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Reformation
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The Welsh Revival of 1904: Problems and Blessings

Eifion Evans

The achievements of the 1904 Welsh Revival were both real and widespread. The churches experienced fresh vigor, thousands were truly converted, and society was challenged anew with Christian realities. Daily newspapers carried reports of revival manifestations, leading to a far-reaching awareness of spiritual activity. Memories of deep convictions and heightened emotions, of crowded gatherings, intense prayers, and exuberant song, lingered long in the land. Other lands, too, were blessed with powerful awakenings as a direct result of the work in Wales.

An objective appraisal of the Revival's beneficial and lasting impact, however, requires deeper investigation. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to establish the integrity and quality of that Revival, and to make a biblical assessment of its legacy to the church of God.

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Definition and General Considerations

First, however, it is wise to be clear about the terms that we use. By *revival* we mean that gracious outpouring of God's Spirit which restores life and vitality to the church. In revival the people of the world become conscious of spiritual realities, and sinners are converted to Christ in considerable numbers. As a result of revival the standard and practice of holiness among professing believers is elevated, and fresh impetus is given to the church's missionary task.

Although our definition is long, it is necessary. It lays down at the outset that true revival is God-given, an initiative taken by God in sovereign grace and powerful activity toward His languishing people. It implies that previously the church has experienced a period of declension and reversal. Thus revival is God coming among His people: "Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before You!" (Isa. 64:1).

Furthermore, such is the realization of God's presence

that the people of the world take notice. Large numbers are convicted of their godless state. Many turn to God in repentance, come to faith in Christ, and are added to the church. The face of entire communities is changed, and eternal realities take on a new urgency and relevance.

Following closely upon such "times of refreshing from the Lord" (Acts 3:19), the means of grace are zealously attended and profoundly blessed. There is abroad a solemn fear of God and a deep-seated delight in godliness. Moral standards are raised and the best interests of the soul are jealously guarded. A new zeal accompanies missionary endeavor as believers give greater priority to the spread of Christ's kingdom.

In every work of God there will always be the efforts of the evil one to detract, divert, and, if possible, destroy. The Egyptian magicians parodied the miracles of Moses (Ex. 7:11, 22), and "while everyone was sleeping" the enemy "came and sowed weeds among the wheat" in the Gospel parable (Matt. 13:25). In 1745 Wesley defended the Great Awakening in England with these words: "Do you delay fixing your judgment till you see a work of God, without any stumbling block attending it? That never was yet, nor ever will. 'It must needs be that offenses will come.' And scarce ever was there such a work of God before, with so few as have attended this."¹ Alongside genuine conversions there will be the counterfeit; mingled with true emotions there will be spurious emotionalism; fleshly zeal will sometimes be mistaken for fervency of spirit. Truly, revival is a mixed work. But the alternative to a mixed revival is not no revival at all, but a revival guarded by discernment, prayer, and wisdom. Likewise, the alternative to false emotionalism is not no emotion at all, but true emotion regulated by the Word of God.

True revival may always be distinguished from successful evangelism by the spontaneous and general nature of the

work. The spontaneity is evident in that men have a sense of God's presence and power independently of human instrumentality. They may be down a mine shaft, or sitting at home, but the faculties of the soul are irresistibly alerted to spiritual values. The general nature of the work is all too apparent. It cannot be confined to a building, or even a locality; one community, distant from another, and independently of it, is touched; whole communities at once, sometimes vast geographical areas and diverse cultural groups, are involved in the sweeping tide of blessing. Revival is not a matter of human organization, but of divine visitation.

All these characteristics were present in the Welsh Revival of 1904. It was widespread, affecting the whole of the country, and spreading to neighboring British localities, to mainland Europe, India, the United States, and in time, Korea and China. One instrument in the revival who received greater publicity than others was Evan Roberts. He not only predicted that the revival would spread worldwide, but was also convinced that 100,000 would be added to the churches in Wales. Far more than this number were affected, and although there were many who fell away, the work proved of immense and lasting benefit. The vast majority of the converts were young people, and these in later years provided leadership, courage, and stability through the trying times of World War I and the chilly breezes of theological liberalism.

Crisis and Opportunity: the Background of the Revival

The end of the nineteenth century in Wales was a time of great social changes. Industrial strife was on the increase, and the population was becoming more urbanized. Education for many was beyond their means. There was a growing nationalism, with an attendant pride in a distinctively Welsh culture. Socialism, although not yet rampant, was a growing

force. Scientific discoveries and evolutionary theories were coming increasingly to the fore. There was a distinct lack of a biblical framework to provide guidelines for a Christian response to these changes in social customs and outlook.

