

5-2000

Touched by the Fire: Presbyterians and Revival

Keith Edward Beebe

Whitworth University, kbeebe@whitworth.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/theologyfaculty>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beebe, Keith Edward. "Touched by the Fire: Presbyterians and Revival." *Theology Matters* 6.2 (2000): 1-8.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

Theology Matters

Touched By The Fire: Presbyterians and Revival

By Keith Edward Beebe

*St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, Scotland,
Tuesday, March 30, 1596*

As the Holy Spirit pierces their hearts with razor-sharp conviction, John Davidson concludes his message, steps down from the pulpit, and quietly returns to his seat. With downcast eyes and heaviness of heart, the assembled leaders silently reflect upon their lives and ministry. The words they have just heard are true and the magnitude of their sin is undeniable. As the minutes pass, a growing sense of God's presence and holiness intensifies, and a spirit of deep repentance breaks in upon them, disrupting their silence. Suddenly loud sighs and groans reverberate throughout the Cathedral as proud men donning long beards and clerical garb begin to shake uncontrollably in tearful sobbing, melting under profound conviction of their sin. Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by the Spirit, those present during this momentous hour are about to experience a radical reorientation of their lives. In turn, they will then be used by God to carry the torch of revival fire from this place, igniting a blaze that will sweep across the Scottish landscape. Indeed, this 1596 General Assembly will later be remembered as having signaled a new chapter in the life of the Church of Scotland.¹

Keith Beebe is adjunct professor at Whitworth College, Spokane, WA and pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Spokane, WA. (KeithBeebe@compuserve.com)

Undoubtedly, the preceding account might come as a surprise to many Presbyterians, as would the assertion that such experiences were a familiar part of the spiritual terrain of our early Scottish ancestors. What may now seem foreign to the sensibilities and experience of present-day Presbyterians was an integral part of our early spiritual heritage. Our Presbyterian ancestors were no strangers to spiritual revival, nor to the unusual phenomena that often accompanied it. A careful survey of Presbyterian history reveals the central role Presbyterians have played in the revival of evangelical Christianity in the English-speaking world. In fact, a case can be made that the early Church of Scotland, predecessor to our Presbyterian denominations, was virtually birthed and nurtured in a period of intense spiritual awakening. In the years that followed, from the early seventeenth century through the early eighteenth century, movements of Presbyterian revival spread beyond the shores of Scotland, first as Presbyterianism was being established in Ireland, and later as it was exported to the colonies of the New World. Furthermore, throughout the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, revival preaching and experience continued to play a formative role in the spiritual history

Table of Contents

"Touched By the Fire"	p. 1
"Preaching in Revival"	p. 9
Study of the Book of Revelation	p. 15

of our tradition in both Scotland and Ireland, as well as the United States.

A Spark Ignites

The seal of reformer John Calvin depicts a hand holding forth a heart lifted toward heaven and set aflame for God. This image of spiritual fire is quite appropriate in describing the experience of early Presbyterians who, through the renewing influence of Reformed evangelical preaching, were set ablaze for God.

As we examine the spiritual origins of the Presbyterian movement and the role Presbyterians have played in the history of spiritual revival, a number of general observations and affirmations can be made.

First, the Presbyterian Church was birthed in a time of spiritual revival. In fact, the Church of Scotland was the fruit borne of a spiritual awakening taking place in the late 1500's in the hearts of the Scottish people.

Most historical accounts of the Reformation emphasize the social and political aspects of the religious movement spreading throughout Scotland. Granted, the major changes that were sweeping through the Church and culture did have a major impact upon the social and political lives of the people. However, what sometimes is underestimated is the tremendous *spiritual* movement that precipitated the social-political events of that period.

In his book *Scotland Saw His Glory*, W. J. Couper makes the point that,

The Reformation was Scotland's first great religious awakening—an awakening all the more thorough because of the people's deep sleep throughout the preceding centuries. That the movement was a spiritual revival has been obscured by the fact that it was political and ecclesiastical in its outward aspect. Its historians have laid almost exclusive stress upon what can be found in State documents and in the papers and letters of politicians and churchmen. No doubt the movement did consist largely of conferences and negotiations between parties, of the passage of armies, of legislation proposed or actual, and of the devices of statesmen. Discussions about forms of church government and discipline were required, for a new ecclesiastical establishment had to be created. But important as these things are, they did not after all constitute the whole of the Scottish Reformation. Its real history lay deeper....

