

The 1904-05 Welsh Revival and its Impact On The Worldwide Church

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Introduction

The Christian church has a rich history of revival.¹ Indeed, one might say the church began with revival (Acts 2:41). However, that history has a mixed legacy. Along with explosive growth and a deep personal experience of Christ on the part of the individual, revival has sometimes brought with it “enthusiasm” and non-biblical practices. In this paper we will find that the Welsh revival of 1904-05 normalized biblically unsound practices and phenomena for the Christian community that had a detrimental effect for generations afterward.

The Need for the Study

Although there was a tremendous amount of literature produced concerning the Welsh revival of 1904-05 immediately after it took place, much of it lacked objectivity. This remains the case even today. It is important to understand the good and the bad of the Welsh revival for it was the spark for a worldwide phenomenon sometimes called the Third Great Awakening.

Many of the practices and behaviors, in the Welsh revival were replicated in the worldwide revival that followed. Some of these activities had appeared in the First and Second Great Awakenings. Many of them had been weighed in the biblical balance and found wanting by ministers and theologians of the past.² However, it seems no such check was to be found during the Welsh revival. As a result, some of these practices became “mainstream” and remain part of the church today.

The Procedure of the Study

This study will rely primarily upon material written about the Welsh revival while it was underway or immediately after it took place. As there has been much written about the positive aspects of the revival, this study will attempt a more broad critique.

¹John Gillies and Horatius Bonar, *Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981).

²Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner Of Truth Trust, 1974), 1.363 and more.

The background of Evan Roberts, the primary personality in the Welsh revival, will be examined. Some of the practices and phenomena that took place in the revival will also be analyzed.

The Revivalist

The land of "Wales is a land of periodic revivals."³ Throughout the centuries, God's Spirit has moved upon the Welsh people, often in concert with a worldwide movement of God. For instance, the 1859 Welsh revival was part of a larger action of the Spirit known as the businessman's revival that began in New England and Canada in 1857.

Many of these revivals in Wales were accompanied by a "loud exhibition of feeling"⁴ from those under conviction. The revival of 1859 was different in that those who came under the conviction of the gospel message showed "a strong current of inward emotions, finding vent in a floods of tears."⁵ Yet, that relatively quiet response to the Spirit was not the norm in the revivals of Wales.

The primary personality associated with the Welsh revival 1904-05 is Evan



Roberts. Roberts grew up in the mining town of Lougher in South Wales and had always been known as "good, always honest, straightforward and earnest."⁶ Although he was religious he did not particularly stand out among his peers. "For years his life was a steady, simple routine" of work and weekly worship.⁷

As Roberts entered his 20s he began to cast about for direction concerning his life's vocation. For a time he apprenticed with his uncle as a blacksmith. His half formed idea was to travel to foreign lands, earn his keep as a blacksmith and share the gospel with those in need. However, after a short time in the blacksmith trade he realized it was not for him. Upon the advice of his pastor, Roberts decided to enter the ministry. Due to his lack of formal education "this necessitated a preliminary period of study at the

³Jessie Penn-Lewis, *The Awakening in Wales: A First-Hand Account of the Welsh Revival of 1904*, Kindle Edition, (1905, New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2014), location 68.

⁴Thomas Phillips, *The Welsh Revival: Its Origin and Development*, (1860, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 30.

⁵Phillips, 30.

⁶Arthur Goodrich, "The Story of the Welsh Revival," Evan Roberts et al., *The Story of the Welsh Revival: As Told by Eyewitnesses Together with a Sketch of Evan Roberts and His Message to the World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1905), 9.

⁷Ibid., 11.

Newcastle grammar school.”⁸ Yet before he could embark upon this course of action Roberts had an experience that changed his life.

As he described it, for a long time he had been “much troubled in ...soul and heart ...thinking over the failure of Christianity.”⁹ This became a subject of intense prayer for the young Evan Roberts. He “prayed and prayed but nothing seemed to give” him “any relief.”¹⁰

Then, one night after a long session in prayer, Roberts fell asleep. That same night he was awakened at one o’clock in the morning and found himself “with unspeakable joy and awe in the very presence of Almighty God.”¹¹ According to Roberts, “he was taken up into a great expanse—without space or time—into communion with God.”¹² Roberts says he spoke face-to-face with God for four hours. When questioned about the event Roberts denied it was Jesus with whom he spoke but “God the father Almighty ... and the Holy Spirit.”¹³ This experience continued each night for three or four months only to end upon Robert’s departure for Newcastle Emlyn. Then, unexpectedly, after a month “in darkness” with his heart “as stone ...he returned to me.”¹⁴ Yet it was a second experience that decidedly put Roberts on the course of activity that made him a famous revivalist.

