

Pastoral Letter January 2012

Just another new year?

In one sense the change for one year to another (in our present case from 2011 to 2012) is fairly arbitrary. It is one day on a calendar. Yet it has a significance all of its own. Not least, it should prompt reflection over the past and consideration over the future. This is especially so for the Lord's people as regards the cause of God and truth. What of *this* new year? Is it just going to come and go? Or will it be characterised by marked blessing from God? In a word: *will God revive his work?*

Without any doubt, the work of God needs reviving (certainly in our own land). For a start, we have gone a long while without seeing one. And consider the evidence. Iniquity abounds. Landmarks are being removed. Morality declines. Evil is called good, and good is called evil. Restraints are absent – everyone does what seems right in their own eyes and pleases themselves. There is a lack of power attending the preaching of the Word of God and a lack of confidence in the unashamed preaching of the gospel. There is often a poor spiritual appetite among the people of God. True conviction of sin is lacking, as is zeal for the glory of God. Church and world often become barely distinguishable. The Saviour's presence is not duly prized. Appalling ignorance of the gospel is found. The Lord's Day is desecrated and his moral law is flouted. Heaven and hell are dismissed. God's past rich blessings to church and nation are forgotten. Where is the broken spirit and the contrite heart?

We thrill to read of the swift progress of the gospel in the time of the apostles. It is a joy to read accounts of revivals that have taken place in different parts of the world down the centuries. Indeed, one of the leading characteristics of a true revival is how God does so very much in (often) such a short time. Amazing advances happen. His church is both revived and reformed. Many press into the kingdom. The entire face of society is changed, even in respect of those who have not themselves been converted. According to one estimate, during the season of revival on both sides of the Atlantic in 1857-9, half a million souls joined the Protestant churches of America; 100,000 the churches in Ulster; and 50,000 the churches in Wales. One Northern Ireland minister testified: 'It were worth ten thousand ages in obscurity and reproach to be permitted to creep forth at the expiration of that time, and engage in the glorious work of the last six months of 1859'.

Yet with our joy is the heartache as we consider the low state of things at present. So what should we do? Grieve, certainly, that our God is so dishonoured and (we sometimes feel) so absent. But grieving on its own is not sufficient. One of the most significant ways in which the Lord proceeds to revive his work (*it is his work*) is by stirring (or, as one has put it, *exciting*) his people to pray. Prayer and revival are most mysteriously connected, in that while true revival is altogether the work of God (it cannot be 'got up' from below, it must be 'got down' from above), yet again and again prayer precedes revival and revival follows prayer.

Are we praying? Are we praying and not fainting? Are we praying and expecting? 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence' (Isaiah 64:1). 'Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?' (Psalm 85:6). 'You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth' (Psalm 80:1). 'Let us go at once to entreat the favour of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going' (Zechariah 8:21).