In church life there was much controversy about the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales. Non-conformist religious privileges were not commensurate with their numerical majority. There was a growing, and eventually successful, campaign to rectify this imbalance. More serious, however, was the growing influence of subjectivism in the realm of belief and behavior. There was growing prejudice against doctrinal and creedal affirmations, vague notions about the moral influence of the church taking their place. Sunday schools tended to neglect the Old Testament, and there was a decline in Bible reading in the home. Man's subjective "moral consciousness" was replacing the objective authority of God's Word, prominence was given to the incarnation rather than the atonement, and "the religion of Jesus," rather than the faith which centers on Jesus, took priority.

Nevertheless, prior to the Revival there were encouraging signs of alarm at these things, and some awareness of a spiritual crisis. Evan Roberts had been praying for some thirteen years for revival. In 1897 there had been a universal call throughout the churches to prayer for "a greater manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit." For some ten years the Welsh religious bodies had talked in the church courts about the necessity for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There had also been smaller, local revivals in Wales throughout the 1890s.² None of these factors on their own, or even together, however, would have stemmed the tide of declension which threatened to remove the candlesticks of God's churches in Wales during the next decade. Man's extremity is always God's opportunity.

Three Important Influences

It would not be true to say that the years preceding the revival were spiritually inactive. What needs to be ascertained is the nature and contribution of those activities. The example of American evangelistic methods, which could be traced back to Charles G. Finney and the campaign methods of D. L. Moody, were being followed. In Wales the brothers Frank and Seth Joshua were constrained to engage in aggressive campaigning in the bigger towns of South Wales, with a measure of local success. Their meetings featured personal testimony, hymn singing, and prayer. Great emphasis was placed on a personal assurance of salvation. These experimental, somewhat subjective, aspects, along with an impatient, immediate desire to register spiritual response, were carried over into the revival meetings.

Meanwhile, further West than Evan Roberts' homeground of Swansea, and nearer in time to his emergence as a revivalist, there were stirrings of spiritual anguish and intense fervor. These manifested themselves principally among young people in the congregations of two ministers, Joseph Jenkins and John Thickens. Both longed for a deeper spiritual experience and wider pastoral usefulness. They were attracted to the holiness teaching of the English Keswick movement, and the meetings they fostered propagated the idea of a "second blessing" by faith as the means of consecration or sanctification. As J. I. Packer points out, this splits salvation into two, one from sin's guilt (justification), and the other from sin's power (sanctification), a position that is hardly sustainable on a biblical understanding of these truths.³ This teaching, too, found favor during the Revival. Indeed, through the pages of the monthly Welsh periodical, *Yr Efynglydd*, provided especially for the Revival converts, it became the staple diet of many in the lean years that followed.

A third factor in the pre-Revival era had great signifi-

cance for the blessings and problems that accompanied it. This has to do with Welsh preaching, in which both style and content were grievously defective. Welsh preachers by and large aimed at “hwyl,” a fervent elevation of voice and manner which gave the impression that the preacher was under deep constraints on account of his message. The voice might be elevated, with or without tremor, and this would sometimes be accompanied by a singing intonation. For the purpose of edifying, however, it did nothing. It was more a rhetorical device to entertain than a prophetic declaration to convict the hearers. As to content, sadly there was increasing evidence of capitulation to liberal theology, and sound biblical exposition was at a premium.

Along with the erosion of preaching standards was the growth of special occasions, like Harvest Thanksgivings, Singing Festivals (*Y Gymanfa Ganu*), watchnight services, literary meetings, and temperance meetings. All these signalled a grave departure from a consecutive and consistent ministry of God’s Word. In addition, many if not most of the nonconformist churches favored itinerant preaching rather than settled ministry. Such had been the tradition handed down for many generations, but it did not provide the revival, when it came, with a solid foundation on which to build.

Salient Facts

As early as February 1904 the first stirrings of fresh spiritual vigor were experienced in West Wales. Young people were coming to faith in Christ, there was an unusual appetite for spiritual things, and some young Christians were giving expression to their new-found faith and joy by confessing Christ publicly. During the summer, other areas, too, were being blessed in a similar way, even though they were geographically remote from one another. With the coming of the winter months, in both North and South

Wales there were clear evidences of God visiting His people. Individual churches could speak of tens of conversions in a short time. In due course, these isolated and unconnected pockets of blessing all merged into the wider pattern of revival. Preaching, singing, and giving testimony characterized the meetings, and those who attended were, for the most part, already church members or adherents.

