

In: De Mey / Pierce / Schuegraf
2012

ON THE ECUMENICAL AND SEPARATING POTENTIAL OF REVIVALS

A Case Study of the Millerite Movement

Stefan Höschele

1. On Revival Research

A review of studies on Christian revivals reveals a remarkable imbalance. While there have been countless analyses of specific revival movements in history,¹ one finds comparatively little systematic scholarly reflection on the subject. Themes common to various or all such movements, issues arising from their study for theology and sociology, evaluations of trends in revival research – all of these efforts are still in their infancy.² Given the significance of historic awakenings and of the revivalist tradition for many segments of Christianity and particularly for evangelism and mission movements arising out of these,³ there clearly is a need of increased academic attention to such phenomena.⁴

¹ Michael J. McClymond, *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America* [hereafter *ERRA*], vol. 2: *Primary Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), lists more than 5000 bibliographic entries on revivals.

² Michael J. McClymond, 'Introduction', in *ERRA*, vol. 1: A–Z, xxv.

³ Cf. Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994) and Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

⁴ Some scholars have differentiated the terms 'revival' and 'awakening'; in this paper both terms are used synonymously and refer to a particular period in time when large groups of Christians underwent intense religious experiences. This definition is similar to the one suggested by *ERRA*, vol. 1, s.v. 'Revivals and Revivalism, Definitions and Theories of', 366–370 (by Michael J. McClymond; see also *ibid.* for different conceptualizations). Such a relatively open definition (which also limits the study to the Christian context) is necessary to avoid theological strictures which tend to include some historical movements (e.g., those viewed as sufficiently 'Evangelical') while excluding others (e.g., Roman Catholic or Pentecostal revival movements).

This is true also for ecumenics. Some churches have their roots in particular awakenings; others were faced with new types of relations to other Christian denominations in the context of such movements. Many Christians redefined their confessional identity in the wake of interdenominational revivals. Surprisingly however, the connection between revivals and ecumenism has been debated relatively little so far.⁵ While this paper cannot remedy this situation, it focuses on a specific revival, the Millerite Movement of the mid-19th century, and explores both its ecumenical and its separatist potential. Thus it aims at contributing to a more general inquiry on the linkage between revivals and ecumenism that is yet to be undertaken.

2. The Millerite Revival

The premillennialist Millerite (or 'Second Advent') Movement of the late 1830s and 1840s has been given attention in revival research relatively late.⁶ However, a semi-independent line of studies, which devel-

oped especially since the 1980s,⁷ demonstrates that Miller and the movement he sparked must be viewed as part of the North American revival atmosphere common throughout the 19th century and beyond. Even if its millenarian dimension was much more pronounced than that of most other revivals of modernity, a review of the movement's main characteristics clearly shows its revival components. Prophetic criticism regarding the state of Christendom and of the denominations, an emphasis on God's kingdom, a trans-denominational outlook, the prominence of personal faith and spirituality, and the organization of associations were typical of both Millerites and other revival movements.⁸ Similarities were also found in the style of spirituality, biblicist preaching, and charismatic and ecstatic occurrences⁹ – only that the latter were somewhat more restrained¹⁰ than in the Second Great Awakening or similar periods of North American church history.

A short summary of the movement's development also shows its many similarities to other revivals. Beginning with the 1816 conver-

⁵ No academic study focusing on this connection exists as far as I can judge. The most comprehensive discussion of the topic is found in Peter Hocken, *The Strategy of the Spirit?* (Guildford: Eagle / Inter Publishing, 1996), a treatise written in popular style. *The Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al, (2nd edn., Geneva: WCC, 2002), has no article on 'revival(s)' or 'awakening(s)'. The fullest explicit discussion of any theme connected with revival in the *Ecumenical Review* is Noel Q. King, 'The East African Revival Movement and Evangelism', *The Ecumenical Review* 20/2 (April 1968): 159–162. The German *Ökumene-Lexikon*, ed. by Hanfried Krüger (Frankfurt a. M.: Lembeck, 1987), has an article ('Erweckungsbewegung', 334–335) which assesses revivals positively but surprisingly does not discuss their importance for ecumenism.

⁶ In his many popular books on revivals, James E. Orr mentions the Millerites only with reference to their calculations and apocalyptic excitement. William Gerald McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), viewed the Millerite Movement as the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening (according to McLoughlin: 1800–1830) and thus as a phenomenon of decline; this is partly due to his somewhat schematic outline of five 30-year periods as distinct revivals. The *ERRA* includes William Miller and other entries related to the movement such as 'Eschatology and Revivals', 'Ellen Gould White' and 'Seventh-Day Adventists'.

