

MAKING WAVES: A PERSPECTIVE ON MINISTRY & REVIVALISM

By Martyn Percy

Introduction

'The man who is won to Christ by a good argument is at the mercy of a better one'. It was David Watson who said this shortly before his death, when his appreciation of 'signs and wonders' ministry as an evangelistic tool was at its height. Watson, in subtly undermining traditional evangelical apologetics, was arguing for Wimber's approach: miracles lead people to Christ. The more powerful and miraculous your church looks, the more non-believers will be impressed and persuaded. At first sight it's not a bad argument - except that the person who is won by a miracle is also at the mercy of a greater demonstration of power, and may be hungry for more even after that.

Contemporary Charismatic Renewal, radically experiential and power-centred religion, has done extremely well in postmodern times. Less textual than traditional Pentecostalism, its stress on empowerment, authority, charisma, intimacy and inner experience has especially endeared it to the middle-classes. Sociologists such as Andrew Walker, Harvey Cox, Peter Berger, Meredith McGuire and David Martin have all looked at this type of religion - increasingly popular since the 1950's - and noted how concepts of success, power and healing have shaped the movement, largely in response to the needs of its main target audience: the bourgeois (more on this later). For the moment though, let me be personal.

I do not write as an evangelical. I am Anglican and 'belong' to a tradition that sees itself as *constructively* liberal and catholic. Yet I have concerns about the impact of contemporary revivalism on evangelical belief: there is a profound crisis brewing. 'Powerful' experience is increasingly operating as 'the ground of being' for those in Charismatic Renewal. The Bible Study Group has been replaced by the home group, which in turn now finds itself replaced by the 'encounter', 'healing' or 'ministry' group. Increasingly, revivalists operate at a considerable distance from their evangelical roots. Hymns (once vehicles for doctrine),

sacraments and a knowledge of Reformed tradition have been replaced by a diet of choruses and personal experiences, which have in turn produced schism, lack of discernment and a power-hungry congregation: 'More power, Lord, more power!', is the sole credo. God is met in the spectacular manifestation, the great praise celebration or the ultimate revelation; not in bread, wine, word or silence. Contemporary revivalism is a city on the sand: popular, playful, yet insecure. It is a shifting religious culture for the postmodern 90's. What follows is an attempt to tease out the main issues as I see them. The thesis is intentionally provocative, although I wish to stress that I do affirm aspects of revivalist praxis; I write as a critical empathiser.

Revivalism and Ministry

Once upon a time, my wife and I were on honeymoon in Ireland. On the last day, we drove to a small fishing village near Youghal to eat lunch in a pub. The harbour was many hundreds of feet below us, and from the window we could see the incoming trawlers making lazy trails in the still waters of the bay. It was a hot day for September, and the sun beat down on the sea, soon causing the mist to rise. Just above us, the cold winds from the Atlantic were gathering the mist into clouds; soon it began to rain on the harbour, in spite of the heat. We were watching rain being made: sooner or later, there would be a rainbow.

Those involved in contemporary revivalism (my terminology for Charismatic Renewal, Restorationism, Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism) often describe their individual and corporate religious experience in terms of 'waves', 'rain from heaven', or 'coming from above', implying that it is somehow revelation. These watery metaphors are tricky, because they almost certainly do not do justice to what occurs in revivalism. 'Rain', although experienced as something that falls 'from heaven', is in fact made through a combination of complex climatic conditions and hot air. 'Waves' are natural, not supernatural. Any sociological or psychological account of revivalism often suggests the same. Participants imagine themselves to be on the receiving end of a direct form of communication from God, but in fact their perception of their experience, and the things that occur in the name of God, are very often projections of their own wishes and desires, combined with a distinctive religious vocabulary and the

dynamics of being in a charismatic situation. To some this may sound a little too reductive, so let me say a bit more.

Take a quality like charisma, a key ingredient in all revivalist churches. As a quality, it functions on a variety of levels. There are held to be charisms - gifts of the Spirit - which when practised turn individuals and groups into more charismatic personalities. The leader, by definition, must be the most charismatic person in the group, even if that is implicit: his or her authority depends on it. Participants have expectations about charisma, concentrated on notions of empowerment, fulfilment, energising and enhanced intimacy. Beyond this, it is usually suggested that God is the source of the charisma, since the leadership is ordained, the gifts are of the Spirit, and the structure of the church is given. There can be conflict and competition here too. The charisma of apostles depends on controlling the charismatic-prophetic, and when that control is threatened, the prophets often leave. Contemporary revivalists like John Wimber, and his unhappy history with the 'Kansas Six', followed by the Toronto Airport Church, provide instructive examples, as does any episode of British Restorationism.

