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Evangelical Heroes Speak, by Richard M. Riss

19 March 2012  2 Comments

Evangelical Heroes Speak

by Richard Riss



Richard & Kathryn Riss

Historian Dr Richard Riss' doctoral research included studies on the current revival awakening.

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*The Holy Spirit IN US is one thing,
and the Holy Spirit ON US is another*
– D. L. Moody

Many Evangelicals, especially those who doubt the genuineness of the current awakening, look to people like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles H. Spurgeon, and Dwight L. Moody as exemplars of true Christianity, or genuine revival. However, these figures, and others to whom they look, such as G. Campbell Morgan, or D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, do not at all conform to the preconceptions of late twentieth-century Evangelicalism.

Critics of today's move of God complain that it is inappropriate to spend time soaking in the presence of God; rather, we must be about the Father's business, seeking and saving the lost. But such an idea would have been completely foreign to Dwight L. Moody, who believed that to be effective for God, people must first wait upon God for His power and anointing.

Here's what he said: "Some people seem to think they are losing time if they wait on God for His power, and so away they go and work without unction; they are working without any anointing, and they are working without any power. . . . The Holy Spirit IN US is one thing, and the Holy Spirit ON US is another; and if these [first-century] Christians had gone out and went right to preaching then and there [at the time of Christ's ascension], without the power, do you think that scene would have taken place on the day of Pentecost? Don't you think that Peter would have stood up there and beat against the air, while these Jews would have gnashed their teeth and mocked him? But they tarried in Jerusalem; they waited ten days. What! you say. What, the world perishing and men dying! Shall I wait? Do what God tells you. There is no use in running before you are sent; there is no use in attempting to do God's work without God's power. A man working without this unction, a man working without this anointing, a man working without the Holy Ghost upon him, is losing his time after all. So we are not going to lose anything if we tarry till we get this power" (*Secret Power*, pp. 44-45).

Critics have raised objections to the laughter that has characterized the present move of God. They have said that weeping, not laughter, is appropriate for revival, since it is appropriate to weep over one's sins in coming to a place of repentance. But Charles H. Spurgeon has said otherwise. In his *Autobiography* (Zondervan, 1946), p. 124-125, he writes, "I do believe in my heart that there may be as much holiness in a laugh as in a cry, and that, sometimes, to laugh is the better thing of the two, for I may weep, and be murmuring, and repining, and thinking all sorts of bitter thoughts against God, while, at another time, I may laugh the laugh of sarcasm against sin and so evince a holy earnestness in the defense of the truth."

"I am not so afraid of excitement as some people" –D. L. Moody

Rodney Howard-Browne was severely criticized for his comments to the effect that he would rather have some form of life in his meetings than no life at all, implying that it would be worth it, even if there were a risk that the life was of the flesh. Yet, one would be hard-pressed to see how Rodney's comments along these lines differed from one of Moody's sermons, "Revivals," in which he said essentially the same thing: "I am not so afraid of

excitement as some people. The moment there comes a breath of interest, some people cry, 'Sensationalism, sensationalism!' But, I tell you what, I would rather have sensation than stagnation any time. . . . Don't be afraid of a little excitement and a little 'sensationalism.' It seems to me that almost anything is preferable to deadness. . . . Where there is life, there will always be a commotion" (*Moody's Latest Sermons*, pp. 111-112).

Critics claim that John Arnott opens people up to deception by quoting Luke 11:11 in order to calm peoples' fears about the current move of God. Yet, this is precisely the language that Moody used when he said, "I believe that if we ask God for a real work, He won't give us a counterfeit. If we ask God for bread, He isn't going to give us a stone" (*ibid.*, p. 114).

Still other critics complain that, in an age of Microwave ovens, we are far too accustomed to the instantaneous. Because we are not satisfied unless things are done immediately, the quick fixes that we see in today's revival are suspect, and won't last. On the other hand, Spurgeon's outlook was just the opposite. He believed that revival and its results are instantaneous. In a sermon entitled "The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit" (June 20, 1858), he said, "There is no power in man so fallen but that the Holy Spirit can raise it up. However debased a man may be, in one instant, by the miraculous power of the Spirit, all his faculties may be cleansed and purged."

"Follow the guidance of the Spirit" –Evan Roberts

Some people criticize the idea of the leading of the Holy Spirit during a church service as too dangerous or too subjective. Rodney Howard-Browne has often been severely criticized for claiming to yield to the leading of the Holy Spirit during his meetings. This may be problematic for many twentieth-century Evangelicals, but it was most decidedly not a problem for Evan Roberts during the Welsh revival. G. Campbell Morgan, in his sermon, "Lessons of the Welsh Revival" (December 25, 1904) said of one of the meetings that he attended in Wales, that all the while, there was "no human leader, no one indicating the next thing to do, no one checking the spontaneous movement. . . . Evan Roberts is no orator, no leader. What is he? I mean now with respect to this great movement. He is the mouthpiece of the fact that there is no human guidance as to man or organization. The burden of what he says to the people is this: It is not man, do not wait for me, depend on God, obey the Spirit. But whenever moved to do so, he speaks under the guidance of the Spirit. His work is not that of appealing to men so much as that of creating an atmosphere by calling men to follow the guidance of the Spirit in whatever the Spirit shall say to them."

Charles Spurgeon also believed that the leading of the Holy Spirit was absolutely essential in all of his church meetings. He said, "I have constantly made it my prayer that I might be guided by the Spirit even in the smallest and least important parts of the services. . . . I might preach to-day a sermon which I preached on Friday, and which was useful then, and there might be no good whatever come from it now, because it might not be the sermon which the Holy Ghost would have delivered to-day."

"A blessed fanaticism . . . a heavenly enthusiasm" –C H Spurgeon

Some people assert that today's awakening cannot be a genuine work of God since there are clear problems within it, and many indications that it is tainted by the work of the flesh. Such people do not realize that every awakening of history has been a mixture of the good and the bad. Here's what Spurgeon wrote of the awakening of 1857-58: "We have received continually fresh confirmations of the good news from a far country, which has already made glad the hearts of many of God's people. In the United States of America there is certainly a great awakening. . . . There may be something of spurious excitement mixed up with it, but that good, lasting good, has been accomplished, no rational man can deny." Along similar lines, Jonathan Edwards, in *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of The Spirit of God*, wrote of the Great Awakening that critics who "wait to see a work of God without difficulties and stumbling blocks . . . will be a like the fool's waiting at the river side to have the water all run by. A work of God without stumbling blocks is never to be expected."

In a sermon entitled "The Great Revival" (March 28, 1858), Spurgeon said that revival is like a hurricane, bringing chaos wherever it goes: "The mere worldly man does not understand a revival; he cannot make it out. Why is it, that a sudden fit of godliness, as he would call it, a kind of sacred epidemic, should seize upon a mass of people all at once? What can be the cause of it? It frequently occurs in the absence of all great evangelists; it cannot be traced to any particular means. There have been no special agencies used in order to bring it about – no machinery supplied, no societies established; and yet it has come, just like a heavenly hurricane, sweeping everything before it. . . . When there comes a revival, the minister all of a sudden finds that the usual forms and conventionalities of the pulpit are not exactly suitable to the times. . . . And there are sobs and groans heard in the prayer meetings. . . . And then the converts who are thus brought into the church, if the revival continues, are very earnest ones. You never saw such a people. The outsiders call them fanatics. It is a blessed fanaticism. Others say, they are nothing but enthusiasts. It is a heavenly enthusiasm. . . . It is not orderly, you say. . . . You may try to stop us, but we will run over you if you do not get out of the way."

Spurgeon was decidedly in favor of revival, but he was opposed to some of the more controversial manifestations. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the manifestations that he disliked had taken place under the ministry of George Whitefield: "In the old revivals in America a hundred years ago, commonly called 'the Great Awakening,' there were many strange things, such as continual shrieks and screams, and knocking, and twitchings, under the services. We cannot call that the work of the Spirit. Even the great Whitefield's revival at Cambuslang, one of the greatest and most remarkable revivals that were ever known, was attended by some things that we cannot but regard as superstitious wonders" (*ibid.*).

Spurgeon is certainly not alone. One of the greatest bones of contention during the important revivals of the past has been controversial manifestations of this kind, such as people falling under the power of God, shaking and trembling, experiencing speechlessness, drunkenness in the Spirit, or holy laughter. In a 1959 sermon, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said with respect to revival that "Under the influence of this mighty power, people may literally fall to the ground under conviction of sin, or even faint, and remain in a state of unconsciousness, perhaps for a considerable time. . . . Then there are people who seem to go into trances. They may be seated or they may be standing, and they are looking into the distance, obviously seeing something, and yet they are completely unconscious, and unaware of their surroundings. They do not seem to be able to hear anything, nor to see anything that may be happening round and about them." Lloyd-Jones lamented that "there are people who dismiss and denounce the whole notion of revival because of these phenomena" (*Revival*, pp. 134-136). He also said (pp. 136-144) that for many years, people had attempted to explain revival in terms of brainwashing, mass hysteria, mesmerism, hypnotism, or demonic activity, but that all of these attempted explanations leave many questions unanswered and fail at major points.