The former coalminer and blacksmith, Evan Roberts, came into prominence as a revivalist early in November 1904. He had just returned to his home near Swansea, South Wales, after an enduement with the Spirit’s power at the West Wales gatherings mentioned earlier. His experience there was unforgettable:

I fell on my knees with my arms over the seat in front of me, my face was bathed in perspiration, and the tears flowed in streams. . . . I cried out, “Bend me! Bend me! Bend us! . . . It was God’s commending His love which bent me, while I saw nothing in it to commend. After I was bent, what a wave of peace flooded my bosom. . . . Then the fearful bending of the judgment day came to my mind, and I was filled with compassion for those who must bend at the judgment, and I wept. . . . I felt ablaze with a desire to go through the length and breadth of Wales to tell of the Savior, and had it been possible, I was willing to pay God for doing so.⁴

As a result, his theological training was curtailed, and he soon obtained the necessary permission from his pastor to hold nightly prayer meetings. These continued long into the night, Roberts relating his experience and urging those present “to prepare for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.”

A reporter from the national newspaper, *The Western Mail*, was present at one of these meetings. The next day’s copy of the paper described the occasion:

I felt that this was no ordinary gathering. Instead of the set order of proceedings to which we are accustomed at the

orthodox religious service, everything here was left to the spontaneous impulse of the moment. The preacher, too, did not remain in his usual seat. For the most part he walked up and down the aisles, open Bible in hand, exhorting one, encouraging another, and kneeling with a third to implore a blessing from the Throne of Grace. A young woman rose to give out a hymn, which was sung with deep earnestness. While it was being sung several people dropped down in their seats as if they had been struck, and commenced crying for pardon. Then from another part of the chapel could be heard the resonant voice of a young man reading a portion of Scripture. . . . Finally, Mr. Roberts announced the holding of future meetings, and at 4:25 [a.m.] o'clock the gathering dispersed. But even at this hour the people did not make their way home. When I left to walk back to Llanelli I left dozens of them about the road still discussing what is now the chief subject in their lives.⁵

From that time Roberts' name was inseparably linked with the 1904 Revival. It is important to remember, however, that the Revival was not confined to the areas where, or to the occasions when, he ministered. Many others rose to prominence at the time, and exercised fruitful ministries, in particular, E. Keri Evans, R. B. Jones, and W. Nantlais Williams.

For some time Roberts had prayed for revival. His upbringing in Welsh Calvinistic Methodism (now known as The Presbyterian Church of Wales) had provided him with a biblical, experimental, and Calvinistic framework for his spirituality. He would have known about the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, and the Welsh hymns it produced taught him sound theology. Next to the Bible, he treasured Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a Welsh Catechism was also his constant companion. His understanding and expectation of revival would have been in keeping with this rich legacy of Reformed history and theology.

Nevertheless, Roberts' practice during the Revival was

to exhort rather than to expound, and to pray rather than to preach. Congregational as well as solo singing featured prominently in his meetings, as did giving testimony. There were direct appeals for individual, personal response, by way of yielding, repenting, coming to Christ, confessing sin, or praying. Meetings were unstructured, sometimes disorderly, invariably crowded, and often charged with emotion. Sadly, biblical content was minimal: an occasional brief sermon, some solid hymns, and Scripture texts of promise or rebuke as befitted the occasion.

From his home area Roberts went to the industrial valleys of South Wales, reaping a similarly extensive spiritual harvest. By the end of 1904 some 32,000 converts had been counted, mainly in South Wales. The following year brought even greater blessings, but also opposition and excesses. Some gave public expression to their skepticism as to the authenticity and integrity of the work. Physical manifestations were widespread: people falling to the ground under great conviction, others crying out loudly in remorse or with the joy of release. Roberts began to display an erratic disposition in his conduct of the meetings, claiming direct visions and messages from God. His visit to Liverpool and North Wales in 1905 was a mixed experience for him. He took the advice of physicians to rest his body and mind, and then resumed his activities. By the spring of 1906 he had effectively withdrawn from public ministry. By this time also, the Welsh revival had waned, and the churches settled into the work of consolidating the numerical and spiritual gains, and of facing the challenge of the diverse problems it bequeathed.

