Critically analyse three of the ways theological messages were communicated during the 1904-6 Religious revival in Wales and explain what lessons churches today could learn from those characteristics and the response to them.

In this essay, the following characteristics of the revival will be analysed:

a. The importance and form of preaching;
b. The participation of the congregation during a "meeting";
c. The role of "direct witnessing" by those in the revival outside the setting of a formal meeting.

It has been well argued that these serve as abstract conceptual markers only and that they are better viewed as part of a unity, the "orality" of the revival[1]. Briefly, "orality" is defined as "interaction with the world by means of the spoken word" and contrasts with "conceptuality" which is similarly defined as "interacting with the world by means of ideas and concepts". This essay examines this relationship with respect to these characteristics.

The religious revival in Wales was extraordinary. Wales was in a culturally unique position within Britain in the sense that the nation *as a whole* was culturally and spiritually anchored to a primitive, Celtic and Protestant[2] Christianity:

[1] Owen J. A. (1997), 'A Study of Orality and Conceptuality during the Welsh Religious revival, 1904-6', PhD Birmingham University, pp116-119, 124, 127, 140, 274-279.

[2] Elizabeth I had actively supported the consolidation of Reformation doctrines within Celtic regions of the realm as a stronghold against Roman Catholicism. The Celtic church had maintained its theological and political independence from Rome.

> "At the beginning of the twentieth century Wales was remarkable among the nations of Europe for its religiousity…to be a Welshman was to be a Christian…."[3]

Consequently, the position and place of the preacher and their preaching was historically an important one within the Welsh culture: "The Welsh evangelicals placed great emphasis on preaching. For them preaching the Gospel was the only way to awaken the Church from its apathy"[4]. Consequently, it is an oversimplification to assert, as Gibbard shows[5], that the revival focussed on "[Sankey and Moody] entertainment evangelism"[6]; or neglected the preaching of the Word; or even that there were two revivals, one "emotional" centred in the chapel and one "teaching" centred in the churches[7]. For example, it is noted in these first-hand testimonies "one of the characteristics of the Revival in North Wales was the adherence to the preached word"[8]; Penar Griffiths (Swansea) commented 'the Bible is resorted to more than ever'; a visitor to the meetings could say, 'I have not known a deeper interest in anything than in the reading of the Scriptures.'[9]

What *did* change was the *way* the fundamentals of faith expressed by the Evangelical Accord of the Welsh churches were communicated. The hour-long "sermon" of classical expositional preaching with its doctrinal theological "content"

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[3] Tudur-Jones, R. (2004), *Faith and the crisis of a nation: Wales 1890-1914*, trans. Jones S. P., Pope R. ed., Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pxiii, p4.

[4] Evans, Eifion E. (1952), *Llan*, 31 Oct 1952 in Tudur-Jones (2004), p22.

[5] Gibbard, N. (2005), *Fire on the Altar (A History and evaluation of the 1904-5 Welsh Revival)*, Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, p140ff.

[6] Gibbard (2005), p163.

[7] Kay, W. (2000), *Pentecostals in* Britain, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, p191

[8] Gibbard (2005), p151.

[9] Gibbard (2005), p152.

and the mandatory "credal assent"[10] favoured by Welsh Nonconformism were characteristically absent. For example, of Evan Roberts[11] who became *the* symbol of the revival it is said:

> "[he] was no traditional Welsh preacher... [his] more conversational style and the fact that he preached mainly in Welsh… in the Revival generally [his] preaching was inspirational. It depended greatly on narrative and illustration." [12]

In that the revival preaching was predominantly in Welsh is often cited as "reactive" to the undermining of the traditional culture, certainties and relationships as English sponsored industrialisation of the valleys took hold:

> "[Faith's] supremacy in the life of the people was being challenged, emotionalism was being thrown out for learning…the revival was a reaction to a new set of circumstances, which was drawing the people of Wales from their old allegiance."[13]

However, this case is easily and oft overstated and the attempt to explain the "revival" *solely* in these sociological terms as a new emergent nationalism, a response to the cultural crisis[14] is soon shown to be inadequate as one considers the practice of the revival. As one of the key symbols of the revival, Evan Roberts' own explanation of the use of Welsh (beyond the obvious fact that it was his first

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[10] Owen (1997), p290.

[11] It is well established that the revival both predates and postdates his ministry. Roberts himself received his "call" at a revival meeting and there was revival at places he never visited. However, he does appear to have had a profound influence on and was held in great respect by many of the ministers involved in the revival and it is reasonable to use him as a representative example.

[12] Gibbard (2005), p151.

[13] Rees D. B. (1975), *Chapels in the valley (A Study in the sociology of Welsh Nonconformity)*, The Ffynnon Press, p153.

