

“Is revival a work of God or a work of man?”

by Stef Schagen

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Dr. Thomas J. Marinello
Tyndale Theological Seminary
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A plain dictionary describes revival as ‘a renewed interest in something’, or ‘a rebirth.’¹ ‘Revival is a new presentation or publication of something.’² “Father of Modern Revival”, Charles Finney, called revival ‘renewed conviction of sin and repentance, followed by an intense desire to live in obedience to God. It is giving up one's will to God in deep humility.’³ Jonathan Edwards calls revival a time wherein ‘Christ remarkably appears coming to His Church to carry on the work of salvation, to enlarge His own kingdom, and to deliver poor souls out of the pit wherein is no water.’⁴ He witnessed ‘an extraordinary and illustrious appearance of divine grace in the conversion of sinners ... leading to eminent examples of piety’⁵, the Gospel being the ‘divine instrument’.⁶

‘True revival leaves a lasting mark on society’.⁷ The Great Awakenings deeply influenced social and political thinking, ‘changed doctrine’, resulted in increase of missions and humanitarian aid, provided a first impulse against slavery and saw educational academies and colleges emerge.⁸

Strangely enough, the phrase ‘revival’ itself is not mentioned in the Bible as ‘revive’ is, nor are some of the bodily responses to a move of the Spirit⁹, but the ingredients are:

¹ Van Dale Woordenboek Engels-Nederlands, (Utrecht: Van Dale Lexicografie bv, 1988, 1996), ‘Revival’

² Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc, 2009), ‘Revival’ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revival>

³ Elmer E. Shelhamer, *How to Experience Revival* (Springdale:Whitaker House, 1984), 7 (quote by Bill Bright, *The Coming Revival*, <http://www.thegreatawakenings.org/revival.htm>)

⁴ Hugh M. Cartwright, review *Thoughts on the New England Revival* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004)

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 5

⁶ Edwards, 2.

⁷ Sunderland Free Church, *Life of Elijah, Principles of True Revival* (Sunderland: Sunderland Free Church, 2009), quote Roger Ellsworth. Online: <http://www.sunderlandfc.btinternet.co.uk/elijah10.htm>

⁸ The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed, (New York, 2001-2007). ‘Great Awakening’, Online: www.bartleby.com

repentance of sin, ‘What must we do to be saved’? (eg. Acts 16:30). When the Holy Spirit moves, the Word of God is preached. Where the Word of God is being preached, the Holy Spirit moves (Acts 2, Acts 10:44). It is the *Holy Spirit* who convicts an individual ‘of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment’ (John 16:8). And ‘conviction of sin is a hallmark of genuine revival.’¹⁰ Is revival, then, a work of God or a work of man?

‘Do you work a revival up or pray a revival down? Who is responsible for revival?’ (Bill Bright, 2Chron.7:14)¹¹ The Great Revival Historian, Dr. J. Edwin Orr, also posed the question in the title of this paper, pointing to *two* men who saw revival in their days and were instrumental in them: Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney.¹² *Edwards* was the key figure in the *First* Great Awakening (c. 1730-1750), *Finney* in the second (c.1790-1840). *Edwards*, “America’s greatest religious mind”, an “intellectual and spiritual giant”¹³, is viewed upon as “America’s Theologian”¹⁴, *Finney*, who, as he said, ‘saved American church life and evangelism from dead orthodoxy’¹⁵ and by his sceptics is called the “Father of the Modern Soul Saving Movement”, can be viewed upon as “The Father of Modern Revival”.¹⁶ *Edwards* insisted revival to be *solely* a work of *God*, *Finney* insisted revival to be a work of man.¹⁷

⁹ Edwards, 91

¹⁰ Sunderland, from Colin Whittaker, *Great Revivals*.

¹¹ Bright.

¹² Sunderland.

¹³ Edwards, backcover

¹⁴ Gerald R. McDermott, *Understanding Jonathan Edwards, An Introduction to Am. Theologian* (New York City:Oxford University Press, 2009), <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/ReligionTheology/American/~~/dmlldz11c2EmY2k9OTc4MDE5NTM3MzQ0OA==>

¹⁵ Clive Taylor, *Charles Finney and the Disappearance of Revival*, par.3. Online: <http://www.the-highway.com/articleApr99.html>

¹⁶ Taylor, Introduction, par.3

¹⁷ Sunderland.