Continuing with his evaluation of the true nature of the Scottish Reformation, Couper writes:

The Scottish Reformation, however, being all these things was yet more than them all. It was in reality a deep moving of the heart of the nation towards God. The argument might have taken the form of debates on

doctrines, church government, and the method of public worship: the real question at issue was how each human soul could best find God through Jesus Christ.²

John Knox, upon his return to Scotland following his years in Geneva with John Calvin, was impressed by the vitality of faith and passion for Christ that had taken hold of the Scottish people while he was away. In a letter from Dun Castle dated November 4, 1555, Knox wrote to his mother-in-law, who had successfully urged Knox to leave Geneva and return to Scotland to assist in the work of God that was progressing there. In this letter, he writes of his surprising joy and delight in what he had found in his native land, describing, "the fervent thirst of our brethren, night and day sobbing and groaning for the bread of life. If I had not seen it with my eyes in my own country, I could not have believed it...the fervency here doth far exceed all others that I have seen."³

This profound spiritual thirst among the Scottish people created necessary conditions from which sparks of renewal finally erupted and the Scottish Presbyterian Church eventually emerged. Everywhere, especially "over the lowlands of Scotland, the breath of the Spirit of God passed, awakening a nation to newness of life. When Knox returned from Geneva and traversed the lowlands, he found everywhere the fuel gathered, needing only a spark to set it ablaze."⁴

Fanning The Flame

Not only was the Presbyterian tradition birthed in a revival, it was nurtured in revival as well. God's work of awakening persons to their need of the Savior became a continual point of focus for the newly established Scottish Presbyterians, and an integral part of their identity, piety, and practice. Two pastoral leaders in particular, John Welch and Robert Bruce, were instrumental in fanning the flame of evangelical piety within the fledgling Scottish Presbyterian movement.

John Welch

John Welch, the son-in law of John Knox, was widely known for his commitment to regular fasting and prayer. Apparent to many of his contemporaries was the tremendous spiritual power that seemed to flow from significant amounts of time he spent in prayer—as many as eight hours a day—and his practice of rising from bed in the middle of the night to intercede on behalf of Scotland. Welch's burden for the spiritual state of the Scottish Church was strong, providing him with a clear purpose and unwavering commitment to pray unceasingly. Over the course of his lifetime, Welch eventually succumbed to

a great weakness in his knees, caused with his continual kneeling at prayer, by which it came to pass, that though he was able to move his knees, and to walk, yet he was wholly insensible in them, and the

flesh became hard like a sort of horn. But when in the time of his weakness, he was desired to remit somewhat of his excessive painfulness, his answer was, 'He spent his life of God, and therefore it would be spent for him.'⁵

Welch not only spent himself in prayer, but also poured himself into evangelistic labors that reaped "a harvest of converts."⁶ According to one historian, "if his diligence was great, so it is doubted whether his sowing in painfulness or harvest in success was greater, for if either his spiritual experiences in seeking the Lord, or his fruitfulness in converting souls be considered, they will be found unparalleled in Scotland."⁷ Sacrificing considerable personal comforts on behalf of Christ and His Church, he courageously followed God's call to bring the gospel to the most difficult of pastoral settings. Sent by God as a shepherd to some of the darkest spiritual corners of Scotland, Welch persevered for years in parishes riddled with strife, factions, and even bloodshed, attempting with some success to restore the moral and spiritual moorings of the communities he served. Furthermore, his zeal for Christ and love for the Scottish Kirk also brought him into conflict with Scottish King, James VI (James I of England), and eventually led to his deportation to France where he spent his remaining years in exile.

Yet perhaps more important than his ministry endeavors was the spiritual impact Welch made upon several young Scottish pastors. After only two short decades of ministry in Scotland, John Welch left an unmistakable spiritual mark on a future generation of pastors. One of his most notable and fruitful followers, Reverend David Dickson, reflecting later upon his own ministry at Irvine in the 1620's, noted "that the vintage of Irvine was not equal to the gleanings, and not once compared to the harvest in Mr. John Welsh's time, when indeed the gospel had wonderful success in conviction, conversion, and confirmation."⁸ Indeed, several key players in later movements of revival (whose numbers included his own son Josias) pointed to John Welch as a prominent guiding force in their lives and ministries.