A revival pastor named Seth Joshua had come to town and preached a series of meetings that many of the students attended. It was at one of these meetings that Roberts experienced what he later described as a baptism in the Holy Spirit. While the evangelist “prayed fervently in what seemed to be the close of the difficult meeting, ‘Bend us – bend us – bend us Lord,’” Roberts was suddenly struck and “rolled off his seat into the aisle. He appeared to be only semiconscious.”¹⁵ Witnesses say “he lay prostrate for a considerable time on the floor of the church sweating profusely.”¹⁶ Although there was no public confession of faith or other typical evidence of salvation it is said Roberts “rose again in newness of life in Christ” and was “to all appearances a new man after this experience.”¹⁷ It is this event that Roberts considered evidence of new birth.¹⁸

⁸David Matthews, *I Saw the Welsh Revival* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1951), 16.

⁹W. T. Stead and G. Campbell Morgan, *The Welsh Revival* (Boston, MA: Pilgrim Press, 1905), 50.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Penn-Lewis, location 569-570.

¹³Stead and Morgan, 50-52.

¹⁴Ibid., 51.

¹⁵Matthews, 19.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Matthews, 19.

¹⁸Ibid., 17.

Evan Roberts returned to his studies after this experience but found what had been difficult previously had become impossible.¹⁹ So, only a few weeks after beginning his formal education, he came under the conviction "that God had called him to lead a great revival in Wales."²⁰

Roberts began his work in his home town of Lougher and initially met with little success. The townspeople knew him for who he was and although they respected his character they found his teaching to be elementary. Indeed Roberts himself "told them frankly at the start that he had not prepared anything to say, but that he would only say what was put into his mind by the Holy Spirit."²¹

Early in his efforts at Lougher, Roberts called a meeting of the town's youth. It was at this gathering that he told them of the burden God had placed upon his heart.²² At this meeting Roberts "rehearsed solemnly and deliberately his experiences, emphasized the deep hunger in his own heart for a new Britain for God and for deeper knowledge of the work of the Holy Spirit within."²³ Although there had been stirrings in Wales since February of the year²⁴ it is this meeting that marks the beginning of the Welsh revival of 1904-05.

The Revival

The Welsh revival of 1904-05 was not a "development, but a sudden and a general break with the past."²⁵ Wherever Evan Roberts went, revival broke out – at least evidence of some stirring as seen in the "enthusiasm" of those who gathered to hear the young revivalist. As Roberts moved throughout Wales, it soon became clear he brought with him not only revival fire but a highly disorganized personal life and ministry. As a result "the minister T. Mardy Davies, undertook to become the organizing secretary of the work, arranging services throughout the country as the overwhelming demands came in."²⁶ This brought order to the schedule and "a triumphal tour followed. No king was ever more honored than this simple-hearted young servant of the King of Kings.

¹⁹Matthews, 19

²⁰Goodrich,13.

²¹Ibid., 14.

²²Matthews, 21-22.

²³Ibid., 22

²⁴Eifion Evans, "The Welsh Revival of 1904: Problems and Blessings," *Reformation and Revival* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1993), 18.

²⁵J. Vyrnwy. Morgan, *The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5: A Retrospect and Criticism*, Kindle Edition,(Revival Library), location 1761.

²⁶Matthews, 71.

Thongs followed him day and night making life almost unendurable."²⁷ However, it did not bring order to the revival itself. For instance, it was at this time that Evan Roberts suddenly decided he "would not attend any more revival services for seven days in succession."²⁸ This took place in the town of Neath, where hundreds had gathered to hear Roberts speak. Yet "no amount of persuasion could prevail with him to alter his decision. Divine instructions had been that he was to remain shut up in the room graciously placed at his disposal."²⁹ Meanwhile, Roberts refused to speak to anyone throughout the entire seven days. No one, including Roberts himself, ever gave an explanation for this behavior. However, keeping in mind that Roberts "was comparatively a young believer himself" it is likely the behavior was the product of stress and immaturity.³⁰

After his period of isolation, Roberts reengaged in the work of revival. His ministry took him throughout the country and in every place the effects were similar. As one eyewitness recounts, the venue for Roberts appearance was packed and

*outside the building there are men and women, and boys and girls, in great numbers: some are coming, others are returning, some are moving backwards and forwards as if they were half mad; others are listening, praying and trembling. As I approached the chapel I distinctly heard the great and strange noise within it; it was heartrending, contagious, even hypnotizing in its influence.*³¹

In the meetings anyone was allowed to speak if he felt led to do so. Yet "no one could speak by invitation."³² Roberts himself was frequently very late for scheduled meetings. When he did arrive, he would "come in with five young women, and ...make his way to the front."³³ At that point he would commence speaking, apparently without any preparation, "saying more or less conventional things in a way that somehow gripped their hearts and made them sit straighter then lean forward, so as not to lose either word or particle of that enthusiastic spirit."³⁴ After a while, the young women who accompanied Roberts would sing and the congregation would join with them. At that point the meeting would take on a different tone. Roberts would typically ask his

²⁷Ibid., 72.

