

A Blind Guide – Popular Histories and the Decline of the Church of England

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Lift up your eyes and look on the fields...!

Searching through Church histories concerning the nineteenth century, I was hoping to find some thoughtful appraisal of the amazing and inspiring events of 1859 and the years immediately following. Covering the time around 1860 most made mention of *Essays and Reviews*¹ and of the Colenso controversy,² but none noticed that around 1860, over a million people were added to the churches in less than two years.

Particularly noteworthy is the vast number of impoverished people reached. Even Roy Hattersley's biography of William and Catherine Booth, *Blood & Fire*, though filling 441 pages, makes no mention of the awe-inspiring developments that launched the Booths on their ministry to the poor, apart from a passing reference to Booth preaching to working men in the Garrick Theatre.³ Apparently it did not occur to him to ask what working men were doing in the Garrick Theatre! Following much united prayer, a strong awareness of the presence of God was felt in Britain, and in London it brought the poorest into experiences of God's love. To meet the hunger to hear the Good News, various groups with the support of Dr Tait, the Bishop of London, arranged Sunday night theatre services. One group using both St. James's Hall and the Britannia Theatre attracted 250,000 'working class' worshippers each winter. The Victoria Theatre held 559 services over four winters with a total of 865,100 people attending.

The attendance at London theatres in 1860 was 20,000 a week.

It was a strange sight, from floor to ceiling the vast house was thronged; in boxes, stalls, pit and gallery were costermongers, street cadgers and labourers, women in fluttering rags, many with babies in their arms, boys in shirt sleeves and corduroys....The people listened with extra-ordinary attention as if they had never heard of the subject before.⁴

The events beginning in 1859 not only produced the Salvation Army, but also launched the Deaconess ministry and provided an army of recruits to overseas missions. Mary Slessor, George Grenfell and Thomas Barnardo committed their lives to Christ's service during this movement.

The Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore, reported that confirmations increased from 200 to 705. Bishop Baring of Durham, appointed in 1861, helped to build 119 new churches, enlarge 130 others and founded 102 new parishes. The London College of Divinity was founded in 1863 to help cope with the increase in the number of ordinands. The church where I served in Brixton was built in 1868 to seat 1,100 people, no doubt to minister to a large increase in the number of communicants. In Belfast in 1859, there was an almost complete cessation of provocative marching, and the Rev. John Venn told of Orangemen calling on Catholic neighbours and asking forgiveness for their previous behaviour.

The ground was made fertile for a host of charitable works and reforms. The Midnight Meeting movement brought large numbers of prostitutes under the Gospel, so that within a year around 1,000 women left the profession; Josephine Butler led a movement against the licensing of vice and, in spite of brutal opposition, presented a petition to parliament of more than 2,000,000 signatures. With the Booths she fought against the 'white slave' traffic which sold girls as young as eleven to wealthy men. Their success resulted in parliament raising the age of consent to sexual intercourse from thirteen to sixteen. A concern for petty criminals who were more the victims of circumstance than of evil, led to the Police Court Mission which became the Probation Service.

Denomination took second place. It was as if heaven failed to realise that, of the Christians in a community, some were Methodists, some Baptists or Anglicans. In response to an appeal from missionaries in India, the second week in January 1860 was set apart as a week of prayer for Christian unity. Dr Eugene Stock, secretary of the Church Missionary Society said of a meeting in Islington, 'I can never forget 9th January, 1860, when at 9 o'clock on a bitterly cold morning, that hall was densely packed for nothing but simple prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.' In London alone there were 200 or more such united prayer meetings. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been kept ever since, but the circumstances of its birth have not been so well preserved.

At the time the spiritual needs of children were largely overlooked, but in 1860 a theology student in Scotland, E. P. Hammond, found he had left his coat in the vestry. Returning to recover it, he found the room filled with children praying. Hearing a tiny child praying with remarkable insight he was moved to tears. He became a children's evangelist and founded the Children's Special Service Mission which a little later, in 1869, launched the Scripture Union. In the first year 45,000 children enrolled. Later in the 1860's Hammond preached to a gathering of 8,000 children. Seventeen years later it was found that many Christian workers began their Christian life as children in that meeting.

Seeing local churches without a single child in the congregation, and with increasing drugs, teenage pregnancies, binge drinking and suicide amongst young people, I would have thought a bishop or two somewhere might have been interested in the dynamics of those days. Personally, I find these records considerably more interesting than *Essays and Reviews* and vastly more important and relevant to our current decline than the Colenso dispute.

