

REVIVAL AND ITS CHALLENGES IN THE METHODIST CHURCH GHANA: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

Introduction

The Methodist Church Ghana is one of the dominant Christian denominations in Ghana.¹ Beginning in 1935, Methodist Church Ghana has developed from its nucleus as a West African District British Methodist Church into an autonomous body, shepherding close to a million members. Although several factors account for the relative strength of the tradition in Ghana, the church's commitment to the founder's vision of winning and discipling of converts played a key role in the growth and expansion of the church. The Methodist Church Ghana, for instance, prided herself with the "class" system of maintaining converts and sustaining their spiritual growth. This revival technique was an important hallmark of John Wesley and the other founding fathers of Methodism, who used the class system, then known as the "Holy Clubs" as a strategy for achieving spiritually growth and holding each other accountable to Christian living.² Recent reports and documents of the church, however, project a worrying situation in that the fortunes of the church with respect to winning and retention of members are declining. One of the reasons given is that the Wesleyan spirit of revival and evangelism which characterized the beginnings of the church has waned. There also appears to be a confusion on what exactly constitute revival and the goals it is suppose to achieve.

In order to consolidate and sustain the gains of the church, there is the need to explore innovative solutions which have strong scriptural basis. Using the Old Testament, this paper explores some scriptural insights, into how the challenges confronting the church's revival ministry can be addressed. Two perspectives on revivalism inform the paper; that is revival on the corporate level and on the individual level. In view of this, I have chosen the story of Jacob as narrated in Genesis 35:1-15 for perspectives on revival from the individual level, and Psalm 85 for insights into corporate revival. I seek to engage these texts to uncover insights that can shape the understanding of revivalism within the Methodist Church Ghana.

Revival in the Methodist Church Ghana: Present Realities

Wesleyan missionary activities in Ghana (then Gold Coast) started in 1835, when Rev. Joseph Rhodes Dunwell arrived and laid the foundation for Methodism. Like the Methodist Church in England, the Methodist Church Ghana had an important Anglican background. Missionary activities by Anglicans in the Gold Coast, which did not meet much success, created a school which led to scriptural knowledge by some indigenes.³ One such indigene, William De-Graft requested for Bibles through Captain Potter. In response to his request, Bibles and a Methodist missionary were sent to the Gold Coast. Through a combination of foreign missionaries and

¹ Sylvia Owusu-Ansah, "Christianity in Ghana", in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 594.

² Charles I Wallace, "Wesley as Revivalist/Renewal Leader", in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*. ed. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84.

³ F. L. Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 7-10.

indigenous efforts, Ghanaian Methodism grew into a well-established tradition until in 1961, the Methodist Church Ghana attained autonomy from the Methodists of Great Britain. Currently, Methodist Church Ghana is the major tradition of Methodism in Ghana.

Currently the Methodist Church Ghana has its vision being “*to build a vibrant, spirit-filled and spirit-led Church for the holistic transformation of society*”. Its mission is “*To equip the Church for Ministry to the world through the demonstration of Christian faith and love*”. As one of the dominant forces of Christianity in Ghana, the Methodist church Ghana adopted a combination of factors which have accounted for its strong presence. Among these is the church’s commitment, especially in its early years, to activities of evangelism, mission and renewal. This commitment is demonstrated in the structure of the church, throughout its levels from the national office to the Diocesan, the Circuit, and then to the Sessional or Society.

Four broad functional offices run through these structures. They are: Board of Ministries; Board of Education and Youth Development; Board of Finance and Development; Board of Social Services. Revival and renewal activities come under the Board of Ministries. Under the Board of Ministries, three sub-offices operate. First is the Advisory Team for Ordained Ministers. Second is the Advisory Team for Lay Ministers. Third is the Advisory Team for Evangelism, Mission and Renewal. Under this last office lies the duty of winning new members and retaining old members. Since these offices are replicated through the various levels of the church’s structure, what can be deduced is that the commitment of the church towards revival and evangelism is diffused throughout the various levels of the church’s hierarchy.

