

Hindrances to Revival - Fear of Emotional Display

By J. Edwin Orr, from *The Church Must First Repent* (1937)

FEAR of emotional display *is* a widespread complex. Within a week, I heard four preachers¹ representing as many denominations, declare their same conviction) in varying words: “We are willing and eager for revival. But we must be quick to crush every appearance of emotional feeling, lest we be led astray.”

Sheer humbug, said I. There has never been a revival of religion unaccompanied by display of emotion of some sort. In their fear of the ridicule of the world, Evangelical leaders are watchfully prepared to prevent anything unusual in the way of a breakdown.

Let me make myself quite clear.

I know of, and most heartily condemn, evangelists who base their appeal on the emotional side of men’s (or more generally women’s) nature. The resultant decision *is* purely emotional, seldom permanent, and brings discredit on the preaching of the gospel. Instances are not hard to recall. A preacher, with tears in his eyes, tells a congregation a pathetic story which has been told so often and varied so much that it can no longer be considered true. But it serves its purpose. It brings a lump into many a motherly throat and it makes young fellows bite their lips. Before they know what has happened, they have signed a decision card. And then people wonder why there are backsliders. Half the so-called backsliders are not backsliders at all. They are forward-sliders, for they were made to slide forward into a position which ought only to be reached by a step of faith. It is far better to make no appeal than to make an appeal based only on emotion.

An appeal must be threefold to be effective. It must reach the intellect. It must touch the conscience. And it must stir the emotions. If the heart is stirred apart from conviction of sin or convincing reason, the result is fruitless in most cases.

But while appeal to both intellect and conscience is essential, the stirring of the emotions must not be prevented. A man, for example, seldom sins in a cool deliberate way with his brain. He more often sins through his passions, his hot desires, and his emotional cravings. And when sin is dealt with, expect a reaction in those very things.

If a hardened old rascal yields his stubborn will to God, let him weep, let him sob, let him cry aloud. It may be the first time for years. Weeping is a good sign, provided it has been preceded by conviction of sin. If you can thank God for the convincing of a man's mind, for conviction of a guilty conscience -thank Him also for broken-up emotions.

And if five hundred hardened hearts are melted at once, expect to be upset yourself at this unusual experience. It was once my privilege to see a great meeting in which the majority were weeping in tearful penitence before God, and all that I could do was to weep with them. The Spirit of God had been mightily at work beforehand.

My dear friend, Andrew Gih, of Shanghai, when speaking by interpretation in Canton, saw something similar:

“Soon the whole congregation was weeping before God, until even my interpreter began to weep, and could not interpret for me; so we had to turn the whole service into a prayer meeting. All went down on their knees weeping and crying to God. It was deep conviction for sin.”

Don't be afraid of emotion. The Spirit of God Who convinces the minds of men and convicts them of sin, is able to restrain their emotional reaction, if such restraint be at all necessary.

If you go round to console a friend whose father has been killed in a tragic motor-smash, and you find your friend crying aloud, do you

upbraid? Do you say, “I don’t approve of all this emotionalism?” You ought to know that a good cry is a safety-valve of relief for the pent-up feelings of a wounded heart.

The same applies to sorrow for sin.

A letter, quoted by Dr. Jonathan Goforth, written by a missionary witnessing the North China Revival of 1908, states:

“Hitherto I have had a horror of hysterics and emotionalism in religion, and the first outbursts of grief from some men who prayed, displeased me exceedingly. I didn’t know what was behind it all. Eventually, however, it became quite clear that nothing but the mighty Spirit of God was working in the hearts of men.”

In my own experience, every time that I have seen an unusual amount of brokenness in a meeting, I knew that it had *in fact* been preceded by heart-searching of the mighty power of God. Similarly, every time that I have seen unusual rejoicing among believers, it has been as a sequel to a great work of grace.

Joy, too, is an emotion, and some folks are afraid of it. Why should they be?

Years ago I attended an International football match. Around me were staid lawyers with steady equilibrium, doctors with calm philosophy, grocers’ assistants with phlegmatic indifference, sardonic, navvies chewing tobacco, as well as excitable students and nervy adolescents. Halfway through, a mighty shout rent the air and hundreds of hats went up to the sky-why? Because a gentleman dressed in a minimum of clothing had succeeded in propelling an inflated ball of leather between two upright pieces of wood. How emotional. Psychologists ought to pour their scientific contempt upon doctors and lawyers and grocers’ assistants who took part in such an unseemly display of emotion! But they don’t. They confine their sarcasm to the results of something which they don’t like - religion -something which is a perpetual challenge to them.

Nobody worries about the shouting and joy and extravagance at a boxing tournament. But if a guilty soul gets the joy of deliverance from the curse of sin, and shouts “Hallelujah,” the Church people try to congeal his blood with a freezing look.

The report of the Irish Presbyterian Church, “Revival in Manchuria,” illuminates this very subject:

“Perhaps you say it’s a sort of religious hysteria. So did some of us when we first heard of the Revival. But here we are, about sixty Scottish and Irish Presbyterians who have seen it—all shades of temperament—and, much as many of us shrank from it at first, everyone who has seen and heard what we have, every day last week, it is certain there is only *one* explanation—that it is God’s Holy Spirit manifesting Himself in a way we never dreamed of. We have no right to criticise; we dare not. One clause of the Creed that lives before us now in all its inevitable, awful solemnity is ‘*I believe in the Holy Ghost.*’ ”

For myself I can say that I have never been considered demonstrative by nature, and in me is a decided antipathy for false display of feeling. But I have thoroughly appreciated some unusual sights at different times.

Can you picture a staid evangelistic committee linking arms and dancing for joy? Why? Some hundred people had professed conversion. And that was as excusable as the mafficking on Armistice Night.

Can you picture the oversight of an assembly, belonging to a body of people noted for their solemnity, bursting into handclapping while they triumphantly sang the praises of the Lamb Who had been glorified by a visitation of reviving power?

Memory keeps suggesting illustrations. One young man was so overjoyed when revival visited Ngaruawahia Camp that he went outside the tent and turned somersaults in the grass. Amused, but gently restraining him, I was told that his chums had been saved.

“I don’t know, Mr. Orr,” he said, “ why I should be so exuberant by nature. I’m not Irish, you know.”

“No ?” said I, passing over a doubtful compliment.

“No” My folks are Old Country folks all right, but they don’t come from Ireland. They come from Wales.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Oh, I know. They came from a place called Cork, in Wales.”²

1. Orr notes: “Incidentally, these four preachers made their declarations in the over-missioned North of Ireland, in my home country. And there, in all my life, I have never seen even one tenth of any congregation moved to tears. I question if they have either. It is an almost unjustified bogey which suits the Devil’s purpose down to the ground. The first sign of revival in Gospel-hardened Ulster will be genuine and open display of sorrow for sin-weeping.”

2. This joke is a little lost on us. It was funny to Orr because Cork is in Ireland, not Wales. The joke is that this man’s ancestors came from Ireland but he was so dim-witted that he didn’t know it