⁷ Today there are a dozen major academic studies on the movement and its various aspects; among the most important are David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800–1850*, AAR Studies in Religion 38 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985); Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (eds.), *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993 [1st edn. 1987]); George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993); and David L. Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁸ Ulrich Gäbler, 'Erweckung im europäischen und amerikanischen Protestantismus', *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 15 (1989): 24–39, lists these five aspects as characteristic features of revival movements.

⁹ While no predominant analysis of revival characteristics exists to date, McClymond's somewhat phenomenological listing is helpful in supplementing Gäbler's more theological description. (1) An 'intensified experience' in a communal event is the essential characteristic; the others do not necessarily occur in all revivals: (2) 'bodily manifestations', (3) 'extraordinary occurrences', (4) 'issues of spiritual discernment', (5) 'issues of lay and clerical authority', (6) 'conflict and division in church and community', and (7) 'the emergence of new ... organizations'. See Michael J. McClymond, 'Preface', in *ERRA*, vol. 1, xxii–xxiii. All of these characteristics are found in the Millerite revival to some extent.

¹⁰ Milton Lee Perry, *The Role of the Camp Meeting in Millerite Revivalism, 1842–1844* (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1994), 254–258.

sion of a Deist in the revivalist atmosphere of the period, this new Christian applied his rationalist common sense philosophy to an intensive study of the Bible in the following years. Although he did not preach his persuasion that the world's history would soon end through Christ's Second Coming until 1831, when he did so throughout the 1830s in some rural areas of New England, small local revivals accompanied his presentations. Only in 1840 did this personal initiative begin to develop into a movement through meetings in larger cities, conferences, magazine publications and a constantly increasing number of preachers coming from various Protestant denominations.

By 1842, one could speak of a large-scale movement. Millerites had begun to hold camp meetings and had expanded throughout the young American nation. Naturally, the years 1843 and 1844 became the climax. From the beginning, Miller had announced that he believed Jesus would return to the earth 'about A.D. 1843'. When he did not come at the end of the Jewish year (i.e., March 21, 1844), recalculations in August led the majority of Millerites to enthusiastically embrace October 22, 1844 (the Jewish Day of Atonement) as the date of the parousia. About 50,000 faithful prepared for the event.¹¹ Few revivals end as abruptly as this one, but the focus on a specific date made it inevitable for this great awakening to turn into a 'Great Disappointment'.

Beyond its end, this Advent revival diverged from earlier and later American awakenings in a few respects. Yet these should not be exaggerated, since many revivals in history included elements that contemporaries and later analysts viewed as theological or phenomenological peculiarities. The particular character of the Millerite Second Advent Movement can perhaps best be described by focusing on what it shared with mid-19th-century North American evangelicalism. The latter's main characteristics have been accurately summarized in four foci: 'new birth, Bible, mission, and millennium'.¹² Millerites appeared not to differ much, except for a more pronounced millenarian-

¹¹ More than half a million persons attended Millerite camp meetings from 1842 to 1844; see *ibid.* i.

¹² Ruth Alden Doan, 'Millerism and Evangelical Culture', in Numbers and Butler (eds.), *The Disappointed*, 118–138, here 118. Doan's essay provides an excellent analysis of the contextual embeddedness of the Advent movement.

ism. When examining the movement's thought more closely, however, a shift in emphasis is visible in each of the elements. The new birth experience, which was the centre of revival emphasis in the Second Great Awakening, lost its dominant role in favour of a literalist Bible reading. The latter resulted in an interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy that stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing mood of progress linked with postmillennialism. Due to this eschatological view, the Millerite concept of mission was not one of a global gospel proclamation but of an implied warning mainly to those who were already Christians.

3. An Interdenominational Movement

Miller had a novel reading of the scriptures, but it was firmly rooted in the revivalistic culture of the time. Thus his interpretations were at first welcomed by ministers of various denominations. His 800 lectures in the 1830s added new members to most of the churches he toured and stirred many of those who already belonged to Christian congregations to commit themselves more strongly to their faith, thus enhancing the conversionist element in the churches' missionary life. The logic behind Miller's supra-denominational venture was that Christ's impending Second Coming made confessional differences unimportant. Apocalypticism could produce an ecumenism of a peculiar kind.

