

# Global Revivals: A Comparison of Jonathan Edwards' Theology of Revivals and That of Ogbu Kalu and Their Contribution to Revivals in the Contemporary African Church

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## Abstract

The study sought to compare Jonathan Edward's theology of revivals and that of Ogbu Kalu and their contribution to revivals in the contemporary African Church. The undeniable fact is that there is probably not a single approach to the study of World Christianity that can be singled out as the sole universal one for all times. We live in a dynamic society, and many factors influence Christianity as a discipline. This study was desktop research. The paper discusses the work of two Christian scholars and theologians, namely Jonathan Edwards and Ogbu Kalu. While it is necessary to appreciate the various models of studying world Christianity that has been in place in the past, it is equally important to note the irresistible need to employ new and relevant approaches to this study. The study concludes that the Church of Christ will need to learn from Edwards and Kalu's theology of Revival on what a healthy and transformational revival entails. This will save the Church from embracing the sheer shallow usage of the term. The Church of Christ will be saved from the gross abuse of the term as a mere program or activity of the Church that makes people feel good.

**Key terms:** African church, global revivals, Jonathan Edwards theology, Ogbu Kalu revivals.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of World Christianity has taken varying approaches within diverse periods. The undeniable fact is that there is probably not a single approach to the study of World Christianity that can be singled out as the sole universal one for all times. We live in a dynamic society, and many factors influence Christianity as a discipline. While it is necessary to appreciate the various models of studying world Christianity that has been in place in the past, it is equally important to note the irresistible need to employ new and relevant approaches to this study. One of these approaches is that of looking at global revivals (Burns, 1960). In seeking to emphasize the significance of global revivals in the study of World Christianity, Burns observes that:

*In the history of religion, no phenomenon is more apparent than the recurrence of revivals. At certain intervals there sweeps over certain districts a strong urge of repentance. Most dead people in different spiritual realities become intensely awakened to them. They are arrested in the middle of their worldly passions. Large numbers of persons who have been dead or indifferent to spiritual realities then become intensely awakened to them. They are arrested in the midst of their worldly occupations; they are suddenly seized by a terror of wrongdoing, and fear of an impending doom haunts their minds. Flinging all else, they earnestly seek a way of escape and cry out for salvation (Burns, 1960).*

Despite the fact that there is a gross abuse of the term 'revival' in Christian circles, we need not neglect the wealth of resources that revivals provide for the study of global Christianity. Revivals need to be seen as delivery systems of all times through which people have experienced renewal. In other words, revivals are vehicles of revitalization. In this case, they play a vital role in shaping World Christianity. However, we need to be cautious of Burns's warning that "It is clearly impossible to deal with revivals as merely isolated phenomena or sporadic movements tossed up by chance in the convulsion of society (Burns, 1960).

These are God's designed modes of bringing about revitalisation to His people. This paper seeks to undertake a look at the theology of revivals as revealed by Ogbu Kalu and Jonathan Edwards and show how they provide a trajectory upon which contemporary Africa can frame her revival endeavours.

## Defining Revivals

Many scholars have endeavoured to define the term revival but from different standpoints depending on the context of their discussion. For the purpose of our World Christianity perspective, the term will be defined from a Christian's viewpoint. Revival is described as a holy spirit that comes forth to restore God's people to normal spiritual life after the declension period (Lovelace, 1979). In talking about restoration, it becomes clear that Revival has to do with recapturing an original intention of a movement that had been lost. In other words, a revival of religion presupposes a declension (Finney, 1978). It further presupposes that the Church is sunk into a state of returning backsliders back into the Church and converting sinners (Finney, 1978). This is a very unfortunate state in relation to the Church of Christ worldwide but has as well continued to occur throughout the history of the Church. To explain the 'lost original intention-phenomenon', Finney observes that:

*Men are so sluggish; there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion and to oppose the influence of the Gospel, that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles. They must be so surrounded that they will break over these counteracting influences before they obey God (Lovelace, 1979).*

Revivals, as earlier stated, become an important vehicle that God uses to bring back the original intention of a movement. God works through this vehicle to restore back the Church to His original intended purpose and keep the Church in His (God's) mission.