Robert Bruce

Another key player who stirred the embers of Scottish spirituality was a pastor named Robert Bruce who, like John Welch, possessed powerful gifts in the areas of prayer, evangelism and spiritual leadership. A successor to John Knox at the Kirk in Edinburgh in the 1590's, Bruce was considered "a great wrestler, who had more than ordinary familiarity with his Master."⁹ It was Bruce's practice to wrestle aloud with God before attempting to preach to the people. On one occasion, a passerby walking near his place of prayer reported that an unseen Someone must be in the room with Bruce, as Bruce was overheard insisting repeatedly that "he would not—he could not—go, unless he came with him."¹⁰

Evidently his times in prayer contributed to his effectiveness in preaching. As historian Kirkton described

him, "He made always an earthquake upon his hearers, and rarely preached but to a weeping auditory."¹¹ According to another chronicler,

There were none in his time, who preached with such evidence of the power of the Spirit; and no man had more seals of his ministry...he spoke with such authority and weight as became the oracles of the living God; so that some of the most stout-hearted of his hearers were ordinarily made to tremble, and by having the door, which had formerly been shut against Jesus Christ, as by an irresistible power broken open, and the secrets of their hearts made manifest, they oftentimes went away under deep conviction. He had a very majestic countenance; in prayer he was short, especially when in public, but every word or sentence he spoke was as a bolt shot from heaven.¹²

Bruce's influence on future generations was particularly evident as he raised up and shaped an emerging generation of Presbyterian pastors. John Livingston, one of Bruce's most influential disciples who later became a leader of revivals in Scotland and Ireland, once remarked: "Mr. Robert Bruce I several times heard, and in my opinion never man spake with greater power since the apostles days."¹³

Robert Bruce, along with John Welch, seemed to set the stage for the revivals that were to arise as Scotland approached a new century.

The Fire Spreads

Although not extinguished entirely, as the 1500's were drawing to a close, some of the spiritual fire generated in Scotland by the preaching of Bruce and Welch began to die down. Clearly what was needed was a more widespread, general outpouring of the Spirit if the Presbyterian movement was to flourish. Signs that such revival was on its way were observed at the 1596 General Assembly in Edinburgh (as briefly described in the opening paragraph of this article). The impact of that General Assembly upon the wider church was considerable, as ministers carried their repentant hearts and spiritual passion back to their synods and parishes. As an early historian of the period later affirmed, 1596 was

a remarkable yeere to the Kirk of Scotland, both for the beginning and for the end of it. The Kirk of Scotland was now come to her perfectioun, and the greatest puritie that she ever atteaned unto, both in doctrine and discipline, so that her beautie was admirable to foraigne kirks. The assemblies of the sancts were never so glorious, nor profitable to everie one of the true members thereof than in the beginning of this yeere.¹⁴

By the end of the sixteenth century and into the next, a vital faith in Jesus Christ—accompanied by dynamic operations of the Holy Spirit—had become the very

hallmark of the Presbyterian movement. As Westerkamp affirms, "This dependence upon the Holy Spirit's moving within individual souls and the resulting religious emphasis upon emotionally charged piety had dominated Scottish Christianity since the early seventeenth century."¹⁵

Revival at Irvine and Stewarton

One of the notable instances of this emotionally charged piety was found in the revival at Irvine and Stewarton. Signs of an impending outbreak first emerged through the preaching of Irvine pastor David Dickson, one of the new generation of Presbyterian preachers who had been influenced by Bruce and Welch. While initially appearing as a local phenomenon, the ensuing revival soon attracted people from nearby Stewarton and throughout the region, who came not only to experience Dickson's preaching during Sunday communions, but his Monday (market-day) teachings as well. An account of Dickson's ministry describes what transpired:

People under exercise and soul concern, came from every place about Irvine and attended upon his sermons, and the most eminent and serious Christians from all corners of the church, came and joined with him at his communions, which were indeed times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. Yea, not a few came from distant places and settled in Irvine, that they might be under his ministry....¹⁶