The dynamics of separatism evolving later in the Millerite Advent revival have been described as a journey changing its adherents 'from ecumenists to come-outers'.¹³ Since the separatist part of this journey is well-documented, the following account emphasizes the early interdenominational nature of Millerism and highlights key aspects of the later phase. It all started with the conviction of a man – William Miller – that his concern would be welcomed by all (or at least by all Protestant) Christians. His initial acceptance by ministers of different deno-

¹³ Wayne Judd, 'From Ecumenists to Come-Outers: The Millerites 1831–1845', *Adventist Heritage* 11/1 (Spring 1984): 3–12; cf. David Tallmadge Arthur, *'Come out of Babylon': A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840–1865* (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1970). Both studies focus on Millerite separatist dynamics.

minations and the broad evangelical alliance¹⁴ forming into a movement in the early 1840s seemed to confirm his optimism. A biblical teaching found in the Apostolic Creed, so Miller and his followers felt, would certainly unite Jesus' followers from diverse backgrounds.

Thus wrote Joshua Vaughan Himes, second in importance in the movement, in his paper *Signs of the Times*,

Our fellow labourers are among the choicest of the faithful in Christ from among all denominations. We know no sect, or party as such, while we respect all (...) Our object is to revive and restore the ancient faith, to renew the ancient landmarks (...) We have no purpose to distract the churches with any new inventions, or get to ourselves a name by starting another sect among the followers of the Lamb. We neither condemn, nor rudely assail, others of a faith different from our own, nor dictate in matters of conscience for our brethren, nor seek to demolish their organizations; nor build new ones of our own (...) nor do we refuse any of these, or others of divers faith, whether Roman or Protestant, who receive and heartily embrace the doctrine of the Lord's coming in his kingdom.¹⁵

Clearly denominations were not to be viewed as negative *per se*.¹⁶ At the same time, for these Advent enthusiasts the eschatological horizon relativized the ecclesiastical establishment.

It was not only particular interpretations of prophecy which contributed to such sentiments. North American Christianity in the early and

mid-19th century was already pregnant with scepticism about denominational tradition. A major symptom of this atmosphere was the 'Christians' movement, today commonly called the Stone-Campbell or Restorationist Movement. It emphasized the necessity to lay all dogmas, creeds, 'sectarian' (i.e., denominational) organization and even denominational names aside and to gather as 'Christians' only.¹⁷ These Restorationists may be viewed as a proto-ecumenical movement, albeit with a radical slant. While Millerites were more moderate and pragmatic ecclesiologically because of their focus on the parousia, they inherited a significant amount of Restorationist reasoning and rhetoric:¹⁸ their publications are replete with criticism of 'sectarianism' and 'creeds' and, increasingly, of the religious establishment.¹⁹ With several of the leading Millerites, including Joshua Himes, coming from a 'Christians' background, this is not surprising. In fact, Miller's movement may well be considered as Restorationist with an increased apocalyptic content. Like the 'Christians', the revival was an ecumenical experiment, differing only in that its motivation was connected with an alternative eschatology.

On this basis, Advent revivalists managed to strike a delicate balance between emphasizing their particular concern and message to the churches and the need to cooperate *with* them. Thus an August 1841 action plan, originating in the movement's second general conference,

¹⁴ Of the leading Adventist lecturers, four were Baptists, six Methodists, five belonged to the 'Christians' movement, one each came from a Presbyterian and Episcopalian background, and two were Congregationalists; see Arthur, *Come out of Babylon*, 14. Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis, 1831-1844* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1994), 166, calculates that of 174 Millerite preachers ('lecturers') with an identifiable religious background, 44.3% were Methodists, 27% Baptists, 9% Congregationalists, 8% Christians, 7% Presbyterians, and the rest from other backgrounds.

¹⁵ 'Our Course', *Signs of the Times*, November 15, 1840, 126.

¹⁶ Although Millerites shared the 19th-century anti-Catholicism common in North America, it is noteworthy that the first Millerite general conference spoke respectfully of Roman Catholics with the same formulation as in the quotation above; see 'Circular: The Address of the Conference on the Second Advent of the Lord, Convened at Boston, Mass., October 14, 1840', *Signs of the Times*, November 1, 1840, 117.

¹⁷ Churches such as the Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ and Independent Christian Churches, with a total membership of more than 2.5 million, are today's heirs of this movement. Cf. Douglas A. Foster *et al* (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁸ The line of inheritance is visible also in the theological history of the largest offspring of the Millerite Movement, the Seventh-day Adventist Church; see Stefan Höschele, 'Constructions of Catholicity and Denominational Particularity: Key Stations in the Seventh-Day Adventist Doctrinal Journey', in Leo J. Koffeman (ed.), *Christliche Traditionen zwischen Katholizität und Partikularität / Christian Traditions between Catholicity and Particularity* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 2009), 131-147.

¹⁹ Miller formulated in his personal confession of faith, 'Art. XVI. I believe that before Christ comes in his glory, all sectarian principles will be shaken, and all the votaries of the several sects scattered to the four winds; and that none will be able to stand but those who are built on the word of God.' Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Himes, 1853), 79. At the same time, Miller remained a Baptist and never intended to leave his denomination.

advised adherents to form prayer meetings as well as Bible classes to study matters related to Christ's Second Coming, but stressed their duty of remaining within existing churches and working inside them rather than severing membership ties.²⁰ As far as its leaders were concerned, the revival was not to become divisive but a cause that would stir up all the churches.

At the same time, a critical distance from all organized denominations was inherent in Miller's reasoning. The assumption that true Christians were found in all churches and viewing the division of 'sects' as 'the last sign' before the parousia (as 'the scattering of the holy people'; Dan 12:7) were two sides of the same coin. Miller argued,

How are they to be scattered? I answer, (...) by dividing the people of God into parties, divisions and subdivision [sic]. (...) Yea, the sects are all divided now. Presbyterians are divided into Old and New School (...) Congregationalists are divided between Orthodox and Unitarian, old and new measures, Unionists, etc. Methodists are divided between Episcopal and Protestant. Baptist[s] are divided between old and new measures, Antimasons, Campbellites, open and close communion, etc. etc. Quakers are divided between Orthodox and Hicksites; and thus might we go on and name the divisions and subdivisions of all sects who have taken Christ for their captain.²¹

Thus in Miller's thinking the scandal of Christian disunity was a 'conclusive sign by which we may know we live on the eve of finishing the prophecies'.²²

4. Separatist Dynamics

As time developed, and especially as the oft-announced year 1843 approached, the revival's peculiar stress on Christ's *near* advent assumed increasing prominence. Some of the movement's leaders underlined the time factor; others resisted. Miller had somewhat naïvely

assumed that his proclamation would be received by every sincere believer, but as the distance to the awaited parousia shrank and the majority of Christians rejected the movement's reasoning, the very persuasion that Millerites believed to be the prime uniting factor among the denominations began to separate them from other Christians. The interdenominational revival was becoming disruptive; it began to follow the very 'sectarian' path that its protagonists denounced – even if they did not seem to realize this.

Conflicts with the church establishment stemmed in part from Himes's aggressive leadership from 1840 onward. Different from Miller, who had only responded to invitations, his younger associate opened activities in big towns even when local denominational leadership did not welcome the movement's presence. But opposition to the Adventists existed also because of the very content of the premillennial preaching and its concomitant calculations. Many of those who argued with Millerites did not think their beliefs to be heretical but odd. Especially the 'time' question, i.e., the assumption that the Second Coming could be determined mathematically, led quite understandably to much debate; after all, Jesus himself had made a statement in this regard (Matt 24:36). Although the main Millerite leaders themselves were divided on the time issue,²³ it assumed increasing importance as the year 1843 approached.

The development of what was perceived as a distinct Adventist identity was a gradual but swift process, which took place within merely four years. Although any intention of forming an organized body of believers had been denied at the outset, the increasing focus on a specific year (and, later, a specific date) and the experiences connected with the revival led to a situation which implied for some a point of no return. Even in the beginning Millerites had not been representative of the general Christian population; stout evangelicals had been strongest among them.²⁴ The interdenominational identity of the movement was only one face of the innovative and restorationist sphere connected with their millennial views. This is also visible in

²⁰ Circular, *Signs of the Times*, August 2, 1841, 70.

²¹ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, about the Year 1843* (Boston: Himes, 1842), 113.

²² *Ibid.* 112.

²³ Arthur, *Come out of Babylon*, 29.

²⁴ These were mainly the Methodists, Baptists and 'Christians' at the time; other denominations such as the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers etc. were clearly a minority. Cf. footnote 14.

the fact that many of the Advent revival's protagonists came from the ranks of vigorous reformers and anti-slavery activists. The 'historical affinity' of 'abolitionists and temperance advocates with the Adventist cause'²⁵ observed by various interpreters of the movement implied that the revival carried in itself a tremendous critical potential and a degree of radicalism that could not be easily tamed. Thus the fact that earlier evangelistic cooperation with the churches could transmute into a rejection of ecclesiastical authorities is not surprising.

As in other revivalist movements, distance from the churches developed in little steps. The fact that the 1841 action plan exhorted believers to remain in their churches also indicates that some must have already considered alternatives. By 1842, Second Advent Associations had been created in the largest cities, New York and Philadelphia, to organize worship services on Sunday afternoons. Similar groups were formed in 1843 in other larger towns. Through initiating newspapers, conferences, camp meetings, prayer groups, and these associations, the movement grew into an increasingly organized network.²⁶

The next phase began in 1843, when a growing number of Miller's followers were excommunicated by their respective churches.²⁷ In this critical phase, the earlier irenic attitude of Miller and his moderate associates in leadership gave way to diverging voices. An increasing number of churches turned against the Millerite revival in a seemingly irrevocable manner. The revivalists responded in a fourfold way in their reasoning about those who continued to belong to any denomination: (1) Some, like Miller himself, urged the Advent believers to stay in their churches; (2) others declared denominational membership a matter of individual conscience; (3) some advised withdrawal for

²⁵ Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 207; cf. also Ronald Graybill, 'The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection', in Numbers and Butler, *The Disappointed*, 139–152. The logic behind the affinity was that many reformers considered Jesus' return as the fulfillment of all reform endeavours.

²⁶ Arthur, *Come out of Babylon*, 27–28.

²⁷ For a detailed account of such a case, see Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), 43–53.

practical reasons; and (4) the most radical leaders insisted that leaving the churches had now become a divine necessity.²⁸

Among the radicals, the outstanding figure was Charles Fitch, a prominent Millerite preacher of Presbyterian origin. His sermon 'Come out of Her, My People',²⁹ preached and published in the summer of 1843, identified all of Protestantism with 'Babylon' and 'Anti-christ' together with Roman Catholicism. Fitch argued that the churches were all 'opposed to the personal reign of Christ'.³⁰ Employing some of the contemporary restorationist rhetoric, he opposed the proliferation of 'sects' and creeds. Moreover, he argued that the acceptance of slavery and the toleration of Christians' accumulating wealth discredited all denominations. While not all Millerites followed Fitch's reasoning, Himes apparently did (he published his sermon as a booklet), and by 1844 the radicals had the movement in their hands. Miller's more ecumenical stance was a thing of the past.

Revival movements face a dilemma: if they merely reinforce views or practices already common in a religious context, they tend to be short-lived or of little impact. A radical departure from inherited religion, by way of contrast, does not lead to revival but to cult formation (as in the case of Mormons, who had started a little earlier but were also inspired by restorationist ideas) or to an addition to the sectarian variety in what has been called the 'religious economy' of a given society.³¹

The Millerites, like revivalists in other eras, had tried to steer a middle course between these two options. As Whitney Cross has observed, their teaching was 'nearest to strict orthodoxy of all the creations of the period'; Miller's followers were not different from the mainstream because of a 'radical change from traditional notions' but because of their 'intensified adherence to them.' Cross even maintains that '[t]heir doctrine was the logical absolute of fundamentalist ortho-

²⁸ Arthur, *Come out of Babylon*, 48–80.

²⁹ Charles Fitch, *Come Out of Her, My People* (Rochester, NY: J.V. Himes, 1843).

³⁰ *Ibid.* 10 (all in capitals in the original).

³¹ Cf., e.g., Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

doxy.³² This conclusion may be somewhat overstated, but it is true that Millerites were not as strange as some later interpreters have made them.³³ In fact, it was precisely the North American context where certain parameters were largely agreed upon in the mid-19th century – a literalist Biblicism, popularized common sense philosophy,³⁴ and a revivalist religious culture – that could produce the reasoning of Miller and his movement. Thus by way of a differing interpretation of prophecy, the (optimistic, postmillennialist) logic of the prevailing religious culture was suddenly questioned. The fact that this ultimately led the majority to put in question the very orthodoxy of Miller's adherents³⁵ shows that an interdenominational revival movement can easily become sectarian the moment it is rejected by its environment. There is only a fine line between 'ecumenical' revivalism and separatism.

It is hard to know whether the leaders in the established churches had an alternative to viewing the Advent movement's teachings as either odd or dangerous. Miller and his associates re-interpreted the millennium, one of the core elements of contemporary evangelical culture, in a divergent manner, thus reconfiguring the entire 'new birth, Bible, mission, and millennium' quadrilateral. This may not be viewed as a major innovation; the really contentious element was the date-setting, which not all Millerites adopted. However, in connection with the calculation of the time of the parousia, premillennialism touched the centre of the evangelicals' identity. The revival had become a rival.

³² Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950), 320. Cross's history is the classic study on the region where the Millerites became very strong in 1843 to 1844; he also discusses the Finney Revival, Mormons, Shakers, etc.

³³ Clara Endicott Sears, *Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), focuses on individuals' reminiscences of oddities happening in 1843–1844.

³⁴ Cf. Tommy L. Faris, *William Miller: A Common Sense Life* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2007).

³⁵ Cf. Ruth A. Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism and American Culture* (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1984).

5. The Variety of Effects

When the parousia did not take place in October 1844, the movement continued but soon disintegrated. Its envisioned climax, which was to be marked by the end of the world's history, came to mark the end of the revival's second distinct phase. The ensuing steps leading to the formation of several new denominations in a third phase do not need to be narrated here;³⁶ the following is an attempt at understanding the *variety* of the revival's effects. These effects can be seen in three realms: (i) The immediate environment, i.e., North American Christianity and evangelicalism at large; (ii) successor movements; (iii) expansionist dynamics beyond the original environment.

(i) As far as the North American evangelical scene is concerned, it is clear that the Advent movement modified it. Ruth Doan correctly observes that the revival came at a time of change in North American Protestantism in which Millerites further developed an older paradigm while others 'realigned' the evangelical quadrilateral in the direction of the later 'liberal' Protestantism.³⁷ Thus at any rate the movement was a ferment in a religious culture that was already changing. Adopting Millerite reasoning, however, was not an all-or-nothing choice, even if (1) some Millerites abandoned the Christian faith after the 'Great Disappointment' and (2) others quietly concluded or publicly declared the movement to have been mistaken, remaining in or returning to the very denominations where they had come from. (3) Others decided the same regarding church membership but continued to hold Millerite ideas and merged them with their own theological heritage.

Although many of Miller's specific assertions would bear a taboo label for some time to come, (4) premillennialism subsisted as a theological option in a religious culture which was still predominantly postmillennial in orientation. Stripped of the movement's calculating reflex, premillennial ideas would later gain prominence in evangelical thinking through the dispensationalist school of interpretation and rose to new fame in the Pentecostal movement two generations later, thus

³⁶ Several accounts exist; see, e.g., Arthur, *Come out of Babylon*, 84–371, for the 'moderate' Millerites and Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 295–325, for the genesis of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

³⁷ Doan, 'Millerism and Evangelical Culture'; quotes on p. 135.

influencing a significant portion of global Christianity in the 20th and 21st centuries.³⁸

(ii) Successor movements to the Millerite revival had several options to deal with the evident failure of its focus on a particular time of Jesus' return: *relativizing*, *repeating*, *transforming* or *theologizing*. Although the Millerite root experience was thus different from more 'successful' revivals, which may enable adherents to look back into a golden era more easily, similar dynamics occur in such movements as well.

(5) Many of the moderate leaders in the revival *relativized* the date-setting and the excitement of 1844, thus stripping Millerism of what they viewed as extremes. By forming the 'Evangelical Adventist' denomination, which they considered as being in direct continuity with the movement, the revival was thus giving way to routinization among the Millerite 'conservatives'.³⁹

(6) The *repetition* of the movement's prime emphasis in its last year, a stress on Christ's soon return connected with a particular time founded on a computation of prophetic periods, remained a temptation only for a minority after both spring and autumn 1844 had proved to be incorrect interpretations. However, the fascination with the possibility of finding out details of God's final intervention in the world by way of arithmetics found new advocates in a notable later movement. Its leader was influenced by former Millerites who had perpetuated time speculations: Charles Taze Russell, who initiated the Bible Student movement, later to become the Jehovah's Witnesses.⁴⁰

(7) A *transformation* of emphasis is best visible in a second large group of Miller's followers who later formed the Advent Christian Church. One addition to their firm convictions about the near parousia that became a rallying point was the doctrine of conditional immortal-

ity, i.e. 'soul sleep' and annihilationism. In the eyes of many, this teaching justified the formation of an independent movement.⁴¹

(8) The circumstances in which Millerites found themselves in and immediately after late 1844 were somewhat chaotic. Many had sold all or most of their property and spent their possessions for 'the cause' and for the poor. A common denominator of the movement, a definite date for the parousia, did not exist anymore. With such conditions prevailing, some Millerites chose experimentation, underwent charismatic experiences, looked for 'new light' from the scriptures, and declared God's 'door of mercy' to be shut.⁴² It is from this turmoil-like environment that an eighth trail of revival effects arose: a *theologizing* of the path of the Advent movement by including the 'Great Disappointment' of 1844 in an interpretation of God's history with his people.⁴³ In the concomitant climate of theological innovation, one group adopted the Saturday Sabbath in addition to conditional immortality and later developed a theology of health. It ultimately grew into the largest body resulting from the revival: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While this denomination is the best known heir of the Millerite revival, it underwent a development significantly beyond its main emphasis.