So, some questions about charisma arise at this point. How do participants, when they listen to their leaders, discern the difference between what the preacher says the Bible says, and what the Bible actually says? What is the difference between a religious experience, and any experience that is then given a religious meaning or gloss (for example, feeling your hands tingle, or swooning)? What happens when a 'grammar of religious possibility' is created and fulfilled? Is that of God, or is it just the benign forces of suggestibility at work? Is the developed (maybe learnt) charismatic style of leadership in a person something that gets confused with perceptions about God? For example, if I make a lot of capital out of God being a certain kind of loving father, and being intimate with his children, and then portray myself as a type of 'grandfather icon' to illustrate this, what sort of analogy am I setting up for the listeners? Furthermore, if I have quasi-family type groups as the basis for my church - kinship or 'home' groups - and then talk about being involved in your personal life, as God is, do I not become a father of the church? The fact that a father figure has much authority is not in doubt. Yet beyond this, am I not a short step away from implying that *the* Father and I are

one', causing my congregation to become confused about the authority and benevolence of God, and my own? Add to this a form of worship that stresses power and intimacy, and the picture is complete. Here, it seems to me, the 'rain-maker' is born: my power and God's power are merged. Of course, I am not suggesting the two should be unrelated - they should not. It is just that charismatic leaders, with their churches of excitement, often housing motifs of adventure and charisma, with their stress on power and love, frequently don't make a good job of separating the two out.

'Power' is, in fact, the key word to understanding contemporary Christian revivalism and fundamentalism. Whilst one is mainly experiential and post-modern and the other mainly cognitive and modernist, the two share an interest in forms or agents of power. The miracles or signs are there to prove that God is there, and greater than the prevailing powers beyond the church. An inerrant Bible, in which God has revealed his will fully, does the same. Both function in a similar way: they give certainty to the believer, and issue a degree of control in the church. Power has become reified - made visible and usable. These 'agents' operate as tools to combat the counter-powers of the world. Believers imagine that with these weapons, they will overcome. Effectively, they are absolutes, agents of God in the hands of the righteous that can withstand anything. Again, as with charisma, there are problems with the idea that God is willing to dispose of his power absolutely in this way. It concentrates enormous power in the hands of the leader (the ultimate agent who reifies the power?), who then channel the power on to the laity: pastors become power-brokers, able to give and receive power, but also to deny or refute it when necessary.

Evidence for this in any fundamentalist or revivalist community is usually very obvious. The more differences of opinion are tolerated, the more the authority of the leaders suffers, and the less powerful the group becomes (this is the very antithesis of an established church). Consequently, plurality of belief is unusual: this is why a genuine dialogue tends to be rare in such communities. Usually, obedience is stressed; those beyond the church are treated to monologues rather than empathetic conversations. In this sense, a revivalist church is a bit like a power circuit. The leaders are the main source for issuing power, and in turn claim their source is

God. The congregation are the points or agents on the circuit that use and transform the power for themselves and others: they are plugged or hooked in to the power circuit. The trick is to keep the (allegedly divine) power flowing, so that the circuit can expand and take in new types of agency, provided the circuit is not broken by this. (This 'power' is usually legitimated inductively: 'tracing back' present experiences to the Bible or authoritative tradition. Even the 'Toronto Blessing' is in the Bible, according to some.) Thus, if you begin with an absorption with power, you are likely to be seduced by new forms of it: mega-apostles, prophets, blessings, words of knowledge and whatever might come after the 'Toronto Blessing'. However, if the acquisition of these causes division or threatens the unity of the circuit, you have to cut them out, even if they have been useful in confirming the authority of your discourse and practice.

Granted, this is a rather reductive way of 'reading' revivalism. I would certainly want to affirm the possibilities of God in any situation, including a charismatic one. People in revivalism do change, and, no doubt, do feel they have met with God. However, it is prudent to add some distinctions at this point. Both Barth and Rahner were careful to point out the difference between religion and revelation. For Barth, there was a huge chasm between the two. Revelation was Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, reflected in the written word. Religion might be the response to that, but no matter how much praxis in accessing God was consecrated, Barth stood firmly against religion being treated as revelation. One wonders how he might have viewed the 'Toronto Blessing' in this light: a search for God (the key attributes being intimacy and power), or a revelation from God? Rahner, in a different way, recognised that although the distinction should be made, there was a grey area: God often does meet you in your religion, although your religion might not be his initiation. Personally, I am more attracted to this notion of Rahner's. I happen to think most revivalist phenomena are 'religion' (i.e. self-generated searches for God that then appear to be revelatory - Feuerbach called this projection, non-realists go further and call it wish-fulfilment). Nonetheless, I hold that God can be present even in this. This does not legitimate, let alone consecrate, all revivalist praxis. It simply recognises that God can use anything to speak and be present.

