

# The Impact of Revivals on Irish Baptist Life from the Rise of Evangelicalism to the Twentieth Century

DAVID LUKE

---

**David Luke** is Lecturer in Historical Theology and the Director of Postgraduate Studies at the Irish Baptist College, Moira, Craigavon, Northern Ireland. Dr. Luke served as pastor of Gilnahirk Baptist Church, Belfast, Northern Ireland for fifteen years. He has contributed to *Treasures of Irish Christianity* (Veritas, 2015), *A Collection of Essays on Jonathan Edwards* (JE Society Press, 2016), *A Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans, 2017), and *The Miscellanies Companion* (JE Society Press, 2018). He has also published in the *Journal of the Irish Baptist Historical Society*, *Reformed Theological Journal*, *Semanatorul*, and the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*.

By the eighteenth-century Ireland was enjoying a period of comparative political stability and economic prosperity under the Hanoverians that stood in stark contrast to the social and political upheaval of the previous century. Even the religious conflict that stood behind much of the turmoil in the seventeenth century had receded as “each of the major religious denominations ministered to pre-assigned communities and only occasionally attempted any kind of controversial proselytism.”<sup>1</sup> Around eighty percent of the population of Ireland was Roman Catholic, with the rest made up of the established Church of Ireland and the dissenting churches, of which the Presbyterians, who were largely located in the northern province of Ulster, were by far the most numerically significant. In Dublin, the nation’s capital, “a lively religious subculture developed during the first half of the eighteenth century with at least twenty-five Dissenting places of worship, some of which had only a fleeting existence.”<sup>2</sup> This vibrant scene did not mean, however, that it was marked by spiritual vitality. Instead,

“liberalizing theology, along with widespread interest in property and propriety, seemed more powerful in the churches as a whole.”<sup>3</sup> The small, struggling Irish Baptist community succumbed to the temptations of this “gay and flattering world.”<sup>4</sup> As a result “By the late eighteenth century their piety and perception was so introspective that they were easily dismissed, marginalised and ill-defined by those outside their community.”<sup>5</sup>

### **IRISH BAPTISTS AND THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL**

In 1744 two young men from Dublin, Antisel Taylor and John Hynd, were impressed when they heard John Cennick preach in London. Cennick, who was a gifted preacher and evangelist, had been associated with John Wesley but was later expelled by him because of his Calvinistic views. He then became a Calvinistic Methodist before joining the Moravians. After meeting with Cennick the two wrote to some Baptist friends in Dublin suggesting they ask him to come to Ireland. Having received the invitation Cennick was initially reluctant to come to Ireland because he had “a strong prejudice against the whole Irish nation and people.”<sup>6</sup> It is unclear why he held these reservations, although such anti-Irish prejudice was typical of many English people at the time.<sup>7</sup> He eventually overcame his concerns concluding, “I am confirm’d in believing our Saviour would have me carry his bloody death into that country... Indeed I feel a flame in my heart for the souls in that city.”<sup>8</sup>

Cennick arrived in Dublin in 1746. Here he was offered the use of a Baptist meeting house in Swifts Alley. He turned down the offer “as I knew there were parties there who adher’d to Arianism or New-Light and others of Orthodox schemes” and he feared that his preaching would incense those who opposed orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he began preaching in a disused meeting house in Swifts Alley which had previously been used by a breakaway group from the original Dublin Baptist congregation.<sup>10</sup> Here, assisted by Benjamin La Trobe, a young Baptist student preparing for ministry,<sup>11</sup> he quickly began to gather large congregations from among the various Protestant groups in the city, as well as facing great hostility from the Catholic population. As Hutton states “It was John Cennick, and not John Wesley, who began the Evangelical Revival in Ireland.”<sup>12</sup> In 1747 John Wesley arrived in Dublin where he bought the Skinners Alley meeting house, had Cennick and his congregation evicted and began a Methodist work. Despite this spat

both men went on to have significant roles in the spread of the Evangelical revival in Ireland. Over a forty year period it is estimated that Wesley spent the equivalent of about five and a half years in Ireland building a Methodist network. Having been ousted from Dublin Cennick carried on his ministry in the north where he preached to such powerful effect he became known quite simply as “the Preacher.” Other notable figures of the day such as George Whitefield and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon also played their part in the growth of Evangelicalism in Ireland in this era.

Despite the impact of the revival in Ireland it had negligible effect outside the Protestant community. Although there were Catholic conversions they were “more notable for the fuss made of them than for their quantity.”<sup>13</sup> The historic divisions and suspicions among Catholics and Protestants in Ireland remained profound and the strident denunciations of Catholicism by preachers like Wesley and Whitefield did nothing to overcome these. Nor did the revival have much of an effect among Irish Baptists, despite the enthusiasm that had brought Cennick to Ireland. Andrew Holmes notes that by 1800 there were around 500 Baptists in Ireland which was a reduction from around 2,000 at the beginning of the century.<sup>14</sup> As Kevin Herlihy has written “they were a ‘remnant’ people on the margin of the Irish Protestant community.”<sup>15</sup> Overall, the arrival of Evangelicalism seems to have upset the Irish Baptists’ sense of decorum by its enthusiasm, even if seemed to accomplish something which they were incapable doing in their current state.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, as Cennick observed, they were in theological confusion. By the time the English Baptist minister Samuel Pearce visited Dublin half a century later in 1796, little had changed. He reported to William Carey that the Baptists there were “dead to piety.”<sup>17</sup> This impression was reinforced when Andrew Fuller visited the city in 1804 where “He was grieved to find the principal Baptist community in Dublin under the influence of the most pernicious errors in doctrine and practice. Many of the members had imbibed principles which, to say the least, verged on Socinianism, while the amusements of the theatre and the card-table were tolerated, and even defended.”<sup>18</sup> While the eighteenth century revival may have had little direct influence on Irish Baptists, the revitalization of English Baptists did have a significant impact upon them in the nineteenth century.