(iii) Expansion of the revival's effects beyond the original North American context happened in two waves. (9) The revival itself spread to Great Britain mainly through publications and an 1845 trip by Himes. It made a quick but limited impact there, and by the late 1840s, numbers of adherents were dwindling.⁴⁴

⁴¹ This denomination exists until today and has a little more than 25,000 members.

⁴² Cf. Ingemar Lindén, *1844 and the Shut Door Problem*, *Studia Historico-Ecclesiastica Upsaliensia* 35 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982).

⁴³ Christ's ministry as High Priest in a heavenly sanctuary was described as entering another phase, in which he holds a pre-advent ('investigative') judgment. On later developments of this teaching see Roy Adams, *The Sanctuary Doctrine: Three Approaches in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981).

⁴⁴ Cf. Hugh I. Dunton, *The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860* (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1984). It is somewhat surprising that the Millerites, who heralded an event of global importance, were not more interested in the world beyond the United States, even if they had sent their literature to a large number of Protestant mission stations worldwide. On attempts at an international distribution of Millerite literature and the mission con-

³⁸ Cf. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979).

³⁹ Evangelical Adventists counted little more than 1000 in the late 19th century and disappeared in the following years; see Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 329.

⁴⁰ On the Millerite-Jehovah's Witnesses connection, see M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* (2nd edn., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 14-20.

(10) The revival's strongest if indirect impact would happen only decades after its nadir climax. Ironically, it was the group originally developing from 'shut door' anti-mission persuasions, the Seventh-day Adventists, who ultimately mutated into an international missionary movement and became established in more than 200 nations.⁴⁵

6. Revivals and Ecumenism

The Millerite Movement, like other revivals, involved rather complex dynamics. Its various effects partly reflect the many influences that had contributed to its emergence. They can also be viewed as a spectrum of options that any revival movement faces as it develops and diversifies.⁴⁶

As the revival principle – periods of Spirit outpouring or growing religious intensity – is firmly engrained in the nature of Christianity,⁴⁷ its contribution to the ecumenical task should not be overlooked. While awakenings often produce some type of grassroots ecumenism rather than well-structured ecumenical organizations, such a 'networking' approach to the relations between the churches may assume increasing importance in an epoch that is critical of institutionalized enterprises of all kinds.⁴⁸

cepts connected with it, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-Day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 53–55.

⁴⁵ For the evolution of further Seventh-day Adventist mission theology, see Stefan Hörschle, *From the End of the World to the Ends of the Earth: The Development of Seventh-Day Adventist Missiology* (Numberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2004).

⁴⁶ A shorter list of options is provided by Hollenweger, who analyses possible paths of those belonging to the Charismatic Movement in their relationship to established denominations: (1) a double loyalty, denominational and ecumenical; (2) becoming a conservative force inside a denomination; (3) joining existing Pentecostal denominations; (4) establishing separate congregations. See Walter J. Hollenweger, *Charismatisch-pfingstliches Christentum: Herkunft, Situation, ökumenische Chancen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 398.

⁴⁷ McClymond, 'Preface', xx–xxii, appropriately calls revival 'a Christian tradition'.

⁴⁸ Cf. the reasoning of Henk Witte, 'From System into Networking: The Social Shape of Ecumenism in the 21st Century', *Exchange* 34/4 (2005): 386–396, particularly 394–395.

There have been, and continue to be, different types of revivals: some mainly concerned with a renewal of spirituality, others like the Millerites emphasizing particular theological themes; some conversionist, others stressing ethical consequences of the Christian faith. All of these foci can form the basis of an inclusiveness that transcends traditional boundaries of doctrine or organization. At the same time, this new inclusiveness tends to exclude those who do not agree with the intensified stress on a novel or particular persuasion or practice. Almost any teaching or way of living Christianity can become disruptive to the ecclesiastical establishment; the fact that Miller did not view his interpretation of the 'blessed hope' as bearing divisive potential illustrates what some may view as a tragic dimension of Christian awakenings.