The Kirk O' Shotts revival

A rather dramatic outbreak of spiritual revival, something akin to a spiritual lightning bolt, erupted one day toward the conclusion of a "solemn communion" in the Presbyterian parish of Shotts. On June 21, 1630, as pastor John Livingston was concluding his churchyard communion message, the atmosphere took on a dramatic change, so that "there was so convincing an appearance of God, and down-pouring of the Spirit, even in an extraordinary way....with a strange unusual motion on the hearers."¹⁷ As Livingston fixed his gaze upon the crowded churchyard, he beheld a sight that would be remembered for centuries to come. Nearly five hundred of the people present had "a discernible change wrought upon them, of whom most proved lively Christians afterwards."¹⁸ This dramatic outpouring seemed to have been a singular event, albeit with continuing results; its short-lived demonstrations came and went in a day, while its long-term impact endured. In his memoirs, he would later affirm: "The only day in all my life, wherein I found most of the presence of God in my preaching, was on a Monday after the communion, preaching at the churchyard of Shotts, June 21, 1630."¹⁹

Later to be known as the "Kirk o' Shotts Revival," this unusually abrupt outpouring of the Holy Spirit soon took a prominent place in the annals of Scottish Presbyterian history. Many who were present on that occasion "could date either their conversion, or some remarkable confirmation in their case, from that day."²⁰ The sudden

eruption in that westside churchyard made an impact all throughout the countryside. Many a person marveled at this sovereign inbreaking of the Spirit's presence. Even Robert Bruce, admired by Livingston since his youth, was providentially present on the occasion and allowed to taste some of the good fruit of his ministry decades earlier.²¹

Fire Across The Water: Presbyterians in Ireland

The revival tradition of Presbyterians continued to spread as they traveled across the channel to Ireland, where they established what would eventually become the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Although already present in Ulster by 1613, Presbyterianism had not made any significant evangelistic impact there until a band of revival preachers, influenced by the ministries of Robert Bruce and John Welch, arrived from Scotland sometime about 1624. By 1625, a spiritual awakening began to take hold in the hearts of the Irish people such that large groups gathered together for the preaching of the Word and the sacrament of Communion, initially centered in the Six-Mile-Water area of Antrim. At these gatherings,

The hearers came from all directions. These meetings began with a sermon on Thursday evening, continued with sermons all day Friday--three in the winter months and four during the summer. The ministers used this time for general consultation among themselves concerning the administrative as well as the spiritual affairs of their congregations. Although Irish church historians described these meetings as the forerunner to presbyteries, their greater importance lay in the constant attendance of hundreds of people gathering to hear the gospel preached and to pray for twenty-four hours at a stretch.²²

By 1630, the young pastors conducting these meetings were joined by others, whose ranks included John Livingston (of Shotts fame) and Josias Welch (son of John), who had left the work in Scotland to assist with the awakening in Ireland. Before too long, the evangelical preaching of these young Presbyterians had attracted and awakened large crowds of people. As the "Six-Mile Water revival" gained momentum its influence spread beyond the counties of Antrim and Down, where in some locations a prayer meeting might last from three to five days, with thousands of people in attendance.

Some of the same dramatic manifestations seen in Scotland (i.e. swooning, panting, weeping, shouting, and others) were witnessed in the Irish revivals.

Whatever else might be said of this work, the Six-Mile-Water revival that broke out in Antrim under the leadership of men like Robert Blair and John Livingston is "recognized by Irish church historians as the beginning of the Irish Presbyterian Church..."²³ This revival, along with the others it ignited, continued to burn until around

1633 when many of the key leaders were eventually deposed.

In both Scotland and Ireland, it was the lively worship (made up of passionate preaching and celebration of the Lord's Supper) and evangelical piety of these spiritual revivals that characterized the religious experience of early Presbyterians. Although numerous political and ecclesiastical battles would also consume much of their time and energy, the foundational issues of greatest concern to these early Presbyterians were *spiritual*. And it was because of these spiritual concerns that they fought such a determined battle to retain their religious freedom. As Westerkamp affirms,

the impact of this era upon Presbyterianism goes beyond an increase of power and authority accorded to the established church, back to the new centrality of piety itself. Simply put, the people were interested in attending religious services, and the services they wanted to attend were revivalist. Such rituals involved massive numbers of participants collected indoors and out; they lasted for several days, sometimes as long as two weeks. Individuals responded openly and emotionally to provocative preaching and prayers, seeking the ultimate goal of conversion. Lay participation was encouraged during these services, as well as in the general spiritual life of the parish, and this was a power that the laity were loath to relinquish.²⁴

Flames from a Distant Fire: Revival in the New World

The prospect of religious freedom to pursue their evangelical convictions in the New World held great appeal and promise to the persecuted Scots-Irish Presbyterians. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a number had migrated to the American colonies, bringing their distinctive piety with them. By the 1720's, the flow of Scots-Irish immigrants to the New World had grown steadily. Along with leaders from the Puritan and pietistic movements, these Presbyterian transplants to the New World brought with them a strong religious fervency that helped set the stage for a major spiritual awakening.