The shock of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, the atrocities carried out

and the great bloodshed that it caused, “focused the attention of the rest of Britain on Ireland as a vulnerable and unstable corner of the empire.”<sup>19</sup> Politically it “reminded England that the wider security of the British empire depended on keeping Ireland under control.”<sup>20</sup> The thoughts of British Evangelicals also turned increasingly to their neighboring island and its evangelization “became a major evangelical priority in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.”<sup>21</sup> Many Evangelicals thought that Ireland’s problems were rooted in the ignorance and superstition of Irish Catholics who, it was believed, were held in spiritual thralldom by the priesthood, some of whom had played leading roles in the rebellion. They were convinced that the answer to this problem lay in creating sound, biblical literacy in Ireland. In 1806 the Dublin Bible Society (later called the Hibernian Bible Society) was formed to address this need.

In December 1813, the Baptist Irish Society was established in London.<sup>22</sup> By this time there were only five Baptist churches in Ireland and, it was reported, that among them “there is much to deplore, yet there are those, in their communion, who are desiring and praying for better days.”<sup>23</sup> The work of the BIS was largely educational and focused on the Irish speaking region of the west, which was the poorest in country. Over the next thirty years several Baptist schools were established and at their peak they had 10,000 pupils.<sup>24</sup> Several churches were founded most of which were small, sometimes consisting of a single family. Whatever gains were made during this period were destroyed by the famine which decimated Ireland between 1847 and 1852. E. A. Payne estimated that “the Baptist churches in the South and West of Ireland lost by death and emigration more than 3,000 adherents.”<sup>25</sup> As a result by 1861 there were only three BIS supported churches left.<sup>26</sup> The Baptist work in this region never recovered.

As the work in the west declined the focus of the BIS now shifted to the north of Ireland and the province of Ulster. In this province, the most Protestant part of the island, Baptist witness had developed independently of the BIS and was largely associated with Alexander Carson, David Cooke and the Haldane brothers from Scotland. By 1845 there may have been about 1,000 Baptists in Ulster, around half of whom were members of Carson’s Tobermore congregation.<sup>27</sup> The work of the BIS and the Ulster churches was significantly impacted by the events of the spring and summer of 1859.

## THE 1859 REVIVAL

Around 1857 a woman from the north of England, Mrs. Colville, came to work as an evangelist in Ulster in the area around the market town of Ballymena, County Antrim. She was affiliated with the BIS but the exact nature of her relationship to the society has now been lost. She spent about six months in the district but there was little response to her endeavors. Yet, the one convert we know of, James McQuilkin, proved to be a significant figure in the events which followed.<sup>28</sup> Once converted McQuilkin, who lived in the village of Connor, near Ballymena, began to seek ways to serve God and in 1857 he established a local Sunday school, which grew and saw a Bible study and prayer meeting added. In September 1858 to further seek God's help in the work McQuilkin, along with other recent converts Jeremiah Meneely, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace, began to meet regularly for prayer, in a schoolhouse in the adjoining village of Kells. Gradually the number of people converted grew until by the end of 1858 there were fifty men meeting for prayer.

By early 1859 word about what was happening in Kells spread to another local village, Ahoghill. Here, as news of revival in the United States had spread across the Atlantic, many people had been praying for a similar movement of the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup> In March 1859 a Presbyterian minister in the village, Rev. David Adams, who had been praying for revival since his ordination in 1841, invited some of the Kells converts to come and speak in his church. On a Monday evening about 3,000 people crammed into a church designed to hold 1,200. Such was the crush that the building had to be evacuated, and the meeting continued outside in the pouring rain. The gathering continued for hours with many people convicted of sin, some of whom were prostrated. Such prostration became one of the most common and controversial features of the coming months. Adams, estimated that around 700 people were awakened.<sup>30</sup>

Over the coming months the scenes in Ahoghill were repeated throughout the province of Ulster as crowds of thousands met inside and outside, in all kinds of weather, to hear the gospel preached and to unite in prayer. People fell prostrate in the streets. Some schools closed as large numbers of children were convicted of sin and prostrated. Factories came to a standstill for the same reason. Public houses closed through lack of business. The

sectarianism that blighted Belfast ceased. Many of those who were more cautious about the revival were forced to admit that the general moral tone of society had improved. The events surrounding the revival reached a peak in June when 35-40,000 people, from all over the province, attended a prayer meeting in Belfast's Botanic Gardens. A prayer meeting the following month brought 20,000 people together.<sup>31</sup>

Many at the time were skeptical about the events surrounding the revivals. Some ministers dismissed it, with one prominent Evangelical minister, Isaac Nelson, publishing a work on the events of the time called, *The Year of Delusion*.<sup>32</sup> This minority of Protestant ministers "charged the revival variously with spreading hysteria, increasing vice and illegitimacy and promoting insanity."<sup>33</sup> Sections of the press such as the *Northern Whig* (Belfast), *Dublin Evening Mail* and *The Times* (London) were also vocal in their skepticism. They usually offered a psychological explanation for what had occurred. There were examples they could point to of false conversions, sensationalism and the behavior of charlatans. Countless others, however, expressed their sense of the reality of what they had experienced. As one convert stated quaintly, "certainly it was not Satan who took me away from whisky drinking."<sup>34</sup>

An often-repeated figure is that 100,000 people were converted during the revival. No-one is completely sure of the source of the figure and it seems difficult to sustain.<sup>35</sup> Conversion, however, was not the only metric of the effects of the revival and many were "revived" in their faith and began to live lives of thoroughgoing Christian dedication. One outcome of this was that some moved to smaller denominations "who demanded a more obvious commitment from their members."<sup>36</sup> One of the smaller denominations to benefit were the Baptists.

