

A Perspective on Evangelism and American Revivalism

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From time to time these days one hears expressions of concern for a declining membership in some of the mainline Protestant denominations and sometimes even a consequent viewing-with-alarm about future prospects for the churches in the Americas. In this context it has often been stressed that there is an urgent need for the revitalization of evangelism by and for the churches.

It is not always clear what is meant by the word "evangelism" when it is used in this way. In the light of the American experience, however, it seems to suggest that evangelism is at least intended to be a way of recruiting new members for the churches. And such a view seems to be the appropriation into American Protestantism of a view of evangelism that was developed on the frontier by those sectarian, pietistic individuals and religious groups who developed what we have learned to refer to as revivalism. In turn, this suggests that evangelism and revivalism have been nearly equated in the minds of most American Protestants. And it also indicates how pervasive and widespread that particular identification has become.

This is not to say, of course, that all American denominations have adopted and employed the revival technique. As a matter of fact, some of them have resisted its use for a variety of reasons. Some have regarded it as a crass public exhibition of bad taste. In the nineteenth century, for example, some of its sharpest critics caricatured and blithely dismissed it as a species of "enthusiasm," i.e., the surrender of rational control to animal passions. Others opposed it on more precisely theological and religious grounds. It is here explicitly contended, however, that such exceptions do not disprove the general tendency which has pervaded most of American Protestant history and, according to a recent study, has appeared on occasion as a phenomenon within American Roman Catholicism as well. It would seem that if one is to understand what evangelism has been in American Christianity, it will be necessary to make an attempt to understand something of the nature and character of revivalism as well as its significance for American Protestantism. When such understandings have been developed, one can proceed to make some evaluative observations about the appropriateness of the revival model for contemporary evangelism.

A DESCRIPTION OF REVIVALISM

We should attempt to state with some care precisely what the phenomenon of revivalism has been, and in great measure still is, on the American scene. Revivalism has been two things: essentially it has been, and still is, a technique which, in practice, has tended to develop into a *system*.

Basically, revivalism is a technique. That is to say, it is a way of doing certain things, of accomplishing certain ends. Most of the great revivalists have had the confidence that if certain means were employed effectively, a specified end would inevitably be achieved. Thus there has been scrupulous attention to the use of those means guaranteed to produce certain desired ends. Hence also the tendency to justify the use of any means that would produce such results. Billy Sunday, for example, threw himself all over the platform when he preached, jumping, falling, staggering, and sliding the full length of the platform on his belly. Others freely employed invective or indulged in sheer sentimentality or harangued their audiences for hours on end. In each instance, the means employed were justified in terms of the fact that they produced results. The point is that all revivalists have been, and still are, technicians; i.e., they have employed a technique in order to produce results. And though certain innovations and variations have been introduced along the way, the methods have become pretty well standardized. Billy Graham takes full advantage of the devices produced by modern technology and the public relations industry, but his basic technique is the same as that which was used by Charles G. Finney and Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday.

It is important to note that the technique of the revivalist is aimed at the individual person. Even though he addresses a mass of people, the revivalist aims at the individual. He does so in the hope and confidence that he will be able to elicit a decision from the individual person. This is the result that the technique is intended to produce. The revivalist, in one way or another, emphasizes that "this is the hour of decision." And in order to assist the listener in making the right decision, the revivalist presents the individual with simple and clear-cut alternatives. He must choose between God and Satan, between heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. There is no room for complexity or ambiguity in the revivalist's appeal. Hence the persistent tendency to oversimplification. One sometimes gets the impression from the revivalist that all complex personal, societal, and international problems would be solved if only individual persons would decide for Jesus. One also gets the impression that a person's salvation is ultimately dependent upon his or her own decision.

But the revivalist appeals not only to the will; he appeals to the emotions. In one way or another, he tries to stir up the emotions because he believes that this will be conducive to making the right decision. Most responsible revivalists have handled this matter of arousing the emotions with considerable skill; they have not allowed the situation to get out of control. But inevitably, whether by the use of a certain kind of music or the telling of a sentimental story or whatever, the appeal has been to what the revivalists have called "the heart." And there have been revivalists like James Davenport or James McGready who were not as circumspect in the use of means. Their revival services often turned into extravaganzas characterized by excitements and emotional upheavals of all kinds. One eas-

ily gets the impression that their primary purpose had been served when the emotions ran rampant. Such outburts constituted one reason why opposition to the revivals developed. It was regarded as a breach of good taste to give way to "animal passions." It is a mistake to equate revivalism with such emotional outbursts. Yet every revivalist has had to appeal to the emotions.