According to church historian William Warren Sweet, "It is an interesting fact that most of the great American revival movements have come largely through Presbyterianism..."²⁵ Contrary to their image as stoic formalists, the Scots-Irish and their lively religion were at the forefront of an intense movement of spiritual awakening that swept through the middle colonies during the Great Awakening. Making the connection between the piety of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians and the spiritual awakenings in the New World, Westerkamp notes that

The Great Awakening in the middle colonies represented neither innovative religious behavior nor a

statement of challenge to the establishment. Rather, that revivalism, first observed in the colonies at this time, was actually part of the Scots-Irish religiosity, a tradition that flourished under the encouragement afforded the colonial ministers. Its importance was attested by the jealousy with which the Scots-Irish guarded their revivalism. It cannot be coincidental that outbreaks of revivalism in Pennsylvania and New Jersey followed directly after large-scale migration from Ireland, nor that the awakening spread to Virginia and the Carolina back country during the years when the Scots-Irish moved south.²⁶

Furthermore, these Scots-Irish Presbyterians, most notably William Tennent (who had migrated from the Antrim region of Ireland) and his sons of the "Log College" so nurtured and promoted this general movement of revival that it gained even greater momentum. According to Maxson, in *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies*

The itinerating evangelists that set the country on fire were, for the most part, Scotch-Irishmen. They were the ministers of the New Brunswick presbytery, the nucleus of which had been fostered by Domine Frelinghuysen, and members of other presbyteries who held close relations with this group. These evangelists were, with very few exceptions, graduates of the Log College, established by the elder Tennent at Neshaminy. This was the New Brunswick or radical New Side party....²⁷

Confirming this important point, Westerkamp states that

If the Presbyterian clergy had not supported the revival, of course, the Great Awakening would not have swept the middle colonies with such speed. George Whitefield's successes, though numerous, were fleeting; usually only in congregations supported by New Light ministers did the revival flourish....For decades the Scots-Irish people had tried to bring their church back to the original reformation tradition. In the middle colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Presbyterian clergy had finally returned to that revivalism as a hundred years of religious experience burst forth in one glorious sweeping movement.²⁸

The Tennents

"William Tennent," according to Dr. C.A. Briggs, 'was one of the greatest of the trophies won by Presbyterianism from Episcopacy in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.' Webster, the conservative Presbyterian historian, concedes that 'to William Tennent, above all others, is owing the propriety and enlargement of the Presbyterian Church.'²⁹

Although newly ordained into Presbyterian ministry when he arrived from the Old World, William Tennent, Sr. had been no stranger to the Presbyterian preaching and piety. From the days of his youth in Ireland, Tennent had

crossed paths with people and places greatly touched by the Spirit's fire. Born in Ireland in 1703 to Scottish parents, and educated in Edinburgh,³⁰ young William had been brought into direct contact with some of the most prominent spiritual leaders of his day, most of whom were Presbyterians. He had developed deep friendships with leading Presbyterian evangelicals who were contending for the spiritual future of that nation.³¹ Graduating from the University of Edinburgh at a time when the banished Presbyterian pastors had just regained access to their pulpits, it is unlikely that he would have spent his years there without his heart being significantly impacted by the highly-charged Scottish Reformed faith. Undoubtedly, both his studies and his acquaintances in the cradle of Presbyterianism had shown him the powerful impact that spiritual awakenings have upon a people, for this was Scotland's heritage.