Given the small number of Baptists in Ulster at this time they seldom feature in accounts of the revival, yet they too were swept up these momentous events. One Belfast newspaper reported,

Since last report, twenty cases have occurred of persons prostrated in the Baptist Church, Academy Street [Belfast], almost all of whom have found peace. Last night Monday ten were affected; some of them at the Sabbath-school prayer-meeting. The under part of the church was crowded with the children, and the gallery was filled with parents and friends. At the

conclusion of the prayer-meeting, the Rev. R. M. Henry preached to a large and most attentive congregation in the open air outside the church. During the service two persons were prostrated. Three Roman Catholics have been brought, it is believed, to the knowledge of the truth in connection with these services.<sup>37</sup>

Henry later recalled that “on two occasions during the Revival, I had an opportunity of addressing audiences numbering from 15,000 to 20,000 persons.”<sup>38</sup> One such occasion was in Armagh when many people travelled to the meeting by train, with some even lying on the top of carriages to make their way there.<sup>39</sup>

Baptist ministers outside Belfast also found themselves dealing with large crowds of hearers. William Eccles, who had recently left the Belfast church to look after the BIS station in Banbridge, County Down, gives a flavor of the times writing,

On Monday evening about two hundred people assembled in a great room of a ruinous building. After a service of two hours and a-half only a few would leave. I had accordingly, afresh to address the anxious and commend them in prayer to God. Outside the house, in the open air, another company was waiting for a few ‘last words.’ When I reached the road, about a hundred perches distant, I found a goodly number waiting to give me a ‘heart warm, fond adieu,’ and who, seeing my fatigue, declared (I believe in all sincerity) ‘*It would do them good if they could just bear me home upon their arms.*’<sup>40</sup>

He continued that this was typical of his experiences throughout the district as he worked himself to the point of exhaustion. His concluded, “I do not know a godly man in the north of Ireland who doubts that *within the last few months more souls have been converted to God than have been converted in the previous fifty years.*”<sup>41</sup>

The BIS committee recognized that the scale of what was occurring in Ulster meant their workers were “unable to meet the demands of the people for the Ministry of the Gospel.” They agreed, therefore, to send some British ministers to offer temporary support.<sup>42</sup> An appeal for funds to finance this was “cheerfully and liberally responded to by many of the friends of Evangelical truth.”<sup>43</sup> One of those who visited Ulster was Francis Wills, minister of Kingsgate Baptist Chapel, London. On his arrival towards the

end of 1859 in Coleraine, County Londonderry, he discovered that the fire of revival had mostly subsided, although its influence continued to be felt. There was still a daily united prayer meeting in the town, where he worked alongside the ministers of other denominations. He spent much of his time in house-to-house visitation counselling those who had been affected by the revival. A great hunger remained to hear the word of God preached. Wills reported that on one Sunday he preached at a series of meetings which in total lasted around seven hours.<sup>44</sup>

Wills' work alongside ministers from other denominations marked one of the features of the revival. Often regarded with suspicion by other denominations, for first time Baptist ministers gained recognition as co-laborers. This was one of the outcomes of the revival, that for a time many of the old denominational enmities faded into the background. John Brown, pastor of the small Baptist church at Conlig on the outskirts of Newtownards, County Down, recorded, "One happy fruit of the revival is, that ministers of all denominations have laid aside their animosities, and harmoniously co-operate in the common cause."<sup>45</sup> This irenic spirit tended to disappear in aftermath of the revival, with Baptists accused of being more interested in proselytism than conversion. Nonetheless, the fact that Baptist ministers helped to labor in the revival contributed to the establishment of the denomination in the province.

The foundation of several new Baptist churches in the aftermath of the revival also helped to cement their place. After their conversion some began to question the validity of their baptism as infants and were then baptized by immersion. As Thompson remarks in such cases there "was no need for the Baptist churches and ministers to do more than offer instruction to the converts who sought it, and to baptise those who requested it."<sup>46</sup> One of the most notable cases was that of J. G. McVicker. McVicker was a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, which was regarded as one of the strictest Calvinistic denominations. In the summer of 1859, seven years into his ministry, he underwent conversion. As a result, he stepped down from his ministry and three months later was baptized in a local river by Jeremiah Meneely.<sup>47</sup> Encouraged by Mrs. Colville he began to preach in Ballymena to a congregation that gathered first in a stable yard and later in a loft. He then joined the BIS and set about building a Baptist chapel in the town. To obtain financial support for this he visited C. H.