Two broad strategies characterize revival activities in the church. These activities can heuristically be described as formal and informal strategies. Formal Strategies come in the form of divine services such as the Sunday divine service and are integrated into the church’s main agenda. An example is the in-church revival programmes (which could be a day, three days, or a week). There is the out-church service such as camp meeting or revival services held outside the church. The out-church strategy normally includes other goals such as evangelism. Its duration could also be a day, three days, or a week long programme. Both in-church and out-church revival programmes normally feature a charismatic figure who is entrusted with the responsibility of whipping people’s interest through charismatic style of prayers and deliverance services, spiced with miraculous happenings. Such figures could be Methodist priests and evangelists or from different denominations. Emphasis is placed on the charismatic traits of the individuals who lead the revival programmes. Finally, there is the class system of revival. With its small size, the class system of revival is considered as the most important strategy for the church. Its relative advantage of size enables various tactics to be used including bible studies, prayer meetings, testimonies, and visitation.

Informal strategies on the other hand are not managed directly by the administrative structure of the church. They normally lie outside the church’s agenda. Their major proponents are lay officials such as the evangelists. Most of the informal strategies fall under a sub-committee known as Methodist Prayer and Renewal Programme (MPRP), which is under Evangelism Mission and Renewal Advisory Team. Some tactics employed here include teaching services, prayer meetings, counselling sessions, deliverance, and social interventions. Days are set aside for these activities, besides the days for the divine services.

Despite the commitment of the church to the revival of its members, there are many challenges it faces. Foundational to these challenges is the lack of understanding of the concept of revival. In conversation with both laity and clergy, I concluded that there appears to be no uniform and common understanding of what constitutes revival. For the laity, revival is characterized with the out pouring of the spirit, with great display of ecstasy among worshippers, which give them the satisfaction that there has been indeed a religious experience, which is evident in deliverance and miracles. This perception reduces revival to a miraculous religious activity with no ties to morality. The clergy, on the other hand, perceive revival from a moral perspective, but too often they kowtow to the wishes of their members by turning revival programmes into deliverance services and miracle performance.

This lack of understanding among the clergy and the laity on what exactly constitutes revival, the nature of it, and the goals set for it within a timeframe, leads to conflict and divisions among the clergy and the lay leaders such as the Evangelists as well as causes disorientation among the clergy. Because worshippers yearn for miracle centred revival programmes, the clergy is forced to provide such services which may not be the calling of the ministers. Some ministers do not have the gift of performing miracles and deliverance services, but they find themselves being looked down upon.

Important again is the development which sees revival programmes dovetailed into fundraising. This is good evidence to support the position that the church seems to have lost its bearings on what it wants to achieve with its revival programmes. Most of the respondents I engaged intimated that many of the revival programmes are organised to raise funds. Indeed, the revival programmes come to mind primarily as a means to raise funds. What this means is that the goals of the revival programmes are secondary to that of fundraising. This point also affirms the above points on the focus on miracles and deliverance, since the church will aim to please worshippers by engaging them in these activities during the programmes in order to generate more money.

There is also the issue of commitment of the church and her leaders to the spiritual renewal of members. On the part of the church, it is difficult to say it lacks commitment to revival when one looks at the structures and activities the church has put in place. However, there is the danger of remaining committed to systems and forgetting the real goal behind the systems. This appears to be the feeling among some Methodist clergy who acknowledge that the church carries out several revival programmes, but there is little that translates into the spiritual renewal of the members.

Another important challenge is the participation and commitment of the laity in revival programmes. From the class system to the weekly or daily revival programmes, participation have been mostly poor, with less than fifty percent of Sunday service attendees available at these programmes. Urbanisation, poverty, and lack of interest have been identified as some of the factors preventing patronage of revival programmes. Latently behind these reasons, however, is the conviction among many members that Sunday service is the mandatory important divine service God demands; the others services are secondary. Such a belief is rooted in the rationalization that growth and spiritual state of the church is primarily the responsibility of the clergy; the laity's role is secondary.

Revival in the Old Testament

Central to the Old Testament message is God's relationship with the created world, especially humankind. It is God who initiates this gesture and grants humans the honour of participating in this divine communion. The Old Testament presents this relationship as a covenant, mainly between God and the Israelites. God initiated and sustains the covenant, but the Israelites had the responsibility of staying true to the relationship if they were to continuously participate in the divine gift of life in God. However, for several reasons, the Israelites either swayed away from God or slacked in their commitment to God. Repeated failures on the part of ancient Israelites towards God's enduring love clearly pointed to a deep lack of understanding of God's desire to commune with them. Revivals became an important avenue through which ancient Israelites reminded themselves of their commitment and loyalty to God.