Edwards was a *monergist*, a true Calvinist, impressed with the absolute Sovereignty and Majesty of God, who believed ‘the course of all events’ to be the ‘orderly outworking of His Plan’¹⁸, and opposed “some of the Arminians”¹⁹, *Finney* an evangelical synergist, who believed in *man’s own free will cooperating* with Gods saving grace at the time of his conversion, or rejecting it to see it pass one’s door. *Finney’s* approach to revival then, was that of *persuasion*, as he used ‘revival techniques’ and even wrote a revival manual, “Lectures on Revivals” (1835) on how to employ them in practice²⁰, whereas *Edwards* ‘preached the whole counsel of God and God plainly honoured his ministry.’²¹

Both approaches to revival are related to the theological debates on *soteriology*, salvation in Christ applied, and *anthropology*, man’s role therein, based on ‘assumptions about human nature’²², especially freedom of will, according to Erasmus ‘a power by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation’, or turn away from them.²³ *Edwards* and *Finney* differed in their approaches to revival, because they had different theologies: Augustine versus Pelagius, The Synod of Dort versus Arminius²⁴, and later Wesley versus Whitefield. And in some aspects, Paul versus John? Their differences still exist in the evangelical Protestant world today.

¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol.II: Basilica – Chambers* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005 online), Calvinism. Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/encyc02.html?term=Calvinism>

¹⁹ Ed. Paul Ramsey, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), preface. Jonathan Edwards [1754], *Freedom of the Will*. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.iii.i.html>

²⁰ Oberlin College Archives, *Charles Grandison Finney*, (Oberlin: Electronic Oberlin Group, 2009). Online: <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/images/CharlesGrandisonFinney.html>

²¹ Edwards, 2, 3.

²² Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica: 1994-2008), *Salvation, Anthropology*

²³ ²⁴ Fook M. Cheah, *A Review of Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*. <http://www.prca.org/prtj/nov95b.html>

'The Good News of the Kingdom is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it' (Luke 16:16). Finney's approach resulted from his own conversion experience, in 1821, which, as he stated later, happened almost totally *'due to the effort of his own will and resolution'* at which the Lord met him privately: *'My conscience was awakened, I had a great shame for sin, my mind was enlightened, I had a vision of Christ and I was broken down under an outpouring of the Spirit.'* It was 'God at work in power', which Finney claimed to be at the effort of his own will, but the Lord most likely *did* use external instruments: 'the prayers of his mother and his sweetheart', his pastor's pulpit power and his attendance of the prayer meetings in his church.²⁵

Finney 'bridged the old religious world and the new'. 'He was a symptom of the changing times'²⁶. Finney seemed influenced by his contemporary German Dr. Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) philosophy *"I ought, therefore I can"*, and by Erasmus, who believed God's glory is manifested in co-working with with man's ability²⁷, and his evangelical fervour as a flamboyant preacher using emotion and persuasion, sprung from his hotly debated view on God, salvation and man's own ability to contribute to it.²⁸ According to Finney, man still has the power to change his will and experience 'a radical shift in intention'.²⁹ Finney reasoned that if God *commanded* man to be born again, he would also have the *ability*, of his own, to be regenerated. Gods strategy, then, is to *convince* him with arguments like a 'statesman swaying the Senate', or 'an advocate addressing the jury'.³⁰

In his views we are possibly faced with the old heresy of Pelagianism, in 'modern

²⁵ Taylor, par. Finney's Early Life and Christian Experience.

²⁶ Taylor, par. Finney's Life Marks a Watershed in Church History.

²⁷ Cheah, Concluding Remarks.

²⁸ Taylor, par. Sin

²⁹ Taylor, par. Regeneration.

³⁰ Taylor, par. Regeneration

dress'³¹, leading to merit by works instead of faith. At the root seems a denial of man's 'total depravity' (Rom.3:10-12) and bondage to original sin as Calvin taught. Can man contribute to his own salvation, righteousness? Is the nature of man totally depraved by original sin, and is the will of man totally captured by evil, bound by the devil, or can man *cooperate* with God for his salvation?³² Finney stressed 'free choice', maybe because of Luke 16:16? This may clarify Finney's approach to revival being a work of man. If the Gospel is only presented persuasively, man has a choice. Presenting the Gospel as *attractive*, is one of the dangers it may lead to?

'No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him' (John 6:44). Revival, then, is the work of God. It is *not* the success of skilful evangelists combining 'revival techniques'³³ with a pragmatic and psychological approach in their evangelic endeavours measured in quantity results³⁴. It happens where the Holy Spirit moves. 'Nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion of a programme for self-revival. Neither denomination nor organization, nor pastor, nor evangelist, can organize an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.'³⁵

*'It pleased God to display His free and sovereign mercy in the conversion of a great multitude of souls in a short space of time, turning them ... to the lively exercise of every Christian grace, and the powerful practice of our holy religion.'*³⁶ 'The ordinary and extraordinary effects on individual's lives' persuade us it is 'a genuine work of God'³⁷, *Edwards* wrote about what he witnessed in the First Great Awakening. *Edwards* claimed

³¹ Taylor, par. Sin

³² Encyclopedia Britannica, Pelagianism

³³ Oberlin: Charles Grandison Finney.

³⁴ Taylor.

³⁵ Sunderland Free Church, Dr. J.Edwin Orr.

³⁶ Edwards 2.