Spurgeon in London, who introduced him to several benefactors.<sup>48</sup> The new building was opened in August 1861. The church grew rapidly and soon had 120 members, with between 400 and 600 in attendance at services.<sup>49</sup> The following year McVicker left the church along with a sizeable part of the congregation to form a Plymouth Brethren assembly. The path to Plymouth Brethrenism was one taken by many who had initially joined Baptist churches.<sup>50</sup> Crawford Gribben has noted at this time “Baptist and Brethren congregations could not always be easily distinguished.”<sup>51</sup> There followed a good deal of friction between the two groups in the coming decades. In 1862, for example, Dr. James C. L. Carson, son of Alexander Carson, published a widely circulated work called *The Heresies of the Plymouth Brethren*. The doctor’s niece, however, after initial opposition to Brethrenism later joined the movement.<sup>52</sup>

Londonderry, with a population of about 25,000 people, was one of only two cities in Ulster at that time.<sup>53</sup> In early 1859 a small number of Baptists sought to establish a church with the support of the BIS and the Baptist church in neighboring Letterkenny, County Donegal. The church was constituted with nineteen members and began meeting in the city’s masonic hall. In July 1860 the local newspaper, the *Londonderry Journal*, published an account of eleven baptisms carried out in the nearby River Faughan. It noted there were three to four hundred people in attendance. The report stated that “Such a scene had never been witnessed in Derry before, and it was profitable to many persons of different character.”<sup>54</sup> Despite the novelty of what was occurring the newspaper was at pains to point out the solemnity and dignity of the baptismal service. This sympathetic reception did not last and the following year T. W. Medhurst, reported “I preached the other evening for our friends in Londonderry. I found them struggling hard against much opposition and misrepresentation.”<sup>55</sup> As was the case in Ballymena, the church in Londonderry split as some wished to pursue a Plymouth Brethren model of ecclesiology. In 1862 the BIS took the decision to withdraw its support from the church as the divisions among the congregation appeared irreparable.<sup>56</sup>

In the aftermath of the revival Baptist churches faced many challenges. Some, like Ballymena, weathered the storms, while others, like Londonderry disappeared.<sup>57</sup> Even well-established churches like Tobermore struggled in the years that followed. R. H. Carson, who saw his congregation

swell and then fall, noted in 1869 “out of some 80 or 90 individuals received at that time, scarcely one remains to us at this moment. And what is worse than their exclusion or withdrawal, their evil conduct, or their spiritual apathy, did not fail to leave its mark behind.”<sup>58</sup> Remarkably, churches in the rest of Ireland remained largely untouched by the revival, even though some, like the new Baptist work in Rathmines, Dublin met “for special prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Dublin and its suburbs.”<sup>59</sup> While Dublin remained the administrative center for Irish Baptists the story of the southern churches was mostly one of decline while northern churches grew more numerous.

The revival led to the foundation of at least six new churches and many outstations in Ulster over the next few years. The number of Baptists in Ulster also more than doubled, representing about seventy-five percent of the total number on the island. As Thompson states “the Baptist community was strengthened and enlarged by the revival movement. The evangelistic spirit of the churches was boosted, many young men offered for the ministry, and a base secured in the north from which later advances were made.”<sup>60</sup> The growth among the Baptist churches during this period led to the reconstitution of the Irish Baptist Association which had fallen into abeyance in 1824.<sup>61</sup> The new IBA recommenced in Dublin in July 1862 with ten churches. By 1868 the number had reached twenty-five.<sup>62</sup> Irish Baptists were on the way to becoming numerous enough to obtain their independence from the BIS and the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. The Baptist Union of Ireland was formed in 1895 with thirty-one member churches.

## **THE 1920S REVIVAL**

By the 1920s Ireland had changed beyond recognition since the summer of 1859. Like other nations it had participated in the gruesome spectacle of the Great War but it had also undergone the 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. In 1921 the country was partitioned with most counties forming the Irish Free State,<sup>63</sup> while the state of Northern Ireland, consisting of six of the historic counties of Ulster, remained part of the United Kingdom. With partition Northern Ireland was consumed by sectarian violence in the early years of its existence. Across the new state, but mostly in Belfast, 500 people were killed, more than 3,000 injured, 10,000

people became refugees and hundreds of businesses were destroyed.<sup>64</sup> It appeared to be an unlikely backdrop for revival. Although as Holmes writes, “There can be no doubt that this background gave the [evangelistic] campaign a sense of urgency as individual Protestants sought to make sense of their situation.”<sup>65</sup>

In October 1920 W. P. Nicholson began a much anticipated evangelistic mission in his hometown of Bangor, County Down. Following his conversion in 1899 and a period of training at Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Nicholson had worked as an evangelist in Belfast, Scotland, Australia and the United States, where he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. He later joined the faculty of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Nicholson’s mission in Bangor was a great success and, according to one witness, “the whole religious life of the town was revived.”<sup>66</sup> Invitations to conduct missions in other towns soon flooded in and interdenominational (Nicholson United Mission) committees were formed to co-ordinate these missions which began in the spring of 1921.

