

THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL:

A Brief History, Its Beliefs and Practices

“To be broken is the beginning of revival . . . It is being ‘Not I, but Christ’ and a ‘C’ is a bent ‘I’ . . . it is dying to self and self-attitudes.” Roy Hession.

“When self is on the throne, it is conspicuously out of place. . . . Revival begins by putting a line through the ‘I’ which is at the Center, and turning it into a cross.”

Festo Kivengere.

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1 John 1.7 (ESV)

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2.20 (ESV)

My childhood was exposed to the East African Revival although the term East African Revival was unknown to us. All we knew was that as conventions were held at our local church, sinners were converted and their lives changed dramatically. They left their life of sin, some unknown to us, and confessed their sins publicly, and began a new life.

Later I drifted away from the church and was captured by youthful sinful habits. The worst of all for me was the sin of filthy speech, obviously rooted in my lustful thoughts. I tried several times to shake off this sin without success. By the time I joined the University of Nairobi to study Mathematics and Chemistry, the habit had taken root beyond my own power to conquer.

On June 18 1976, a university student shared with me about this salvation, which I had known from my childhood, and I accepted Jesus as my Saviour. The change in my speech was immediate, and of course there were other transformations which followed. To date I marvel how God takes an utterer of obscenities and changes him into a preacher - no longer speaking unutterable words, but the very Gospel that brings men and women to eternity.

When I returned to Uganda, I sought out the Revival fellowship meeting. While I was well equipped with scriptures, this fellowship taught me how to walk. One of the resultant challenges I got was to ‘put right’ anything what had gone wrong in my past so that I could walk without a guilty conscience about them. Thus I was convicted to go back to my former secondary school where I had stolen ‘James Bond’ books to make restitution. What was this move of the Holy Spirit then?

First of all, the word ‘Revival’ does not occur in the Bible though we know what it means. Secondly, often the people experiencing a revival do not think it as such in the beginning. This was true of the early days of *The East African Revival*. Converts were riding on the crest of the wave of Revival. I intend to dwell somewhat on what they experienced and what characterized their life.

The Stirrings of a Revival

It is wrong to discuss the East African Revival as a relic of history since the importance of this revival had an abiding impact; it defined Christianity and the Church in East Africa. The second challenge is to place dates to a Revival. It is like asking: ‘When did God begin the revival?’ A strange question indeed!

In the 1920’s, the Anglican Church in Uganda and Ruanda had stagnated spiritually.

Two men had one burden. They were the Englishman Dr. Joe Church and the Ugandan Simeoni Nsibambi. Church was a Cambridge graduate greatly influenced by the message of the Keswick Convention in England. He was going to Gahini, Rwanda, as a missionary. Nsibambi was a government employee and wealthy. He had been converted in 1922.

Their common burden for the Church led them to the scriptures and prayer together on Namirembe Hill, Kampala in 1929. Both were burdened with the nominalism and syncretism in the Church. The cleavage of English and African, white and black that resulted between the two was to become a characteristic of many other such cohesions in the East African Revival.

Nsibambi led his own brother, Blasio Kigozi, to Christ. But it seemed that Kigozi had ‘a double portion’ of the Spirit who rested on Nsibambi. God called him to Gahini Mission Station as a missionary schoolmaster in 1929. Blasio’s fervor in prayer and preaching lit the fires of Revival. He asked three insightful questions:

1. What is the cause of coldness and deadness of the Church of Uganda?
2. Why are the people allowed to come to the Lord’s Table who are living in open sin?
3. What must be done to bring revival to the Church of Uganda?

We could ask similar questions today, especially when institutional Christianity threatens to replace our precious faith. Unfortunately, he died during the early days of Revival in 1936.

God chose Gahini, a small unknown place in Rwanda to launch the fires of Revival. There were dreams and visions, and contrition over sin that marked the work of the Holy Spirit from the beginning. Unbelievers saw how they were destined to perish if they did not turn to Christ. Those forgiven by God testified to all and sundry about their newfound faith, and others were drawn to the Saviour too.

A week-long convention was held in Kabale in September, 1935 led by Joe Church, Simeoni Nsibambi and Blasio Kigozi. Although few were saved at the first convention, the next months were to reveal **a deep divine conviction of sin and unflagging zeal for righteousness**. Revival had come to the Church in Uganda, with the same marks of conviction of sin as had been witnessed in Rwanda. Since then, deca-annual conventions are held in Kabale, the next will be in 2015.

Bishop Stuart of Namirembe welcomed the team from Gahini to conduct a mission at Bishop Tucker College in June, 1936. Forty students were converted and they became the living embers of revival wherever they were posted in Uganda. **They witnessed as individuals and as teams.**

The clergy and the missionaries were for the most part the least eager for the evangelistic task, except for the few who had been revived. God used the laity to enthusiastically proclaim Christ. Thus **Evangelism became the common life of the entire Church**, both ordained and lay, a phenomenon in East Africa today attributable to this Revival.