In the Old Testament, incidents of revival are scattered throughout the historical epoch of the Israelites. Beginning from the patriarchs and stretching into the post-exilic era of Ezra-Nehemiah, revival has been one of the constant spiritual happenings which secured and renewed the relationship between God and the Israelites – a relationship which was always under the threat of staleness. Revivals in the old Testament can be considered from two perspectives: individual and corporate. Some revivals were centred on individuals, who for some reasons, sought for spiritual transformation and renewal of faith in God. An example is Jacob, an unworthy man, but who receives divine touch to deepen his spiritual life (cf. 35:1-15). Other forms of individually centred revivals appear in the Psalter. Corporate revivals, on the other hand, dominate the Old Testament. They usually involve the leader of the community either initiating or commanding the series of activities that seek to transform and restore the community back into a renewed faith in God.

Individuals' devotion to God or renewal of faith in God is essential because it is the foundation of the group's or society's spiritual life. It is the personal states of faith that collectively represent the faith and spiritual life of a group. One of the revival incidents which centered on the personal life of an individual is the story of Jacob in Gen 35:1-15. Perhaps what makes this story rife for personal revival is the fluctuating character of Jacob. On the one hand, Jacob emerges as a deceiver, a liar, and a self-centred individual, but on the other hand he is a character God does not hesitate in reaching out to. Privilege to belong to a family God has chosen to establish a relationship with, Jacob had the responsibility of maintaining his family's tradition of personal devotion to God. His first personal encounter with God occurred in Bethel (Gen 28), when he was fleeing from his past life of deceit and betrayal of family bonds. In this encounter, God assures him through a dream that he is with him, and Jacob responds by taking upon himself several obligations, including his commitment to take the Lord as his God – **wěhāyāh YHWH lī lē'lohīm** (v.21). So key is this text to the process of connecting with God that some scholars have likened it to the Christian tradition of baptism.⁴

In the next encounter in Gen 35, Jacob is reminded by God of an earlier vow he has not fulfilled that is to go and worship at Bethel. But why did it have to take God to remind Jacob of his own vow? We cannot tell for sure exactly why Jacob reneged on his vow, but among the competing reasons could be that Jacob's memory of God's grace had begun to dim. God's reminder

⁴ See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 281.

was therefore timely in order to revive Jacob's faith in him. His command to Jacob, "arise" (**qûm**) is a startling call, one that could not be ignored by the patriarch.

Jacob's preparation for completing the vow included a process of purification. First, Jacob saw his family as a reflection of himself and himself as a reflection of his family.⁵ The actions of his children in Gen 34 contaminated the entire family. A pilgrimage to Bethel could not take place in their state of contamination, unless they make themselves whole or purified. Second, as the head of his family, Jacob did not want to live any person out of this important spiritual journey. The phrase, 'ăšer 'immô -*who are with him*, refers to members of his household including servants and slaves. Spiritual renewal within his life and that of his family cannot be complete when other proximate members of the household remain in an impure state; this will always be a challenge.

In a three-stage imperative mood, Jacob instructed his household *to put away* – **hāsirû**, *and to purify*– **wēhiṭṭahārû**, *and to change*– **wēhaḥālîpû**. Significantly, these series of actions which precede the journey to Bethel, indicate the need for some form of commitment and active personal engagement of the members who were to go to Bethel. Impliedly, Jacob's instruction to the members of his household shows a call to repentance, one necessitated by the immediate need of returning to God. The return was to enable Jacob build an altar to God, that is to worship him. More importantly, Jacob states that his worship of God is premised on the past favours of God in his life, which give him assurance of what lays ahead in the future

From vv. 3-7, Jacob instructs his household on the need to embark on the journey to Bethel, takes their idols and hides them, manages to get his household to their destination, and constructs an altar to worship God. These series of activities culminate in the goal of the Journey that is to get to Bethel and worship God. Clearly, Jacob achieves what he set out to do; he is focused and does not let fear of the Canaanites or the enormity of getting his entire household to be with him to dissuade him from his goal. Jacob's obedience to God leads to another theophanic experience.⁶ This time Jacob remains silent and God does the speaking (vv. 9-14). An interesting observation is that Jacob seems to have no fears in this second encounter of Ch. 35. Indeed, there is important change in the terminology of God's appearance. In v. 1, the construction reads modestly as "And God said to Jacob" (**wayyo'mer' 'ēlohîm el'ya'ăqov**), while v. 9 reads "And God appeared to Jacob" (**wayyērā 'ēlohîm el'ya'ăqov**). Despite the progression, Jacob appears calm and utters no word, a development that can be explained against the back drop that Jacob had cleansed himself and that of his household. Clearly, revival gives one confidence in the presence of God.