Nicholson’s style was blunt, uncompromising and earthy. It did not sit well with those who believed that a preacher’s demeanor should be dignified and refined. One Church of Ireland minister said he was “compelled to make an indignant protest, and to state that this kind of thing is an almost incredibly offensive caricature of religion as I understand the religion of Jesus Christ.”<sup>67</sup> Nicholson’s plain style of speaking, however, was hugely popular, not least among working class Protestants and thousands flocked to hear him preach in towns all over the north. Not only did they come to hear him but countless numbers professed faith at his meetings. After his mission in Portadown, County Armagh, it was recorded that “over 900 names were registered as of those accepting Christ and whole families became one in him.”<sup>68</sup> In Lisburn, County Antrim, “well over 2000 souls definitely pledged themselves to Jesus Christ. 1,950 were dealt with in the enquiry room: over 700 names were transferred to the minister of one church.”<sup>69</sup>

Having conducted missions throughout the provincial towns, Nicholson commenced a mission in Belfast in February 1922. The mission was held on the Shankill Road, which was one of the most troubled parts of the city. On the first evening “many of those present later recalled hearing the sound of rifle and machine-gun fire during the course of the meeting. Some who came on tram cars had been ordered to lie flat when passing

certain crossings. Even as he preached it was often to the accompaniment of gunfire and bombing outside.”<sup>70</sup> It turned out to be one of the most violent days in the conflict that engulfed the city with eleven people killed and forty wounded. Despite the ongoing disturbances the mission was attended in the coming weeks by almost 3,000 people each evening and 2,260 people were counselled in the enquiry rooms.<sup>71</sup> In March a three week mission was held in the north of the city, again there were thousands in attendance each evening and over 1,000 people passed through the enquiry room.<sup>72</sup> Following the Belfast campaigns Nicholson moved to Londonderry to conduct a six week mission. Once more there were large attendances and upwards of 1,300 people came to the enquiry rooms.<sup>73</sup> By the end of 1922 it was recorded that in total more than 12,000 people had passed through the enquiry rooms of the various missions.<sup>74</sup>

In the autumn Nicholson came back to Belfast and conducted missions in various venues across the city. Again, there were large attendances and a great number of converts. Then in 1923 Nicholson moved to the east of the city. This was the industrial heartland of Belfast with the shipyard where the Titanic had been built employing tens of thousands. It was also an area where there had been much sectarian violence, although this had eased by the end of 1922. The east of the city had numerous churches and a thriving mission hall culture. With Nicholson’s arrival there followed, what one newspaper described as, “the flame of revival burning so brightly... with consuming power.”<sup>75</sup> A Presbyterian minister reported that by the end of March 1923 they had seen 5,000 professions of faith.<sup>76</sup>

In the coming years the events in the east of the city reached almost mythical proportions. One often repeated story was that converted shipyard workers returned so many stolen tools it was necessary to build a new shed to store them. Certainly “on two occasions shipyard workers marched en masse to meetings, and at one of these 200 men decided for Christ and publicly destroyed their betting paraphernalia.”<sup>77</sup> It was one of the notable features of Nicholson’s ministry that his message appealed especially to men, many of whom were working class and often caught up in the violence of the time. There were even reports of loyalist gunmen being converted.<sup>78</sup>

By the time Nicholson returned to the United States in June 1923 “it was claimed that 23,000 individuals had made a profession of faith, church membership had increased, religious zeal was rekindled, and the Irish

Alliance of Christian Workers' Unions received a substantial boost."<sup>79</sup> Supporters would later claim that Nicholson had saved Ulster from Civil War. While he undoubtedly had a profound impact across the province, much of the heat had gone out of the sectarian tensions as the Irish Civil War had broken out in the Irish Free State in 1922 which directed violence away from Ulster.

Nicholson returned to Northern Ireland in July 1924. Once more he conducted numerous missions across the province and a mission in Dublin. While he still gathered large crowds and saw many professions of faith these did not reach the heights of the earlier campaigns. In the following years he conducted missions in the USA, Australia, and South Africa. While he continued to return to Northern Ireland, the visits became less frequent and, as his health declined, his campaigns grew shorter. In 1959 he left the USA intending to spend his final years at home in Bangor. He suffered a heart attack on board ship and, although he was transferred to hospital in Cork, he died.

In November 1922, at the height of Nicholson's campaign another evangelist, Archibald Irwin presented a paper to the General Secretaries Christian Union called "Is there a Revival in Ulster?"<sup>80</sup> As in 1859 many were skeptical that this was a genuine work of God. Not least this was because of the revivalist techniques employed by Nicholson. Although, many doubters admitted that having visited Nicholson's meetings and heard him preach they became convinced that God was at work. One newspaper reporter acknowledged, "Mr. Nicholson gained the ear of the people in a marked degree and although uncompromising in his condemnation of smoking and dancing and the picture show, and presenting the bold alternative of 'Christ or Hell,' even those who disagreed with him came under his spell and were converted."<sup>81</sup> By the metrics Irwin used, including increased prayer, unity among the churches, professions of faith, growing church membership, increased evangelistic endeavor and the numbers attending Bible studies, he concluded "there are many signs of a general revival of religion... I am driven to the conclusion that a deep and genuine work of grace has been, and is now going on in many parts of Ulster."<sup>82</sup> One reporter remarked Nicholson "has stirred Ulster for God as has not been done since the memorable days of 1859."<sup>83</sup> Some who had lived through the events of that year were still alive and concurred with such sentiments.

