

BOOK REVIEWS

Editor

AN INQUIRY INTO THE SCRIPTURAL CHARACTER OF THE REVIVAL OF 1859

Rev William Hamilton

Publisher: The Reformed Book Outlet, Hudsonville, USA.

*Distributor: Covenant Reformed Fellowship, Ballymena, NI
1993, paperback, 297 pages, £4.50 + p&p.*

*Obtainable from: CRF, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Ballymena
Co Antrim BT42 3NR, N Ireland. (Tel: 0266-891851.)*

Was the 1859 Revival in Ireland a work of the Holy Spirit of God? Were similar revivals in Wales and Scotland at that time works of the Holy Spirit? Have any of the revivals that have taken place since that time within the British Isles been works performed by the third Person of the Trinity? Listen to Rev William Hamilton, a contemporary eye-witness of the revival in Ireland: "It is essentially and fundamentally evil"! (page 295).

Before denouncing the writer as either a heretic or a lunatic, we should perhaps first be prepared to read what he has to say and, with the author, bring the revival – and other more contemporary movements, for that matter – to the bar of the Scriptures and the great confessions of the Church. This is exactly what Rev Hamilton did and the conclusion he arrived at was that the 1859 Revival was found wanting.

This perhaps begs more questions than it answers. If the Rev Hamilton is correct in his analysis, then we might well ask the following questions:

- 1/ What are we to make of revivals in general? Have they all been "essentially and fundamentally evil"?
- 2/ In what do we place our hope for the future blessing and prosperity of the Church? Many of us have grown up with the conviction that much, if not all, twentieth century evangelism has been essentially arminian and detrimental rather than advantageous for the well-being of the Church. But when revival comes – so we have been led to believe – all our problems will be solved! Or will they?

3/ Given that the 1859 Revival and other similar movements were, to say the least, of a questionable and dubious nature, does this mean that there is no such thing as a genuine work of the Spirit of God, a genuine revival? No one would surely dare criticise the Reformation, so was that a genuine revival? If the answer is that it was a 'reformation' as distinct from a 'revival,' then how do we define the difference?

Perhaps our readers have thoughts on these and other related questions and we would be glad to hear from them – but only after they have read and perused Rev Hamilton's book!

For the interested reader, the back cover of the reprint of this fascinating contemporary study states:

In 1859 there was a great revival in Northern Ireland that began in the little village of Kells. According to the many accounts, all kinds of people were converted including prostitutes, drunkards and thieves. Immediately many of these people began "preaching" through the whole of the land. The result seemed to be a great return to the Lord and to true religion...

However, not all during the 1859 revival believed that it was the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. They came to this judgment because of the unscriptural and anti-confessional stance of those who participated in the revival. One man who observed what went on, the Rev William Hamilton, wrote *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859* in which he pointed out clearly the errors he saw.

Hamilton was a respected minister of the Irish Presbyterian Church, ministering for some 38 years chiefly in the town of Edenderry, Co Tyrone.

From the Foreword, written by the book's Distributor, we learn:

William Hamilton's book... is not just a searching critique of a specific revival, that of Northern Ireland in 1859, but of all revivalism. It says things that need to be repeated today and that need to be heard by those who think or act as if revival is the sum and substance of true religion or the only hope of the church...

It amounts to a Biblical and Confessional examination of many issues, both doctrinal and practical, which remain in the church. On the basis of Scripture and the Confessions it establishes principles that ought to rule the church in every age and promotes practices that are both godly and edifying. Consequently, we believe that the book will be of interest even to those who have no particular interest in Northern Ireland or its church history.

For example, the book deals in a very succinct but thorough way with the doctrines of Scripture, of the Person and work of

the Holy Spirit, of the church and its ministry, of conversion, of the law and its place in the life of the Christian, and of assurance.

For those interested in questions of Christian practice there are interesting and Biblical discussions of such subjects as lay ministry, women teaching in the church, revival meetings, the giving of testimonies, total abstinence (from all alcoholic drink), ecumenism, and various forms of religious excitement such as are found in the charismatic movement. These things were characteristic of the Revival of 1859 and are judged in the light of Scripture and the Confessions. Since they are still to be found in the church the book can be read with profit by anyone interested in these issues.

An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859 is not the easiest of books to read and has its shortcomings. It is written in the style of a continuous discourse and the material is not arranged under headings and in chapters as would have been preferred. Nevertheless, the book is highly recommended and folk are urged to obtain a copy for themselves and consider the evidence presented by the author.

