



REVIVE US, O LORD: NEW SEASON, NEW FOCUS

David Hull

DAVID A. HULL, CHAIR OF MET, PRESENTS MET'S FRESH FOCUS, AS UNANIMOUSLY ENDORSED BY THIS YEAR'S AGM.

'I think we sing Charles Wesley's hymns, enjoy them tremendously, but we don't always listen to the words, or hear what the words mean. I've been thinking of that hymn ... "O thou who camest from above, the pure celestial fire to impart, kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart".'

It isn't very often that MET Connexion articles begin with a quotation from a prime minister, but those were the words of Margaret Thatcher, when speaking at the reopening of John Wesley's House in 1981.

A number of her predecessors have similarly made remarkable claims about the Evangelical Revival which birthed our Methodist Movement. Lloyd George said that his native Wales, 'owed more to the movement of which Wesley was ... leader, than to any other movement in the whole of its history. It civilised the people ... There was a complete revolution effected in the whole country.' Stanley Baldwin said that historians, 'now realise that they cannot explain nineteenth century England until they can explain Wesley.' He added, 'I believe it is equally true to say, that you cannot understand twentieth century America, unless you understand Wesley.'

For the sake of political balance, having quoted two Conservatives and a Liberal premier, I'll add a further comment from former Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who

affirmed Morgan Phillip's claim that the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marx. Wilson didn't, however, see why Methodism should be given all the credit, and suggested that the alliteration should be dropped in favour of non-conformity more generally.

They all observed something that seems so easily to be overlooked. We cannot understand our culture in the UK today, until we have grasped that much of what we value has its roots in the Evangelical Revival. It was a moment of refocussing and reenergising which fundamentally changed our country. It seems to me that we now stand in need of revival once again, perhaps more than ever since then.

Over recent years, as we have reflected within Methodist Evangelicals Together upon not only our national context, but also that of our denomination, a clear consensus has emerged that we are now in a new season, and a new focus is therefore needed. MET is a river which runs with the water of three streams: a conservative evangelical emphasis on the authority of the Bible brought to us by Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism, a charismatic dependence on the renewing power of the Holy Spirit contributed by Dunamis magazine, and a commitment to pray for revival which was the *raison d'être* of the Methodist Revival Fellowship. Whilst each of these emphases have continued to guide our work over the years, and will continue to do so into the future, we have concluded that it is time to put Prayer for Revival 'front and centre' again, with three points of focus.

PREPARING FOR REVIVAL

I am often inspired by remembering that, before the Evangelical Revival began in England, John Wesley read Jonathan Edward's account of revival in America. He recorded his conclusion in his journal: 'This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes!'

I am sure that the book must have sparked a passionate longing for revival in Wesley's own heart. He did not have long to wait. As the year turned from 1738 to 1739, he met with his brother Charles, their great friend George Whitefield, and about sixty others to see in the new year with an all-night prayer service. At three o'clock in the morning, they had an astonishing experience:

'As we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God come mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.'

The fire of the Lord fell! A flame was kindled in his heart and, empowered by that experience, Wesley travelled to Bristol at Whitefield's invitation, preached for the first time in the open-air, and the revival flames began to spread like wildfire.

First, however, the kindling was prepared. It seems to me, that was what happened as Wesley read the account of revival in New England. It opened his heart and mind to a deeper understanding of the Word and work of God and put a desperate, passionate longing within him.

As we place Prayer for Revival front and centre once again, I believe this is our first task. We need to prepare for revival with teaching from the Bible and testimonies from past revivals, reminding ourselves what revival really is. Personally, I understand revival to be the recovery of authentic Christianity, accompanied by the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in wide-reaching transformation.

Let's Prepare for Revival by rediscovering all the Bible teaches about revival and telling again the stories of past revivals, increasing our openness, expectation and longing for the Lord to repeat such marvellous work in our own day.

PRAYING FOR REVIVAL

It was in a prayer meeting that the flame was kindled in the hearts of the Wesley brothers and their friends as they encountered the presence of God in an extraordinary way. Later that year, when John Wesley was in Bristol, the Methodists in London realised they were losing the sense of God's presence in that extraordinary way. They wrote to Wesley, urging him to return. As soon as he did, they gathered again in Fetter Lane, the same place in which they had met to see in the new year. They humbled themselves, confessed their unfaithfulness and acknowledged they had grieved the Holy Spirit through their divisions, through relying on their own strength, and through being dismissive of the Spirit's work. 'In that hour,' Wesley wrote in his journal:

'We found God with us as at the first. Some fell prostrate upon the ground. Others burst out, as with one consent, into loud praise and thanksgiving. And many openly testified, there had been no such day as this since January the first preceding.'