Yet, while Nicholson was a key figure in this period, he was not the only one whose ministry was having a great impact. As Irwin suggested, what was occurring went beyond the conversions taking place under Nicholson and impacted the whole of the religious tenor of society. *The Irish Baptist Magazine* of March-April 1923 posed the same question as Irwin, *Is it Revival?* It answered the question by recording that they were “passing through unprecedented times.”<sup>84</sup>

Baptists saw much fruit as the result of Nicholson’s ministry. In several towns Baptists joined with other churches in supporting his missions. In 1921 the church in Lurgan, County Armagh participated in the joint mission and subsequently saw twenty-four people baptized.<sup>85</sup> Several other Baptist churches including Tandragee, Omagh, Armagh and Coleraine saw significant increases in the number of baptismal candidates.<sup>86</sup> Pastor J. S. Fraser commenting on the effect of Nicholson’s mission on the Shankill Road Baptist Church said that in March 1922 the Sunday School superintendent asked all who had accepted the Savior during his mission to stand. He noted that “immediately something like a score of the elder scholars rose to their feet.” When the superintendent then asked if any others would like to trust in Jesus “the number was augmented by almost a dozen.”<sup>87</sup>

While Nicholson’s campaigns saw large numbers of professions of faith there were numerous other evangelistic campaigns being carried on throughout the province. In 1921 the Scottish evangelist James McKendrick, who visited Ulster frequently, conducted a mission in Londonderry which drew large crowds and saw many conversions. This was several months before Nicholson’s arrival.<sup>88</sup> Mountpottinger Baptist Tabernacle, in east Belfast, recorded sixty-seven conversions in 1921<sup>89</sup> which, again, was before Nicholson began his campaigns in the area. Local Baptist pastors and evangelists saw considerable fruit for their labor in this period. A mission conducted by J. K. Paisley in Armagh in 1922 saw thirty converts.<sup>90</sup> After Nicholson visited Newtownards James McKendrick visited the town.<sup>91</sup> Again, there were many conversions and this helped to lay the ground for the formation of a Baptist church in 1923. After Nicholson’s campaign in Portadown a mission conducted in 1924 by two Baptist pastors, R. Clendinning and G. H. Weir led to the formation of a Baptist church.<sup>92</sup> Nicholson may have captured the headlines but there was a large supporting cast throughout the province, including visiting evangelists, local

Baptist pastors and evangelists and even church members who held impromptu open-air meetings which saw numerous conversions.

As with the events of 1859, church leaders recognized the need for spiritual discernment amid the excitement of the time. T. R. Warner, editor of *The Irish Baptist*, offered some words of caution. He wrote, "During the revival many hold up their hands to show their acceptance of Christ's message to a lost world and we are glad of it. But how many of these are prepared to render obedience to His command and publicly confess Him by being immersed into the likeness of His death and resurrection?"<sup>93</sup> Warner touched on an issue Baptist churches faced, that despite widespread numbers of people being converted, this did not necessarily translate into baptisms and church membership. The church secretary of East End Baptist Church, which was in the heart of the shipbuilding district in Belfast, wrote, "in February [1923] a remarkable tide of revival swept in and in the four months following 700 persons professed faith in Christ." It was an extraordinary figure for a church of fewer than eighty members. The considerable number of conversions, however, did not correspond to an equally large surge in membership. As he went on to add "forty-five followed our Lord in Baptism, and twenty-nine were received into membership. The attendance at the morning service is not good, but the attendance at the Evening Service shows a considerable increase."<sup>94</sup> As his comment suggested, even baptisms did not necessarily indicate willingness to join the church. In the years following the membership of the church settled at just over 100 members, despite the large number of professions of faith. There were similar patterns in other Baptist churches where large numbers of conversions did not result in corresponding numbers of baptisms and additions to the church.

The small number of people who became church members, considering the large number who had professed faith raises the question in the minds of some about whether this truly was a revival or was this phenomenon merely the result of revivalism which caught the public attention at a turbulent time? Some historians have suggested that this populist style of religion resonated with the Protestant population when they were in search of certainty amid socio-economic issues, sectarian violence and political instability. Historians have sought similar social explanations for the events of 1859. There can be little doubt that revivalism played its part as it was a feature of the evangelical sub-culture at this time. It was also reflected



in Nicholson's ministry as he combined plain speech, decision making and sentimental music. Furthermore, this was often allied to his dispensational theology that made much of the theme of the imminent return of Christ as people came to terms with the fallout from the Great War and their own political uncertainty. Yet, does such revivalism explain the event of the 1920s? Was all that occurred simply the result of a socio-cultural phenomenon embedded in a set of unique historical circumstances?

Andrew Holmes has pointed out that those who study revival, from a range of scholarly disciplines, now recognize that there are often multiple factors involved in times of revival.<sup>95</sup> Yet, even at the time Christians recognized the interplay of different factors and therefore sought to answer the question, *Is it Revival?* They also saw a need to try to distinguish the true signs of the Holy Spirit's work from apparent conversions based on other factors. What churches longed for was genuine fruit of the Spirit's work, not mere numbers. For Baptists this meant looking for converts to profess their faith by being baptized. They also continued with regular roll revisions, removing those who no longer fulfilled the requirements of membership. In other words, there was no sense of simply being carried along by events on a superficial level and seeing numerical growth. Whatever social factors might have been involved in the events, or whatever techniques Nicholson and others may have employed, many who lived through these times believed that they witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, they thought that while Nicholson was God's instrument, many other unheralded figures were also involved reaping a rich harvest. Among Baptists, for example, much more attention was given to the work of local pastors and evangelists across the province than was given to role played by Nicholson.

There can be no doubt, as with the events of 1859, Baptists in Ulster benefited from the general revival of the period. In 1920 there were forty-one Baptist churches in Ireland with a little over 2,700 members. A decade later there were almost 3,600 members in fifty-seven churches. The revival also strengthened Baptists at a time when the church in Ulster was about to enter a period of ecclesiastical conflict as its own version of the Modernist versus Fundamentalist debate unfolded. While other denominations, especially the Presbyterians, were embroiled in this, Baptists emerged from the events of the 1920s firmly rooted in the historic Evangelical faith.