In fact, the East African Revival introduced a mode of evangelism yet unknown in the church, namely, using every opportunity to preach the Gospel. All manner of social or religious functions are used to proclaim Jesus Christ. Both happy and sorrowful events are an opportunity for the Gospel. Funerals of Revival brethren (and even unbelievers) are evangelistic campaigns as much as their weddings! Paul's exhortation to "preach the Gospel in season and out of season" became and is the lifestyle of revival brethren. Interestingly this has become accepted by all, believers and unbelievers alike.

Remarkably, the 'Brethren' or 'Balokole' (the Saved), as they were called, felt strongly **God's call to stay in the Church**. There was no doctrinal compulsion to leave. Even Roman Catholics who were saved did not leave until their church sent them out.

The Balokole were marked with **a sincere love for one another and overflowing joy**. They endured hardships together and rejoiced together. One of the most distinctive features of the revival is the song "Tukutendereza", which is sang joyfully across East Africa among revivalists. The words are:

Tukutendereza Yesu	(We praise You Jesus)
Yesu Mwana Gw'endiga	(Jesus the Lamb)
Omusaayi Gwo Gunaziza	(Your Blood has cleansed me)
Nkwebaza Omulokozi	(I thank You, Savior).

The first line in the song, "Tukutendereza Yesu" also became the greeting used when two Balokole met. Today it has received various iterations such as, "Praise the Lord", or "Praise God", and so forth.

Its Beliefs and Practices

My purpose is to highlight *the beliefs and practices the Revival has bequeathed to the church today in her preaching and practice.*

I. The Centrality of Jesus

Probably the most prominent theme is the centrality of Jesus. As Nagenda put it so well, the focus of 'revival' preaching was 'Jesus', not 'revival'. Sin alienates man from God, from fellow man and even from himself. The Son of God appeared as the divine answer to the problem of sin.

This Jesus is the Crucified One - Jesus and the Cross are synonymous. They proclaimed, *"There is life for a look at the Crucified One - Look! Look! Look and live"*. Oh, how we need to preach Christ crucified uncompromisingly! This

'... was the center of the movement that had to be guarded - the preaching of the Cross, the Person of Christ, and the response of repentance and faith. "Please don't speak about the Revival," urged William Nagenda repeatedly, "Let us talk about Jesus"' (Porter 1979, 34).

For Jesus the Saviour bore the price for their sins. That Name is sweet indeed to the believer's ear. *"The emphasis in the fellowship is definitely Christo-centric. ... (Whereas) ... the majority can just barely read, (yet) their confidence is in their great indebtedness to the Lord Himself, who met them in the mire of sin, saved and set them free from judgment and condemnation."* (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 149-150).

The theme of the 1945 Kabale Convention was "Jesus Satisfies" church reported that people were called upon to pray to the *"Holy Spirit to show you only Jesus.."* because *"real revival is just walking with Jesus, victoriously, moment by moment and day by day"* (Church 1977a, 17, 20).

There is a very telling paragraph from one message:

"I believe He is saying these most intimate words to us: "Can you see Me there, hanging on the cross? I was dying as the Lamb, slain for the sin of the world. Yet I was a King; for I came from heaven. Can You see my crown, as I died for you? But it was a crown of thorns. Can you see my throne? Yes, but my throne was a cross. Can you see my title? The King of the Jews. But can you see all this, and still remain blind? This is His conversation with us" (Church 1977a, 28).

Without a doubt the East African Revival presented Christ Crucified. *"When a man meets the Christ of Calvary, self-effort dies away"* (Church 1977a, 38). There is one conclusion. There is no Revival without Jesus Christ crucified.

The Aversion to Sin

The East African Revival preached a strong aversion to sin. The first work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner is to create hatred for sin and terror for its consequences (Church 1937, 51; Porter 1979, 20; John 16.8-11). *Revivalists testify about the sins Jesus*

saved them from. Indeed a testimony is incomplete without God's supreme forgiveness.

This. Bishop Festo pointed out that it is not to gloat over a brother's weakness; rather the sharing of the powerful cleansing of the blood of Jesus; no longer dirty linen but spotlessly clean! **My Testimony.**

“ . . . When a brother stood up and confessed openly his sin, ... the rest of the people were not paying much attention to the sin confessed. Before (he finished his) confession, they ... burst out in ... praise” (Sempangi 1978, 24).

Revival conventions opened with preaching on Sin (Church 1981, 116-117, 139). At the Kako convention of 1938, Nsibambi aptly summarized revival abhorrence for sin **“with his strong insistent voice and his long remembered ‘Ekibi kibi nnyo!’ which is a forceful way of saying ‘Sin is very bad indeed’”** (Church 1981, 139).

However, as much as they laid emphasis on the ‘sinfulness of sin’, they also were quick to show the sinner the overflowing mercy or grace of God. God's mercy flowed sufficiently through His Son, Jesus (Church 1981, 139).