I am often greatly encouraged to remember that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them all, not only once, but repeatedly, and I am challenged and spurred on by the fact that they found the way back to be through deliberate and desperate prayer.

Over dinner during the first week of this year, someone mentioned to me the American UMC pastor, David Thomas. His name was new to me at the time, but a few months later I had the privilege of spending some time with him when he was visiting the UK to speak at a conference. He has spent much of his life studying revivals of the past and was asked to 'shepherd' the recently reported outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Asbury, which he did very quietly and humbly in the background, unbeknown to many. We talked about how, through his research, he has discovered that almost every revival, perhaps every past revival, has been preceded by a particular kind of prayer, which he refers to as Travailing Prayer.

It is the sort of prayer in which Elijah engaged on the top of Mount Carmel. After the fire of the Lord had fallen, and having pursued the so-called prophets of Baal, Elijah climbed Mount Carmel again. Having trusted the Lord for fire, now in the midst of a severe drought, he had to trust the Lord for rain. Perhaps they had used the last of the water when he had instructed them to pour it extravagantly over the sacrifice he had prepared. He sent his servant to look out towards the sea. Six times the servant returned, saying 'There is nothing there'.

Each time the servant turned back from the sea, he would have seen an extraordinary sight. Elijah had 'bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees' (1 Kings 18:42). The only possible explanation of that extraordinary posture, it seems, is that it was the position, in the ancient world, of childbirth. Elijah was travailing in prayer, groaning as in the pains of childbirth. Paul the apostle would later share the experience, writing to the Galatians: 'My dear children,

for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you ...' (Galatians 4:19).

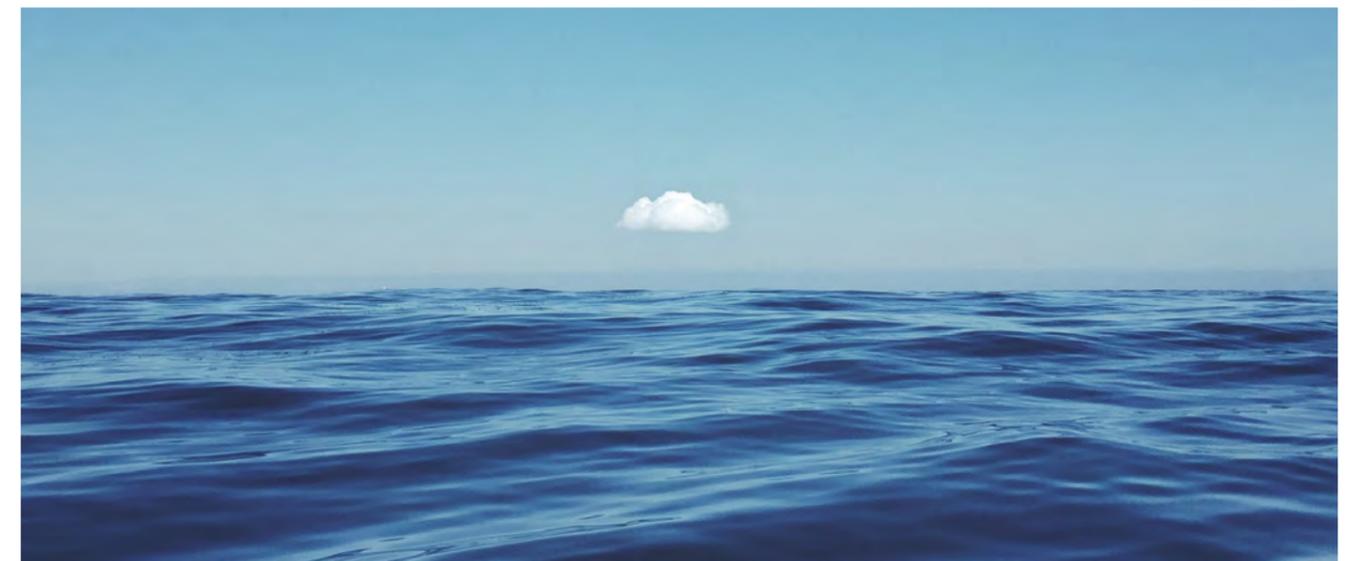
It was only after an extended time of such travailing prayer that, on the seventh time of looking, the servant was able to report the sight of coming rain: 'A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea' (1 Kings 18:44). It was an image that Charles Wesley applied to revival in his heart-stirring hymn, 'See how great a flame aspires, kindled by a spark of grace'.