Yet more caution should be expressed at precisely this point. Revivalist religion is a very powerful movement in postmodernity. It is less textual-cognitive and more experiential-visual than its fundamentalist and Pentecostal parents. As a movement, it tends to take hold of peoples neuroses (whether implicit or explicit) and convert them into mania: it is a power transformer. The mania is obvious (look at any 'revivalist' meeting), but what might the neuroses be? Amongst the white middle-classes, where revivalism has done so well in Western Europe, it is probably a cluster of things. Freud and Marx would simply see it as being a general crutch, providing power for an increasingly disempowered social body. Noam Chomsky talks of the loss of identity and de-professionalisation of the middle classes, that has turned many to the certainties of revivalism, fundamentalism or old moral ideologies ('back to basics', etc). The stress on intimacy and power certainly provides an inoculation against alienation. The endemic worship of revivalism - primarily meeting God in the worship, which assumes an almost sacramental status - to the exclusion of creeds, liturgy and tradition, certainly seems to feed the hunger for this power and intimacy. Perhaps there is hint of pre-millennial tension (PMT) too? Empirical evidence is difficult to come by, but any analysis of the types of healings claimed in revivalist circles does tend to prove the point.

It is worth bearing in mind that most global disease and illness is caused by poverty. It is odd how 'signs and wonders' ministries keep away from war zones, casualty units or the millions dying through malnourishment. True, some Christians from revivalist churches are there, and are probably doing good work. But I have yet to hear of useful prophecies on the plains of Southern Sudan, or a starving child feeling blessed because it was slain in the Spirit. At this point, some readers will no doubt be tempted to recall 'remarkable stories of healing' from Africa or the like: but just think for a moment - how do world-views condition responses to illness? Have healing ministries made substantial differences to mortality rates in the Third World? The fact that some Third World cultures think demons exist to cause illness - and then find them and exorcise them - does not actually make them 'real'. Similarly, if Jesus believed in the Old Testament literally, his cosmology would presumably be pre-Copernican and his geography disposed to seeing the world as flat (Psalm 19). If the Bible is wrong about these things, why is it then right about medical

matters? Cause and effect relationships between prayer and healing, especially when grounded in literal readings of ancient texts, are almost impossible to sustain.

Thus, the sociologists of revivalism start to look about right at this point. If you look at any analysis of what is 'cured' at a revival meeting, a pattern soon begins to emerge. God, it seems, does not miraculously feed the billions who are malnourished, or help the millions of crippled children who are victims of war. So what does God cure? If the pages of one recent magazine devoted to healing are to be taken at face value, it seems that the Holy Spirit of the Home Counties does a good line in middle-class, stress-related problems: backaches, heart problems, phobias and other illnesses. Good news if you are bourgeois; shame about the Third World though.

Some more thoughts about poverty and illness from closer to home might further the reflective process here. Suppose I am an overweight smoker in my 50s and not a Christian. One night I am invited to attend a healing rally or conference. Uneasy at first, I become more impressed as the evening wears on: I am attracted by the sense of power, intimacy and immediacy. At the end of the meeting, I respond to a word of knowledge about chest pains, and am prayed for. As a result of this ministry I feel elated, and I return home feeling that God has met my needs and answered my prayers.

Now comes part two of the story. I live on a council estate in a high rise block. I am divorced. My kids joy-ride all day and don't go to school. I have been unemployed for two years. There is nothing to do where I live except stay in all day and watch telly. So, a week after God meeting me, I take up smoking again, and soon my chest pains are back. I return to the healing meeting for advice, but instead face a barrage of questions. Do I have enough faith? Have I prayed hard enough? Have I dabbled in the occult? Maybe I live in a stronghold of Satan? Perhaps my family is cursed? I am left with a sense that failing to be blessed is my fault, even though poverty is clearly the root cause. Of course, I do not wish to deny that Christians, along with others, often do good work amongst the poor and deprived. The question remains though: does an exclusively 'signs and wonders' ministry affect the causes of illness and disease? Can a starving child be helped by a word of knowledge, or by being 'slain in the Spirit'?

In my own case, there are no doubt many reasons why I felt better at the healing meeting. Maybe God was there. Maybe the charismatic atmosphere of the meeting induced me to believe in things I thought were possible. Maybe sociological, psychological and anthropological accounts of the event would help us understand what is going on. But what about the theological story?