Since the definition of revivals given in this paper is from a Christian viewpoint, it will be necessary to

keep in mind the unique indicators of genuine Revival. It is not, however, the intention of this paper to go into details, and so a summary of these can be seen from what Lovelace says:

*Experiences of renewal which are genuinely from the Holy Spirit are God-centered in character, based on worship, an appreciation of God's worth and grandeur divorced from self-interest. Such experiences create humility in the convert rather than pride and issue in the creation of a new spirit of meekness, gentleness, forgiveness and mercy. They leave the believer hungering and thirsting after righteousness instead of satiated with self-congratulation (Lovelace, 1979).*

### Edward's Theology of Revivals

Just as the definition of revivals is diverse depending on the context in which the term is being used, so is the interpretation of revivals. It is important to note that different Christian scholars have held different interpretations of revivals throughout the history of Christianity. Two Christian scholars and theologians will be discussed in this paper, namely Jonathan Edwards and Ogbu Kalu.

Edwards saw revivals as 'the glorious work of God, a sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit which restored the Church to normal spiritual life after the period of spiritual decline (Lovelace, 1979). Revivals were not mere human initiatives or chance-based occurrences. God, that is, must bestow the Holy Spirit by his own sovereign initiative before individuals can have a right perception of him (Valer, 1733). This glorious work of God has a twofold purpose, namely, restoring the backslidden Christian and redeeming the sinners. Edwards sees it as purely an act of the sovereign God to humanity. Taylor and Hawkins observe that "When God chooses to do a sovereign work of revival, it seems that regardless of where the church is located, he literary brings the mission field to its door (Taylor & Hawkins, 1975). This is to suggest that Revival is God's initiative to revitalize people's relationship with Him and that in His sovereignty, he overrules every possible human intervention mechanism. For instance, geographical location

cannot hinder God's sovereign work of Revival. Edwards wrote in his treatise on the human will that the will was free to act in ordinary matters of life but that morally it was bound and helpless.

Edwards also saw revivals as the operational vehicle that God used to accomplish His magisterial plan for cosmic redemption. This was reflected in many of Edward's sermons which depicted God as self-revealing through these revival encounters. Valer Mark says that:

*This spiritual and divine light doesn't consist in any impression made upon the imagination. 'Tis no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes: 'tis no imagination or idea of an outward light or glory, or any beauty of form or countenance, or a visible lustre or brightness of any object. This spiritual light is the dawning of the light of glory in the heart (Valer, 19733).*

Since Revival involves a revelation that an individual receives about God and the human predicament and then passes it on to others, we see the role that Revival played in being a vehicle of God making Himself and His will, known to people. This can be explained well by looking at Blumhofer's article on 'Consuming Fire: Pandita Ramabai and the Global Pentecostalism'. In this study, the author demonstrates how Revival came to the Mukti community and notes a firsthand witness.

Abrams observed:

*One June morning at 3:30, Abrams awakened to pounding on her door. She found an excited student who summoned Abrams to a dormitory. There Abrams found a woman who, the night before, had agonized in prayer for the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Abrams put it as follows: At three o'clock in the morning, the Lord awoke her with the fire coming down upon her. It was a wonderful time. She cried out in fright. She had not experienced such a thing, and the young women sleeping on either side of her sprung up and saw the fire. One of them ran across the room, picked up a pail of water and brought it to dash upon*

this young woman when she discovered she wasn't on fire. It was a case of the "burning bush" over again. All the young women got up;

I got there at a quarter of four, and the young women in that compound were kneeling about, weeping, and confessing their sins to God. So began the long-anticipated revival at Mukti. The next day, June 30 1905, Abrams was summoned with the news that "the Holy Ghost has come into the church." She found "all in the room weeping and praying, some kneeling, some sitting, some standing, many with hands outstretched to God. . . . Words of help were of no avail. God was dealing with them and they could listen to no one else (Blumhofer, 2001).

The above scenario demonstrates how God, in His sovereignty, used this extraordinary occurrence to not only reveal Himself but to bring about a spiritual awakening amongst the Mukti community. Through this vehicle, God was able to reveal Himself even to the wider community of India.