If the revivalist appeals to the will and to the emotions, he does not appeal to the human intellect. In the words of the early revivalists, he appeals to "the heart," not "the head." He has

not believed that he could lead persons to make the necessary decisions by arguing them into it or by demonstrating that it was the rational thing to do. As a matter of fact most revivalists have been suspicious of the human intellect. They have even, on occasion, tended to regard it as an enemy to be overcome. Some revivalists, therefore, have become decidedly anti-intellectual, and they have contributed to the stream of anti-intellectualism that has manifested itself in almost every period of American history .Suspicious of doctrines and standards of almost any sort, revivalism, insofar as it was influential, tended to put an anti-intellectual stamp upon American Protestantism.

Revivalism, then, is a technique which employs certain means by which it appeals to the will and emotions of the individual person in the confident hope that certain desired results, viz., decisions, will be produced.

In practice, revivalism tended to produce certain patterned ways of thinking and acting. In the hands of an experienced revivalist like Charles G. Finney, it tended to take on some of the characteristics of a *system*. This is not to say that revivalists deliberately and self-consciously developed particular patterns. As we have already observed, they were not especially interested in that sort of thing. It is to say, however, that revivalism in practice tended to imply certain patterns and structures. Hence, for example, revivalism in practice implied a doctrine of the church that was similar to the left-wing view of the church as a gathered community .The revivalist, as revivalist, did not claim that the gathered community was the New Testament pattern of the church that was to be made normative for all times and places. But he did emphasize that each individual person must make his or her own decision, and he implied thereby that by their individual choices persons do create the church. On his view, the church is made up of those who have made the right decision. Persons create the church; in no way is the church prior to individual decisions. Finney gave the most extreme statement of this point of view when he once declared that "the devil has no right to rule this world," and Christians ought "to give themselves to God and vote in the Lord Jesus Christ as governor of the universe."

Likewise, revivalism in practice implied a certain view of the ministry. On this view, the minister is not necessarily the one who has been called and trained to be a pastor. Rather he is the one who is close to the people and who has demonstrated his capacity for "winning souls." From the time of Gilbert Tennent and on, the revivalist, by and large, has been suspicious of an educated ministry which, as he claimed, could not speak in the language of the people. American revivalists have tended to define the nature of ministry almost exclusively in terms of the picture of the soul-winner. They simply ignored, where they did not explicitly reject, the more traditional pictures of the minister as priest or prophet or shepherd.

By implication, the revivalists also developed anew theological under-

standing—though most of them were not aware that they had done so. It was new in the sense that it differed from the Calvinism in which most of them had been reared. One might characterize their theological perspective by saying that it tended in an Arminian direction with its emphasis, at least by implication, that persons somehow save themselves by their own free choices. In the hands of the revivalists, Calvinism was modified almost beyond recognition by the emphasis placed upon their interpretation of the doctrine of free will.

In America, then, revivalism was developed as a technique by which the churches could

win converts and recruit new members. It tended also to develop, though perhaps not intentionally, certain characteristics that had enormous sys temic implications. Both as technique and as system, it has been influential in the shaping of American religion, and in particular American Protestantism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REVIVALISM FOR AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM

The significance of pietistic revivalism in the shaping of the American Protestant ethos can be summarized in a few general statements.

