

Evidence on Revivals

*ANSWERS TO QUERIES ON THE SUBJECT OF THE REVIVAL OF
RELIGION IN ST. PETER'S PARISH, DUNDEE.*



26th March 1841

by Robert Murray McCheyne

Submitted to a Committee of the Presbytery of Aberdeen.

In December 1840 the Presbytery of Aberdeen appointed a committee to inquire into the revivals which had recently occurred in different parts of the country, or were taking place at that time. The committee, besides hearing evidence *viva voce*, issued queries which were sent, amongst other ministers, to Mr. McCheyne. The following are copies of these queries, and of his answers:—

I. Have revivals taken place in your parish or district; and if so, to what extent, and by what instrumentality and means?

II. Do you know what was the previous character and habits of the parties?

III. Have any who are notorious for drunkenness, or other immoralities, neglect of family duties or public ordinances, abandoned their evil practices, and become remarkable for their diligence in the use of the means of grace?

IV. Could you condescend on the number of such cases?

V. Has the conduct of any of the parties been hitherto consistent; and how long has it lasted?

VI. Have the means to which the revivals are ascribed been attended with beneficial effects on the religious condition of the people at large?

VII. Were there public manifestations of physical excitement, as in audible sobs, groans, cries, screams, etc.?

VIII. Did any of the parties throw themselves into unusual postures?

IX. Were there any who fainted, fell into convulsions, or were ill in other respects?

X. How late have you ever known revival meetings last?

XI. Do you approve or disapprove of these meetings upon the whole? In either case, have the goodness to state why.

XII. Was any death occasioned, or said to be occasioned, by over-excitement in any such case? If so, state the circumstances, in so far as you know them.

XIII. State any other circumstances connected with revivals in your parish or district, which, though not involved in the foregoing queries, may tend to throw light upon the subject.”

Additional Queries.

XIV. What special circumstances in the preaching or ministrations of the instruments appear to have produced the results in each particular case which may have come under your notice?

XV. Did the person or persons whom you described as the instruments in producing the effects above adverted to address children? At what hour? In what special terms? And what might be the age of the youngest of them?"

Answer to Query I.

It is my decided and solemn conviction, in the sight of God, that a very remarkable and glorious work of God, in the conversion of sinners and edifying of saints, has taken place in this parish and neighbourhood. This work I have observed going on from the very beginning of my ministry in this place in November 1836, and it has continued to the present time; but it was much more remarkable in the autumn of 1839, when I was abroad on a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews, and when my place was occupied by the Rev. W. C. Burns. Previous to my going abroad, and for several months afterwards, the means used were of the ordinary kind. In addition to the services of the Sabbath, in the summer of 1837, a meeting was opened in the church, on Thursday evenings, for prayer, exposition of Scripture, reading accounts of missions, revivals of religion, etc.; Sabbath schools were formed, private prayer-meetings were encouraged, and two weekly classes for young men and young women were instituted, with a very large attendance. These means were accompanied with an evident blessing from on high in many instances. But there was no visible or general movement among the people until August 1839, when, immediately after the beginning of the Lord's work at Kilsyth, the Word of God came with such power to the hearts and consciences of the people here, and their thirst for hearing it became so intense, that the evening classes in the schoolroom were changed into densely crowded congregations in the church, and for nearly four months it was found desirable to have public worship almost every night. At this time, also, many prayer meetings were formed, some of which were strictly private or fellowship meetings, and others, conducted by persons of some Christian experience, were open to persons under concern about their souls. At the time of my return from the Mission to the Jews, I found thirty-nine such meetings held weekly in connection with the congregation, and five of these were conducted and attended entirely by little children. At present, although many changes have taken place, I believe the number of these meetings is not much diminished. Now, however, they are nearly all of the more private kind—the deep and general anxiety which led to many of them being open having in a great degree subsided. Among the many ministers who have assisted here from time to time, and especially in the autumn of 1839, I may mention Mr. Macdonald of Urquhart, Mr. Cumming of Dumbarney, Mr. Bonar of Larbert, Mr. Bonar of Kelso, and Mr. Somerville of Anderston. Some of these were present here for a considerable time, and I have good reason for believing that they were eminently countenanced by God in their labours.

