

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

BOOK REVIEW

Collin Hansen and John Woodbridge. *A God-Sized Vision—Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. 192 pp. ISBN 9780310327035.

In this volume Hansen and Woodbridge endeavor to rekindle a passion for revival praying and proactivity by reflecting on the biblical stories of revival that find their expression in unique revival movements down through church history. In the preface the authors claim that “many Christians have grown so content with the ordinary that they don’t bother asking God for anything more” (12). They trace a number of reasons for this, including fuzzy thinking about the nature of revival, the role God plays and the role we play in revivals, and the interrelationship between the two. The book derives its title from the need to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God (to borrow William Carey’s slogan and apply it to revival).

Restudying God’s work in biblical and extra-biblical history is frequently a catalyst for revival, and this premise and principle is the operational guideline for the authors. “For many years it was common for evangelicals to read stories of revival around the world. Some have been stirred to holy jealousy for God to pour out His Spirit in a fresh, dramatic way” (16). The authors quote Jonathan Edwards’s strong use of “example” to stimulate revival in the First Great Awakening, and suggest that such emphasis is needed today. The difference between “hoping” for revival and “expecting” revival is a helpful nuance. Almost every sincere Christian hopes for some revival, but do we have the biblical and historical moorings to move beyond a vague and ethereal “hope” to a more solid and sustained expectation of revival?

After presenting this probing opening challenge, the authors develop a biblical and historical theology of revival by tracing the history of revival and renewal movements in the Old and New Testaments. They trace God’s unusual work in the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, revival under Hezekiah, under Josiah,

HANSON AND WOODBRIDGE *A God-Sized Vision*

and in the exile (which the authors see as revivalistic). There is a strong emphasis interwoven in these accounts of a motivation of glory for the Name of God. This needs to be our primary motivation in seeking revival, not our flagging spirits, our faltering evangelistic zeal, our failing financial stability, or our fading influence in the community. These may be legitimate, but should never eclipse the primary motivation of passion for the glory of God and his Name. The authors then move into the New Testament, with its emphasis on “times of refreshing.” The debate on the paradigmatic value of Pentecost is discussed, with the authors offering an overview of the various sides of the argument. Seeking to move beyond that debate, they try to find the common elements that both the proponents and doubters of revival in the New Testament have in common. On this issue the book left me wishing that more conclusions were drawn as opposed to the fairly open-ended ones that the authors leave with the reader. The authors then proceed to reflect on church history for insights that might supplement the biblical narratives of revival in the arduous process of articulating a biblical theology of revival. Edwards and Finney are referred to in a stimulating endeavor to find a blend and biblical balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility as it relates to revival. While Edwards places a strong emphasis on the sovereign pleasure of God in revival, Finney reacts with a strong emphasis on human responsibility. “For too long, Finney believed, Christians have waited for God to move, when all along God has gifted the church with everything it needs to spark revival” (33). I submit that this tendency to polarize these two schools appears too frequently. While the authors are right to stress the particular emphases that Edwards and Finney give to divine sovereignty or human responsibility, I believe that more serious reflection on Edwards’s “freedom of the will” and Finney’s emphasis on divine grace would lead us to conclude that many tend to caricature these two protagonists of revival. One of the synonyms of “caricature” is “travesty” and unfortunately that seems to be what has happened throughout history. We have caricatured both Edwards and Finney and the unique emphases they give to revival, and the result is a travesty of revival justice.

McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry 12

I believe the authors do a good job of pointing us to the complementary nature of Edwards and Finney but they could have moved further into a position of reconciliation of these apparent antinomies. I believe that a false dichotomy here is a disservice to the evangelical community, which needs a kind of clear thinking that nurtures both prayer and action towards revival. The authors are moving in the right direction, but could have gone further on this point.

One can hardly consider the history of revival without a close look at Jonathan Edwards. The authors do an excellent job of introducing him and his role in the First Great Awakening. Edwards promoted the need for the cognitive and experiential knowledge of God through his incisive preaching, and the book offers many insights into the nature of this revival, including the fact that 32 towns outside of Northampton were affected. The authors also show the common emphasis of two post-Reformation currents, Pietism and Puritanism, and their influence in North America. Some of the information provided here will be of interest even to those who are quite familiar with the events. Likewise, the following chapter on the Second Great Awakening, focusing on Jonathan Edwards's grandson Timothy Dwight, who was a powerful influence on the Yale University campus, is very enlightening. The chapter points to the significance of having a spiritual revival legacy and heritage. Dwight's faithfulness to stand up for Christ on the campus is powerful, and was a harbinger for revival on campuses such as Asbury and Wheaton.

The book also offers chapters that reflect on "The Prayer Meeting Revival" of 1857–58, and the Welsh revival that was brought about by tremendous social upheaval and then itself brought about genuine social reform and spilled over onto the mission fields of the world. This leads to a consideration of revival outside of North American or Western culture. As a former missionary to Latin America, I was inspired and challenged by the emphasis that missionaries have given to revival throughout recent history.

A final chapter considering the relationship of evangelism and revival by looking at figures like Billy Graham and Bill Bright is illuminating in exploring the differences but also the

HANSON AND WOODBRIDGE *A God-Sized Vision*

interrelationship between the two.

There are many strengths that commend this book as a useful volume on the topic of revival. Perhaps one of the greatest is its emphasis on human responsibility when it comes to revival. Obviously there will always be a theological tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility as it relates to revival, but this book, chapter 7 in particular, expresses a biblical harmony between the two that is as effective as any I am aware of. Further, the book summarizes the principles of revival, with an emphasis on persistent prayer, repentance, preaching of the gospel, acknowledging Christ's authority in humility, and serving God with boldness. As an overall reflection on the human side of revival these principles represent an effective contribution to the ongoing dialogue around the topic of revival today.

Like many others, although I have had a passion for revival I find my interest in revival coming and going like the tide's ebb and flow. Reading Hanson and Woodbridge's book definitely produced more flow to curb the ebb. The stories are well documented in their historical context. The cumulative effect was powerfully motivating. It could serve as a book to be read for personal insight and edification or as a textbook for college or seminary courses that deal with revival as part of their curriculum. This book will inspire its readers to take up the torch for personal and corporate revival as they consider how God has moved in the past.

Ernie Klassen
Quinte Alliance Church, Belleville, Ontario, Canada