

A SURVEY OF PREVAILING CONDITIONS, AND A PROSPECTUS FOR OUR TIMES

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“It would be easy to show that at our present rate of progress the kingdoms of this world never could become the kingdom of our Lord. Indeed, many in the Church are giving up the idea of it except on the occasion of the advent of Christ, which, as it chimes in with our own idleness, is likely to be a popular doctrine.” (Spurgeon, ca. 1867)

It is rarely heard nowadays, but one or two still remember seasons of God’s reviving of true religion. Of course this prospect finds little sympathy among those who have parleyed the ‘revival’ of Whitefield’s preaching for the ‘revivalism’ of Finney’s ‘new measures.’ And even those few who have not jettisoned all hope of repair are insecure as to the means of recovery. Nevertheless, perverted theology cannot readily dismiss the witness of history. Consider the prevailing religious climate prior to three true awakenings of the past:

1. Conditions prior to Coming of Our Lord

The religious establishment was ruled by the ecclesiastical clerks and librarians of antiquity, trafficking in useless pedantry and endless citation, addicted to casuistry and pettifoggery; inter-mixed with pious-sounding expletives and self-applauding legal mechanics. “To this day it is hard to conceive the arid dreariness of the teaching of the scribes.” (Lenski)

Farrar described Judaism’s spirituality by declaring that it was

...at once erudite and foolish, at once contemptuous and mean; never passing a hair’s breadth beyond the carefully watched boundary of commentary and precedent; full of balanced inference, and orthodox hesitancy, and impossible literalism; intricate with legal pettiness and labyrinthine system; elevating mere memory above genius, and repetitions above originality.... It was not indeed wholly impossible to find here and there among the debris of it a noble thought; but it was occupied a thousandfold more with Levitical minutiae. (*Life of Paul*)

Or, as Spurgeon observed, “They were at home upon such rubbish, which would neither save a soul, nor slay a sin, nor suggest a virtue.”

2. Conditions Prior to the Reformation

Farrar (*History of Interpretation*) condemns the spiritual life of the Church prior to the Reformation as

...a sacerdotalism at once arrogant, intolerant, immoral, and idle, headed by a Pope who might be once a priest, an atheist, and a god.... It had poisoned the veins of all Christian life by substituting a visionary satisfaction for a true reconciliation, and a mechanical conformity for a holy life. Impunity was sold to the living and deliverance to the dead.... A priesthood, calling itself the Church, claimed absolute authority over men's bodies and souls, shut the Bible from the many, made it easier for the rich than the poor to escape damnation, and gave to the grace of God the aspect of capricious concession to the purchased intercessions of the Virgin Mary.... The name of faith was prostituted by being bestowed on the abject acceptance of unproved postulates; the name of morals was conferred upon a blind obedience to human traditions; the name of grace was confined to the mechanical operation of perverted sacraments; the name of orthodoxy to the passive repetition of traditional ignorance...the whole Papal system had, even on the confession of its own historians, sunk into a formalism and corruption which made it a curse to mankind.

Calvin was more to the point:

If Peter were now alive, they would tear him in pieces; they would stone Paul; and if Christ himself were still in the world, they would burn him with a slow fire." (*Synoptic Gospels*, III)

3. Conditions Prior to the Great Awakening

J. C. Ryle summed up the character of the age pointedly:

Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, or alarm. Both parties seemed at least agreed on one point, and that was to let the devil alone, and to do nothing for hearts and souls.... The celebrated lawyer, Blackstone, had the curiosity to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He says that he did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero.... When they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect they were generally preached to empty benches. (*Five Christian Leaders*)

Conclusion

Note that in each of the above cases the existing religious structures were not extinguished. Each continued and continues to flourish to this day! Again, Ryle:

Our Lord knew well that Pharisee-doctrines and Sadducee-doctrines would prove the two great diseases of His Church, until the end of the world. Their successions shall never fail. Their generation shall never become extinct. Their name may change, but their spirit will always remain. (*Expository Thoughts*)

Note also that in each instance the primary instrument of reform was not a sustained frontal attack or withering tirade against existing religious structures. Even the Reformation was primarily a revival of preaching!

God's people are warrantably appalled and distressed by a survey of the prevailing ecclesiastical atmosphere. But rare indeed are those occasions when it has not been so. And perhaps rather than being on the brink of the demise of the Church, we are on the brink of that which portends a revival of true religion. It has happened before, and always in the darkest hour imaginable. 📖