As to the extent of this work of God, I believe it is impossible to speak decidedly. The parish is situated in the suburb of a city containing 60,000 inhabitants. The work extended to individuals residing in all quarters of the town, and belonging to all ranks and denominations of the people. Many hundreds, under deep concern for their souls, have come, from first to last, to converse with the ministers: so that I am deeply persuaded, the number of those who have received saving benefit is greater than any one will know till the judgment-day.

Answer to Queries II & III.

The previous character of those who seem to have been converted was very various. I could name not a few in the higher ranks of life that seem evidently to have become new creatures, who previously lived a worldly life, though unmarked by open wickedness. Many, again, who were before nominal Christians, are now living ones. I could name, however, far more, who have been turned from the paths of open sin and profligacy, and have found pardon and purity in the blood of the Lamb, and by the Spirit of our God; so that we can say to them, as Paul said to the Corinthians, "Such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified," etc. I often think, when conversing with some of these, that the change they have undergone might be enough to convince an atheist that there is a God, or an infidel that there is a Saviour.

Answer to Query IV.

It is not easy for a minister, in a field like this, to keep an exact account of all the cases of awakening and conversion that occur; and there are many of which he may never hear. I have always tried to mark down the circumstances of each awakened soul that applied to me, and the number of these, from first to last, has been very great. During the autumn of 1839, not fewer than from 600 to 700 came to converse with the ministers about their souls; and there were many more, equally concerned, who never came forward in this way. I know many who appear to have been converted, and yet have never come to me in private; and I am every now and then meeting with cases of which I never before heard. Indeed, eternity alone can reveal the true number of the Lord's hidden ones among us.

Answer to Query V.

With regard to the consistency of those who are believed to have been converted, I may first of all remark, that it must be acknowledged, and should be clearly understood, that many who came under concern about their souls, and seemed for a time to be deeply convinced of sin, have gone back again to the world. I believe that, at that remarkable season in 1839, there were very few persons who attended the meetings without being more or less affected. It pleased God at that time to bring an awfully solemn sense of divine things over the minds of men. It was, indeed, the day of our merciful visitation. But many allowed it to slip past them without being saved; and these have sunk back, as was to be expected, into their former deadness and impenitence. Alas! there are some among us, whose very looks remind you of that awful warning, "Quench not the Spirit."

Confining our view, however, to those who, as far as ministers could judge by the rules of God's word, seemed to be savingly converted, I may with safety say that I do not know of more than two who have openly given the lie to their profession. Other cases of this kind may have occurred, but they are unknown to me. More, I have little doubt, will eventually occur; for the voice of God teaches us to expect such things. Some of those converted have now walked consistently for four years; the greater part from one to two years. Some have had their falls into sin, and have thus opened the mouths of their adversaries; but the very noise that this has made, shows that such instances are very rare. Some have fallen into spiritual darkness; many, I fear, have left their first love; but yet I see nothing in all this but what is incident in the case of every Christian church. Many there are among us, who are filled with light and peace, and are examples to

the believers in all things. We had an additional communion season at my return from the Continent, which was the happiest and holiest that I was ever present at. The Monday was entirely devoted to thanksgiving, and a thank-offering was made among us to God for His signal mercies. The times were hard, and my people are far from wealthy, yet the sum contributed was £71. This was devoted to missionary purposes. It is true that those whom I esteem as Christians do often grieve me by their inconsistencies; but still I cannot help thinking that, if the world were full of such, the time would be come when “they shall neither hurt nor destroy in all God’s holy mountain.”

Answer to Query VI.

