



Preface

In a sermon in 1959, commemorating the revival, Martyn Lloyd-Jones made the point emphatically that 'you cannot stop a revival any more than you can start it'. In his view, each and every revival is a sovereign work of God, for which humans cannot and should not take responsibility¹. A revival cannot be organised in the way, say, a church might organise an evangelistic campaign. This may be seen by comparing responses to revival in 1833 and 1859. At the General Synod of Ulster, meeting in Coleraine in 1830, deep feelings and much debate were excited by a letter from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA containing news of an 'all-important' spiritual change in that country². When news of the revival became known throughout Ireland in the early 1830s meetings were organised, as there would be in 1859, to deliberate upon the surprising events taking place on the other side of the Atlantic. In Belfast, for example, a meeting was held at which ministers discussed the propriety of uniting with their American colleagues in a day of prayer and fasting (7 January 1833 was the date set). This was to implore the blessing of God on the preaching of the gospel and to pray for 'the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit for the extension of religion throughout the world'. Four different meetings

1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival. Can We Make It Happen?* London 1992, p. 236.
2. *The Orthodox Presbyterian*, No. XXIII, August 1831, pp. 378–81.





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took place – at the Presbyterian churches in May Street, Fisherwick Place and Berry Street, as well as in the Independent meeting house in Donegall Street – and all were attended by large numbers of people. A follow-up meeting was planned for a couple of weeks later and organisers expected some permanent arrangement to be made to continue these meetings into the future³. What became of these meetings is unknown. What we do know is that no widespread revival took place either in Belfast or anywhere else in the north of Ireland as it would do, in a similarly expectant and prayerful atmosphere, in 1859.

Nevertheless, God has determined to use humans to preach the gospel and provides in His Word much encouragement to people to plead with Him for the souls of others. Strangely, there has probably never been a revival that has originated, from the human point of view, from within a church hierarchy. Indeed, quite frequently in church history, revivals have taken place almost against the wishes of those in authority. It is not unusual for church leaders to dislike and oppose them, or at least aspects of them. To their credit church hierarchies generally welcomed the revival of interest in spiritual matters in the north of Ireland in 1859. They were the first to admit the origin of the latter movement had little to do with them.

Historians seek to unearth the socio-political, economic and cultural causes of religious revivals. More often than not, the goal is to explain away the divine work. One must admire their creative ingenuity, though it would be fatal to overlook the hidden agenda. Historians fail, moreover, to provide reasons for the end of revival, which comes as suddenly as it had once appeared on the horizon. For believers in the historical truth of the New Testament Scriptures a revival is something sent periodically by God to refresh His people. A clear vision of His glory is the hard

3. *The Orthodox Presbyterian*, No. XL, January 1833, p. 143.





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core of that revival. In the study which follows factors are discussed that accompanied and seem to have facilitated the human response to the unexpected, sudden move of God's Holy Spirit in the northern counties of Ireland. These factors do not fully explain that move; they were not the cause of the movement. The Christian must accept that the start and end of revival are sovereign, uncontrollable activities of the Holy Spirit.

Yet it is equally clear from reading the Pauline epistles that the Spirit can be grieved (Eph. 4:30) and quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). This points to the crucial importance of a correct human response to the leading and movements of the Holy Spirit. In the context of these verses it would seem that the way Christians speak about and to one another and the way they respond to prophetic utterances can lead to the withdrawal of God's Spirit. Put another way, when individuals or home groups of a congregation fail to reflect the nature of the Divine Spirit in their relationships, or when behavioural patterns inimical to God's character are tolerated, then, inevitably, the Spirit's operations are quenched.

Most revivals have thrown up many questions which Christians and non-Christians have struggled with. The 1859 revival is no exception. How is one to explain the apparent disorder that manifests itself during periods of revival? Is God not a God of order and is not everything to be done in an orderly manner? How should leaders deal with the unbounded enthusiasm shown by young converts? In every revival people stand aghast and ask: What is this? There are always mockers and scoffers wanting to quench all kinds of enthusiasm. Here Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a man hardly known for charismatic exuberance, warned his congregation in 1959 when he said that opposition to enthusiasm could be one of the greatest hindrances of all to revival⁴.

4. *The Orthodox Presbyterian*, p. 73.





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It is difficult, however, not to have some sympathy with the critics as well as with leaders who have, at times, a difficult balancing act to perform: managing events without stamping out the fires of revival. When the revival comes to an end there are more questions to answer. There is something intangible and inexplicable about every revival. The veil cannot be fully lifted on the whys and wherefores. People are left a little stunned, bewildered, overjoyed and yet full of questions – and a desire for more of the same. For Christians who can say ‘This is what was spoken of, this is what God meant when He said: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”’ the appropriate attitude to a revival should surely be one of worship and thankfulness. In each revival God again calls attention to Himself and His power. It is as if He were saying: ‘I haven’t gone away, you know.’

The 1859 revival in Ulster still holds a hallowed place in the hearts of Irish Christians. It impacted evangelicalism profoundly and one might say people are still enjoying the fruit of that movement. No single denomination monopolised revivalism in the Coleraine area. Evangelicalism was, and is, not bound by denominational labels and doctrines. The declared purposes of the revival meetings were never denominational reform of one kind or another, but rather the awakening of people’s minds and hearts to their religious state. The agents of the Ulster revival came from all denominational backgrounds and none; they came from Reformed communities in Ireland, Britain and the USA. The focus of the revival in Coleraine was certainly the daily prayer meeting, which united Christians of various persuasions. In other words, focusing on theological developments within any one specific denomination seems to be inadequate as a way of explaining the ‘awakening’ of whole communities in 1859. In this study a pan-evangelical approach is taken.