The revival tradition thus demonstrates how inclusiveness and divisiveness are often two sides of the same coin,⁴⁹ a very basic socio-religious reality and indeed part of the *conditio humana*. Yet instead of viewing all renewal and revival movements as merely bearing the seed of separation in itself,⁵⁰ the potential of revivals must be recognized. Beyond an evidently novel mode of connecting Christians of different and sometimes opposing backgrounds, one main contribution of awakenings is to fuel mission and diaconical movements. Translating revival intensity into the readiness to serve Christ in areas and ways beyond the known, such revival movements have functioned as key factors in the spread of the gospel worldwide and in social change.⁵¹

⁴⁹ The *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (2nd edn.), s.v. 'Renewal', 980, observes in the same vein, 'The growth of church base communities, of house churches and of charismatic groups may be ways of bringing renewal to church congregations but may also become stumbling blocks in the way to fuller ecumenism.'

⁵⁰ Ion Bria criticizes the revivalist tradition from an Orthodox point of view: 'The Orthodox church will agree that unity and renewal belong together, but all renewal, reforms and revival movements succeeded in dividing the faithful and creating "new churches". Renewal which ends in schism is not credible!' ('A Fresh Breath of Spirituality', *Ecumenical Review* 44/4 [October 1992]: 431).

⁵¹ On the revival-mission connection, see footnote 3; on revival and social reform, cf. the classic by Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1965 [1st ed. 1957]).

Beyond the revivalistic dynamics of enhancing conversion and cross-cultural mission, the particular if indirect contribution of the Advent revival to mission theology is not insignificant. Christian mission is firmly embedded in an eschatological framework. In a predominantly postmillennial context, which viewed missionary projects as part of human progress, the Millerite revival provided a challenge to the common mode of proclaiming an overly optimistic gospel. Moreover, while the Millerite Movement was doomed to break apart, one of its successor movements, the Seventh-day Adventists, translated the revivalist and apocalyptic perspective on the Christian existence into a new concept of mission. Here the impulse that relativized denominational structures and church tradition led to a thoroughly missiological ecclesiology, which considered 'church' to be almost identical with mission.⁵² While revivals may appear to have a tendency towards a weak ecclesiology, the ecclesiological redefinition resulting from them – viewing the church as essentially being a vehicle of God's mission – bears significant potential for alternative approaches to both ecumenism and the theology of mission.

At the same time, the fact that revivals regularly lead to organizational splits and produce new denominations even if this was not intended by revival leaders must lead to a reflection on the dynamics that cause such schisms. While they may not be avoidable in a world of sin, the ecumenical double nature of revivals implies the need of both a deeper understanding and a healing of memories on the side of those whose movements or organizations have been involved in such histories.

Several insights may help in such a process. One is the necessity of a fundamental recognition of revivals as an approach to the ecumenical character of the Christian faith. Where this approach is not appreciated, revivals easily turn into protest movements that create competitive bodies. Revivals should be viewed as an expression of the crucial

⁵² This is the essence of Seventh-day Adventist 'remnant' ecclesiology; cf. the denomination's 'Fundamental Belief' no. 13, 'The Remnant and Its Mission': *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (2nd edn., Silver Spring: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 181.

Christian quest for unity based on authentic experience and firm convictions.

Connected with this is a second concern. How much diversity is tolerated in established Christian groups is a delicate issue. Especially in revival contexts the question of where heresy starts and where heteropraxis turns into unacceptable features is a sensitive one. The Millerite story elucidates this very point, that what some viewed as 'present truth' was dismissed by others as oddities but was also rejected in some congregations as heterodox. A careful treatment of theologoumena is, therefore, a lesson to be derived from, and reappearing in the assessment of most revivals.⁵³

Finally, denominations originating from interdenominational revivals would do well to remember their roots and thus to rethink interpretations of their origin. This memory may be long forgotten among some, but doing so will help them see relations to other churches in the light of a history in which Christian unity was often a crucial aspect of a revival movement.

⁵³ In this context, it is also vital to consider the reasoning of *anti*-revivalists; it is documented well in James D. Bratt (ed.), *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau Nr. 91



**Mission und Einheit –
Gemeinsames Zeugnis getrennter Kirchen?**

Tagungsbericht der 16. Wissenschaftlichen
Konsultation der Societas Oecumenica

**Mission and Unity:
Common Witness of Separated Churches?**

Proceedings of the 16th Academic Consultation
of the Societas Oecumenica

Ed. by
Peter De Mey / Andrew Pierce / Oliver Schuegraf



EVANGELISCHE VERLAGSANSTALT
Leipzig

2012