During the progress of this work of God, not only have many individuals been savingly converted, but important effects have also been produced upon the people generally. It is indeed amazing and truly affecting to see that thousands living in the immediate vicinity of the spot where God has been dealing so graciously, still continue sunk in deep apathy in regard to spiritual things, or are running on greedily in open sin. While many from a distance have become heirs of glory, multitudes, I fear, of those who live within the sound of the Sabbath bell continue to live on in sin and misery. Still, however, the effects that have been produced upon the community are very marked. It seems now to be allowed, even by the most ungodly, that there is such a thing as conversion. Men cannot any longer deny it. The Sabbath is now observed with greater reverence than it used to be; and there seems to be far more of a solemn awe upon the minds of men than formerly. I feel that I can now stop sinners in the midst of their open sin and wickedness, and command their reverent attention, in a way that I could not have done before. The private meetings for prayer have spread a sweet influence over the place. There is far more solemnity in the house of God; and it is a different thing to preach to the people now from what it once was. Any minister of spiritual feeling can discern that there are many praying people in the congregation. When I came first here, I found it impossible to establish Sabbath schools on the local system; while, very lately, there were instituted with ease nineteen such schools, that are well taught and well attended.

Answer to Query VII, VIII, IX.

As I have already stated, by far the most remarkable season of the working of the Spirit of God in this place, was in 1839, when I was abroad. At that time there were many seasons of remarkable solemnity, when the house of God literally became “a Bochim, a place of weepers.” Those who were privileged to be present at these times will, I believe, never forget them. Even since my return, however, I have myself frequently seen the preaching of the word attended with so much power, and eternal things brought so near, that the feelings of the people could not be restrained. I have observed at such times an awful and breathless stillness pervading the assembly; each hearer bent forward in the posture of rapt attention; serious men covered their faces to pray that the arrows of the King of Zion might be sent home with power to the hearts of sinners. Again, at such a time, I have heard a half-suppressed sigh rising from many a heart, and have seen many bathed in tears. At other times I have heard loud sobbing in many parts of the Church, while a deep solemnity pervaded the whole audience. I have also, in some instances, heard individuals cry aloud, as if they had been pierced through with a dart. These solemn scenes were witnessed under the preaching of different ministers, and sometimes occurred under the most tender gospel invitations. On one occasion, for instance, when the minister was speaking tenderly on the words, “He is altogether lovely,” almost every sentence was

responded to by cries of the bitterest agony. At such times I have seen persons so overcome, that they could not walk or stand-alone. I have known cases in which believers have been similarly affected through the fullness of their joy. I have often known such awakenings to issue in what I believe to be real conversion. I could name many of the humblest, meekest believers, who at one time cried out in the church under deep agony. I have also met with cases where the sight of souls thus pierced has been blessed by God to awaken careless sinners who had come to mock.

Am far from believing that these signs of deep alarm always issue in conversion, or that the Spirit of God does not often work in a more quiet manner. Sometimes, I believe, He comes like the pouring rain; sometimes like the gentle dew. Still I would humbly state my conviction that it is the duty of all who seek the salvation of souls, and especially the duty of ministers, to long and pray for such solemn times, when the arrows shall be sharp in the heart of the King's enemies, and our slumbering congregations shall be made to cry out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Answer to Query X, XI.

None of the ministers who have been engaged in the work of God here have ever used the name "revival meeting"; nor do they approve of its use. We are told in the Acts that the apostles preached and taught the gospel daily; yet their meetings are never called revival meetings. No other meetings have taken place here, but such as were held for the preaching and teaching of the gospel, and for prayer. It will not be maintained by any one that the meetings in the sanctuary every Lord's day are intended for any other purpose than the revival of genuine godliness, through the conversion of sinners and the edification of saints. All the meetings in this place were held, I believe, with a single eye to the same object. There seems, therefore, to be no propriety in applying the name peculiarly to any meetings that have been held in this place. It is true, indeed, that on week evenings there is not generally the same formality as on Sabbaths; the congregation are commonly dressed in their working clothes, and the minister speaks with less regular preparation.