Consolidating the Blessings

It is hard to quantify the benefits of revival. The church was re-awakened and invigorated, lives were changed, relationships were restored, standards of social behavior el-

evated. The 1904 Welsh Revival produced all these in abundant measure. There were underlying aspects, too, which deserve notice.

First, the numerical gain of the churches happened at a crucial time. Behind them lay the impending threat of devastation by liberalism, formality, and superficiality. Ahead lay trials of another kind, too: the coming ravages of war, the economic depression of the 1920s, further shaking of creedal foundations. Those who were converted in the revival maintained a biblical witness during those crucial years. Their spirituality was warm even if, on occasions, their discernment was inadequate. They provided the churches with faithful leadership as they grew into spiritual maturity.

Identifying the Problems

The most serious charge that must be laid against the leaders of the Revival is that they failed to insist on biblical exposition during revival meetings. This is a general statement, of course, and there were exceptions.⁶ However, a sustained and solid presentation of the biblical message would have done two things for the new converts. It would have given them a safer grounding in the faith, and it would have established clearly in their minds and hearts the authority of God's written Word. As it was, many were ill-equipped to face in years to come the fierce battle waged over biblical inerrancy and authority. Another consequence was the neglect of family worship, a fact bemoaned by a contributor to *Yr Efenglydd* in 1931 (p. 99).

The presuppositions with which some of the leaders entered the Revival persisted afterwards. This was particularly true with regard to the validity and usefulness of the Keswick holiness teaching, and belief in the imminent, premillennial second advent of Christ. These found particular expression in *Yr Efenglydd* and the Bible Training Insti-

tute, both started by R. B. Jones. Its purpose was "To keep alive the spirit of revival, to spread the truths emphasized by the Revival, and to build up the faith and holiness of people blessed by the Revival." For his part, R. B. Jones claimed for it:

No one has been more faithful to Calvary and the Atoning Blood. Yet Christianity is not a circle but an ellipse with two centres: Calvary and the Cloud; the Crucifixion and the Coming. No other Welsh periodical holds to the scriptural teaching on Second Advent. It was from the revival that the *Efenglydd* received this faith. The second stress is on holiness.⁷

Later issues endeavored to "dispel the mists of higher criticism, restore healthy Protestantism, reunite small sects and to revive the churches so that they could reap one more harvest before the End."⁸ These ideals, however laudable in their objective, assumed too much. Both during and after the Revival, clear teaching on the meaning of regeneration and justification, on the true nature of Christian experience, and the Christian's walk and warfare in a sinful world, would have been most salutary. Sadly, these areas were neglected.

Instead, both at the time and subsequently, there was much loose talk about the "baptism of the Spirit" and "being filled with the Spirit." To think of these phrases in the way Pentecostalism did then, and the charismatic movement does now, would be wrong. Rather, they were intended to convey the sense of entire submission to Christ's lordship usually involved in what Keswick teaching referred to as the "second blessing." Pentecostal manifestations and charismatic gifts were not involved or desired. However, the 1904 Revival's loose terminology together with the immediacy of its experiences of salvation and assurance meant that it would be regarded by some as the precursor of these movements. An obsession with instant experiences of the

Spirit, at the expense of the gradual, progressive ministry of the Spirit in and to the believer in sanctifying grace, proved highly detrimental to future stability.

Regrettably, it must be admitted that during the Revival, the leaders were not careful enough in the matter of admission to church membership of those who claimed conversion. E. Keri Evans certainly advised caution in this matter:

I was invited to meetings up and down the land and proclaimed chiefly, "Conviction is not conversion,"... adding, "nor is awakening repentance."... There were many... who had been on the crest of a wave of jubilation for well-nigh a whole year, and when the jubilation subsided sought to regain it by artificial means, not realizing that the Holy Spirit works through the imagination and the emotions to the conscience to produce repentance, and through the conscience to the will in order to lead to conversion.⁹

Understandably, however, these words were not always heeded: convictions were strong, appearances were convincing, large numbers were clamoring to join the fellowship of God's people. Even so, there seems to have been a general lack of teaching on the true meaning and cost of discipleship. The disciplines of understanding God's will from Scripture, and of working out its application to everyday life, seem to have received scanty attention. For some, this led to disillusionment as they found a discrepancy between the image of the Christian life projected during the Revival and its reality later. Others failed to realize their calling as "salt" and "light" in society, depriving the culture in which they lived of an important testimony to both God's judgment and salvation.