Edwards further saw Revival as involving both a spiritual and a social dimension. Lovelace observes the following,

*Edwards establishes the principle that a full-fledged revival will involve a balance between personal concern for individuals and social concern. A revival is, therefore, not something exclusively 'spiritual' and 'religious'. Edwards insists that the proliferation of religiosity in the form of meetings, prayer, singing and religious talk will not promote or sustain Revival without works of love and mercy, which will 'bring the God of love down from heaven to earth... to set up his tabernacle with men on earth, and dwell with them (Lovelace, 1979).*

In many cases, Revival has been associated with spiritual dynamics alone. This argues Edwards is not an indicator of a healthy revival. Individual interests, as well as corporate interests, must be factored into any full-fledged revival. True Revival should be

embodied in both our spiritual and social realms of being.

According to Edwards, revivals involved spiritual warfare. This warfare, according to Edwards, touched on two spheres, namely, conflict with the fallen nature and conflict with the powers of darkness. Lovelace, in explaining this aspect, says,

*Since the work of Revival involves the displacement of the world, the flesh and the devil, periods of renewal are times of great spiritual agitation in which troop movements on both sides are dimly visible in the background. As the sun shining on a swamp produces a mist, the rising of the countenance of God among his people may result initially in disorders and confusion (Lovelace, 1979).*

It is clearly observed that most of the writings of Edwards were a response to accusations or criticisms posted to him by his opponents. But we also need to note that it was not the primary reason for such writings because, at the same time, these writings were used to inspire the Church at the time. An incident that occurred during Edwards' time and acted as a clear indicator of struggle is the untimely death of his uncle. It is observed that,

*In June 1735, Edwards's uncle Joseph Hawley, certain that he was damned and incapable of conversion, killed himself by slitting his throat. The tragedy cast a pall over the town, and from that point on, the Revival waned precipitously. A disconsolate Edwards watched as his congregation, including many of those who were supposedly converted, returned to their "vicious habits" and general indifference to religion (Hickman, 1995).*

Finally, Edward's theology of revivals is the aspect of scripture. He believed that scripture was mandatory in bringing about awakening in the mind of man. Scripture was, in Edwards' eyes, the divine means of awakening and determining man's will (Hickman, 1995). Edwards believed that the preacher was instrumental in presenting the truth of the message of scripture and letting and leaving the rest to the Holy Spirit. This was crucial in that it

is the word of God that produces consciousness of sin in the hearts of people. Edward's sermons are said to have produced this kind of consciousness.

## Ogbu Kalu's Theology of Revivals

Ogbu Kalu held scripture as of paramount importance to any genuine Christian revival. This is seen in what he says about the genesis of Revival. He alludes that;

*At several points in time, a movement would flare up as certain elements in the gospel, either it is charismatic/pneumatic resource or its ethical imperative, would be emphasized enough to compel a new expression of its spirituality and structure (Ogbu, 2005).*

What Kalu seems to be advocating is that without hearing the Gospel, as found also stated in Romans 10:17, it would be difficult to experience a lasting revival. True Christian Revival is embedded in an understanding of the Gospel. The issue of translation of scripture into vernacular comes into play at this point. Sanneh observes that "it was by such a natural congruence with the vernacular that the Christian impact sent sound waves reverberating throughout the land (Lamin, 1984)". Further, Sanneh adds that "it must be stressed that, for most converts, the Bible that they came to know was the vernacular Scripture, so that in the new vessel of a written sacred text converts heard God addressing them in the old, familiar Idioms (Lamin, 1984)". The emphasis is on the fact that scripture ought to be in the language of the people in order for them to hear God well and be convicted well.

Kalu sees Revival as involving both the individual as well as the communal aspect of the people. He does not see the individual as the sole focus of Revival. According to Kalu, since Revival involves conversion, it is to be noted that the consequences of that conversion are to impact beyond the individual convert. This ties in with what Edwards holds about Revival impacting individual and communal aspects of people.

Revival goes beyond the transformation of the mind and heart to affect the emotional being of the

person. In revivals, there could be a 'violent expression of feelings with tears and cries, with shaking and convulsion, with a falling to the ground and even unconsciousness (Ogbu, 2005). Kalu is here arguing that the impact of Revival manifests itself in diverse ways covering some emotional expressions as stated above, although this may not be said to be the norm for all revivals.

Kalu attests to the fact that revivals, especially in the African context, come at the Centre of African efforts to cope with colonialism, white settlers and missionaries (Ogbu, 2005). This analogy is based on the argument that in the face of suffering or denial of certain freedom or rights, people would seek divine assistance. In the process, God would bring in either a new light leader who receives direct revelation from God and, in turn, begins to announce the possibility of new hope in God. He observes that "The prophet that emerged in times of social convulsion was marked by several features. For the most part, they were marginalized characters, outsiders who experienced a call to challenge people and to adopt a new lifestyle (Ogbu, 2005)". People would find consolation in God and seek Him more for their protection and prosperity. However, Kalu's caution against taking a functionalist interpretation to such situations should be taken seriously.