More probable an influence was his father-in-law, Gilbert Kennedy, a well-known leader of the Presbyterian movement in Ulster. Having married into the family of this strong leader gave Tennent a first-hand view of the religious and political struggles these Irish reformers experienced as they sought God's reviving influence upon that nation. Yet he also witnessed the spiritual fervor these same leaders exhibited in the heat of their daily struggles. Although initially ordained in 1704 into the official Anglican Church of Ireland, William's sentiments clearly leaned toward the more evangelically-minded Presbyterians who had first established a vital presence in his native Ulster in the early 1600's. (His "non-conformist" sentiments could have been the reason why he never served in a parish while ordained in the Church of Ireland.)³²

Yet, what might have impacted young William the most was his knowledge that God's glory had once shone brightly throughout Ulster, particularly in his own region of Antrim. Like Scotland in the early 1600's, Ireland had been impacted by historical outpourings of the Holy Spirit. His own area of Antrim had been the scene of one of the greatest revivals ever to hit the British Isles, the famous "Six-Mile-Water Revival" of 1625. That revival, going strong through 1633, had left an indelible mark upon the landscape of Irish religion, and had firmly established an evangelical Presbyterian witness on the island. And while both Scotland and Ireland had seen the movements wane over the years, the memory and effects of those spiritual awakenings had not been lost in the hearts of Presbyterians in Ulster. Fire from the embers of these early Presbyterian revivals had ignited in the heart of William Tennent, and he eventually carried that fire, along with his young family, to the New World. Upon his arrival, he applied for admission into the Synod of Philadelphia of the Presbyterian Church, a newly-established denomination merely twelve years old that was more in line with his evangelical convictions.

Through his establishment of the "Log College," Tennent trained and equipped a handful of young pastors—

including his own sons Gilbert, John, Charles, and William Jr.—for a ministry of revival preaching. While his efforts were embraced by many, Tennent's Log College became a source of contention for others, its emphasis and influence later resulting in a painful division amongst the Presbyterians, many of whom were uncomfortable with the passionate spirit that emanated from its students. Opponents asserted that Tennent's theology and practices were not Presbyterian, nor Calvinistic. Some even claimed that these "New Lights" (a derisive title given to the Log College group) were outside the realm of true Christendom.³³ Yet, the emphasis and preaching of the Tennent party was actually very consistent with the historic Presbyterianism of Scotland and Ireland in the early 1600's—of the great leaders like David Dickson and John Livingston, and Robert Blair—who had been so instrumental in the life of the Presbyterian movement during its formative years. In fact, one historian later affirms that "Northern Ireland had been Presbyterianized by preaching of the same order," and that "the views and practices of the Log College men were, accordingly, nothing new or unusual in either Scottish Presbyterianism or English Puritanism."³⁴

The transatlantic connection between Scots-Irish revivalism and the Great Awakening sweeping through the colonies was further strengthened, ironically, by the ministry of Anglican evangelist George Whitefield. Through his close association with the Tennent party, Whitefield's theology took on a distinctly "Calvinized" flavor, making him more palatable to the average Presbyterian. Furthermore his growing acceptance by Presbyterians opened doors for his evangelistic efforts throughout the colonies, and eventually opened the way in 1742 for him to assist in the spiritual revival that had erupted in the Church of Scotland.

Sharing The Fire

When news of the American revival eventually made its way to the British Isles, the reports caught the attention of several Presbyterian clergy in Scotland who had been praying and laboring to see such awakenings in their own parishes. By February of 1742, the first reports of revival from within Scotland began to circulate, beginning with an outpouring on the tiny parish of Cambuslang (under the leadership of Reverend William M'Culloch) that spread to Kilsyth (with Reverend James Robe) and beyond. Later that same year, George Whitefield was invited by the clergy of the Scottish kirk to assist in the revival efforts, resulting in a dramatic acceleration and spread of the revival movement and touching tens-of-thousands of lives. As was characteristic with the Scottish revivals of the 1600's, as well as the American awakenings, these revival events were focused primarily upon the preaching of God's Word and the sacrament of holy communion.

By the end of 1742, it was clear to contemporary historians, both Scottish and American alike, that revival

had become a transatlantic phenomenon. This transatlantic connection was keenly felt by revival leaders on both shores, and became a point of mutual encouragement and support. This is readily apparent from the correspondence exchanged between Scottish pastors and the leadership of the colonial Awakening.