Who is a Revivalist?

Two history books noticed the stirrings that followed the Wesleys, and one quite sympathetically notes the 1859 revival, but gives no indication at all of the immense numbers involved. Both used the term 'revivalist' to describe those prominent in the movements. This term can convey the picture of a rather fanatical preacher who is skilled in arousing the emotions of a congregation so that they can be persuaded to do things that in an un-aroused state of mind, they would have considered unreasonable. This suggests that their efforts are rather unworthy and on the fringe of solid, respectable Christianity.

In fact it is often the same ministers whose preaching has for years produced little effect, using basically the same message, who become the agents of revival. It is the Holy Spirit who comes in as the Revivalist, not the preachers. David Brainerd after recording, 'Was much of the day in a great degree of despair about ever doing or seeing any good in the land of the living,' came to the day when, '...the power of God seemed to descend upon the assembly like a rushing mighty wind, and with an astonishing energy, bore down all before it...Old men and women, who had been drunken wretches for many years, and some little children not more than six or seven years of age, appeared in distress for their souls, as well as persons of middle age.' It was common for Indians who were strangers, coming into the settlement

...before they had been with us one day, to be deeply convinced of their sin and misery, and solicitously enquire 'what they must do to be saved'...I seemed to do nothing, and indeed had nothing to do, but stand still and see the salvation of God, and found myself obliged and delighted to say 'Not unto us', not unto the instruments and means, 'but unto thy name be the glory'.⁵

The strong feeling that the kingdom of heaven really was at hand did not depend upon the devious skills of 'revivalists'. Concerning the events of 1860, Bishop Handley Moule wrote of his father's ministry in *Memorials of a Vicarage*.

Fordington was one of the scenes of Divine Awakening. For surely it was Divine. No artificial means of excitement were dreamt of; my father's whole genius was against it. No powerful personality, no Moody or Aitken came to us. A city missionary and a London Bible-woman were the only helpers from a distance. But a power not of man brought souls to ask the old question: 'What must I do to be saved?' Up and down the village, the pastor, the pastoreess, and their faithful helpers, as they went their daily rounds found 'the anxious'. And the church was thronged to overflowing, and so was the spacious schoolroom, night after night throughout the week. The very simplest means carried with them a heavenly power. The plain reading of a chapter often conveyed the call of God to men and women, and they 'came to Jesus as they were'. I do not think I exaggerate when I say that hundreds of people at that time were awakened, awed and made conscious of eternal realities. And a goodly number of these showed in all their after life that they were indeed new creatures, born again to a living hope and to a steadfast walk.⁶

A feature that is frequently mentioned in such events, even in recent times, is that people were drawn together to hear the gospel without any human agency. Brainerd said that Indians came from forty miles away '...many came without any intelligence of what was going on here, so that it seemed as if God had summoned them together from all quarters to hear the gospel'.

An account of such a phenomenon amongst lumbermen of America in 1829 is recorded in C G Finney's autobiography—

These men that came down with lumber attended our meetings, and quite

a number of them were hopefully converted. They went back into the wilderness and began to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to tell the people around them what they had seen in Philadelphia, and to exhort them to attend to their salvation. Their efforts were immediately blessed, and the revival began to take hold and to spread among those lumbermen....Men who were getting out lumber and were living alone in little shanties, or where two or three or more were together, would be seized with such conviction that it would lead them to wander off and inquire what they should do. They would be converted and thus the revival spread. This work began in the spring of 1829. In the spring of 1831, two or three men from this lumber region came to inquire how they could get some ministers to go up there. They said that not less than five thousand men had been converted in that lumber region, that the revival had extended itself along for eighty miles, and that there was not a single minister of the gospel there.⁷

A revival without a revivalist? There are reports of people being drawn to hear the preaching of the gospel without apparent human agency in the East Anglian revival of 1921 and in the Hebridean revival of 1949.

Much of the criticism aimed at these revivals could also be aimed at the Acts of the Apostles. Was that man Peter who persuaded three thousand people to repent and be baptised a mere revivalist? Was it mere revivalism that caused 'almost the whole city to come together to hear the word of God?' (Acts 13:44).

Why did it vanish?

One does not have to look far to find the pressures that erased the events of 1859-60 from the Church histories. After the rise of the Oxford Movement there was a bitter polarisation between Reformation Anglicans and a large number of clergy who, looking to Rome, found it difficult to accommodate the theology and the practices of those involved in the remarkable events that began in 1859. People engaged in those events sat lightly on denominational divisions and rode roughshod over rules and regulations that hindered the Good News from reaching the masses outside the churches.