³⁷ Cartwright, par.3.

revival to be a sovereign act of ‘divine grace’, because he witnessed ‘the heavenly influence run from door to door, filling the hearts and lips of every inhabitant with importunate inquiries, *What shall we do to be saved? And how shall we escape the wrath to come?*’.³⁸ Edwards, who preached “God is Glorified in Man’s dependence” in his first sermon³⁹, emphasized Romans 9:16 in salvation, not free will: *‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.’*⁴⁰ Edwards stressed it is by God’s grace that one is regenerated, not by one’s own choice or free will. Revival then is a sovereign act of God to which man cannot contribute.

For Edwards, then, revival was about letting God do the Work as He wills and pleases, which is what he witnessed: *‘... in the latter part of December (1734), the Spirit of God began extra-ordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us; and there were very suddenly ... five or six persons ... savingly converted. ‘... And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ’*⁴¹. *It was God displaying His free and sovereign mercy in the conversion of a great multitude of souls’*.⁴²

Influenced by Erasmian humanistic thought that uses ‘reason and philosophy’, ‘twists Scripture to say what they do not mean’ and centralizes man’s ability through which, as Erasmus stressed, ‘God’s glory is seen in cooperating with it’⁴³, Finney’s approach resulted

³⁸ Edwards, 3.

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *God Glorified in Man’s Dependence* (Stanford: Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, 1996-2006)

⁴⁰ Edwards, *The Works etc...*, A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of Will, 3

⁴¹ Edwards, 12, 13

⁴² Edwards, 12

⁴³ Cheah, par. Concluding Remarks

from *his* view of salvation: that of man's effort, his choosing, *Edwards* view sprouted from his Calvinist background: Gods sovereign acts in creation. The central theme of discussion in a major move of Gods Spirit in which Christ is once again, in a new way, 'presented', is how His Atonement is *appropriated* to the individual, how 'salvation is achieved', and how it is evident⁴⁴.

Yet, revival is also a work of man. But, *better* put: Revival is Gods initiative in which man works. Good examples are what happened in Cornelius' house and in Samaria. The Holy Spirit began to move as *Peter* preached in Cornelius' house, after an angel instructed Cornelius to have Peter come (Acts 10:3-7, 44-48). Samaria didn't experience "an Acts 2 revival", it's Harvest, mass conversions like at the Day of Pentecost, until *Philip* arrived there much *later* (Acts 8:1-25).⁴⁵ Great joy overwhelmed the entire city as Philip preached Christ who manifested His power (Acts 8:8). 'Christ was building His church, as He said. *The initiative was clearly with God*, and the growth of the church did not depend for its basic inspiration and power upon the organising abilities of the disciples'.⁴⁶ Peter and Philip worked in (local) revivals the Spirit began. And the Spirit began at the time of His own choosing. All He needed was a spokesman (Rom.10:13-15).

Studying revival, all *historical* accounts mention key leaders being instrumental in a move of God. Studying *Scriptures*, we see the Holy Spirit bringing conviction of sin, as men and women preached Gods Word in obedience to being sent. As Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, the people present '*were cut to the heart and said: 'What shall we do?''*' (Acts

⁴⁴ Britannica, Salvation

⁴⁵ Rev. Robert Evans, "Research in Evangelical Revivals", *Revivals in the Bible* (Hazelbrook, 2009)

Online: <http://revivals.arkangles.com/study-newtestament.php>

⁴⁶ Evans, Study 12.

2:37).⁴⁷ As Ezra spoke about returning to the Law of God, the Israelites repented of idolatry and sin with *weeping* ‘as they listened to the words of the Law’, and were deeply moved (Ezra 8:9, 9:1-3). As Jonah, sent by the Word of the Lord, obeyed and brought His Word of repentance to Nineveh, to help escape from judgment, the entire city repented in sack and ashes, the king included (Jonah.3:5-6).

‘It is predicted, that before God sends wrath, he will send messengers to summon to repentance. In every subsequent revival of religion in the Church it has been so. In the Reformation of the 16th Century, Elijah came in the burning words of Luther, Calvin & Knox; in the 18th, in the fervid spirits of the Wesleys, Whitfield, & Edwards... Indeed, to every regenerated soul there is essentially this coming of Elijah, this summons, ‘Repent, for the day is coming’.⁴⁸

The Lord sends out workers in the Harvest (Matt.9:37). Jesus instructed His disciples to pray He would (:38). Revival, then, is man working under God in the fields to get the Harvest in. For, doesn't it say?: “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, will be saved*”. *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe, in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? ... How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the Gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things’ (Rom.10:13-15b).* Therefore, ‘*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation’ (Mark 16:15)!* May we ‘long for a powerful work of God's grace, spoiled as little as possible by the hand of man’.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ All Scripture verses taken from the NIV translation, The NIV Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corp., 1985).

⁴⁸ Sunderland Free Church, quote Thomas Moore.

⁴⁹ Cartwright, par.8.

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