeratedly popular. The elect are the “who-soever wills,” repentance is “doing your whole duty,” evangelism is getting “men to see how merciful God is to the man that wants to do the clean thing.” Somehow, for Jones, the origin of the atonement in the love of God eliminates any aspect of wrath from it. When speaking of the wrath of God being poured on the Son, Jones cried, “It’s a lie! It’s a lie! God never was mad, nor did He ever shoot the javelin from His great hand at the heart and body of His Son.” If a traditional orthodoxist protests that if the Son had not received the Father’s wrath, he would have to pour it on us, Jones replies, “It is false! It is false! It is false!” He then can quote I John 4:10 and completely ignore the concept of *propitiation*. Is it uncharitable to contemplate whether some in this camp may be among those of whom Paul said, “One comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached?” (2 Cor. 11: 4 NASB).

A New New Measures

In light of the development of reformation and revival in the last 200 years, it is worth asking whether the contemporary church growth movement is simply an advanced species of New Measures. Among the commitments the movement has in common with historic Reformation theology are the desire to be obedient to the great commission, a passion for the salvation of individuals, and the numerical growth of the church. Church growth leaders have been at the forefront in insisting on the continuance of cross-cultural missions. In addition, they have sought to maintain the priority of evangelistic and church planting missions while others have been pressured into what is called holistic missions, which more often than not substitute social ac-

tion for evangelism. Also their work in analyzing cultural anthropology has given a necessary reminder that we must not transport Western culture into mission areas, but we must be sure that we do all things for the sake of the gospel, and to the uncircumcised become as uncircumcised. The structuring of *strategy* in evangelizing both the world and the church field has been seen as a legitimately spiritual task.

Given these strengths, there are also some cautions which need to be stated. These cautions come from a novice in this particular area of practical divinity, but seem to emerge regularly as concerns in my conversation with church growth specialists and practitioners and in reading church growth literature.

First, in the same mentality with Finney, there is a tendency to compete with the world by imitating its values and develop greater excitements than the world. An analysis of what people like and are accustomed to as a model for what the church should give them tends to minimize the head-on conflict that the gospel always has with the world.

Second, this tendency has an admittedly pragmatic feature which can be harmless but can also be compromising. The gospel has an ultimate goal of glorifying God, a penultimate goal of saving sinners, and an antepenultimate goal of drawing sinners through convincing them of their sin and misery and enlightening their minds in the glories of Christ. Sometimes church growth principles focus only on the penultimate goal and redefine it in terms of movement toward Christ. In this way the antepenultimate goal is often bypassed, and the ultimate goal is seen only dimly.

Third, this pragmatic tendency many times leads to a minimizing of theology. In reformation and historic revival, clear and precise theology held a place of preeminence. This was seen as a matter of eternal life and eternal death. No careless dealing with souls was permissible. Church

growth advocates do not forsake the vocabulary of repentance and faith, but close analysis of their nature appears to have very little place in church growth concerns. Sometimes, for the sake of discussion, movements are considered genuine which even in the most casual and forgiving reading appear to have little real gospel truth connected with them. Peter Wagner has said, "Church growth principles have intentionally been kept as atheological as possible, on the assumption that they can be adapted to fit into virtually any systematic theological tradition."⁵² This Sam Jones principle may be harmless in some areas, but in others, when creating a theory that has to do with confronting sinners with the claims of God and the gospel, an atheological approach is inadequate simply because it is atheological.

Fourth, church growth emphases tend to assume that initial conversions will be of such a nature that deep spirituality will only be attained by a subsequent system of follow-up. This is similar to Finney's development of his brand of sanctification to accomplish that which his gospel could not do. Obviously, continued teaching is in order for growth in grace, but the gospel of the Reformers, Edwards, Whitefield, Samuel Miller, and others, had at its heart a principle that drove men toward the pursuit of holiness. Establishing principles that create a large body of nominal Christians in need of a second work or a "secret" of happiness and holiness is hardly friendly to the biblical gospel.