On 24th February, 1860, Viscount Dungannon urged the House of Lords to condemn the theatre services as injuring religious principles. He said that for clergymen to preach in a theatre was as extraordinary as comedians appearing

in parish church pulpits. The Archbishop of Canterbury replied that the services were legal under recent legislation, and although not sanctioned by ecclesiastical authority, they would not be discouraged. 'If the poor and the outcast were induced to attend, though even in a theatre, to hear the Word of Truth, and if those who came, some perhaps to scoff, remained to pray, he could not be induced to interfere.'⁸

The way in which Anglican clergy prayed and worked with Free Churchmen was a thorn in the flesh of high church bishops. The Bishop of Cork strongly opposed such participation in joint prayer meetings and said that they 'used any form of words, except our public Liturgy, that may seem fit at the moment of uttering them'. The Bishop of Hereford attacked the movement because it 'savoured of John Wesley and the insincerity of the Wesleyans'.

The Bishop of Ripon gave qualified support, but refused permission for clergy to work inter-denominationally.

The Anglican clergy and Free Church ministers thereupon arranged an alternating programme of services, with the result that on some Sundays the preachers enjoyed the episcopal blessing as well as Divine approval, while on alternate Sundays the preachers enjoyed Divine approval only.⁹

The English Church Union was formed in 1859, perhaps not specifically to oppose the work, nevertheless that was its immediate concern. In 1860 it tried to prosecute Anglican clergy who were involved in the theatre services, but found that the action had to be taken by an incumbent in whose parish such a theatre stood. None would oppose the ministry and said that in spite of the proximity of theatre services, their congregations had increased. The Church Union tried to prosecute the Bishop of Carlisle who supported the revival movement and also appealed to parliament for a measure to try clergymen for what it considered to be breaches of church discipline.

Theologically, a major stumbling block was the issue of the complete assurance of sins forgiven through the finished work of the death of Christ. If the Lord is continually offering in 'an age-long day of atonement'¹⁰ then one cannot be sure of complete justification. Thus the Rev H Grattan Guinness, who at one time preached in the open air to at least 15,000 people, was accused of

committing an 'oracular untruth' in a sermon. His crime was that he said, 'A Christian is a man who knows his sins are pardoned.'

Related to this was the expectation of the 'Holy Spirit witnessing with our spirits, that we are the sons of God', in the experience of conversion. The Times, which opposed the movement, said that '...spontaneous conversions could not appear in the Church of England'. The Times gave prominence to all the criticisms against the revival, but it refused to print letters of support, even one from a spokesman for the Bishop of Connor.

It is encouraging to see that the polarisation of those days has softened and not many clergy would now hesitate to work with other denominations, nor would they reject those who professed to a conversion experience. Unfortunately, the sad fact is that because of the nineteenth century polarisation caused by the Oxford Movement, the compilers of church history could not accommodate the events of those days and they were soon forgotten.

Loss of vision

Almost all the prayers of the Old Testament and many in the New were inspired by the recollection of great things that God had done in the past. The Church in Kenya was transformed by the East African Revival that began in the 1930's. In the Diocesan administrative offices in Kenya I spent some time looking at the Church History syllabus for ordinands and readers. It includes the study of the East African Revival. One of the churches visited was being rebuilt because the congregation had more than doubled in eighteen months. Not many Anglican churches in England are being rebuilt because the congregations have doubled! How many English theological colleges study revivals? The disappearance from church history of the 1860 events has robbed the church of the knowledge that a million poor and un-churched people can be reached with the Good News and people added to the church daily. 'Where there is no vision the people perish.' (Prov 29:18)

This amnesia concerning God's love for the world is frustrating the clear teaching and promises of Christ. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, 'Hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' As only around five percent of the people of England ever go to Church, do only five per cent of the heavenly host hallow God's Name? Without the vision of

God's power to reach the thousands, the opening petition of the Lord's Prayer is little more than a prayer for personal piety. For its literal fulfilment an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on thousands is required as happened on the day of Pentecost and in the progress of the Acts of the Apostles.

The first means to reach the multitudes is prayer, but the Lord also gave the Parable of the Sower, which He asserted was the key parable, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?' 'The seed is the Word of God.' The Lord promised that where the true seed is sown and the ground cultivated, it will bring forth fruit 'multiplying thirty, sixty or even a hundred times'.