²⁸Ibid., 75

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 76.

³¹Morgan, location 1838.

³²Matthews, 75.

³³Goodrich, 25.

³⁴Ibid., 25.

audience if they wanted an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If so, he told them that “four conditions must be observed. They are essential.”³⁵ According to Roberts the four essential conditions were: “(1) Is there any sin in your past life that you have not confessed to God? On your knees at once. Your past must be at peace. (2) Is there anything in your life that is doubtful? Anything you cannot decide whether it is good or evil? Away with it! There must not be! (3) Obey the spirit. (4) Confess Christ publicly before men.”³⁶

Throughout this time of public ministry, Roberts ministered primarily in South Wales. It was said that 32,000 converts were accounted for by that time.³⁷ Yet it was not long before the excesses of the revival began to attract more attention than the positive aspects. “Physical manifestations were widespread: people falling to the ground under great conviction, others crying out loudly in remorse or with the joy of release. Many reported “dreams, religious and otherwise were registered by the score.”³⁸ Moreover, “many people vowed they had heard voices in the air, calling them by name and speaking to them in distinct tones and words.”³⁹ One woman claimed “she heard the voice of her dead son, and that the conversations that passed between them were as real as those that had passed between them in the days of his flesh.”⁴⁰ On another occasion, a woman whose husband was involved in revival work in their home town remained at home in a huff while her husband went to church. She later reported that while at home,

The room went all dark and it seemed as if the room was full, or like a swarm of bees around me. I went out to the back yard and saw about a dozen men going into church, so I said to myself, “Why should I be against my husband doing good when others are going to do good?” and turning into the house again the kitchen was beautiful and light as if the sun was shining there. I went back to the wash tub and there before me appeared the four [deceased] children, and one of them spoke in English to me saying, “Mam, come,” and then they disappeared. I could hear the singing of the hymn “O Paradise” until it died away in the distance.”⁴¹

³⁵Stead and Morgan, 59.

³⁶Stead and Morgan, 59.

³⁷Evans, 21.

³⁸Morgan, location 1075.

³⁹Ibid., location 1864.

⁴⁰Ibid., location 1871.

⁴¹A. T. Fryer, “The Psychological Aspects of the Welsh Revival,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 19 (December 1905), 132, brackets added.

Before departing, the children (all of whom had died before age two), said "crown him Mam" and the woman could see Jesus standing behind the children. Thereafter she was "a different woman and attended all the services."⁴² In addition, throughout Wales, people caught up in the revival reported seeing unexplained lights that moved rapidly about, fire balls that fell from heaven, the sound of singing in open fields that came from nowhere and "strange music similar to the vibrations caused by telegraph wires only much louder."⁴³



Roberts himself began to display "an erratic disposition in his conduct of the meetings, claiming direct visions and messages from God."⁴⁴ By the last quarter of the year 1905 it became apparent that "Mr. Roberts was beginning to feel the ...continual strain of the work ...telling upon his strong constitution."⁴⁵ Then, "by the spring of 1906 he had effectively withdrawn from public ministry"⁴⁶ and went into seclusion at the house of Jessie Penn-Lewis.⁴⁷ The seclusion was so complete that he refused to see members of his own family.⁴⁸ With the disappearance of the primary impetus behind the Welsh revival, the movement waned.⁴⁹ It was over before summer.

The Effects Of The Welsh Revival

The positive effects of the Welsh revival have been well documented and are well known. In most of the regions where the revival was felt, drunkenness decreased, debts were repaid and "stolen goods returned. Prizefighters, gamblers and publicans" were converted and found new employment.⁵⁰

However, another effect of the Welsh revival of 1904-05 was a heightened interest in "enthusiasm" over sound doctrine. One reason for this was that the revival was characterized by a "comparative lack of teaching."⁵¹ For, "the theological hemisphere of

⁴²Fryer, 131.

⁴³Ibid., 134, 148.

⁴⁴Evans, 21.