Finally, the place assigned to human agency in revival, as advocated by Finney's *Lectures*, and implicit in so much of the Revival's activity, was biblically unsound.¹⁰ This was as true of Roberts' understanding of "how to be filled with the

Spirit" (the right use of his method would infallibly secure the blessing desired), as it was of the manner in which so many of the meetings were conducted. Finney's confidence in the success of human methods in evangelism, and in the moral ability of the sinner to respond, was misguided and unbiblical. "Pray, preach, and plead," he felt, was a sure recipe for revival. However, stirring a moribund church in revival is as much a divine miracle as quickening a dead soul in regeneration. God is sovereign in both of these as in all else, and not at our command, whatever conditions we may fulfill.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Welsh Revival of 1904 holds out for us both warning and encouragement. The time before God's visitation should be seen as an opportunity to lay strong foundations in biblical teaching and earnest prayer. Basic gospel truths are neglected to our peril. In Wales there has been no major revival since that of 1904. It is a fact of history that where the legacy of sound biblical exposition, orthodox creedal statements, sustained church discipline, vigorous preaching, and warm fellowship has been eroded, revivals have become fewer and scarcer. While this in some measure explains the grave decline of Christianity in the West, it also holds out a glimmer of hope for the future, for the way ahead must surely lie in restoring these things among us. We must vigorously and joyfully seek once more the old paths, setting in order those things which have decayed, and prepare an altar and sacrifice which will be ready for the fire to fall.

The present spiritual wilderness which surrounds us calls for faithfulness in duties and importunity in prayer. God's Zion lies desolate, while the feverish wickedness of those who know not God seems to continue unabated. But God will yet make the desert to rejoice and blossom, pour-

ing water on the thirsty ground. Let us not lose our spiritual nerve by abandoning God's promises. As He has done in the past, so He will again bring forth a nation in a moment (Isa. 35:1; 44:3; 66:8). It is still the day of grace, and is not the Son of God exalted a Prince and a Savior, "that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:31)? "The Lord is enthroned as King forever!" (Ps. 29:10).

Author

Eifion Evans is the author of a number of books on the subject of revival, including: *Revival Comes to Wales: The Story of the 1859 Revival in Wales* (1959), *The Welsh Revival of 1904* (1969), *Revivals: Their Rise, Progress and Achievements* (1961), and *Two Welsh Revivalists* (1985). He lives presently in Pembroke Dock, Dyfed, Wales, and continues to study and write on the subject of revival.

1. Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, Vol. 1, 1878, p. 469.
2. An excellent survey in Welsh of conditions before the Revival appears in R. Tudor Jones, *Ffydd ac Argyfwng Cenedl, Hanes Crefydd yng Nghymru 1890-1914*, cyfrol i, 1981, pp. 104-106.
3. For a perceptive treatment of Keswick teaching, see J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit*, 1984, pp. 150-63.
4. D.M. Phillips, *Evan Roberts: The Great Welsh Revivalist and His Work*, 1906, pp. 124-25.
5. "Awstin" and other special correspondents of the *Western Mail*, *The Religious Revival in Wales*, six pamphlets newspaper reports issues in 1904-05, pp. 45.
6. For example, an article bearing the title "Recollections of 1904-05" in *Yr Efenglydd* for 1928, p. 91, speaks of a revival meeting in North Wales when the sermon was on "The Deity of Christ."
7. B. P. Jones, *King's Champions*, 1968, pp. 97-98.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

9. *Fy Mhererindod Ysbrydol (My Spiritual Pilgrimage)*, 1938, pp. 74-75.

10. Finney's *Lectures on Revival* had appeared in Welsh in 1839.

A Welsh article on the similarities between Finney and Roberts, and the revivals with which they were associated, is found in *Y Drych*, 6 Ebrill, 1905.

... **W**ithout a single exception it is the rediscovery of these cardinal doctrines that has led ultimately to revival. There is always a preliminary to revival. It appears to come suddenly, and in a sense it does. But if you look carefully into history, you will always find that there was something going on quietly, there was a preliminary, a preparation unobserved by people. And the preparation, invariably, has been a rediscovery of these grand, and glorious, central truths.

Take, for instance, the history of the Protestant Reformation. It was only after Martin Luther had suddenly seen the grand truth of justification by faith only that the Protestant revival came. It was getting back to that truth, in the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, that prepared the way for the outpouring of the Spirit.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