During the autumn of 1839 the meetings were in general dismissed at ten o'clock; although in several instances the state of the congregation seemed to be such as to demand that the minister should remain still longer with them, that they might counsel and pray with the awakened. I have myself once or twice seen the service in the house of God continue till about midnight. On these occasions the emotion during the preaching of the word was so great, that after the blessing had been pronounced at the usual hour, the greater part of the people remained in their seats or occupied the passages, so that it was impossible to leave them. In consequence of this, a few words more were spoken suited to the state of awakened souls; singing and prayer filled up the rest of the time. In this way the meeting was prolonged by the very necessity of the case. On such occasions I have often longed that all the ministers in Scotland were present, that they might learn more deeply what the true end of our ministry is. I have never seen or heard of anything indecorous at such meetings; and on all such occasions, the feelings that filled my soul were those of the most solemn awe, the deepest compassion for afflicted souls, and an unutterable sense of the hardness of my own heart. I do entirely and solemnly approve of such meetings, because I believe them to be in accordance with the word of God, to be pervaded by the Spirit of Christ, and to be oftentimes the birthplaces of precious, never-dying souls. It is my earnest prayer that we may yet see greater things than these in all parts of Scotland.

Answer to Query XII.

There was one death that took place in very solemn circumstances at the time of the work of God in this place, and this was ascribed by many of the enemies to religious excitement. The facts of the case, however, which were published at the time, clearly show that this was a groundless calumny.

Answer to Query XIII.

I have been led to examine with particular care the accounts that have been left us of the Lord's marvellous works in the days that are past, both in our own land and in other parts of the world, in order that I might compare these with what has lately taken place at Dundee, and in other parts of Scotland. In doing this, I have been fully convinced that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Kirk of Shotts, and again, a century after, at Cambuslang, etc., in Scotland, and under the ministry of President Edwards in America, was attended by the very same appearances as the work in our own day. Indeed, so completely do they seem to agree, both in their nature and in the circumstances that attended them, that I have not heard a single objection brought against the work of God now which was not urged against it in former times, and that has not been most scripturally and triumphantly removed by Mr. Robe in his *Narrative*, and by President Edwards in his invaluable *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*: "And certainly we must throw by all talk of conversion and Christian experience; and not only so, but we must throw by our Bibles, and give Up revealed religion, if this be not in general the work of God."

Answer to Query XIV.

I do not know of anything in the ministrations of those who have occupied my pulpit that may with propriety be called peculiar, or that is different from what I conceive ought to characterise the services of all true ministers of Christ. They have preached, so far as I can judge, nothing but the pure gospel of the grace of God. They have done this fully, clearly, solemnly; with discrimination, urgency, and affection. None of them read their sermons. They all, I think, seek the *immediate* conversion of the people, and they believe that, under a living gospel ministry, success is more or less the rule, and want of success the exception. They are, I believe, in general, peculiarly given to secret prayer; and they have also been accustomed to have much united prayer when together, and especially before and after engaging in public worship. Some of them have been peculiarly aided in declaring the terrors of the Lord, and others in setting forth the fullness and freeness of Christ as the Saviour of sinners; and the same persons have been, at different times, remarkably assisted in both these ways. So far as I am aware, no unscriptural doctrines have been taught, nor has there been a keeping back of any part of "the whole counsel of God."

Answer to Query XV.

The ministers engaged in the work of God in this place, believing that children are lost, and may through grace be saved, have therefore spoken to children as freely as to grown persons; and God has so greatly honoured their labours, that many children, from ten years old and upwards, have given full evidence of their being born again. I am not aware of any meetings that have been held peculiarly for children, with the

exception of the Sabbath schools, the children's prayer meetings, and a sermon to children on the Monday evening after the Communion. It was commonly at the public meetings in the house of God that children were impressed; often also in their own little meetings, when no minister was present.

26th March 1841.