The answer lies primarily with power. Most people in fundamentalist and revivalist churches misunderstand the nature of God. In their desire to beat back the forces of pluralism and secularisation, they appeal to a particular type of omnipotence which is in fact distorted. God is completely almighty, powerful, forceful there is nothing he cannot do. In contrast, the actual doctrine of the power of God specifies and practices limits. Jesus is powerful, but not all-powerful: John the Baptist is not healed, and the incarnation is a constraint as much as it is a disclosure of God's power. So, what are the dangers of over-stressing the doctrine of omnipotence, especially in relation to ministry? There seem to be several.

First, God does not usually deal with the world in terms of almighty power. The disclosure of power is limited, because God does not want to force or coerce people into submission. He wants a relationship: here revivalists may sometimes be correct in stressing intimacy, but wrong on power. Second, notions about the power and intimacy of God get confused or conflated with the leaders of the church - they become like 'power-brokers'. Congregations don't find it easy to distinguish between the power of God and the power of the Apostles or Pastors: 'if you disobey us or refuse this ministry, you are turning away from God'. Third, the place of weakness, suffering and freedom in the Christian life is neglected. Because God's power is made perfect in weakness, it is important not to get seduced by the latest wave, fashion or blessing currently doing the rounds. Fourth, an over-investment in God's omnipotence can lead to personal ego-omnipotence for believers: they start to believe that there is little they cannot do in relation to God's power. Healing the sick becomes ordinary, raising the dead and moving mountains the next target. Yet this can be deeply damaging; those with a different faith are made to feel it is 'less', that any failure is somehow their fault. Last, the stress on a certain kind of cosy intimacy with God may turn out not to be so great - it domesticates God, making him private property, even

tribal. A theology built on intimacy, the hope of a few miracles and some dramatic experiences is not universal - it is just personal. Thus, revivalism acts as an 'energy transformer' for many: it takes the neurosis of individuals, harnesses it in worship and teaching, and then transforms it into mania (perhaps in a 'clinic'), largely through ideological concepts rooted in power and intimacy. The revival is created and sustained by a 'grammar of possibility', but it often lacks any real dimension other than the language that creates the situation. Knox called this 'enthusiasm': you feel good because of the atmosphere, maybe even 'blessed'; but your social situation doesn't change, and neither do you, ultimately until the next revival.

James Hopewell, in his subtle analysis of churches (1987), suggests that the attraction of revivalism lies in the power, excitement and adventure it delivers to believers. The charisma of leaders, coupled with narratives of demons, angels and spirits, along with the promise of fulfilment and empowerment, creates an entertaining and enticing religious arena, almost like a spiritual theme park. It is a world of romance, in which Jesus, the powerful super-hero, is intimate and passionate with the subject, yet trouncing the opposition. Here is a religion where God sweeps you off your feet, and makes everything sublime: this is the socio-psychology of being 'slain' in the Spirit. It is a very appealing religion: a power-trip that brings its own risks and thrills to the believer.

So how are we to read the stories of healing so prevalent in contemporary charismatic renewal? One way forward is to recognise that a theological story is being told in each testimony: the power and intimacy of God are being witnessed to by the way in which encounters are described. But are they divine encounters, or is this just 'religion', a sort of post-modern shamanism? Ignatius of Loyola used to describe mystical experiences as 'uncaused consolations'; in other words, they were encounters with God that were not mediated through anything except the self. Typically, those in revivalism describe their experience in similar ways: uncaused consolations or consummations with the divine. However, such an approach ignores the 'field of agents' already established in charismatic contexts. The worship, testimonies, preaching and atmosphere all have a vital part to play in leading individuals and congregations heuristically to their own religious

experience. Sociologists and anthropologists know that religious consciousness is structured by human language and behaviour, not necessarily divine revelation. Furthermore, each person has their own set of agents within them that mediates personal religious experience to them. Again, the work of some neuroscientists and psychologists suggests that religious experience may be quite natural and anthropocentric, not necessarily given from above. That said, one must remember that Ignatius is probably wrong anyway: what religious experience is not channelled through an agent of some sort, which is then in turn open to some form of empirical investigation or alternative interpretation? In other words, phenomena such as the 'Toronto Blessing' undoubtedly do tell a religious story that some may or may not find helpful: yet sociological, psychological and anthropological accounts for the blessing are no less valid.