## CONCLUSION

Over recent decades historians of Ireland have increasingly recognized that the island's story must be understood in the context of its relationship to the Atlantic world. This has shaped its history economically, socially, educationally, politically, culturally and militarily. It has also shaped its history religiously, as the island has been impacted by the great Evangelical revivals. While these affected the state of all churches, they greatly benefited Irish Baptists, both indirectly and directly. As these historic events occurred Baptists were renewed and their witness on the island given new impetus. As a result, they helped to establish a significant Baptist witness in Ireland. Although there has been no period of revival in Ireland since the 1920s there have been important periods of growth for Irish Baptists. The most recent of these has been in the Republic of Ireland, where there was little direct impact from the revivals. Since 1990 the number of Baptist churches in the Republic has more than trebled.

- <sup>1</sup> David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew R. Holmes, "Protestant Dissent in Ireland," in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Volume II: The Long Eighteenth Century c. 1689-c. 1828*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 121.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 46.
- <sup>4</sup> Kevin Herlihy, "A Gay and Flattering World: Irish Baptist Piety and Perspective, 1650-1780" in *The Religion of Irish Dissent, 1650-1800*, ed. Kevin Herlihy (Blackrock: Four Courts, 1996), 66.
- <sup>5</sup> Herlihy, "Gay and Flattering World," 67.
- <sup>6</sup> R. E. Cotter, "John Cennick, 1718-1755: His Role in the Eighteenth-century International Revivals: Formation; Doctrine; Activity in Ireland" (Unpublished PhD diss., Queen's University of Belfast, 2019), 206, 207.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon spoke of "poor wicked Ireland." Joseph Belcher, *The Baptist Irish Society; Its Origin, History, and Prospects: With an Outline of the Ecclesiastical History of Ireland, and a Lecture, Enforcing its Claims on the Sympathy and Efforts of Christians in England* (London: The Baptist Irish Society, 1845), 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Cotter, "John Cennick," 207.
- <sup>9</sup> David Hempton, "Noisy Methodists and Pious Protestants: Evangelical Revival and Religious Minorities in Eighteenth-Century Ireland" in *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*, eds. George A. Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids and Montreal/Kingston: Baker and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 61.
- <sup>10</sup> Steven C. Smyrl, *Dictionary of Dublin Dissent: Dublin's Protestant Dissenting Meeting Houses, 1660-1920* (Dublin: A&A Farmer, 2009), 137.
- <sup>11</sup> La Trobe eventually joined the Moravians and became a prominent minister in England.
- <sup>12</sup> J. E. Hutton, *A History of the Moravian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Moravian Publication Office, 1909), 323, 324.

- 13 David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750–1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), 37.
- 14 Holmes, “Protestant Dissent,” 120.
- 15 Kevin Herlihy, “The Faithful Remnant: Irish Baptists, 1650–1750” in *The Irish Dissenting Tradition, 1650–1750*, ed. Kevin Herlihy (Blackrock: Four Courts, 1995), 65.
- 16 Hempton, “Noisy Methodists,” 63, 64.
- 17 Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*. ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 20.
- 18 Andrew Fuller and Andrew Gunton Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller: With a Memoir of His Life*, Vol.1 (Boston: Lincoln, Edmands and Co., 1833), 76.
- 19 David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740–1890* (London: Routledge, 1992), 51. Estimates of the number of deaths caused by the rebellion range between 10,000 and 50,000.
- 20 Jane Ohlmeyer, *Making Empire: Ireland, Imperialism, and the Early Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 197.
- 21 Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*. 52.
- 22 Belcher, *Baptist Irish Society*, 3,4.
- 23 Belcher, *Baptist Irish Society*, 3. There were, however, eleven other Baptist churches in Ulster that were not connected to those in the south. John Warburton, James Whitelaw and Robert Walsh, *History of the City of Dublin, from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time: Containing Its Annals, Antiquities, Ecclesiastical History, and Charters, Its Present Extent, Public Buildings, Schools, Institutions, &c., to Which Are Added, Biographical Notices of Eminent Men, and Copious Appendices of Its Population, Revenue, Commerce, and Literature*. Vol. 2 (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1818), 829.
- 24 D. P. Kingdon, *Baptist Evangelism in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*. (Belfast: Baptist Union of Ireland, 1965), 65.
- 25 Quoted in Kingdon, *Baptist Evangelism*, 35.
- 26 Joshua Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland 1792–1922: A Dimension of Protestant Dissent* (Unpublished PhD diss., Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, 1988), 135.
- 27 Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland*, 135.
- 28 J. G. M’Vicker, *Selected Letters with Brief Memoir of J.G. M’Vicker*, (London: Office of “Echoes of Service,” 1902), 31, 32.
- 29 Joseph Thompson, “The 1859 Revival with Particular Reference to the Baptist Churches in Ireland” in *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 17 (2009): 56.
- 30 John Weir, *The Ulster Awakening: An Account of the 1859 Revival in Ireland* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 28.
- 31 The population of Belfast at this time was almost 120,000 people.
- 32 Andrew R. Holmes, “The Ulster Revival of 1859: Causes, Controversies and Consequences,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63, No. 3 (July 2012): 489.
- 33 Holmes, “The Ulster Revival,” 503.
- 34 William Henry Harding, *The Ulster Revival of 1859* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1911), 6.
- 35 One possible source is Baptist Noel, pastor of John Street Baptist Church in London. He quoted this figure at a meeting of the Evangelical Alliance in 1859 suggesting it was probably an underestimate of the number of converts. See Thompson, “The 1859 Revival,” 58. Others in Ulster were more circumspect about the numbers converted, although few doubted the positive impact that the revival had on church life. See Holmes, “The Ulster Revival,” 508, 509.
- 36 Andrew R. Holmes, “Protestantism in the Nineteenth Century: Revival and Crisis”, in *The Cambridge History of Ireland Vol. 3: 1730–1880*, ed. James Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 344.
- 37 Quoted in *Irish Chronicle*, August 1859, 529. *Irish Chronicle* was an insert in the monthly *Baptist Magazine* which featured reports on the work of the BIS in Ireland.
- 38 *Irish Chronicle*, June 1860, 411.
- 39 Thompson, “The 1859 Revival,” 57.
- 40 *Irish Chronicle*, November 1859, 721.
- 41 *Irish Chronicle*, November 1859, 722.
- 42 *Irish Chronicle*, November 1859, 722.
- 43 *Irish Chronicle*, December 1859, 785.
- 44 *Irish Chronicle*, January 1860, 62.
- 45 *Irish Chronicle*, August 1859, 532.