Fifth, in some cases church growth principles become more than a framework into which the gospel can be more widely disseminated. At times, the principles themselves become the drawing power. The means have become the end. Such an attractive situation is established by the use of sociological tools, that many people are drawn simply on the basis that they find a social group with which they feel comfortable. The preaching becomes void of the offense of

the cross in order not to undo what the sociological principle has done, and an increasing number are received into the church through the broad way and not through the narrow gate. In many American churches this produces a shifting in the arrangement of church members and has created mega-churches and killed neighborhood churches. The mega-churches grow, not because they are superior in their evangelism or better in their preaching or more apt to produce genuine discipleship, but because they have the resources to create special activities appealing to the desires of many different types of groups. This situation is not intended by any of the church growth advocates, but follows very naturally from some of the methods. What is atheological has at times become tremendously devastating theologically.

Conclusion

The church must always seek reformation and revival. Likewise, all that tends to erode true reformation or pollute true revival must be resisted and/or corrected. God will undertake this for Himself and will raise up a company to accomplish it. Without being insincere or melodramatic, we should not fear to emulate the examples of Luther and Calvin in one of the most strategic and dangerous of all times for the church and claim as our own intention that of Calvin before Charles V.

In regard to ourselves, whatever be the event, we will always be supported, in the sight of God, by the consciousness that we have desired both to promote His glory and for good to His Church; that we have laboured faithfully for that end; that, in short, we have done what we could. Our conscience tells us, that is all our wishes, and all our endeavours, we have had no other aim. And we have essayed, by clear proof, to testify the fact. And certainly, while we feel assured, that

we both care for and do the work of the Lord, we are also confident, that He will by no means be wanting either to Himself or to it.⁵³

- 1 John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, edited and translated by Henry Beveridge, 1:125.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 5 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1:621.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 653.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 652-53.
- 8 Gilbert Tennent, *Sermons and Essays by the Tennents and Their Contemporaries*, p. 33.
- 9 Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God in the Great Awakening*, pp. 231-32.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 410.
- 12 Edwards, *Works*, 1:235.
- 13 Edwards, *Works*, 1:656.
- 14 Edwards, *Faithful Narrative in The Great Awakening*, p. 160.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 167-68.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 17 Edwards, *Works*, 1:345.
- 18 *The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*, November, 1803, pp. 180-81. The report is by Silas Churchill, pp. 179-89. It is typical of several that occur in the magazine from July 1800, when it began, through at least 1804.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 21 *Ibid.*, March 1804, p. 359.
- 22 Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p. 139.
- 23 Ted Turner, "Humanism's Fighting Chance" in *The Humanist*, (January/February 1991) pp. 12-15, 34.
- 24 Bennet Tyler, *New England Revivals As They Existed at*

- the Close of the Eighteenth, and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries*, pp. vii-xi.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- 26 Edwards, *Works*, 1:350.
- 27 W.B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revival*, p. 109. Appendix, Letter XIV, from Rev. Henry Davis.
- 28 *Ibid.*, Letter I by Archibald Alexander, p. 7.
- 29 *Ibid.*, Appendix, Letter IV, p. 41.
- 30 *Ibid.*, Appendix, Letter XVIII, p. 144.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-85.
- 32 John W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, pp. 7, 18.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-28.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 36 Herman Hanko, "Ought the Church to Pray for Revival?", *Trinity Review*, May/June 1991 (Number 79): Published by the Trinity Foundation, Jefferson, MD.
- 37 Charles Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, p. 5.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 41 Charles Finney, *Reflections of Revival*, compiled by Donald W. Dayton, pp. 17-18.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-84, 119-123.
- 44 Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 207.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 167.
- 47 Finney, *Revivals*, p. 414.
- 48 Charles Finney, "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts," in *Issues in American Protestantism*, p. 169.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 104-110.
- 50 Alexander, p. 22.
- 51 Samuel Porter Jones, *Sam Jones' Revival Sermons*, p. 232.

52 Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, p. 83.

53 Calvin, *Selected Works*, 1:233.

Author

Dr. Thomas J. Nettles is Professor of church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. He previously taught at Mid-America Baptist Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is an author and minister of the gospel and serves as an advisor to Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc.