

# THE THREE CONSTITUTIVE COMPONENTS OF AN EVANGELICAL REVIVAL

The evangelical revivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (in, for example, Britain and the USA) had a deep and long lasting impact on western society. (It has been said that without the Wesleyan revival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain would have gone through the horrors of an upheaval similar to the 1789 Revolution in France.<sup>1</sup>) This is what makes revivals a fascinating study even for secular historians. Some see in it quest for personal autonomy others expressions of simmering discontent. And although it is obvious that there are no simple explanations, this article is based on the belief that revivals have supernatural source of power and this is what made them into such a influence on society. But during the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only revivals became less in number (especially in the West), but the social, cultural and political influence of these revivals began to diminish.

My explanation of this phenomenon given in this article is that for a religious revival to have a deep and lasting impact on society, three components or “ingredients” must all be present and must continue to be present. These three elements according to my analysis are

1. Personal and explicit experience of the Holy Spirit (pneumatic experience).
2. A strong focus on salvation and social justice for as many as possible, (soteriology central).
3. A belief in the possibility and practicality of living a holy life, (sanctification or perfection).

All three of these elements stem from conservative evangelical theology.

## 1. THE COMPONENTS

### 1.1 Spiritual Experience

- Conversion

For most Christians, their first experience of the Holy Spirit is when they are convicted of sin (John 16:8). If they respond to this by receiving God’s forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, then they are born-again into the family of God. The New Testament tells us that “we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13) so that this too is the work of the Holy Spirit.

- Assurance

The good news of God’s grace is that sinful people may become new creations. When we are born-again, we have a new relationship with God and a new relationship with other people. The person who has been truly born-again into the kingdom of God is able to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, and He gives assurance of the forgiveness of sins, of having become a child of God, and of having a home in heaven. (Romans 8:16)

---

<sup>1</sup> The origins of this analysis are usually traced to the French historian Elie Halévy and the English historian W.E.H. Lecky, neither of whom was an evangelical Christian. Halévy wrote: “we shall explain by this movement [the revival] the extraordinary stability which English Society was destined to enjoy throughout a period of revolutions and crises” (*A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 387, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1961). W.E.H. Lecky spoke of it as “a great moral revolution in England” (*A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol.3, p. 100, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1913) More recently this was controverted by some historians, but I think their arguments are not very persuasive.

- “Second Blessing”

The emphasis in revivals on having a spiritual experience of conversion, meant that the people were generally open to further spiritual experiences. In some revivals these experiences were called “entire sanctification”<sup>2</sup>, in the others “the baptism in the Spirit”<sup>3</sup>, “the second blessing”<sup>4</sup> etc.<sup>5</sup>

- Theology of experience?

The experiences of Christians in revivals cannot be listed in a systematic way because they are the work of God the Holy Spirit, and God is much bigger than our lists or systems for describing what he does. As Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

## 1.2 Personal Salvation

Revivals are very much about individuals becoming Christians. This follows from the evangelical understanding of the Gospel as “good news” about the possibility of getting right with God - being saved - through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- Salvation in the centre

However, an important point is that in revivals in the past, this emphasis on salvation had a very pragmatic/practical application and consequence. In these revivals, almost everything else, all doctrine, was assessed by its usefulness in preaching salvation through Jesus. The issue was how to see the most people saved. Because of this, many issues which had previously and outside revival divided Christians were for the time being pushed back out of the way.

- “Soteriological Pragmatism”<sup>6</sup>

This almost exclusive stress on soteriology meant that questions about doctrine/belief which were not directly related to salvation were either ignored, or they were modified in the light of the preaching of the Gospel. This may have made the preaching in some sense simpler, though it may have created some difficulties for the growth and development of the new Christians.

## 1.3 A Holy Life

Many Christians in the revivals since the time of Wesley have spoken about the possibility of attaining to the so called “evangelical perfection”. This is why revivals are often accused of teaching the doctrine of “perfectionism”.<sup>7</sup>

- “Perfection” – Use and Abuse

Nowadays, evangelical Christians are wary of using the term “perfectionism” because it does seem to imply actual sinlessness, and we know that this is not our practical experience. However, it is written:

---

<sup>2</sup> So John Wesley in his writings. Eg. in his Journal he speaks of a woman, who “received the great promise of God, entire sanctification, fifteen or sixteen years ago...” (*Works, Vol.4*, p. 138, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979). A. C. Outler says of Wesley: “His irreducible minimum of Christian fundamentals were...: (1) sin and repentance (i.e., selfknowledge), (2) justification and pardon (i.e., assurance) and (3) “holiness of heart and life.” “Sanctification”, “perfect love”, “Christian perfection” were various synonyms, in his vocabulary, for “holiness”... (OUTLER, A. C. *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, p. 69, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Charles G. Finney describing his conversion says he “received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost” on the day of his conversion (*An Autobiography*, p. 20, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, New Jersey).

<sup>4</sup> This expression also was used by John Wesley.

<sup>5</sup> This experience is also known by various terms representing its different phases, such as "Christian Perfection," "Perfect Love," "Heart Purity," "The Baptism with the Holy Spirit," "The Fullness of the Blessing," and "Christian Holiness." (CORLETT, D. S. (ed.) *The Second Work of Grace*, p. 6, Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, 1950)

<sup>6</sup> This term is sometimes used to describe Buddhist view of salvation. Because in revivalism, practically everything is subsumed under soteriology and is judged by its usefulness in preaching salvation, I used it in this connection. “Soteriological pragmatism” does not evaluate the truth of a doctrine but its “preachability”. A good illustration of “soteriological pragmatism” is Finney’s *Systematic Theology*, (Bethany House Pub, Bloomington, 1994) where all discussed topics are seen in their relation to salvation.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley propounded his views in the tract called *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. (Sage Software, Albany, 1996)

“It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.” (2 Samuel 22:33 and Psalm 18:32) Jesus said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) And the writer to the Hebrews tells us, “By one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:14) Thus, the Bible uses the term “perfection” to describe the life of an obedient Christian, but it is not used so much by Christians these days because of the possibility of misunderstanding.

- Practical “Christian Perfection”

Perhaps we don’t speak or write about holiness as much as some Christians in the past, but we do generally have a concept of the need to live a holy life. The combined emphasis on a holy life and a strong practical focus on personal salvation resulted in the establishment of a number of charities and educational Christian institutions that literally changed the character of western society. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the USA the holiness movement was part of almost every Christian denomination. For example, its adherents fought slavery and required the introduction of biblical principles into capitalist enterprise.

## 2. OMISSIONS LEAD TO DOWNFALL

Just as we need a balanced diet to remain healthy, so all of these above mentioned three components of revivals are necessary to maintain a healthy move of God and to avoid moving into error and away from the truth.

In fact, several of the major “movements” in our society may be seen as the consequence of dropping one or more of the three factors which we are considering. The diagram below summarises these and we shall discuss them in the remainder of this section. The diagram shows what happened to revivalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

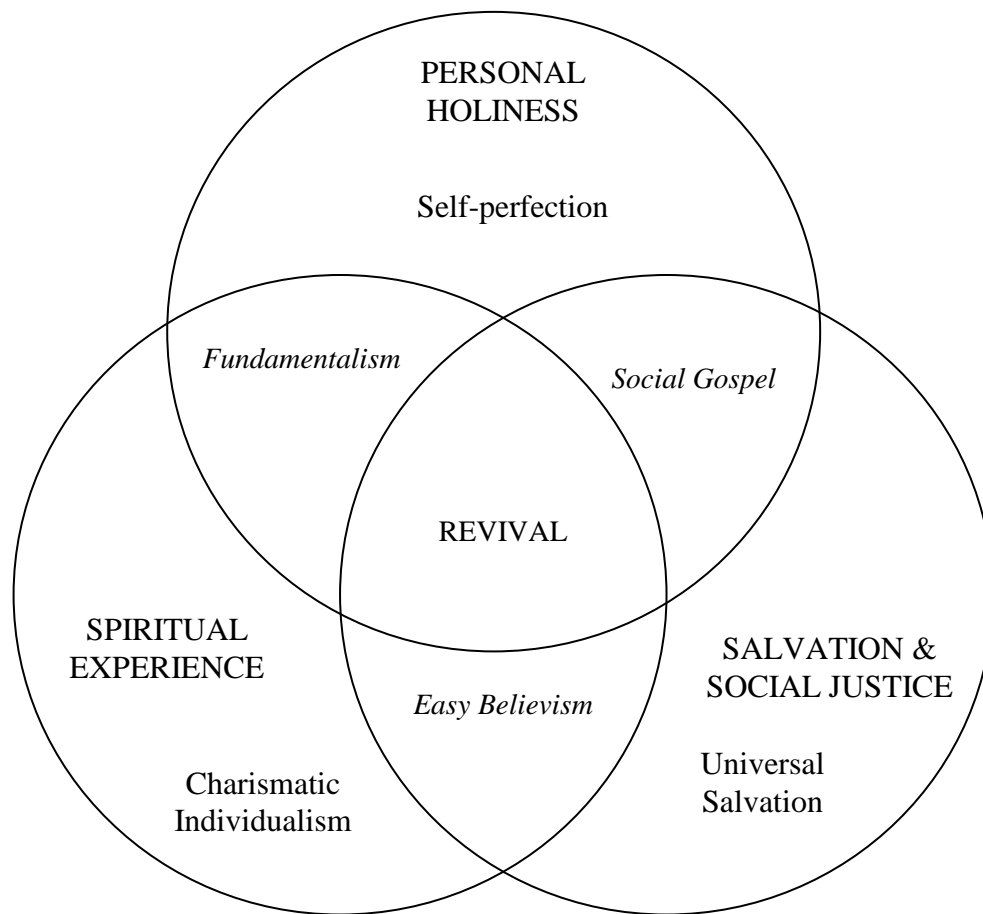
Leaving out any one of the three constitutional “parts” of a genuine revival led to the formation of movements related to revivalism but missing its lasting impact on society.