Jonathan Edwards had to deal with criticisms of the Great Awakening because of phenomena of this kind. One of his critics, Charles Chauncy, insisted that because these things were integral to the Great Awakening, that it could not possibly be a genuine outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In his several works in defense of the Great Awakening, Edwards repeatedly pointed out that the presence of these manifestations neither proves nor disproves that God is at work. In our own day, critics attempt to argue that Edwards, especially in his later works, was against the manifestations. But any careful reading, even of his *Treatise on Religious Affections* (1746), will indicate that his viewpoint was always that, while the manifestations do not indicate that a work is of God, neither do they indicate the opposite. According to Edwards, the true sign as to whether a work is of God would be the positive effects in peoples attitudes and behavior, or the fruit of the Spirit in their lives and character.

Nevertheless, the writings of Edwards do demonstrate that the manifestations were a component of the Great Awakening. He made clear references in *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of The Spirit of God* to "tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of Bodily strength." He wrote, "some who are the subjects of it have been in a kind of ecstasy, wherein they have been carried beyond themselves, and have had their minds transported into a train of strong and pleasing . . . visions, as though they were rapt up even to heaven, and there saw glorious sights. I have been acquainted with some such instances, and I see no need of bringing in the help of the devil into the account that we give of these things."

"Outward signs . . . accompanied the inward work of God" – John Wesley

George Whitefield also played an important part in the Great Awakening. At first, Whitefield did not believe that the manifestations should be encouraged. On June 25, 1739, he wrote a letter to John Wesley about them, saying, "I cannot think it right in you to give so much encouragement to those convulsions which people have been thrown into under your ministry. Was I to do so, how many would cry out every night! I think it is tempting God to require such signs. That there is something of God in it, I doubt not. But the devil, I believe, does interpose."

But about two weeks later, John Wesley had a talk with George Whitefield about these matters, and Whitefield changed his mind. On July 7, 1739, Wesley wrote of him in his Journal, "I had an opportunity to talk with him of those outward signs which had so often accompanied the inward work of God. I found his objections were chiefly grounded on gross misrepresentations of matter of fact. But the next day he had an opportunity of informing himself better: for no sooner had he begun (in the application of his sermon) to invite all sinners to believe in Christ, than four persons sunk down close to him, almost in the same moment. One of them lay without either sense of motion; a second trembled exceedingly; the third had strong convulsions all over his body, but made no noise, unless by groans; the fourth, equally convulsed, called upon God with strong cries and tears. From this time, I trust, we shall all suffer God to carry on His own work in the way that pleaseth Him."

"God manifested Himself much amongst us" – George Whitefield

As can be seen in George Whitefield's own Journal, from that time onward, the manifestations were one of the components of Whitefield's ministry. On August 3, 1740 he wrote, "Before I had prayed long, Br. B. dropped down, as though shot with a gun. Afterwards he got up, and sat attentively to hear the sermon. The influence spread. The greatest part of the congregation were under great concern. Tears trickled down apace, and God manifested Himself much amongst us at the Sacrament." The following day, Whitefield wrote, "I asked, 'what caused him to fall down yesterday?' He answered, 'The power of God's Word.'"

Whitefield wrote that during the same year in New York, on Sunday, November 2, "After I had begun . . . the Spirit of the Lord gave me freedom, and at length came down like a mighty rushing wind, and carried all before it. Immediately, the whole congregation was alarmed. Crying, weeping, and wailing were to be heard in every corner; men's hearts failing them for fear, and many were to be seen falling into the arms of their friends."

Similar things happened two days later in Staten Island: "Oh, how did the Word fall like a hammer and like a fire! One poor creature in particular was ready to sink into the earth. His countenance was altered, till he looked, as it were, sick to death. At length he said, 'What shall I do to be saved?' Others were dissolved in tears around him; and one of my fellow-travellers was struck down, and so overpowered, that his body became exceeding weak. He could scarcely move all the night after. God, I believe, was working powerfully in his soul." Whitefield wrote that a day afterward, in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, "I had not discoursed long, when, in every part of the congregation, some one or other began to cry out, and almost all were melted into tears. . . . Most of the people spent the remainder of the night in prayer and praises."