As we place a focus on Revival front and centre once again, surely our central task must be to Pray for Revival – rediscovering what it is to travail in prayer. Let's pray deliberately, determinedly and with desperation, that a spark of grace would kindle revival fires once again.

PURSUING REVIVAL

When I read the accounts and reflections about the reported outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Asbury earlier this year, I was a little concerned that some seemed to suggest that the answer, for all of us who long for revival, is to copy what was happening there. The mistake with that, it seemed to me, was that they were seeking to replicate the effects of the outpouring, rather than what led to it. We will never truly know all the ways in which the ground was prepared. There were years of faithful prayer across the USA for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on university campuses. That day, an ordinary group of staff and students gathered in the chapel for an ordinary chapel service, just as they gathered every week, and an ordinary preacher spoke, feeling as he concluded that he had failed. It was then, in his grace, that the Lord poured out his Spirit.

Revival is always and only in the hand of our Sovereign God, and he determines when to give his gifts according to his perfect purposes. However, if revival is – as I understand it – the recovery of authentic Christianity, accompanied by the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in wide-reaching transformation, then perhaps there is a part we can play in pursuing revival – doing all we can to rediscover authentic Christianity.



That, it seems to me, is one of the great lessons we can learn from the Evangelical Revival which swept across this country, and across the world more widely, almost three hundred years ago. Our Lord Jesus himself has taught us how we can know him more deeply, experience more of his power and grow in his likeness. We seek extraordinary acts of God through the ordinary means of grace: bible reading, prayer, fasting, worship, holy communion, fellowship and merciful service.

I remember the late Donald English once telling the story of being approached by a man after he had preached in a church he was visiting. The man wanted to know more about becoming a Christian, but Donald was unable to arrange to meet him because he was due to travel again. Instead, he suggested that the man simply started reading the Bible, beginning with the Gospels, each time with a prayer for revelation. He said it wasn't long before he received a letter from the man, letting him know that he had become a Christian. He wrote 'As I read, I suddenly became aware that he, of whom I was reading, was present with me'.

I think we can too easily forget what these means of grace are: channels through which God's Spirit really does flow into our lives. As we do these things, he really is with us and we can encounter him, more than in any other way. Though let's always remember that we seek God, not because of what he can do for us, but because of who he is - to know him more deeply and grow in his likeness. Ultimately, we seek his face, his heart, more than his hands.

Surely, our placing Prayer for Revival front and centre should aim at spurring us on to Pursue Revival, seeking extraordinary acts of God through the ordinary means of grace, to know him more deeply, grow in his likeness, and trust him to act as he knows best. Whatever happens in this world and within our denominations, nothing that is gained through seeking our extraordinary Living God through the ordinary means of grace will ever ultimately be lost.

Let's join together in Preparing for, Praying for and Pursuing Revival - a recovery of authentic Christianity, accompanied by the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in wide-reaching transformation!



*The Revd Dr David A Hull is
Chair of MET and Lead
Pastor of Freedom
Church Bristol.*

O THOU WHO CAMEST FROM ABOVE

Charles Wesley

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me -

Ready for all they perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.



NEW SEASON:NEW FOCUS

MET LOCAL

Join us at a venue near you as we Prepare for, Pursue and Pray for Revival together!
... Inspirational Worship and Preaching ... Prayer for Revival and Personal Renewal ...

SPEAKER | REV DR DAVID A. HULL

285 years ago, the greatest revival these nations have known began. It birthed our Methodist movement.

It has shaped our national life to this day. Both church and nation now stand in need of revival again.

For more information about dates and venues, go to revive.me.uk

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Charles Wesley (1707-1788)