There is an immense amount of devotion and hard work exercised in parishes up and down the land, but still the decline is inexorable. It seems that in the terms of the Parable of the Sower, many Anglicans have been ploughing and cultivating with great dedication, but sowing the wrong seed! Is the decline because the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, cannot bless things that are not true?

The events of 1859 stirred such a great longing to see God's name hallowed that there arose a vast wave of prayer. In Ireland, the movement began with a prayer meeting of four young men. As people began to feel the awe of God's presence, prayer meetings multiplied.

With something approaching unanimity, the ministers of Belfast launched a united prayer meeting in the Music Hall, with the Mayor in the chair. The meeting was crowded to excess. A week later, the Bishop took the chair, assisted on the platform by 146 clergymen...Hundreds participated in overflow meetings and thousands were turned away.

This was followed by open-air prayer meetings in the Botanic Gardens, the first attended by fifteen thousand people. Throughout Britain, prayer meetings were held daily, some attended by a thousand or more people, and not only in homes and halls, but in factories, mines and foundries. One rural parish had over a hundred prayer meetings.

In 1945 under the inspiration of Archbishop William Temple, a well thought-out and deeply spiritual book was launched, *Towards the Conversion of*

*England.*⁹ Its recommendations were ignored. We have seen many evangelistic campaigns and we have seen the Decade of Evangelism come and go unnoticed. Is the decline like the weather, beyond our control so we can but vaguely hope for some sunnier day?

Not only is the decline in church attendance showing no sign of abating, but also in the community at large, growth in crime is a major concern. Politicians now publish their plans to reverse this trend as a major vote-catcher. Broken homes proliferate; in our own Sunday School, attendance is interrupted by 'Daddy Sundays'. Single parents are part of everyday life.

The effect of disrupted families is disruptive child behaviour. One of the main reasons for teachers leaving the profession is despair at pupil behaviour. I met a young lad who had about a hundred scars on his back where he had been stabbed by things like compass points. A teacher recently burst into tears as she told me of the fear she has from violence in her school. During times of such religious awakening, crime has dramatically fallen. Has the salt lost its savour, for the land is in need of preservation?

Concentrating the mind!

There is a saying amongst sailing people, that the most efficient means of emptying water from a sinking boat is a frightened man with a bucket! The Church of England is sinking but who is frightened? The nineteenth century time of revival saw the Church of England grow from eighteen per cent of the population to twenty-seven per cent, other denominations also increased. From the beginning of the twentieth century decline set in and has increased in the twenty-first century; the first two years saw a drop of eight per cent.

It is significant that the twentieth century also saw an erosion of belief in the supreme authority of Scripture in favour of Catholic views based on Tradition. Subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles expressing the supremacy of Scripture was required by canon law under a strict formula. It is difficult to see how anyone who was of the Catholic tradition could honestly make that subscription, but an increasing majority of clergy did so. Most did it knowingly and openly ridiculed the Articles. The evidence is that if all who subscribed to the Articles had done so in sincere committal to the supremacy of Scripture, the Articles would never have been sidelined as the standard of orthodoxy.

The almost total loss of young people has had a dramatic effect on vocations to the ministry. Retired clergy are papering over the collapsing fabric by wearing themselves out doing what used to be done by an almost vanished class of clergy known as ‘curates’. Perhaps things will have to get worse before people will ask ‘Why?’ and start examining themselves and the *status quo*.

However, there are small signs of encouragement. Prayer is gathering momentum and united prayer meetings are becoming a feature in some areas, but even so, there is little direct prayer for revival. Perhaps there is someone out there who will dig into Church history as it really was and catch the vision of what God can do, for He has promised, ‘If my people who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land’ (2 Chron 7:14).

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ENDNOTES

1. *Essays and Reviews* (A collection of Essays published in 1860 attacking the inspiration of the Bible.)
2. The Colenso affair when the South African Bishop was deposed and re-instated in 1862 over his extremely critical views of the Pentateuch.
3. Roy Hattersley, *Blood & Fire* (Great Britain: Little, Brown & Company, 1999), p. 310.
4. G R Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (Church Book Room Press), p. 196.
5. John Gillies, *Historical Collection of Accounts of Revival* (Banner of Truth, 1981), p. 467ff. First published 1754.
6. Cited in J Edwin Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening* (London, Edinburgh), p. 110. This work is also the source of other unacknowledged material.
7. *The Autobiography of Charles G. Finney* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), p. 146.
8. Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening*, p. 45.
9. *Towards the Conversion of England*, Press & Publication Dept. of the Church of England, 1945.
10. E J Bicknell *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (London; Longmans) p. 144