

EDITORIAL 2-09: 1859: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

The year 2009 marks the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival in Northern Ireland, during which God moved in a glorious and wonderful way, saving as many as 100,000 souls, changing lives and transforming whole communities. Many local churches will have held special events or series of meetings to commemorate the momentous events of 1859. Whilst not wishing to simply re-tell the story of events leading up to and during 1859, in this editorial I wish to look briefly at what happened, along with the resultant impact of those events. Following on from that, I want to consider what are the practical implications for Christians living in Northern Ireland today – in 2009.

1. WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED BACK IN 1859? In 1857 three earnest new converts to Christ in Kells, County Antrim, were challenged by their own godly minister to “do something more for God.” In September of that year these three men, along with another co-worker, started regular prayer meetings, focusing, in a united and specific way, on the need for revival. And it was these very meetings that were to become the harbinger of the 1859 Revival. The preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who recognised the strong link between prayer and revival, once said “Where God has something very great to accomplish for His church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of His people” (Ezek 36:37). As had similarly happened in New York in 1858, the 1859 Revival in Northern Ireland was born and bathed in prayer. Fervent biblical preaching was also at its heart, as those who knew not Christ were faithfully evangelised, in turn coming to Him in great numbers.

2. WHAT WAS THE END RESULT? God came down in saving power and might, making for Himself a glorious name. People felt an overwhelming awareness of God and a deep sense of His holiness, as the fear of God gripped hearts and minds, bringing intense conviction of sin. Satan was recognised for who he really was – not a joy-giving liberator, but a destroyer of lives, out to take precious souls to a lost eternity. The numbers of conversions to Christ simply multiplied. Church attendances soared, often full to overflowing, as many now struggled with getting people to *leave* church, rather than actually have them come in! Old prayer meetings became thronged (attendances sometimes increasing twenty fold) and many new ones were formed. On Wednesday 29th June 1859 an open-air prayer meeting was held in Botanic Gardens in Belfast, attended by 25,000 people from all over the province. Obedience to the commands of scripture and an increase in holiness of life was manifestly apparent, as the Bible was hungered for, cherished and delighted in. God put a new song in many mouths (Ps 40:3). If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature...” (2 Cor 5:17). In numerous localities police found they had little or no crime to investigate, whilst judges had few or no cases to hear! Last but by no means least; the 1859 Revival produced a deep love for God and for fellow Christians, in addition to a great zeal and burden for precious souls.

3. COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN AGAIN? There is a short but simple answer to this question. It is a clear, emphatic, unequivocal “Yes”! This confidence and absolute certainty is based on one key truth – that of the immutability or changelessness of God. “For I am the LORD, *I change not* ...” (Malachi 3:6). “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, *with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*” (James 1:17). “Jesus Christ *the same yesterday, and today, and forever.*” (Heb 13:8) The great God we love and serve has

lost none of His ancient power, and an ever-changing world with ever-changing views and values can do nothing to stifle, limit or negate His power. He has not, will not and cannot change. What He was pleased to do back in 1859 He is abundantly able to do again today.

4. DO WE REALLY WANT ANOTHER REVIVAL TODAY? We live in an increasingly secular society in what has been termed a “post-Christian age” where church attendances are falling and many no longer have a grasp of even the biblical fundamentals of Christian belief. The problems of *coldness*, *complacency* and the struggle within Christian circles to secure *commitment* all take their toll. Given all these things, the question may seem a peculiar one. But, if we are really honest with ourselves, is it so outlandish? Where our personal lives are going swimmingly, thoughts about revival may be the last thing on our minds. Conversely, where difficulties and pressures may beset our lives, we may understandably feel we’ve enough to worry about. Yet the reality is that a Heaven-sent revival has the power to greatly change our lives and witness for the better, even if our personal circumstances remain far from perfect.

The hymn writer, Elizabeth Ann Head, wrote the following words: “Revive us, Lord! Is zeal abating / Whilst harvest fields are vast and white? / Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting, / Equip Thy church to spread the light.” In the light of all that is happening all around us today, and in the knowledge we all will have family members, friends and work colleagues who have never trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour (Jn 3:36), perhaps a more apt question should be: “*How can we not want another revival?*”

5. WHAT ARE WE PREPARED AND WILLING TO DO ABOUT IT? The challenge to “do something more for God” is equally valid today. The chorus of another great revival hymn “Visit us, Lord, with revival” reads “Lord send a revival! / Let it begin now *in me!* / Gladly dethroning each rival / Yield I my heart unto Thee.” Great changes in nations have invariably begun with positive changes in the lives of individuals – who, with a vision for others, have then gone on to impact countless other lives. Dear Christian reader, do you need God to revive you? An honest answer to one question will tell you all you need to know: - Am I closer to the Lord now than I was 12 months ago? – or have I grown colder? If your answer is the latter, thank God, as the Psalmist David expressed it so eloquently, He is the One who can restore your soul (Ps 23:3). Will you ask Him to do so? God will always answer any prayer that aligns with His Word.

Revival and prayer always go hand in hand. God’s method of blessing is that it should be prayerfully sought from Him. When Isaiah prayed “Oh that Thou wouldest rend the heavens, that Thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at Thy presence,” (Is 64:1) he was asking that God would not just look down, but that He would come down among them in a mighty revelation of His presence and power. The 1859 Revival turned around a time of spiritual barrenness and decline. There is a similar need in our land today – the challenge comes clearly to us to earnestly petition God for another great revival. “O LORD, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.” (Hab 3:2) “Wilt Thou not revive us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?” (Ps 85:6)