
Contemporary Revivals

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Revivals in the Christian church are not just facts of history, they are occurring now. However it is much harder to discern which movements are genuine God-sent revivals and which are just a fad. Revivals are mixed works, a bit of God, a bit of man, so there is not always a clear dividing line. The passage of time helps in making a fair assessment of a movement, but when a movement is in action, or in recent memory, such an evaluation is not fully possible. This article describes a number of candidates for revival that have occurred in the West since the 1960s.

Introduction

Revivals are an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes salvation in Christ, and the presence of God, real in the experience of people. It spreads in an epidemic-type fashion because revived Christians are so changed that they "infect" others around them. Other believers see more of Jesus in them than they thought possible and want the same. Unbelievers see what they look like in the sight of God, compared with the revived Christians, and repent and believe. Either way a revived Christian attracts others and cause a change. As a preacher once said "When you set yourself on fire for God, people love to come and see you burn."¹

Such revived Christians are one example of enthusiasts in the Limited Enthusiasm model of church growth. The rapid growth follows from the attention that the revived Christians have in their social networks. However there is a downside, as revivals have opposition; that is there are people who do not approve of this behaviour. These people are often other Christians, and as such revivals are very controversial in church circles.

Of course with past revivals many of the controversies have faded, and all that is remembered in any detail is the glory and the conversions. Read any book on the great awakening or revivals in Wales before 1904 and they will have widespread approval across most of the modern Christian church, an approval they never had from their contemporaries.

However this rosy view of revival does not extend to those that have taken place in recent memory. Nor does it extend to those where the media has reported them extensively. For

¹ The quote is often attributed to John Wesley, or Moody, but there is no evidence either of them ever said it! But it is a good summary of an enthusiast.

example there is more criticism of the 1904-5 revival in Wales, simply because it has more material available. It was reported extensively in the secular media. Likewise the 1949-1953 revival in the Outer Hebrides and the Pentecostal revival from 1905 onwards are very well documented and also receive a certain amount of criticism within Christian circles (Murray 1998).

Of course more recent revivals have both the double disadvantage of being in living memory and having their wares, and opponents views, broadcast over the Internet, the ultimate in media presentation. Thus they are subject to a large amount of criticism and often labelled false revivals or deceptions.

However from a purely modelling point of view all these movements are of interest because they exhibit "revival growth" phenomena. They are social movements whatever anyone thinks of their theology or spiritual origin. As this project's main aim is to understand church growth in a way that will assist the Christian church to grow and understand the dynamics of revival, then it will attempt to study all candidates for revival movements fairly, regardless of the views of their opponents. Those battles are beyond the scope of this project.

Below are a number of candidates for revival movements from recent church history, including some of which are current.

The Toronto Blessing

Although not chronologically the first of the modern revivals, the "Toronto Blessing" deserves primary attention just because of its high profile it achieved and the degree of support and opposition it produced.

The Toronto Blessing started in a church in Toronto in January 1994, from which it acquired its popular name. Initially people travelled to the Airport Christian Fellowship to be blessed and take the blessing home with them. However by summer it came to the attention of the British media and, with the Internet, the spread of the unusual manifestations multiplied rapidly (Roberts 1994, Riss and Riss 1997, Hilborn 2001, Poloma 2003). It was this revival that initially inspired the first Church Growth Model, when someone said to me "This is spreading like an epidemic", and then I decided to see if an epidemic model could explain the pattern of behaviour.²

The Toronto Blessing has proved very controversial. At one time in the search engines the opponents heavily outnumber those in favour. Its detractors have referred to it as the "Toronto Deception" and the "Laughing Revival". By contrast, during the summer of 1994, the British newspapers gave it a cautious welcome, with some hoping it might be the revival they felt the church needed. I doubt if today's newspapers, as of 2014, would greet it with the same enthusiasm, given their general opposition to religion.

My own experience confirms the strong feelings the Toronto Blessing aroused in the church. I first came across the phenomenon at a John Wimber worship conference at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) London in September 1994. I had booked for the conference months earlier as I had joined a worship group the previous year, and I was looking for some teaching from

² Mathematical Modeling of Church Growth, Journal of Mathematical Sociology, 23(4), 1999.

the pioneers of worship in the Spirit movement. Clearly the meeting was packed with enthusiasts for all things Charismatic and the “Blessing” was well received. There was a phenomenal sense of God throughout, and there were none of the excesses present, such as animal noises, that detractors say characterised the movement. Of course John Wimber, despite his reputation, was not an enthusiast for chaos, and had learnt over time how to discern what was of God, and what was of man – well, most of the time!