First of all, there is no question about the fact that revivalism as a recruiting technique was very successful. Thousands upon thousands of persons were added to the rolls of church membership as a result of revival activity. Despite the fact that the population of America was increasing rapidly, and at the same time was continually moving westward onto the ever-expanding frontier, the churches were able to increase the ratio of church membership relative to the population. This means that the total number of church members increased greatly and rapidly, but even more significant than that was the fact that the percentage of the total population that held church membership increased as well. In 1790, only about ten percent of the total population claimed membership in a church. It is estimated that by 1860 almost thirty percent of the total population had become church members. Thus in the relatively brief period of seventy years the enrolled membership of the churches relative to the total population had tripled. When one recalls that this success was achieved at precisely the time that the churches were made completely dependent upon their own voluntary efforts by the provision for religious freedom in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, the achievement is all the more remarkable. It indicates that the revival technique was well suited to the peculiar conditions that the churches had to face in America. No wonder, then, that churchmen exulted in their success They believed they had demonstrated that they could successfully meet the problems that the frontier thrust upon them, and that they could do so without the support of the coercive power of the state. It is no wonder that the use of revivalism as a recruiting technique lingers on in American Protestantism.

But revivalism was not only successful in recruiting new members for the churches. It was also instrumental in changing the configuration (i.e., the relative size) of the Protestant denominations in America. Not all of the American denominations employed the revival technique and, among those that did, not all relied exclusively upon it, or they used it for purposes other than that of recruiting new members. The significant fact is, however, that those churches who relied almost exclusively upon the revival technique as a way of recruiting new members tended to grow more rapidly than the others. William Warren Sweet maintained

that those churches which succeeded in meeting the problems posed by the frontier became numerically the largest and geographically the most widespread in America—hence also, he thought, the most influential of the American churches. There can be little question that those churches which employed the revival technique did become the largest in terms of size and geographical distribution. Whether or not this made them the most influential is a more debatable question.

There is a third significance of revivalism for American Protestantism. For want of a

better term, it may simply be referred to as its anti-intellectualism. Since the revivalist always appealed for a decision it was necessary for him to reduce all ambiguities and complexities to two simple alternatives. This resulted inevitably in a vast oversimplification of fundamental issues and problems. Moreover, in his eagerness to "get results," the revivalist usually manifested a crusty impatience with intellectual questions. He tended instead to sanction the maxim: "that is true which gets results." It was in terms of this test that he justified the means that he employed. It also became the criterion in terms of which he judged Christian doctrines. The consequence was not only that he accepted any idea that could pass this test, but that he was thereby deprived of the possibility of developing a clearly articulated perspective in terms of which he could make discerning theological and moral judgments on the ideologies and practices of his society.

This fact helps us to understand why generations of American revivalists have been inclined to accept in an uncritical fashion the ideas and mores that have prevailed in the popular culture. As a rule, American revivalists have not been intellectual leaders. Rather they have simply been reflectors of the prevailing popular culture. Although they have manifested a remarkable adaptability in relation to technological advances, they have shown neither a desire nor an aptitude for fundamental intellectual questions. Where they have not ignored such issues or shied away from them, they have regarded them as positive threats to Christian faith and life and have defended themselves against them by hiding behind bastions of obscurantism.

Generally speaking the mainstream of American Protestantism has learned a fundamental anti-intellectualism from revivalism. Dominated by an activistic concern to get tangible, measurable results, which it derived from the spirit of sectarian, pietistic revivalism, it has failed to come to terms with the great intellectual questions of the modern world. It has tended instead to adopt, with only the slightest modification, the standards that have prevailed in American society. Often it has found itself in the awkward position of defending as Christian certain ideas and practices which most certainly have been derived from other sources. Insofar as it has tended to sanction the American way of life, which it did massively in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it has become simply a form of culture religion.

If such judgments are deemed too harsh, they nonetheless indicate the fact that the character and ethos of American Protestantism has been decisively influenced and shaped by revivalism.

A FEW EVALUATIVE OBSERVATIONS

Having said something by way of describing the nature and significance of revivalism in American religion, we can move to the more analytic task of inquiring

about the appropriateness of the revival model for evangelism in the contemporary mission and ministry of the American churches. It is presumed here that in terms of the root meaning of the word itself, evangelism always refers to the act of proclaiming the Gospel. A few observations will make clear the opinion that as a description of the essential character of the evangelistic task, the model of revivalism leaves a great deal to be desired.

For one thing, it seems altogether shortsighted and even debilitating to reduce the multifaceted richness of evangelism, as the act of proclaiming the Gospel, to a narrow and ultimately constricting concern for the "successful" deployment of techniques, i.e., to be so

obsessed with means that one no longer even considers ends. There is no doubt that the question of technique, and the appropriateness thereof, will always be a worrisome part of any particular evangelism strategy, but it should be possible to hope that it will be related to a critical consideration of the ends which are being sought.