- Removing the necessity for spiritual experiences led to the *Social Gospel*.
- Removing the focus on salvation and social justice for as many as possible led to *Fundamentalism*.
- Removing the need for a holy life led to *easy believism*.

Similarly, if only one of the factors is preserved and the other two are removed, then there are even more extreme errors.

- An emphasis only on spiritual experiences leads to *charismatic individualism*.
- An emphasis only on salvation for as many as possible leads to the doctrine of universal salvation or *universalism*.
- An emphasis only on holiness leads to *individual perfectionism*.

(If I am allowed to use a simile from the world of things I will compare this with a three-legged stool that is stable on its three legs, but if one or more of the legs is removed it falls!)



## 2.1 The Social Gospel

The so-called “Social Gospel” is a result of leaving out the experiences of the Holy Spirit from the teaching and experience of revival. There is no teaching about the experience of the Spirit in the new-birth, or in the Baptism of the Spirit, or in entire sanctification, etc. These terms are re-interpreted to mean openness and capacity for solidarity, responsibility and social justice. The emphasis is on seeing the effects of the Kingdom of God now, on this side of eternity.<sup>8</sup>

Social Gospel theology is certain that the salvation of the individual from his/her sins is only a part of changing the whole social order. Faith in historic Christian doctrines (Jesus – the Son of God; the Bible – the Word of God, etc.), because it is basically a product of theological development, should be subservient to the modern theological views. What matters are the ethical principles derived from the teaching of Jesus – the value of human beings, love for neighbours, justice in the workplace, etc.<sup>9</sup> Ethical behaviour is seen as a result of the right decision, and not of some spiritual experience as it was formerly taught during the revivals.

<sup>8</sup> “The Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God.” (RAUSCHENBUSCH, W. A. *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 142, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1917)

<sup>9</sup> Usually, this is meant by “The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man” theology.

## 2.2 Fundamentalism

The origin of the word “fundamentalism” dates to an early 20th Century American religious movement that produced a compendium of twelve volumes published between 1910 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth*. This Christian Evangelical Fundamentalism was a conservative (basically American) reaction to the Social Gospel and the doctrines of liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It criticised the move away from traditional/orthodox Christian beliefs relating to salvation by those committed to the Social Gospel and stressed the doctrinal points which the Social Gospel omitted. For example, Fundamentalism stresses such points as the inerrancy of the Bible, miracles, the Virgin Birth and resurrection of Jesus, the need for an experience of the Holy Spirit and the assurance of salvation.

However, Fundamentalism left out the emphasis on individual salvation and lost the practical relevance of Christianity in society. It over emphasised the eternal dimension of Christianity and thereby lost the contemporary relevance.<sup>10</sup> Revivals in the past never separated eternal salvation from social concern to the point of exclusion.

## 2.3 Easy Believism

Another form of departure from revival-Christianity is leaving out the emphasis on holy living. The stress is only on getting individual salvation and perhaps on some kind of experience of the Holy Spirit. However, omitting the need for an outworking of salvation in a holy life means that people just give mental agreement to the message of the Gospel and enjoy some emotinal experience, but do not see the need for their “salvation” to translate itself into practice in the society in which they live.

This heir of revivalism does not believe in an ethical response to personal salvation, and by this fact the social impact of the Gospel is seriously weakened. This is because Christianity without the ethical qualities of the New Testament can hardly influence its environment. It is the salt that has lost its saltiness. This kind of “revivalism” tends to run after the greatest possible number of new converts. Usually it does preach regeneration, but by leaving out the ethical dimension it gives up the radical difference between the Church and the world.

## 3. IS REVIVAL STILL POSSIBLE?

Nowadays, evangelicals are trying to regain the same influence in contemporary society as revival-Christianity had in the past – to impact the cultural, social and political realities of contemporary life. However, if we fail to learn the lessons of the past we shall simply repeat the errors of the past. Therefore we need to maintain our emphasis on a personal experience of the Holy Spirit, a strong focus on personal salvation, and a belief in the necessity of living a holy life. If we fail to do this we shall slip into one form of error or another and we are likely to end up in one of the cul-de-sacs identified above.

---

<sup>10</sup> In 1947 this was criticised by Carl F. H. Henry in his *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* and since then Evangelicalism has been split into the fundamentalist and neo-evangelical factions.