Trying to communicate the revival events back to people who were not there however was problematical. I would say most Christians to I talked to back in Wales had already decided to reject it as a move of God, based on hearsay alone. As such they never went to a meeting to find out for themselves. It strongly brought home to me the difficulties any revival movement faces from the church itself. I was left with the feeling that even if Evan Roberts³ himself came to town, most Christians, including evangelicals and charismatics, would have given his meetings a miss!

Despite the opposition, the influence of the Toronto Blessing on the church has been enormous, and seen by a significant number in Charismatic Christianity as a revival movement. Numerous churches across the western world and developing countries have been affected and it gave a new lease of life to charismatic renewal, which had been flagging. It gave new life to many congregations, and I have personal experience of a number that more than doubled in size as a result. In addition it affected the church, HTB, where the Alpha course started. The Alpha course has had over two million attendees in the UK and beyond, and must be one of the most successful evangelistic ventures ever (see below).

Although the Toronto Blessing is not the influence it was in the 1990s, the Toronto church is still packed with visitors for numerous conferences each year. In addition it has a network of like-minded churches, those affected by the blessing.

I used the Toronto Blessing as an example for the Limited Enthusiasm Model of church growth in a paper in 2002.⁴

Alpha Course

The Alpha Course originally started as an evangelism course at Holy Trinity Brompton, London, back in the late 1970s. In content it was similar to a number of other courses in charismatic renewal, aimed at church members wanting the basics of the faith, but useful for those interested⁵. It took off in numbers in the early 1990s, with 4 courses in 1991, growing to 2,500 in 1995. As noted above the Toronto blessing may have had a big influence in its adoption, even though the two are not formally connected.

It has been used extensively in many churches across all denominations and many countries. Though it peak in 1998, it is still a powerful evangelistic tool in churches. It has also led to a number of other evangelistic courses with varying theological emphases. Over 2 million people in the UK have done the Alpha Course.

³ The leading evangelist of the 1904-5 Welsh Revival.

⁴ A Dynamical Model of Church Growth and its Application to Contemporary Revivals, *Review of Religious Research*, 43(3), pp.218-241, March 2002.

⁵ My own personal experience was of a course on tape by David Watson, then of St Michael le Belfrey York, which I was taken through in 1983. The content was very similar to the Alpha course.

Because the course encourages participants to invite their friends to later courses it has been a superb example for the Limited Enthusiasm Model of church growth⁶⁷⁸.

The course has its critics, especially among Christians opposed to charismatic phenomena. It has also been accused by some anti-cult people of being an example of “Large Group Awareness Training”, one of whom has used results from Church Growth Modelling to support that view. However I can assure the reader no such conclusion can be drawn from the modelling work.

Charismatic Renewal

Charismatic renewal has been a movement within the Christian church that has brought new life to believers and, as a result, growth to their churches. It is generally taken that it started in California with Dennis Bennett, an Episcopalian priest, being baptised with the Spirit (Bennett 1970). Though there had no doubt been instances of this in non-Pentecostal denominations prior to that date, this event was significant because it was in a high profile “establishment” denomination. Through the 1960s and 1970s it spread throughout non-Pentecostal churches, including the Church of England. It has brought about a massive change in the culture of protestant Christianity in the West, especially in the areas of worship, prayer and evangelism. It had a significant influence on Roman Catholicism in the West and helped break some barriers between that church and Protestantism. Various smaller movements have kept the renewal going and it has benefited greatly from its contact with Restorationism (see below). Although not as powerful as it once was it nevertheless continues to re-surface from time to time. I have often argued that Charismatic Renewal is an example of extended revival⁹.

Restorationism (UK)

In the UK, Restoration Christianity has been a parallel movement to charismatic renewal, led by Christians outside the existing denominations. Although charismatic in nature, its primary aim has been to restore the church to its New Testament roots, without creating new denominations. To be precise, they have aimed to restore the church to the one intended by God, the fulfilment of the one started in the New Testament, without the “errors” picked up on the way.