There is no guarantee, however, that such will happen. On numerous occasions I have observed with dismay the inordinate haste with which ecclesiastics latch on, without careful examination, to any technique (e.g., the Kennedy Plan) that promises "success," and they do so ostensibly on the conviction that thisiswhat evangelism is all about. There are at least two dangers here: on the one hand, there is the possibility, often manifest, that in the preoccupation with technique one will slight or even pervert the clear word of the Gospel; on the other, the same preoccupation often leads directly to the manipulation of persons. There are indications that this particular obscenity has been perpetrated on unsuspecting victims. In both instances, the essential purpose of genuine evangelism is thwarted.

Another troublesome consequence of construing the evangelistic task of the churches in terms of the revival model is that this subtly implies that evangelism is a discrete activity which is relatively easy to identify and, consequently, to isolate from all other activities which might be called religious. Hence it is suggested, for example, that worship is one thing, and Christian education another, and that evangelism as a special sort of religious activity, i.e., as the deployment of a specific technique, stands apart from and alongside the others. No longer is there the sense that evangelism, as the act of proclaiming the Gospel, is that ineluctable core aspect of religion which pervades and permeates every other activity .To assert that evangelism is a discrete routine activity is actually to restrict its amplitude in such fashion as to rob it of its essential character. Evangelism is simply the act of proclaiming the Good News in whatever ways and in whatever contexts that can be done. Once again, it is clear that revivalism does not provide an adequate model for evangelism. Hence it is at least unfortunate that revivalism and evangelism have so easily been identified with one another.

There is a third observation to be made by way of evaluation. American revivalism has been individualistic and has been a powerfully influential factor in the process of individualizing American religion. The essential genius of the revivalist's appeal is to address individual persons and to elicit from each of them, as individuals, a personal decision. And there is never the slightest doubt that the religious life at its core is regarded as an affair between the individual person and God.

The individualistic emphasis of American revivalism has had a number of

unfortunate consequences. For one thing, it has exacerbated the importance of individual decision. The objective of the revivalist's appeal has been achieved when individual decisions have been made. Aside from the consideration that such an emphasis miscontrues the essential message of the Gospel (i.e., that the Gospel heralds what God has done rather than what individual persons must do), the individualistic emphasis skews a proper understanding of the human situation by abstracting the person from the community. If community is regarded as essential for the being and well-being of the human person, one does wonder on occasion whether or not genuine personhood is possible under such circumstances. A second unfortunate consequence of the individualism fostered by American revivalism follows from this: it tends to

lose, if it ever had, a sense of the church as a community of believers that is prior and absolutely essential to the individual. In terms of the revivalist's understanding, the church is essentially a voluntary association which is created and sustained by the choice and consent of individual persons. Even as such, it has relatively little constitutive meaning for the religious life of the individual person, for that is deemed almost entirely a private matter. Likewise, the revival model manifests a somewhat restricted concern for the life of the larger civil community. As a number of studies have shown, some of the revival converts have involved themselves in concerns and problems of the community, but usually only to the extent of participation in charitable enterprises. By and large, they have not regarded it as their proper religious business to involve themselves with the larger questions and problems that emerge out of a fundamental concern for the establishment of a just social order.

By contrast the Gospel, which evangelism proclaims, creates and shapes the center of the community which is the church. And it thrusts persons forth into the larger human community to participate fully in it for the sake of the neighbor.

As a final observation, it should be mentioned that American revivalists have usually been suspicious of the cultural life of the human community. They have tended to deem it worldly, hence under the dominion of evil, and usually as unalterably inimical to that which they regard as good. This suggests that they have been inclined to construe their understanding of the environing culture in clear cut moral terms and then to require choices between simple moralistic alternatives. There is little room for complexity or ambiguity in this view of the world.

By contrast, true evangelism does not demand that for the sake of faith one must run away from human culture and the problems it raises for faith and life. It does not isolate certain discrete areas of life and specific attitudes, postures, or stances as religious. Rather it insists that the Gospel pervades the totality of human life, both individual and collective, in order to focus all of life on the centrality of God's grace.