[14] Tudur-Jones (2005), p354. He describes this approach in the critical work of Frusac (anthropological) and Bois (psychological) as first-hand observer's and analysts of the revival in the following years.

language[15]) and his only occasional use of English was 'at the direct instigation of the Spirit'. He would preach in English if the Spirit prompted him to and there are recorded instances of him doing so[16].

Nevertheless, the sociological factor is significant. The author believes that a good case *can* be made that it was a *Celtic* revival amongst the *Celtic* peoples. Gibbard is almost alone in indicating the revival was found amongst the Celtic diasporas in the English cities, in Scotland, Ireland as well as where the scholarly and apocryphal focus has been historically centred, in Wales:

> "People from Glasgow thronged to the Wales during the end of 1904 and the beginning of 1905…When J.G. Govan heard of the Revival in Wales, he read all the accounts available to him and eventually journeyed there to experience it for himself….Like other visitors, he marvelled at the singing, and at the fact that Calvary was central in all aspects of worship…On one occasion, the Scotsmen and the Welsh came together for prayer and praise, and received the help of the Glasgow Townhead Glory Band."[17] [emphasis mine]

Another distinctive of the revival was its "democratic"[18] nature:

> "The Welsh Revival was a remarkable example of popular religion; it came from the people, the ordinary folk of the mining valleys and the villages of the countryside; their emotions and religious aspirations shaped it…The leadership

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[15] As noted by Owen (1997), p263.

[16] For example, the meeting led by Roberts almost wholly in English at Dowlais, Glamorgan, in January 1905 and another partly in English at Neath (D C Davies in *Y Goleuad*, 03/02/05, pp5-6).

[17] Gibbard, N. (2005), *Fire on the Altar (A History and evaluation of the 1904-5 Welsh Revival)*, Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, pp115-119.

[18] Many spiritual people would prefer to use a non-politically loaded phrase such as "participators rather than spectators" (my pastor) or "omniparticpatory" (Owen) but the idea of a congregationally centred living community of faith rather than a sterile institutional one with a ministerial hierarchy which governs the people is the essential "democratic" feature.

> passed into the hands of the young people...women became extremely prominent"[19]

It appears that rather than a single "sermon" the Word was distributed throughout the meeting, owned in a democratic fashion by all present:

> "…Roberts and others, would ask for Scriptures to be recited and there would be a willing response. Prayers were full of Scripture. Elfed heard someone in Rhos reciting Isaiah 49 in his prayer….the converts…read the Bible with a new insight;"[20]

It is well noted that Evan Roberts and other "ministers" of the revival may have taken no part in a meeting for its first two hours, then given a short address, invited testimonies, would encourage the congregation to spontaneously pray or sing even to "interrupt" their "address" and then simply leave the meeting with a departing 'obey the Spirit'. A visiting missionary commented on the lack of formal leadership but nevertheless commended the great spirituality:

> "She noticed that everyone had liberty to speak, sing or pray, and that occasionally a short address was given….nothing could account for the nature of the services: not the preacher, nor the singing, nor the novelty of the situation. It was, rather, a 'God-sent hunger after spiritual things."[21]

J Vrynwy Morgan even lamented this "disrespect" for the ministry and the religious establishment[22] but it is this same democratic characteristic that was so important to its supporters and inspirational to those who were to be called "children" of the

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[19] Rees (1975), p154.

[20] Gibbard (2005), p151.

[21] Gibbard (2005), p51.

[22] Morgan, V (1909), *The Welsh Religious Revival: A Retrospect and Criticism*, London: Chapman and Hall, p189.

Revival. Early modern Pentecostals such as the Jeffrey's brothers and Mr D.P. Williams[23] directly adopted this congregational model of ministry from the Revival. In short, the Church was not to be a *ministerially led* hierarchy but a living expression of the *Body* of Jesus Christ on the earth. As a living organism in itself, it *naturally* expressed itself through the witness of its *people*:

> "..small children spontaneously formed processions, held meetings and evangelised….people would go canvassing from house to house and form processions which visited public houses and clubs to persuade people to attend services."[24]

In Seth Joshua's words a "holy disorder" seemed to come to characterise the once rigid program of the Nonconformist chapel or liturgy of the High Church:

> "At the end of the Seiat at Libanus…the young people insisted on having their own prayer meeting. 'It was the most terrible meeting' that the minister…had been present at. 'There was praying, and failing to pray, crying and tears…an unordered spontaneity. The young people at Trecynon visted every public house in the area, and preached outside to the willing listeners…The emphasis lay on the personal testimony, on their emotional experience."[25]

It is key to the overall interpretation of the revival theology here that this "emphasis on the personal testimony…on their emotional experience" is very different from there being a lack of theological *content* in the practice of the revival. This is because, as alluded to at the start of the essay, the revival fits well the taxonomy of orality developed by Ong[26] in contrast to the conceptuality of Western

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[23] Associated with the now worldwide Elim Foursquare, Assemblies of God and Apostolic churches.