- 46 Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland*, 149.
- 47 M'Vicker, *Selected Letters*, 14.
- 48 William McKillen, *History of Ballymena Baptist Church* (Unpublished manuscript).
- 49 *Irish Chronicle*, October 1860, 666.
- 50 Another notable example was Rev. R. M. Henry who had steered the Belfast Baptist church through the revival before later joining the Brethren movement.
- 51 Crawford Gribben, "Baptist or Brethren? Primitivism, Restorationism, and the Legacies of Alexander Carson," *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 29 (2022): 9.
- 52 Gribben, "Baptist or Brethren," 18-21. For a fuller discussion of Carson's charges against the Brethren see Crawford Gribben, *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 80-83.
- 53 Belfast despite being almost five times the size of Londonderry was not chartered as a city until 1888.
- 54 *Irish Chronicle*, October 1860, 667.
- 55 *Irish Chronicle*, December 1861, 790.
- 56 *Irish Chronicle*, December 1862, 810.
- 57 A Baptist church was not constituted in Londonderry until 1897.
- 58 Quoted in Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, 156.
- 59 *Irish Chronicle*, July 1859, 466.
- 60 Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland*, 152.
- 61 Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland*, 27.
- 62 Thompson, *Baptists in Ireland*, 291.
- 63 The Irish Free State was reconstituted as the Republic of Ireland in 1948.
- 64 Robert Lynch, *The Partition of Ireland: 1918-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 99, 100.
- 65 Andrew R. Holmes, "Revivalism and Fundamentalism in Ulster: W. P. Nicholson in Context," in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century*, eds., David Bebbington and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 263.
- 66 David N. Livingstone and Ronald A. Wells, *Ulster-American Religion: Episodes in the History of a Cultural Connection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 117.
- 67 Holmes, "Revivalism and Fundamentalism," 267.
- 68 S.W. Murray, *W.P. Nicholson: Flame for God in Ulster* (Belfast: The Presbyterian Fellowship, 1973), 12.
- 69 Murray, *Nicholson*, 14.
- 70 Livingstone and Wells, *Ulster-American Religion*, 125.
- 71 Murray, *Nicholson*, 16.
- 72 Murray, *Nicholson*, 17.
- 73 Murray, *Nicholson*, 19.
- 74 Murray, *Nicholson*, 27.
- 75 *Belfast Telegraph*, January 30, 1923, 4.
- 76 Murray, *Nicholson*, 23.
- 77 Andrew R. Holmes, *The Irish Presbyterian Mind: Conservative Theology, Evangelical Experience, and Modern Criticism, 1830-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 207.
- 78 T. K Wilson, "Almost frantic with joy". The Nicholson Revival and the Belfast Troubles, 1922-23' in *Irish Studies in Britain: New Perspectives on History and Literature*, eds. B. Griffin and E. McWilliams (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 98.
- 79 Holmes, *Presbyterian Mind*, 208.
- 80 Murray, *Nicholson*, 26.
- 81 Quoted in Livingstone and Wells, *Ulster-American Religion*, 119.
- 82 Murray, *Nicholson*, 27.
- 83 Quoted in Livingstone and Wells, *Ulster-American Religion*, 129.
- 84 *The Irish Baptist*, March-April 1923, 17.
- 85 *The Irish Baptist*, May-June 1922, 46.
- 86 *The Irish Baptist*, November-December 1921, 126.
- 87 *The Irish Baptist*, September-October 1923, 82.
- 88 *The Irish Baptist*, January-February 1922, 18.
- 89 *The Irish Baptist*, May-June 1922, 39.

---

<sup>90</sup> *The Irish Baptist*, July-August 1922, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Donnan, "The Centenary of Newtownards Baptist Church," *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 30 (2023): 53.

<sup>92</sup> J. H. Corbett, "Pioneering, Penetration and Progress: An Account of the Church at Portadown," *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 22 (1990-91): 13.

<sup>93</sup> *The Irish Baptist*, May-June 1922, 46.

<sup>94</sup> *The Irish Baptist*, November-December 1924, 96.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew R. Holmes, "The Experience and Understanding of Religious Revival in Ulster Presbyterianism, c. 1800-1930," *Irish Historical Studies* 34, no. 136 (2005): 361.