Initially they were called house churches but have since become known as "new" churches and refer to the different groupings as streams rather than denominations (Walker 1989, Virgo 2007). They grew rapidly through the 1980s and 1990s although the last English Church Growth survey in 2005 has shown their numbers have fallen back. Some of this is due to some streams changing their nature as leadership passes to a new generation. Some have refused to stay together and be a denomination. The largest stream, New Frontiers, continues to grow.

⁶ Report: [The Alpha Course - An Example of Church Growth Through Enthusiasts](#)

⁷ A Dynamical Model of Church Growth and its Application to Contemporary Revivals, *Review of Religious Research*, 43(3), pp.218-241, March 2002.

⁸ A General Model of Church Growth and Decline, *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 29(3), pp.177-207, 2005

⁹ E.g. Blog post [Is the Charismatic Renewal Over?](#)

I used the New Churches as an example for the Limited Enthusiasm Model in 2005¹⁰.

Jesus People

The Jesus People, or Jesus Movement, started in California among the hippy culture and was thus a predominately young people movement. It grew rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s until it became part of mainstream church life. With its emphasis on contemporary music it had an influence on Christianity much wider than the denominations that it spawned like Calvary Chapel (Enroth, Ericson et al. 1972).

If on a summer's day you find the people sitting around you in church are wearing shorts, sandals and T-shirts, rather than suits and ties, then it was among the Jesus People that this started! However the movement was much deeper than attire, with many people being delivered from sinful lifestyles. It was one of the four streams of charismatic revival, along with classic Pentecostalism, mainline Charismatic Renewal and Restorationism.

The Vineyard

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship owes its origin to John Wimber. Wimber, some time after his conversion, became a church growth consultant. However, over time, he became increasingly unhappy with this approach and became more impressed with stories of signs and wonders told by overseas missionaries who were studying at the Fuller Seminary. His church entered into charismatic phenomena and separated from Calvary Chapel (Jackson 1999). There are now many Vineyard churches across the Western world. Its significance to revival movements is that Vineyard were pioneers in the area of contemporary worship music, adding a depth of intimacy to the worship. This has impacted churches across all denominations. When you go to the local parish church and hear a worship group playing quiet reflective songs during communion, it is from the early Vineyard that this style originated. If it was not a revival, then it was certainly a worship movement, which I have referred to in one publication¹¹.

Worship-Evangelist Revivals

Overview

“Worship-Evangelist” is a generic name for revivals, which are propagated by the combination of intensive worship and evangelism. They are driven by the named worship leader and evangelist, and usually have large events in a fixed location. Although this style can be seen in both the Vineyard and Toronto movements it was more clearly defined in the Brownsville Revival, or Pensacola Outpouring, of 1995, which had the combination of worship leader Lindell Cooley and evangelist Steve Hill at Brownsville church, Florida. It never moved from that church centre and relied on visitors travelling to Florida, which they did from all over the world.

¹⁰ A General Model of Church Growth and Decline, Journal of Mathematical Sociology, 29(3), pp.177-207, 2005

¹¹ [A Dynamical Model of Church Growth and Global Revival](#), Technical Report UG-M-00-4, presented at "The Annual Meeting for the Scientific Study of Religion", Houston, Texas 18-21 October 2000.

The Lakeland Revival of 2008 had worship leader Roy Fields with evangelist Todd Bentley, a movement that also included a healing ministry with the evangelism. The movement has spread to other branches, notably The Bay of the Holy Spirit revival, 2010-11, with worship leader Lydia Marrow (née Stanley) and healing evangelist Nathan Morris. Less well known, but very effective, are the revival meetings of worship leader Heather Clark and evangelist David Tomberlin. Sometimes, as in the case of Roy Fields, the worship leader and the evangelist are the same person; another example being Danny Steyne of Mountain of Worship.

Later developments include the revival meetings being taken on tour; e.g. Roy Fields international tour and the Bay of the Holy Spirit US tour. This has helped propagate the revivals. The role of television, in particular God TV, has helped prepare the ground for these tours. Meetings are often live on the Internet with excerpts on YouTube.

There is of course historical precedent for the worship leader/evangelist combination in Moody and Sankey and the Wesley Brothers. The difference in the contemporary movement lies in the amount of time spent in worship. In fact they are almost worship-led revivals.