The following week, on Saturday, November 15, in Philadelphia, "the Word seemed to smite the congregation like so many pointed arrows. Many afterwards told me what they felt; and, in the evening I was sent for to a young woman, who was carried home from meeting, and had continued almost speechless." Whitefield said that a week later, at Fagg's Manor, "God's presence so filled my soul that I could scarce stand under it. I prayed and exhorted and prayed again, and soon every person in the room seemed to be under great impressions, sighing and weeping. At last I was quite overpowered." Whitefield couldn't move, and a friend had to help him go to bed that night: "A dear friend undressed me. The Lord gave me sweet sleep, and in the morning I arose with my natural strength much renewed."

There is an interesting quotation in *The Biography of Barton W. Stone* (1847) with respect to the manifestations of the Great Awakening and its aftermath: "Mr. Benedict, in his *Abridgment of the History of the Baptists*, on page 345, speaking of the great revival that began among them, on James River, in 1785, says, 'During the progress of this revival, scenes were exhibited somewhat extraordinary. It was not unusual to have a large proportion of the congregation prostrate on the floor, and in some instances they lost the use of their limbs. . . . Screams, groans, shouts, hosannas, notes of grief and joy, all at the same time, were not unfrequently heard throughout their vast assemblies. . . . It is not unworthy of notice, that in those congregations where the preachers encouraged them to much extent, the work was more extensive, and greater numbers were added. . . . Among the old fashioned Calvinistic Baptists of the Old Dominion these strange bodily agitations obtained; and many of the preachers "fanned them as fire from heaven," and the excitement and confusion that pervaded their vast assemblies well nigh fills Mr. J. L. Waller's measure of a "New Light Stir" in Kentucky.'"

"He never saw a more glorious sight" – Barton Stone

According to Barton Stone (pp. 360-361), not only did George Whitefield encourage such things, but Charles Hodge wrote about them in his *History of*

the Presbyterian Church, pages 85 and 86. Stone also wrote that “the manner in which Whitefield describes the scenes at Nottingham and Fagg’s Manor, and others of a similar character, shows he did not disapprove of these agitations. He says he never saw a more glorious sight, than when the people were fainting all around him, and crying out in such a manner as to drown his own voice.”

In his Journals and in his sermons, George Whitefield alluded frequently to the new wine of the Spirit. In New Hampshire, on one Friday and Saturday in March of 1745, “All [were] seemingly hearty friends to and great sharers in the late blessed work of God. Their accounts of it were very entertaining. Every time the Lord was with us, but he seemed to keep the good wine till the last, for on Saturday, many of God’s people were filled exceedingly.” In these cases, he is speaking with specific reference to God-given joy, and preached about it at considerable length in his sermon, “The Kingdom of God,” in which he said, “I have often thought, that if the apostle Paul were to come and preach now, he would be reckoned one of the greatest enthusiasts on earth. He talked of the Holy Ghost, of feeling the Holy Ghost; and so we must all feel it, all experience it, all receive it, or we can never see a holy God with comfort. . . . The apostle not only supposes we must have the Holy Ghost, but he supposes, as a necessary ingredient to make up the kingdom of God in a believer’s heart, that he must have ‘joy in the Holy Ghost.’ There are a great many, I believe, who think religion is a poor melancholy thing, and they are afraid to be Christians. But, my dear friends, there is no true joy till you can joy in God and Christ. . . . We are told that ‘Zaccheus received Christ joyfully,’ that ‘the eunuch went on his way rejoicing,’ and that ‘the jailer rejoiced in God with all his house.’ O, my friends, what joy have they that know their sins are forgiven them! What a blessed thing is it for a man to look forward, and see an endless eternity of happiness before him, knowing that everything shall work together for his good! It is joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

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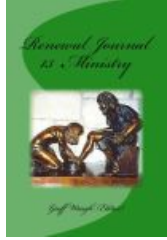
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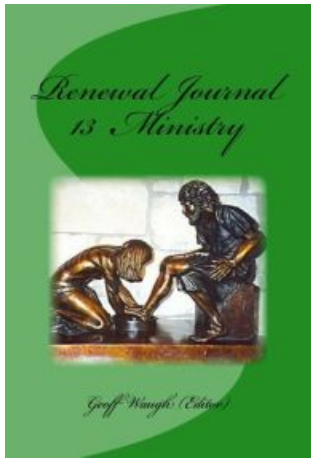
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