I do not, of course, want to argue that God is neither powerful or intimate. My concern is about the way omnipotence in revivalism is misunderstood. God acts in the world with restrained power, because the being of God is love and God is looking for equivocal and participatory relationships with his people. A disclosure of full omnipotence would amount to force, and God does not force us because he respects our freedom - including our freedom to reject him - too much. This dynamic is most chiefly expressed in the incarnation: God's conscious self-limitation in Jesus as a means of grace. Arising from this, prayer becomes a mutual process in which divine and human wills affect each other: it is not a 'divine laser beam' directed against passivity or opposition. Prayer helps you get through, not normally around, suffering. It is not 'magic'.

Conclusion

Following Barth and Rahner, and working with metaphors such as 'rain' or 'wave', I think it is helpful to draw some sort of distinction between religion and revelation. The kind of phenomena associated with the 'Toronto Blessing' seem to me to be a kind of search for God rather than a search from God: the middle-classes looking for certainty of God's presence, more power, and more intimacy. It is a projectionist vindication of what they crave for socially. The idea that it might be simply a revelation is certainly naïve, and possibly dangerous. It seems to me to be a primarily power-based ritual, which is then linked to God, that is enabling people; this has its value. Maybe it is a kind of postmodern

shamanism with a Christian gloss, where God is met only in certain kinds of worship, personal encounters, with its potential results. Who can tell?

Shamans, of course, constitute a very powerful class of religious practitioners. What those in revivalist ministry have to be sure of, is that they own the current absorption with power and experience that they have partly created. From there, there has to be some question as to what might constitute sound and lasting Christian or ecclesial identity in the future, apart from more of the same. The irony of revivalism and fundamentalism is that in its ascription to God of supreme, unlimited power, the power of the leaders or agents does not diminish, but grows. The more powerful God is, the more power the leaders have. In fundamentalism and revivalism it is not the Bible that rules, but the interpreter.

Revivalism, although useful and beneficial for some, has substantial limits on the contexts in which it can operate. It is a religion of power for the post-modern middle-classes. It offers meaning, choice, adventure and empowerment for participants, who are locked into a grammar of assent that helps them to believe that the things that they experience are actually of God. Yet there are real questions about the underlying ideology and theology here: are they distortions or reflections of orthodox Christianity? Of course, it is much more complex than that. But what do I know? Only that more waves are forecast, and that understanding where the rain comes from doesn't stop you getting wet.

Ten Toronto Teasers:

Ten questions designed to facilitate the process of 'testing the spirits'

1. What is the difference between a religious experience, and an ordinary experience you give religious significance to (e.g. tingling hands, 'hot spots', intuitive 'senses' or 'words' etc)?
2. Why do people who are 'slain in the Spirit' today fall on their backs, when in the Bible and in 'classic' revivals they tend to fall on their faces?
3. How do you stop the charisma, authority and power of God being merged with that of your pastor? Is there a way of

discerning the difference between what the Spirit might be saying and what a leader claims God is saying?

4. Can you disagree with a 'charismatically anointed' pastor over the interpretation of phenomena and still remain in the same church? Can you discern and own the difference between what the Bible says and what your pastor claims it says?
5. Is there a difference between the social types of people Jesus healed (e.g. outcasts, marginalised, non-Jewish, etc) and the target audience of today's healing ministries? If so, why?
6. Is there any proof that a healing ministry can make a difference to genetic deformities (thus transforming a created personal identity) or poverty-related illnesses (e.g. Rickets, caused by lack of vitamin A, leading to curved bones in children)? What sort of healing miracles cannot happen? (e.g. John the Baptist, post-decapitation etc)?
7. Can cause and effect relationships between prayer and its apparent results ever be proved? Is a 'miracle' a description of an event or an interpretation of it?
8. Is God ever revealed in powerlessness, weakness or vulnerability? What does the cross of Christ say about the negation of God's power?
9. Is the present interest in healing ministries a reflection of our cultural obsession with health, or a reaction to it? Is the 'Toronto Blessing' part of, or a revelation to, post-modern culture?
10. Does the formation of your religious consciousness by your church dictate your sense of revelation, or simply reflect what is true? How do you know this?

Revd Dr Martyn Percy is a Church of England minister and academic. He has been Dean of Christ Church, Oxford since 2014 and was previously Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford. He teaches in the Faculty of Theology & Religions, and is a Fellow of the Said Business School, University of Oxford. He is also Professor of Theological Education at King's College London and Professorial Research Fellow at Heythrop College, London. His theological outlook is rooted in his long-standing commitment to middle-way Anglicanism. His writings fall into three distinct-but-related groups: ecclesiology; contemporary Christianity, religious movements and sociological trends; and spiritual devotional writings.