Brownsville Revival & Bay of the Holy Spirit Revival

A revival started on Father's day 1995 in the Brownsville Assembly of God with evangelist Steve Hill, pastor John Kilpatrick and worship leader Lindell Cooley. Its effect on people was to draw visitors in, rather than set up a network. Like the Toronto Blessing the Internet proved an effective medium for communication, particularly to advertise its meetings as they happened. A huge archive of revival services were made available from their website. It continued in various phases after the original leaders moved on. With leadership changes it is now over but probably lasted about 10 years. The live-streamed Friday night service was a weekly fixture for many Christians in the UK, even as late as 2004.

A similar revival re-appeared July 2010 with Kilpatrick, and Lydia Stanley (now Marrow), a worship leader from Pensacola days. Known as the "Bay of the Holy Spirit Revival" it is taking place in Mobile Alabama and is connected with the "Church of his Presence". The evangelist is Nathan Morris from Sheffield in the UK. Initially the exposure was through YouTube rather than their own website, but with exposure on God TV, full broadcasts could be watched. The key that has made them claim it as a revival, rather than just powerful services, is the "glory", i.e. the "presence of God".

Lakeland Outpouring and Subsequent Revivals

On April 2nd 2008 a revival started in Lakeland church Florida. The evangelist Todd Bentley conducted a healing ministry and again the Internet was used to show people being healed. An interesting statistic is that it took nearly 2 months for the opponents to pass the supporters in the hierarchy of search engines. It also showed that the Internet can be a mixed blessing for any potential revival movement. The revival abated with the fall of Todd Bentley. The history of revival is littered with fallen leaders on whom the pressure has taken its toll.

Subsequent revival meetings have been carried on by Run with Fire Ministries, run by Roy Fields, the worship leader with Todd Bentley. With a strong emphasis on worship and the "presence of God", this revival ministry has moved from place to place. In January 2011, a

planned 4-day visit to Cardiff UK was extended to at least 15 days, with visits to other parts of Wales. It became known as the new Welsh Outpouring. Although he has returned to the UK, the host church of the 2011 Cardiff meetings has never invited him back, again showing the difficulties of handling opposition to revival.

Cwmbran Outpouring, Wales, 2013

A series of meetings started on April 10th 2013 in Victory Church Cwmbran, following a dramatic healing that night. Also known as the Welsh Outpouring, the church had meetings most nights to experience the presence of God. People travelled from all over the UK to catch the fire from this small town in Wales. There were no named worship leaders, though Roy Fields and Godfrey Birtill did some evenings as guests. Nathan Morris from the Bay Revival also visited. The senior preacher associated with the revival was Richard Taylor, who became yet another victim of the pressures of revival. However most of the preaching was done by the extensive ministry team of the church, and no one person can really be associated with this movement. Victory Church has a heart to see churches planted throughout Wales, a work, which has continued past the revival. I wrote numerous blogs on this revival¹².

College Revivals

The USA has a long history of short revivals occurring on campus. Asbury College 1970, and Wheaton College 1995 are two such examples (Orr 1994, Beougher and Dorsett 1995). Although short-lived, there was a fast-moving intensity in these revivals, perhaps assisted by the students and faculty being in close and frequent proximity to each other. They spread very much along the lines of the limited enthusiasm model.

Potential Revivals that Stalled

I have occasionally noted movements that had the potential to be revivals but in the passage of time have not progressed beyond the early stages. They still persist, but have not grown noticeably.

New Mystics

A wild charismatic movement arose early 2000s in USA under the name of New Mystics, and in the UK, of whom Emerge Wales was a representative. They use YouTube to advertise themselves and it has attracted much critical comment on the Internet, sometimes for doctrinal aberrations. The movement was largely underground at the end of 2009 and very off-centre of mainstream Christianity. By late 2014 it has remained very much a fringe movement. My personal experience of the last days of Emerge Wales, before they split, was posted on the Church Growth Modelling Blog.¹³

Emerge Wales divided into two movements. One branch, New Ecstatics, has appeared to have departed completely from Christianity (as of 2016). Their website mentions neither God nor Jesus. The other branch, the Company of Burning Hearts, has very heart-felt spontaneous Christian worship, but the teaching has moved more towards speculative New Age ethos.

¹² These are summarised in the article: [Blogs on the Wales Outpouring, Cwmbran](#)

¹³ See the blog: [Revival with a Smile](#).

Both branches show the dangers of embryo revival movements that detach themselves from mainstream Christianity.