WHY DENOMINATIONS? A Brief Answer to Ecumenism

J A Watts

Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 12b Roundwood Lane, Harpenden, Herts AL5 3DD
1993, paperback, 52 pages, £2.50 inc p&p

The Gospel Standard group of Strict Baptist churches are renowned for adherence to the teaching of hyper-calvinism, that is, they reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be urged to repent and believe in Christ and they aver that the gospel should be preached only to 'awakened sinners.' While we could not concur in any way with such ideas, it must be admitted that in these days of laxity on every hand, while moral standards are slipping at an alarming rate and while churches are rapidly losing all credibility in the eyes of the general populace, Gospel Standard churches are remaining very much as bastions of truth and integrity.

The Gospel Standard Trust has been responsible for publishing many worthwhile books and in recent times have produced a series of contemporary booklets on topical subjects. The above title is one of the latest to be published and offers a defence of traditional church structures and divisions as opposed to the cry for ecumenical union heard nowadays even within the evangelical fraternity.

The author in a few places (naturally) exhibits his preference for the baptist community and also argues in favour of the autonomy of the local congregation. He does concede, however, that "the best form of inter-church relationships is when groups of churches holding to the same faith and order bind themselves together in a voluntary way in the spirit of the gospel" (p 7). What a pity this falls short of the full-blown tried and tested form of church government expressed in the Reformed confessions and notably in the *Westminster Form of Presbyterian Church Government*. Nevertheless, in chapter 6 under the heading *The Need for Articles of Faith*, the author, in one of the best passages in the book, remarks: "Perhaps one of the greatest dangers among the churches at the present time is that all too frequently every man does 'that which is right in his own eyes' (Judges 21.25) in disregard of the interests of his brethren and the religious community in which he moves. As soon as there is a difficulty, people and churches are tending to sever their denominational links and become independent instead of retaining the links and exploring every possible avenue for reconciliation. In recent years this has seriously reduced the strength of useful church groupings which in past generations have had such a stabilising effect on the churches. What a need there is to reverse this trend and to obey the Scripture exhortation to 'strengthen the things which remain' (Rev. 3.2)! Daniel was told by the Lord to 'stand in his lot' and perhaps this exhortation is needed today" (p 42).

One or two minor criticisms could be levelled, notably the repeated use of anonymous quotations, such as "one writer observed..." and "a contemporary writer says..." This anonymity almost includes the author himself as no details are provided about him, such as whether he is a pastor or church officer. Even the famous 18th century preacher William Huntington was unashamed to declare his credentials, signing himself on every occasion as "William Huntington, S.S." - Sinner Saved!

We commend the Gospel Standard Trust for this publication and hope that it achieves a wide circulation.

Other titles in the series include: *A Christian Attitude to Trade Unionism*; *Christian Marriage and Divorce*; *Creation - The Bible and Science*; *Cremation - Not for Christians*; *Divine Guidance - How I may Know God's Will*; *Drug Taking - A Warning*; *Our Inheritance - A Protestant Constitution*; *Spirit of Truth - Some Aspects of Charismatic Teaching*; and *"The Old is Better" - Some Bible Versions Considered*.

ARCHAIC OR ACCURATE? Modern Translations of the Bible and *You Versus Thee* in the Language of Worship
 Edited by J P Thackway

The Bible League, 20 Thistlebarrow Road, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP1 3RT

1993, paperback, 48 pages, £1.00 per copy inc p&p
 (£8.50 per 10 copies inc p&p)

The Bible League celebrated its centenary in 1992. It was founded with a single aim: "To promote the Reverent Study of the Holy Scriptures, and to resist the varied attacks made upon their Inspiration, Infallibility and Sole Sufficiency as the Word of God." True to this objective the League has selected eleven contributions, drawn largely from past issues of its magazine, the *Bible League Quarterly*, relating to the vexed question of whether Deity should be addressed in public worship by singular or plural pronouns.

The articles vary widely in size and style. Three are extremely short, each occupying little more than a page, while two contributions by the late Professor John Heading of Aberystwyth account for over a third of the booklet. The blurb on the back cover sets the scene for the publication:

Recent decades have seen the arrival of many new translations of the Bible, and with them the increasing tendency to use the pronouns *you* and *your* when addressing God.

Is this a healthy bringing up-to-date of a Christianity which is too often seen as old-fashioned and irrelevant? Or is it a curious departure from timeless principles, both in accuracy of translation and in reverence when calling upon the Lord?

The articles in this book, written by different authors at different times, maintain that we are witnessing today a modern Downgrade which is scarcely appreciated by the Lord's people in their eagerness to be 'contemporary.'

With a Foreword which sets the scene, we have here perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of this subject available today.

John Thackway is Minister of Holywell Evangelical Church in North Wales, and Editor of the *Bible League Quarterly*.

One criticism must be voiced and that is that no details are provided of any of the contributors. One or two are well known names within contemporary evangelicalism but the majority may be unknown to most readers.

The booklet is thoroughly recommended for dealing with a subject that today is in danger of rapidly becoming taboo amongst the Lord's people.