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A REVIEW ARTICLE

John H. Armstrong

PENTECOST TODAY? THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR UNDERSTANDING REVIVAL

Iain H. Murray

Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth (1998).

226 pages, cloth, \$19.99.

Rarely is a new book on revival published which merits almost universal consideration by serious evangelical readers. This book is the exception! Iain Murray, who has long studied the history and theology of true revival, has given us what is, simply put, the very best argument available, both biblically and theologically, for what true revival is and why we need it in our time.

Arguing from a biblically balanced understanding of Pentecost, Murray demonstrates that the gospel is able "to win sudden acceptance despite the strongest opposition." But is Pentecost still a reality for today? For nearly a century large numbers of evangelicals have argued that Pentecost was a one-time "birthday" for the church and therefore has little, if any, abiding importance for us in the present age. Murray's arguments have value in several areas but none more important than this—he demonstrates that we can and should expect, and pray for, Pentecostal showers upon the church in every age and in every region.

How do you explain epochs in church history where men and women were powerfully filled afresh with the

knowledge of God and the love of Christ? How do you explain gospel advances which parallel the accounts we read in the book of Acts? Murray calls such epochs, which have plainly occurred in redemptive history since the era of the apostles, revivals. He also argues, convincingly to me, that Scripture is clear on what is actually given to those who seek a more abundant measure of the Spirit's ministry in this age—stronger faith in the truth and hearts enlarged with love for Christ and others.

Murray probes the meaning of revival deeply. He shows how confusion regarding the actual meaning of the term "revival" has brought about untold harm. He argues that the difference between normal seasons and revival seasons is primarily "one of degree and measure" (31). He adds, "If revival be, in the first place, a larger giving of the Spirit to Christians, it must mean that they receive more of what they already possess" (31). What this means, practically, is that every alleged revival must be "judged by the same tests by which the genuineness of all Christianity is to be tested" (31). It is for this very same reason that this reviewer is not greatly impressed, overall, with the present hype and continual claims for great revival which presently come from places like Smithton, Missouri, or Pensacola, Florida.

Murray follows this chapter with a survey of the life and thought of Charles G. Finney. In a little over twenty pages he tells the same story I tell in my book, *When God Moves: Preparing for True Revival* (Harvest House, 1998). Finney's aberrant theology was unquestionably dangerous, and thankfully not embraced by significant numbers in our time (at least not knowingly). What does remain, however, is his methodology. This practice, and the resultant view of revival that Finney taught, clearly remains with us to the present day. The effects are chilling!

In chapter three Murray rightly sorts out the issue of human responsibility and divine sovereignty regarding the

subject of revival. His conclusions are pastorally responsible and extremely helpful.

In dealing with the ministry of the Holy Spirit and preaching (Chapter Four) he demonstrates that "The New Testament shows that the times which saw great ingatherings of people into the kingdom of God were always times when the Word of God was being preached in the power of the Holy Spirit" (80). And, he adds, ". . . revival times are to be recognized . . . as times when the Spirit of God filled preachers in a marked way" (83). Furthermore, "there is good reason to believe that, before any new era of church expansion, it is to them (i.e., to preachers) that an unusual degree of the Spirit's filling is commonly first given and that it comes to expression in the way they speak about Christ" (99). The only conclusion one can draw is that earnest preachers, if they would be used of God in their ministry, must more fervently and frequently ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Murray concludes:

Living as we do in a day when conditions in the churches are a great deal closer to the church at Sardis than they are to biblical normality, there is every reason to believe that we must turn in penitence to him who "has the seven Spirits of God." Many times before has the work of preaching fallen into such ineffectiveness as is to be seen at present. . . . There is a near famine for the word of God as far as its power and freshness is concerned and everything points to the inability of man to redress the situation (103).

Chapter Five provides a helpful interpretation of Christian experience, especially revival experience. The two principal marks Murray cites for authentic revival experience include: (1) The Bible is the guide for all that happens, followed by (2) Christ's work is central in what is preached and believed. In this section he includes a helpful section

on the diversity of teaching on "Christ Baptizing with the Spirit" (112-125). He then shows how wrong views of these matters can actually harm the health and progress of true revival.

In 1883 Spurgeon wrote, seemingly in a way that borders on the prophetic, that "Half the people of God hardly know their head from their heels at this time. They are gaping after wonders . . . We are only at the beginning of an era of mingled unbelief and fanaticism" (134). Murray develops the idea that evangelical fanaticism hinders and arrests true revival in Chapter Six. An interesting section of this chapter takes up the 1904-05 revival in Wales, which is to be particularly noted for excess (153-164). Murray admits that "To discern between genuine zeal and evangelical fanaticism is by no means easy" (164), but we need to remember that "the purpose of Satan in promoting evangelical fanaticism is to discredit true revival" (164). What are we to do? Murray's advice is wise and time-tested: "The extent to which revivals remain pure and free from excess is directly related to *the degree of sound scriptural knowledge preserved in the churches and maintained from the pulpits*" (emphasis mine) (165). Should revival be granted in our day Murray suggests three vital lessons to be learned: (1) "Everything possible should be done to avoid mere excitement and to maintain normal routines," (2) "Unpopular though it may be, the first appearances of wildfire need to be resisted," and (3) "Great care and caution is needed in any co-operation between churches and the news-media" (168).

The concluding chapter is a survey of six things revival will bring. These are: (1) Faith in the Word of God, (2) Definiteness in the meaning of "Christian," (3) Advances in the work of the gospel with amazing swiftness, (4) Moral impact upon communities, (5) A definite change in how the ministry is understood, and finally, (6) A change in

public worship within the churches. Appendices follow with helpful material on "the extraordinary gifts," "the co-ordination of grace and duty," and, "Presbyterian doctrine on regeneration, inability and free-agency." A useful index is also included.

Iain Murray accurately notes on the dust jacket of this volume that

It is noteworthy that there are more books describing revivals than there are those that deal with their biblical basis. That may be because to read about revivals is more pleasant, and initially, perhaps, more inspiring, than understanding the struggle to establish a biblical theology which explains and justifies the phenomenon. But in the long run it has to be the latter which is more important. This book aims to supply that lack.

I believe the author has quite ably accomplished what he set out to do. And if we who pray for revival will not also labor to explain both the reality of *real* revival and the need for it then it is doubtful this generation will recover the older and wiser view which was widely held before the mid-nineteenth century. Because the present need is so great, this is a book that I will personally use with great profit the rest of my earthly journey. I encourage every pastor to read it. Give it to your fellow church leaders, elders and deacons. Encourage a widescale discussion of the content. Perhaps the Lord of heaven and earth will hear our cry and "come down" to us with true revival that sets our hearts ablaze with love for God!

EDITOR