## A comparison of Edwards and Kalu's Theology of Revivals

In a majority of their perspectives, Edwards and Kalu share similar positions on revivals except for the difference in the way they express it. It will not be possible in this small paper to go into details pertaining to each and every aspect of their theology of revivals, but a general overview will be given.

Both Edwards and Kalu agree on the role of Scripture in Revival. They see scripture as mandatory to the illumination of the mind of people and in the process of convicting people of their sinfulness. On the issue of emotional expression, both Edwards and Kalu agree that Revival is beyond the mind and heart of the person. It brings about the excitement that is expressed through emotions such as crying, shouting, sobbing

and so forth. While they are not arguing for emotional expressions as the norm for Revival, both of them seem to see an aspect in which the emotional realm of the person is impacted. "True revelation evokes love, esteem, and trust—responses of the faculty of the will (which, by Edwards' use here, includes moral judgment) rather than of the understanding (Valer, 1733)".

Edwards and Kalu see Revival as involving both individual interests as well as communal interests. They do not see Revival as an experience that stops at the level of the individual but one that moves the individual to impact the surrounding. Stopping at the individual level will invalidate the credibility of the Revival. God has a larger mission than the individual person. Shaw notes that "revivals for Edwards were not only vehicles of personal renewal but also revitalization movements that would change the world (Shaw, 2010)".

The only point of contention that I see in the theology of revivals between Edwards and Kalu is that of the origin of the revivals. Edwards seems to be arguing that it is purely the divine work of the Holy Spirit without any form of Human catalyst. Shaw notes, "For Edwards, a spiritual awakening occurs when such a doctrine of grace becomes vividly alive through the divine and supernatural light of the Holy Spirit (Shaw, 2010)". Kalu, on the other hand, seems to see a situation in the background that leads people to seek divine intervention. "In Africa, many revivals appear amidst African efforts to cope with colonialism, white settlers and missionaries (Shaw, 2010)".

## Relevance of Edwards and Kalu's Theology of Revivals

What is our greatest need today? Investors are claiming it is financial security. Insurance salesmen are insisting our greatest need is adequate retirement benefits and protection. Social workers are stressing it is feeding and clothing the poor. Educators tell us our greatest need is more learning. Ask fifty people that question, and most likely, you will receive fifty different answers! However, I am convinced our greatest need today is Revival, the kind of Revival that results in

repentance, restitution, reunited homes, and love, love, love (Taylor & Hawkins, 1975).

Edwards and Kalu act as the model of the desperate revival model that we need today. They represent a revival paradigm that is worth considering in the contemporary African Church. We live in times when the Church of Christ has become compromised and when it is hard to distinguish between the Church and the world. With all the up-surgings such as globalization, secularism, pluralism, and so forth confronting and shaping Christianity, the Church of Christ is faced with the danger of being ineffective and embracing that which seems popular and comfortable. Lovelace once noted that "Periods of spiritual decline occur in history because of the gravity of indwelling sin that keeps pulling believers first into formal religion and then into open apostasy (Lovelace, 1979)". We seem to be confronted by such a situation. Edwards and Kalu's theology of revivals becomes an important springboard through which the Church can begin to relook at her spirituality.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** In a time like the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when the term revival litters Church advertisement boards, Television announcements and Christian literature, just to mention, the Church of Christ will need to learn from Edwards and Kalu's theology of Revival on what a healthy and transformational revival entails. This will save the Church from embracing the sheer shallow usage of the term. The Church of Christ will be saved from the gross abuse of the term as a mere program or activity of the Church that makes people feel good. Benjamin's observation is important to the Church of Christ at such a time when he says, "In every age of scepticism, immorality and confusion, preaching evangelism has been the only immediately effective answer. Can our largely ineffective church schools, our well-oiled ecclesiastical machinery, or even moral and social reform through political pressure do the job (Benjamin, 1968)?" Both Kalu and Edwards offer the contemporary African Church a premise upon which to look at Revival and upon the wish to base the revival endeavour.

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