Perhaps most surprising is the support and encouragement solicited by Jonathan Edwards from the Scottish clergy as the revival in New England began to decline. The distressing reports and anguished sentiments in correspondence from Edwards about the developments in New England soon prompted the Scottish clergy to propose spiritual countermeasures to preempt a similar decline in Scotland. Initiating a plan called a “Concert For United Prayer,” the Presbyterian leaders urged all Christians to join together at specified times for focused, intentional prayer for revival. Starting on a small scale, this prayer initiative grew to become a widespread movement, eventually reaching the attention of Jonathan Edwards, who swiftly promoted and publicized the endeavor in a lengthy tract with an equally lengthy title: *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People, In Extraordinary Prayer, For the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth.*³⁵

Fire in the West

The strong connection between Scots-Irish piety and revival in the New World continued into the nineteenth century, evidenced most clearly as the Second Great Awakening spread west to Kentucky and Tennessee through the influence of Presbyterian preachers like James McGready. The forms and phenomena characteristic of these frontier revivals—even some of the more unusual types—were, once again, heavily influenced and fashioned after the traditions of Scottish Presbyterianism. Rather than being unique “inventions” of the American frontier preachers, the camp meeting practices—the remote, open-air meetings, the passionate evangelistic preaching, the protracted Communion, the emotionally-charged atmosphere—took their cues from the traditions passed down to them from the early Scots-Irish immigrants. Such input from these Presbyterians shaped a whole genre of American religious practice.

The Fire Continues to Burn

Well into the nineteenth century, the revival spirituality of Scots-Irish Presbyterianism, both in content and in form, continued to play a major role in shaping both American religious customs and the spiritual climate in Scotland.

In America, the controversial theology and innovative practices of Presbyterian evangelist Charles Grandison Finney took a prominent place in the revival tradition during the early part of the century. Meanwhile, across the ocean in Scotland the revival tradition continued as well,

most notably repeated in 1839 in Kilsyth and spreading to Dundee and beyond through the ministries of William Chalmers Burns and Robert Murray McCheyne.³⁶

The willingness of Presbyterians to both embrace and endorse a tradition of praying and preaching toward spiritual revival is evidenced as late as the 1850’s in the Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly. In the 1857 *Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within the Bounds of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, we read the following description:

Another and the last evidence, that we cite, of an increasing vigor and efficiency in our denomination is, the intense longing, breathed through all the Narratives for a general, glorious outpouring of the Spirit. The past year has not been one which may be characterized as a year of revivals, although many churches in many Presbyteries have been greatly quickened, and some have been favored with spiritual influences of extraordinary power.... ‘This longing for revivals we cannot but consider a cheering indication of the noblest life. Next to a state of actual revival is the sense of its need, and the struggle to attain it at any sacrifice of treasure, toil, or time. We trust that the period is not distant, when this state of actual, general, glorious revival shall be ours....’³⁷

By the following year, the General Assembly was reporting that:

The meeting of the present Assembly occurs in the midst of what has been very properly styled ‘The great Awakening.’ In this remarkable work of grace, our own Church has shared, and is sharing, largely; so that, with gratitude and rejoicing, we mention it as the chief feature of the Narrative. The members of the Assembly have come from scenes of revival, to mingle in a revival progressing in the place of meeting. This wave of blessing is rolling over the land. Already it has reached every Presbytery within our bounds; and there is scarcely a church that has not felt, in some degree, its cheering influence. One of our largest Presbyteries says: ‘...There is not, within our bounds, a single church in which tokens of the divine presence have not been distinctly seen; although in several there has been no general awakening and turning to God. In many, the work has been one of unwonted power.’

Describing how the revival fire had ignited and spread throughout the nation, the report remarked:

This Pentecostal season manifested itself at an early period of the present year, in a remarkable degree, in the city of New York. This great heart of the country now became the fountain of religious life, sending out its currents to the extremities. Its influence spread most rapidly. Individuals from the east and the west, from the north and the south, came to this business

centre, and, like the men of old who visited Jerusalem, they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and returned home to kindle the sacred flame at their own altars, and in the places where they dwelt, until the holy fire was lighted in almost every city and village of the land, where it is still burning more or less brightly.

