

Notes on *Letters on Revival* by Ebenezer Porter  
1858; Banner of Truth, 2004

Background: Ebenezer Porter gave these lectures in 1832 as the President of Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, a Congregational spinoff from Harvard, which was sinking quickly into Unitarianism (vii). Andover was known in its day as the “West Point of Orthodoxy.” They contain lessons he had drawn from the early days of the New England experience of the Second Great Awakening (1773-1788; 6). His observations and interpretations of the history are those of historic Calvinism (not to be confused with today’s New Calvinism). [This note-taker does not share all of President Porter’s theology in this regard.]

### Letter One

Theme: The What of Revival

1. Dependence on God’s Spirit in gospel ministry (2).
2. Spirit-changed pastors (3).
3. Avoidance of Holy Spirit counterfeits (6).
4. Avoidance of politics (7).
5. Salvation and sanctification of church children (7).
6. The power of small victories (10).
7. Renovated rather than dying local churches (11).

Summary of the “What of Revival”: Revival is the conversion of lost sinners, whether many or few, by the power of God’s Spirit, accompanied by a renewed awe in believers in response to the presence of the Lord in the work (6).

### Letter Two

Theme: The Preaching of Revival

1. It is gospel preaching (14).
2. It is uniform preaching, i.e. focused on conversion of sinners, not theological controversy (17).
3. It is simple, passionate, biblical, practical preaching (18-19).

4. It is interdependent preaching (23).
5. It is prayer-supported preaching (24).
6. It is male preaching (25).
7. It is discipline-supported preaching (26).

Summary: The author spends time reconciling Calvinism with the need for preaching, which somewhat interrupts his on-the-whole valuable counsel about the nature of what it means to preach the Word so as to encourage revival.

### Letter Three

Theme: Hindrances of Revivals

1. There are often none in spite of the lack of revival (27).
2. Pastors with too little reliance on God (27-31).
3. Ministry transience (32).
4. No discipline (33; see also 115).
5. Discord (33; see also 62-63).
6. Ecclesiastical provincialism and rivalry (33).
7. Expectations out of sync with the work of God's Spirit (34; see Mark 9:17-40).

Summary: After listing these hindrances, the author emphasizes the need for a deep conviction of sin, conviction which is best not accompanied by responses that engender confusion in the meeting.

### Letter Four

Theme: The Imperceptibility of Conversion.

Summary: While the author's emphasis on the imperceptibility of conversion is difficult to reconcile with preaching like Peter's in Acts 2:38 (the ordinance of credo-baptism seems to solve biblically many of the concerns of the author in this regard; see 66-67), it may be helpful in dealing with people to know that it is possible for them to be converted with saving faith without a full understanding of what that means. Valuable insights in the chapter

include: (1) none is saved without an acknowledgement of the sin-plague of his own heart (56), and (2) the salvation of a sinner is wholly of God – His grace must be given all the credit for the work of salvation (57).

## Letter Five

Theme: The Results of Revival

- (1) Changed lives (few examples of apostatizing professors; 74-75).
- (2) Assembly faithfulness (76).
- (3) Unity (76).
- (4) Humbled pastors (78).
- (5) A spirit of gratitude (81).

Summary: The biblical list of results would seem to be similar to these: multiplication of disciples (Acts 6:1, 7); of the Word of God (Acts 12:24); and of local churches (Acts 9:31). It would seem that there is a sense in which the results of revival are simply the normative results of the Christian life and mission.

## Letter Six

Theme: Some Concerns of Revivals

1. God's glory (85).
2. Balance (86).
3. Faithfulness (87).
4. Two elements of preaching – accountability of sinners and their dependence on divine grace (89).
5. Primacy of the local church (91, 95).
6. Importance of a beloved pastor (92).
7. Godly pastoral assistance (93).
8. "Above all, and more than all, acknowledge God and the power of his Spirit as the only agent able to overcome the deep aversion of sinners to all good, and make them submissive to his will" (99).
9. Passion (102).

Summary: The chapter concludes with counsel to be conservative regarding admission of members. "The strength of a church consists not in the number, but in the character of those who belong to it" (112). However, the author does recognize an opposite danger of waiting too long (117). It would seem that it is God's will for every baptized believer, no matter how newly born again, to be added to His church (Acts 2:47). Those added daily, it would seem, had not waited six months. It is normal for newly saved babes in Christ to not yet be mature believers, albeit members of the body (contra 114).

## Letter Seven

### Theme: Conclusion

Summary: In order to promote the work of God's Spirit in the salvation of souls and the sanctification of believers, we must "correctly . . . understand and represent the subject of divine influence in the conversion of sinners" (118). One need not be a consistent Calvinist to appreciate this brother's main concern, that "all speculations which tend to exalt human instrumentality and diminish a humble reliance on God as fundamentally erroneous, and fatal to the spirit of genuine revivals" (126). The true work of God's Spirit produces a love of holiness, not a love of happiness (131).

Whatever we do, however, we must not let the fear of being incorrect paralyze us to do nothing (136). In the end, God uses the weak things of the world in a mighty way. "So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" (1 Cor. 3:7).