⁴⁵Matthews, 111.

⁴⁶Evans, 21.

⁴⁷Matthews, 112-114.

⁴⁸Ibid., 116.

⁴⁹Evans, 21.

⁵⁰Penn-Lewis, location 667.

⁵¹Morgan, location 1188.

the Revivalist was very circumscribed."⁵² Yet when older, more educated and experienced Christian ministers offered advice and admonishment, Roberts would typically respond with a "scathing word from the Lord" claiming that his critics were "blocking the way of revival."⁵³

Nonetheless, it was this criticism and correction the revival sorely needed. This need was not new to the Welsh revival. In times of revival it is often the young who are most stirred by the Spirit. "They have not the advantage of age and experience, and have had little opportunity to study divinity or to converse with aged, experienced Christians and divines."⁵⁴ As a result, revivals often "run to extremes and get into confusion; and especially in these three things, enthusiasm, superstition and intemperate zeal."⁵⁵ While the youthfulness of revivalists need not be a problem, it can be when youth is allowed to lead in ignorance. This was the case in the Welsh revival to the point that more mature Christian ministers were unwilling to lead.⁵⁶ Due to its widespread influence on the character of the worldwide revival that followed in its wake, there is some evidence that it gave rise to "the first pampered youth generation," a generation that enthusiastically agitated for war in Europe within the decade.⁵⁷

The Welsh revival also helped normalize the presence of unusual phenomena in the Christian community. Granted, the revival of 1904-05 was not the first time these kinds of things occurred. However, perhaps more than any other, the Welsh revival drew interested observers and participants from around the world that then took the spirit of the Welsh revival home with them. An alert clergy may have discovered a problem from the start. Roberts' conviction that he regularly conversed with God the Father and not Jesus contradicts the witness of Scripture (1 Timothy 2:5, cf. Colossians 1:19, 2:9). Moreover, claiming direct communication with God the Father is a characteristic of many occultists who use Christian terminology and claim a Christian faith.⁵⁸ Unexplained lights, music and voices are also common occult phenomena.⁵⁹ Finally, communication with the dead, as accepted during the height of the Welsh revival, or in any form, is

⁵²Ibid., location 1188

⁵³Matthews, 100.

⁵⁴Edwards, 1.373.

⁵⁵Ibid., 1.372.

⁵⁶Matthews, 23-29.

⁵⁷Paul Johnson, *Modern Times, from the Twenties to the Nineties (rev. Ed.)* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1991), 18 – 19.

⁵⁸Gary North, *Unholy Spirits: Occultism and New Age Humanism* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1986), 203.

⁵⁹Ibid., 50-51, 180-81

forbidden by Scripture (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). Unfortunately the “mild” necromancy practiced during the revival went mainstream and remains acceptable to many Christians today as is evidenced by bestselling Christian books promoting the activity.⁶⁰ Truly all of these kinds of occurrences have become acceptable to large portions of the modern Christian church.

Conclusion

It is true that much good is realized when the Holy Spirit moves the hearts of Jesus’ followers. The Welsh revival changed the character of a nation. The numbers professing Christ as Lord and Savior was notable; “lists of converts were sent to the newspapers, giving record of ...over 85,000 by the end of March 1905.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, along with revival comes the danger of ungodly behaviors and practice.

The Welsh revival was also notable for visions of angels,⁶² unexplained lights, fire and glowing figures,⁶³ communication with the dead⁶⁴ psychic premonitions,⁶⁵ visions of events taking place a great distance away,⁶⁶ encounters with “Jesus” complete with wings and halo⁶⁷ and so on. Acceptance of these phenomena was once confined to fringe elements within the church. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, things common to the Welsh revival of 1904-05 have become unobjectionable in much of the church at large.⁶⁸ One tool of the church in judging such events is the historical environment of their appearance. History tells us the Welsh revival of 1904-05 was not a Bible anchored movement. Thus we are reminded; all that happens in times of revival is not necessarily of God.

⁶⁰Just one example is the wildly popular *Heaven Is For Real*. The subject, Colton Burpo individually and physically meets God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and visits his dearly departed grandfather. In other words, best-selling books published by Christian publishers, purchased by self-professing Christians, deny the Trinity and endorse necromancy. Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent, *Heaven Is For Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 100-103

⁶¹Penn-Lewis, location 670.

⁶²Fryer, 124.

⁶³Ibid., 154-ff.

⁶⁴Morgan, location 1871.

⁶⁵Fryer, 122 – 123.

⁶⁶Morgan, location 1881.

⁶⁷Ibid., 140.

⁶⁸John. F. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 292-ff.