We do not attribute this revival to any one human instrumentality. It is most manifestly the work of God. 'This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.' One of the most carefully prepared Presbyterian Narratives says: 'No cause of sufficient power for the production of such results was visible. No Edwards of resistless force in argument; no Whitefield of commanding eloquence; no Summerfield or McCheyne of impassioned feeling, was raised up to be the herald of the Lord. The more we study this work, the more deeply is the truth impressed upon our minds, *This is the work of God.*'³⁸

© 2000 Keith Edward Beebe

¹ See David Calderwood. *The True History of the Church of Scotland, 1678.* (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971). pp.315-17.

² Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory. (A Compilation of Materials Gathered From The Work of W.J. Couper)* pp. 11-13.

³ Knox. David Laing, ed. *Works.* iv.(*Letter from Knox to Mrs. Bowes, 4 Nov. 1555*) Edinburgh: James Thin. pp.217-218.

⁴ Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory.* p. 52.

⁵ John Gillies. *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of Success of the Gospel and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It.* Originally published in Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulz, 1754. Reprinted in Fairfield, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981. p. 169.

⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt. *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals In The Early Modern Period.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). p. 24. (*Quoting seventeenth century historian James Kirkton.*)

⁷ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 168.

⁸ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

⁹ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* (Article on Robert Bruce from the Presbyterian Review, July 1843, quoting Robert Fleming in *Fulfilling of the Scripture*) p.179.

¹⁰ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* (Article on Robert Bruce from the Presbyterian Review, July 1843) p. 179.

¹¹ Rev. James Munro. "Lecture IX: Encouragements from the History of the Church under the Old and under the New Testament Dispensations, to expect, pray and labour for the Revival of Religion." *The Revival of Religion: Addresses by Scottish Evangelical Leaders delivered in Glasgow in 1840.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984)

¹² Howie. *Scots Worthies.* p. 150.

¹³ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 171.

¹⁴ Roberts. *Scotland Saw His Glory. (Quoting Calderwood, History Of Church of Scotland,1678. p. 323)* pp. 97-98.

¹⁵ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 86.

¹⁶ Gillies. *Historical Collections. (From Wodrow's Preface to Dickson's Truth's Victory over Error.)* p. 198.

¹⁷ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

¹⁸ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p. 198.

¹⁹ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* p.198.

²⁰ Gillies. *Historical Collections.* pp. 198.

²¹ Schmidt. *Holy Fairs.* p. 22.

²² Westerkamp. *Triumph.* pp. 24-25.

²³ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 16.

²⁴ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p. 42.

²⁵ William Warren Sweet. *Religion On The American Frontier. 1783-1840.* Vol. II, *The Presbyterians.* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964). pp. 83-84.

²⁶ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* p.14.

²⁷ Charles Hartshorn Maxson. *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies.* Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1958.

²⁸ Westerkamp. *Triumph of the Laity.* pp.212-13.

²⁹ Maxson. *The Great Awakening In The Middle Colonies.*

³⁰ James B. Bennett. "'Love To Christ'--Gilbert Tennent, Presbyterian Reunion, and a Sacramental Sermon." *American Presbyterians (Journal of Presbyterian History).* Volume 71, Number 2, Summer 1993. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1993) p. 77.

³¹ George Whitefield. *George Whitefield's Journals. Journal Five, in the period of August 1739-January 1740.* (London: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1960) p.344.

³² Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier. *The Presbyterians.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) p. 230.

³³ Leonard J. Trinterud. *The Forming Of An American Tradition: A Re-Examination Of Colonial Presbyterianism.* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949) p.169.

³⁴ Trinterud. *American Tradition.* p.170.

³⁵ In his preface, Edwards credited the Scottish Presbyterians for initiating this worldwide movement. The "Concert of Prayer" movement continues today.

³⁶ For more detail, see Roberts, ed. *Scotland Saw His Glory.* pp. 269-79, and Andrew Bonar, ed. *Memoirs of McCheyne: Including His Letters and Messages.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947).

³⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America: With An Appendix. A.D. 1857. (Appendix. I. Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within The Bounds of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America.)* New York: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1857. p.418.

³⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America: With An Appendix. A.D. 1858. (Appendix. I. Annual Narrative of the State of Religion Within The Bounds of the Presbyterian Church In The United States of America.)* New York: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1858. pp.610-11.

You Can Help!

Let us know if you would like multiple copies of *Theology Matters* mailed to your church.

Send us names of individuals that you would like to have receive *Theology Matters*.

Continue to support PFFM with your prayers and donations.

We need your help in order for this vital ministry to continue!