[24] Tudur-Jones (2004), p358.

[25] Rees (1975), p155.

[26] Ong W. J. (2007), *Orality and Literacy*, first published Methuen 1982, London: Routledge, pp36-57.

thinking after Plato[27]. Ong develops the thesis that the process of becoming literate, of "interiorizing writing"[28] restructures consciousness in a fundamental way, creating "a tremendous difference in thought processes"[29] and hence the mode of communication.

This is of primary importance, as the revival was, above all else, concerned with *communicating* the concrete reality of what it meant to be a Christian. Roberts' theological distinctives are recorded remarkably simply *in writing* as being obedience to the Spirit and four simple formulaic "conditions". Consequently, they are frequently viewed as being radical rejections of the rational interpretation of faith in terms of assent to creeds and doctrines in favour of a non-doctrinal, mystical form of Christianity:

> "visions…launched him on his career as a Revivalist…The evidence that has been preserved suggests that no 'mainstream' Revivalist previous to Roberts ever alleged such a 'practical' mysticism in such a public way"[30]

However, this is to misapply an analytic, conceptual model to evaluate the oral content of what Roberts would *mean* when *he spoke* those "simple" statements. Ong astutely recognises that "orality" can be just as sophisticated and powerful in organising one's relation to the world as conceptuality:

> "…we [must] not imagine that orally based thought is 'prelogical' or 'illogical' in any simplistic sense…oral cultures <u>can</u> produce amazingly complex and

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[27] Ong (2007), pp23-24, 46. Plato famously banishes poets from his republic although he expressed serious doubts himself about the ability of writing to communicate ideas.

[28] Ong (2007), p57.

[29] Ong (2007), p51.

[30] Owen (1997), p287.

> intelligent and beautiful organisations of thought and experience."[31] [my emphasis]

His "simple" statements are suddenly no longer "simple" but loaded with content as an expression of Christian theological truth owned by the community. The organic, sociological corollary of communally defined knowledge and meaning is posited in Berger's seminal analysis of "social reality". Knowledge is shared by the *spoken* word:

> "Language…may be defined..as a system of vocal signs...language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations…"[32]

For the purposes here, this applies equally to spiritual reality created with language as it does the sociological corollary of community. Indeed, for the believer, the spiritual and the concrete perfectly correlate as the "Kingdom of (from) Heaven"[33] and the "Kingdom of God". By means of the testimony, the song, the exhortation, the laughter and the tears, the theologically abstract becomes living Word, intangible becomes tangible, a veritable spiritual foundation is laid; the theological content is just as rich, just as deep but is understood *non*-conceptually[34].

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[31] Ong (2007), p57.

[32] Berger P. and Luckmann T. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality Penguin*, Reprint Edition (1991), London: Penguin, pp51-53.

[33] When considering Matthew's gospels use of the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven', the Jewish context of the phrase suggests grammatically a genitive of source (concrete). The term 'Kingdom of God' is a generic, non-Jewish term used to describe the Church generally (mystically or spiritually).

[34] In the modern "faith movement", this would be termed "revelation knowledge". The spiritual reality comes from the *rhema* that results from the pneumatic enrichment of the *logos*.

Thus, in view of our final conclusion, there are some obvious lessons regarding the importance of orality to enrich the spiritual life as an alternative to the cold "empirical rationalism" of fundamentalism[35] that is frequently the conceptual response of Christians frustrated at spiritual apostasy. Fundamentalism, in light of this analysis, must recognise that Christianity is not based on an abstract "spiritualised, timeless 'idea principle' " but in narrative also, in the "tell[ing] of the life of a human, historical Jesus"[36]. It must recognise with Goldberg the key role of the 'story' that tempers "propositional" theology with the reality of human experience[37]; in Ong's terms, the Church must maintain contact with the "living human lifeworld"[38].

The Western Church would do well to look to the orality of the Far East with its joy-filled believers, many of whom have never seen a bible but *understand* in a far deeper way what it *means* to be a Christian. The strong narrative tradition within the culture with the respect for the elder and the wisdom of the "story" are effective at communicating theological knowledge without written text. The oral and the conceptual are correlates not contradictions: they reconcile the doctrinal and propositional with the mystical, the experiential, the testimony; fellowship with abstract Christian metanarrative; the *logos* with the *rhema* in the body of Christ.

Word count: 2510 (excluding Bibliography and References).

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[35] Barr, J. (1984), *Fundamentalism*, 2nd Edition – 3rd impression, London: SCM, p272.

[36] Goldberg M. (1991), *Theology and narrative: A critical introduction*, Original edition 1981 Nashville: Abingdon Press, Philadelphia: Trinity Press, p16.

[37] Goldberg (1991), p64.

[38] Ong (2007), p49.

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