Just as an individual can experience a strong sense of change and renewal of his or her commitment to God, so can the consciousness of change be experienced at a group level. As indicated earlier, many of the Old Testament cases of revival take place as a group phenomenon. I isolate one instance to be the basis for our discussion on corporate or group revival. Psalm 85 is considered as one of the important texts on Old Testament revival, perhaps because of its explicit use of the Hebrew word **ḥayah** which is translated as *revive*. Psalm 85 belongs to the third book of the Psalter and it is a Koharite psalm.

⁵ M. S. Mills, *Genesis : A Study Guide to the Book of Genesis* (Dallas : 3E Ministries, 1999)

⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 281-2.

As a group prayer, Psalm 85 pleads that God restores and revives the people presently as he had done in the past.⁷ The psalm oscillates between the past and the present and anticipates the future. It can conveniently be structured into three parts to reflect this movement: vv. 1-3 details past goodness, vv. 4-6 relates present distress, and vv. 7-13 gives the hope for the future. In the first part, God reacts positively to the negative state of his people. The people were guilty (**‘āwôn**) and had sinned (**ḥaṭṭā’**). Their state of impurity caused several problems for them. The psalmist thus recognizes that Israelite past troubles had resulted from their sins. But the troubles were no longer there, because the favour of God has been on them. The psalmist heaps in succession a number of verbs to demonstrate God’s active role in the lives of his people. First, God had been favourable, then he restored, he forgave and covered, as well as withdrew and turned away from his anger. Although not explicitly stated, we can imply that God’s positive reactions was in response to the confession of the people.

A completely different mood permeates the second division.⁸ There is a present distress that needs God’s intervention once more. The psalmist believes that the people can draw from the assurance in God’s redemptive and forgiving act in the past. God’s commitment to his people is revealed in his characterization as a God of salvation. This characterization is affirmed through the style of inclusio by the repetition of the word salvation (**yāša’**) in v. 4 and v. 7. Salvation has been the bedrock upon which the nation’s existence depended, but equally important is God’s steadfast love (**ḥesed**) – that is commitment to the wellbeing of the Israelites despite the odds. This character of God appears in v. 7 as a forerun to salvation. Appealing to God’s faithful love is crucial in the face of God’s anger (vv. 5-6). God’s anger threatens the life of the people; it creates a gap which makes it impossible for humans to approach him. The rhetorical question of v. 6 is very instructive. A glimpse into a renewed or revived life is given; it is one that leads to rejoicing in God. In this sense, God’s steadfast love and redemptive act, for the psalmist, are the hope of the people.

Confident in the steadfast love of God, the psalmist has prayed and opened his heart to God; now he yearns to hear what God has for the people. God indeed has a message for them but as the psalmist points out it is conditional. First God promises peace (**šālôm**) for his people. Peace here transcends the absence of war to refer to wellbeing of every dimension.⁹ Second, God’s people who are labeled as saints (**ḥāsīdīm**) should not return to their previous folly. An important connection is made between the promise of **šālôm** and the people’s piety. The responsibility on humans to continuously enjoy in the life of God is yet again emphasized in the link between the fear of God and salvation. Lovingkindness (i.e., loyal love) and righteousness are what God provides. Truth and peace are what the objects of His blessing experience. They unite when God’s people return to Him and He responds with blessing. Productive harvests are a blessing God promised His people if they walked in obedience to His covenant (Deut. 28).¹⁰

⁷ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship : A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Edinburgh : W.B. Eerdmans; Handsel Press, 1998), 281.

⁸ James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville : John Knox Press, 1994), 276.

⁹ Cf. W. Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1982), 16.

¹⁰ Tom Constable: *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*. Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003, S. Ps 85:10

Revival in the Old Testament: Implication for the Methodist Church Ghana

Despite the structures the Methodist Church Ghana has in place to ensure the renewal and revival of its members, there are many challenges that confront the church. In order to discern what God can do in the face of these challenges, the church has to search the scriptures to determine his will. Conversations I had with the clergy on the problem of revival in the church reveal that many seem disillusioned. What can the Old Testament tell us in this moment. Below, I try to tease out some principles from Jacob's story and Psalm 85 to address the challenges that Methodist Church Ghana is facing.