Emerging Church

“Emerging Church” is a name given to a loose grouping of churches that have sought a freer form of church affiliation than mainstream Christianity. Additionally they pursue alternative and experimental forms of worship that differ from the evangelical and charismatic churches that many have emerged from. They see its role as attempting to reach the people that other churches miss by meeting the "non-Christian" on their own ground (Gibbs and Bolger 2007). Some are more like community projects, others closer to a new form of monasticism. They can be strong on the arts, strong on mysticism, but critics regard them as compromised in doctrine. It is difficult to assess the size of the movement, or if it is a candidate for revival growth. It would prove challenging to model due to its diversity.

Fads, Fashion and Revival

There are movements within church that spread and change church culture, but they do not fit the pattern of historic revival. When is it a fashion, a social movement, or a work of the Spirit?

From a dynamical point of view any sort of church movement that has an element of spread by word of mouth can be modelled with the Limited Enthusiasm Model, whether it is a revival or not. Thus a revival, social, behavioural or doctrinal movement cannot be distinguished by dynamical behaviour. The distinguishing criteria needs to be Biblical.

In a genuine revival there is a spiritual transformation of believers that affects the way they behave, especially with speech. Whether it is an infilling of the Holy Spirit, or an experience of the presence of God, something about the person communicates the attributes of God to other people. Often it comes “out of their mouths”, or it could be in their countenance. Other types of church movements lack this spiritual dimension and are thus not really revivals.

Grace Revolution

The “Grace Revolution” is an example of a doctrinal movement in the church, but the personal spiritual dimension appears to be lacking. The name is taken from one of the pioneer churches in this movement, that of Joseph Prince in Singapore. It is also called the “Grace Reformation” (van der Merwe 2011, Brown 2014).

As a doctrinal movement it is seen by some as the logical extension of the Protestant reformation of salvation by grace alone. This is extended to the processes of sanctification, which, it is claimed by some, to be in the hands of God alone. Thus Christians do not need to try to become better, or to worry about their sin. Indeed for the Christian confession of sin is seen as a thing of the past. The Law is deemed unnecessary and even a hindrance. In its milder form it may present God as so gracious he will accept anyone, and they can stay as they are.

Because there are shades of doctrinal evidence it is difficult to measure its spread, but it would be possible, in principle, to count churches where the gospel sounds more like a

“gospel of acceptance”, rather than a “gospel of salvation”. It spreads through books and popular teachers, but it is unclear whether there is a significant spiritual element in individuals in the churches of the movement, as they are told they do not need to do anything, they are accepted as they are. I have not read or heard of anyone claiming the movement is a revival, but some congregations definitely grow fast. Lakewood Church Texas, connected with the movement, is the largest congregation in the USA¹⁴.

Beliefs and Behaviour Acquired from Society

In any age there is great pressure on the church, and its members, to fit in with the host society. This is true across a range of cultures in the world. In particular, in the West over the last 50 years, there has been pressure on the church to keep in step with the “liberal” and “progressive” values of society, especially on issues connected with gender and sexual behaviour. It is unclear whether the most pressure on the church comes from society, or from the pressure groups within society that drive the change. Often the pressure comes from sympathisers within the church itself.

At the time of writing, 2016, the two prominent movements within the church are to give women equal ministerial status with men, and for the church to accept, bless and marry same-sex couples. Different denominations in the USA, UK and others, are in different stages of acceptance or rejection of these behaviours. In particular the Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches in the USA have divided over these issues, with churches leaving denominations and legal battles resulting. Some churches have also left the Church of Scotland over these issues. The mainstream denominations in England are still travelling down the same route, with most exploring ways of incorporating same-sex marriage. One high profile ex-evangelical minister, Steve Chalk, is openly advocating same-sex marriage, and has produced a charter for other churches to sign to pledge the allegiance to go down this path. In 2015 the Church in Wales was prevented from adopting same-sex blessings and marriage by significant opposition in their ranks, though the Bishops nevertheless produced prayers to be used at same-sex celebrations, and clearly aligned themselves with the ideology¹⁵.

It is clear these social movements will affect the decline of denominations, especially if the liveliest churches leave those denominations. The conflict within congregations will also take its toll. The movements are almost entirely confined to declining denominations, and there may be a connection between the two. It is less clear whether this movement is driven by a grass-roots movement, which would be the norm in word-of-mouth phenomena. The evidence is that it is driven by denominational leadership and the ministers of key churches, but I suspect some time will have to pass before there is sufficient evidence to understand these issues.

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¹⁵ <http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/news/2016/04/same-sex-marriage-statement/>

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