First and foremost, the Methodist Church Ghana should have a clearly defined concept of what constitutes revival. Such concept should be developed through consensus building by involving all important stakeholders within the church as well as with clear guidance from the scripture and traditions of the church. Both Genesis 35: 1-15 and Psalm 85 teach us that Jacob and the Psalmist were committed to reviving their faith in God. They had no lingering mind as to what they wanted to achieve. When the opportunity came for Jacob to revive his relationship with God, he grasped it with a clear strategy and an unwavering mind. Equally, the psalmist portrays the Israelites as unwavering in their desire to get God to revive them once gain. Clearly, revivalism demands conviction and focus, and unity. What currently pertains in the Methodist Church Ghana where there are clashes of ideas on what revival is and the goals of revival does not lead to genuine renewal of faith in God.

Second, since the church is a sum total of all its members including the laity and the clergy, it is important for transformation and renewal to take place within the lives of the individuals. Members would need to understand that revival begins in the heart and soul of each believer as his or her personal continuous commitment to the Christian life. In the story of Jacob, one of the essential ideas that come to the fore is the need to be cleansed before approaching God. As Gordon J. Wenham puts it, "Encounter with God demands purity in the worshiper".¹¹ If revival connotes invigoration of life, then the pre-state of revival suggests that that life is dwindling or stagnant. Sin and complacency are the two factors that lead to the dwindling or stagnation of life. We notice from the Jacob narrative that sin was hovering over his house due to the actions of his children and the earlier theft of the gods by his wife, Rachel. Jacob himself seemed to be complacent due to his earlier encounter with God, forgetting to honour his vow to God. When it became necessary to approach God again, this time Jacob took every step to make sure he and his household were clean. Christians need to understand that a renewed and energized life only happens when the factors that debilitate against life that is sin are done away with.

Jacob showed spiritual leadership in his home, and ensured that the entire household was prepared and ready for the worship of God. How do we pull the rest of our family towards spiritual journey to God? As an important social setting, the family is central in shaping the life of individuals. Its state of spiritual growth, therefore, has an effect on its members. Many Christians ignore their family members and pursue their spiritual growth, forgetting that when they return to

¹¹Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 329.

their family members, their contamination affects them. Jacob saw through this and ensured that his entire household was prepared to meet the Lord. The Methodist Church Ghana can take a cue from this by targeting the family heads and educating them on the need to move the family along in their spiritual growth.

An important picture that emerges from the Jacob narrative is that revival is God and not man initiated. In other words, the genuine outpouring of the spirit from the above cannot be manipulated by man and schematized as has been done into the weekly and monthly revival programmes. This understanding must be foremost in the minds of the church leadership in their planning and facilitation of revival programmes. Their strategies then should not be construed as constituting revival, but rather creating an enabling context for God to act in his own time.

Psalms 85 affirms this premise that any genuine restoration of the spiritual life of the church has its origin in God. The expression “will you not revive us again” (v. 6) emphasises God’s as the agent who brings about revival. Interestingly, the psalmist does not indicate that God’s intervention to revive humanity happens once. We seem to get the impression that God is ever willing to revive his people as and when his people are ready for the experience. Revival, accordingly, is needed as long as there has been a straying from God. This is where the church’s strategies can be useful as they provide frequent contexts from which people can reach out to God.

Conclusion

The Methodist Church Ghana is one of the dominant Christian traditions in Ghana. In order to maintain this position, it has to find innovative ways of sustaining the growth and spiritual renewal of its members. Revival has been one of the major strategies used by the church to achieve her spiritual goals. Commitment to revival and spiritual renewal by the church is evident in her administrative structure as well through hosts of programmes and activities she carries out at the various administrative levels of the church. However, despite her commitment, there is the uneasy feeling that the spiritual growth of the church has stagnated. An interrogation of scripture, specifically Genesis 35:1-15 and Psalm 85, reveals several measures that the church can employ to deal with her challenges. Among these include the need for the church to clearly delineate its concept of revival and formulate goals that can be achieved and measured. This overarching move can help deal with other challenges such as the tension between the clergy and the laity on the best approach to revival and the subsidiary role revivalism plays to fundraising.