The Holy Spirit

To the East African Revival brethren, revival is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Church 1981, 238-239). In the book, *Every Man a Bible Student*, a collection of subjects in revival teaching, the Holy Spirit **“wakens, He revives, He gives the burning heart, and He lights up the faces of men and women to be truly Christ-like”** (Church 1977b, 69)¹.

The very initial stirring in the hearts of believers and unbelievers were considered the work of the Holy Spirit (Church 1981, 125, 142, 170, 189, 228).

“Revival is the fruit of the Spirit, and is, therefore normal spiritual life” (St. John 1971, 121).

In Rwanda, those who were revived were at first given the name Abaka; literally “those aflame”. They were aflame because the Holy Spirit had ‘torched’ them (Smith 1946, 110).

The Holy Spirit is He who points sinners to the Savior. It is **“through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus is revealed to His people, through the Holy Spirit the brethren are enabled by looking to the Cross”** (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 219).

The speakers at the Kabale (1975) convention of the East African Revival exhorted their hearers to **“ask the Holy Spirit to show you only Jesus . . . calling you**

to come and drink” (Church 1977a, 17). The Holy Spirit shows a sinner convicted of sin the refuge in Jesus. Church summed up His work in these words:

(The Holy Spirit) inspires men to build, . . . to speak, to preach, He gives people respect, caring, courtesy and love. He gives true fear of God, and understanding of the blood of Christ as God’s remedy for sin, He helps men to bow their stubborn wills, to repent, to humble themselves, to yield and so to be set free (Church 1977b, 69).

There was definite emphasis on being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’. We are denied this fullness due to sin in our lives. In other words, there is moral conversion for a Christian filled with the Holy Spirit of God (Church 1977a, 39; 1977b, 72-73; St. John 1971, 70).

Moral Transformation

“There was no conscious spiritual pride in this, it sprang from jealousy for the truth and the fair Name of Christ” (Smith 1946, 105). The Balokole were burdened for those whose lives were compromised by sin.

. . . . This is the great message of the Revival, Cleansing and Victory through His Blood. For ourselves it means death to self-pleasing which means lust, and self-seeking which means pride.

Revival Christo-centricity is the root of all the moral transformation that has been the most remarkable manifestation of conversion among the revivalists.

The pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus over and above every other consideration makes the movement Christo-centric, and through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus is revealed to His people, through the Holy Spirit the brethren are enabled by looking to the cross, to be broken, repent, make restitution, share it with the brethren and rejoice in forgiveness frequently. (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 219).

For the Balokole it was incomprehensible that one should profess the name of Jesus without any visible change from a sinful lifestyle. The resultant lifestyle so reshaped the opinion of secular society that the secular community’s recognition of a Mulokole’s moral integrity was well known (Porter 1979, 34).

The Fellowship

Another remarkable feature of the revival was their fellowship (Smith 1946, 110); or to put it differently “the unity of the Holy Spirit” (Warren 1954, 48).

A saved man is a friend of all and no longer bothers about denominations. . . . This is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Africa today all those who have been saved by the Lord feel that they are one. . . . This is the work of the Spirit. He who has the Lord inside him has no war inside. . . . (Warren 1954, 112).

The word 'Fellowship' also means the gathering of brethren where they pray, testify and read the Bible together week by week.

The Bible

Church's book, "Every Man a Bible Student", made clear that *there is no book of greater worth or with a truer message to a Mulokole than the Bible*. The Bible is the most prized possession he has; and he reads it. He carries it to Church and to fellowship meetings (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 195; Warren 1954, 95). No Mulokole would allow even poverty to deny him the treasure of the written scriptures.

When we read the Bible, we hear the word of God and receive it with faith. Even unbelievers are counted to be under its authority. For the scriptures tell of the Savior of all mankind.

No Balokole fellowship meeting is complete without a reading from the Bible. At each of these meetings, each carries his or her own Bible and opens it as God's Word is preached (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 195).

Brokenness

In the East African Revival there is the practice and preaching of Brokenness. During the early days of Revival, a Mututsi sub-chief, Kilimenti Semugabo had a dream.

. . . He said: "I saw all the host of heaven and I heard the voice of God calling to His Son who stood before Him. Then God said, 'My Son, are you willing to go down to the earth which Satan has spoiled, to save the world? The Lord Jesus standing erect, then bowed His head and said, 'Yes, Father'. Then a second question came: 'My Son are you willing to be born as a human being into a very poor home, and to be deserted by all your friends and family to die a very cruel death?' Again the Lord bowed His head and said, 'Yes Father'. Then a third question came: 'Are you willing, my Son, as you die for the sins of the world, for me, Your Father, to hide my face?' Then for a few moments Christ stood erect, and paused, while all heaven waited. Then He bowed slowly and said, 'Not my will, but Thy will, Oh My Father.' . . . I saw Christ dying for me, I found myself gazing at Him on the Cross as He bowed His head for my sins, and I heard a voice saying to me, 'Are you a thief? But quickly I stiffened my neck and said, 'No, I'm not. It's only what everyone does!' Then as I looked at the One on the Cross looking down at me my heart melted, and I bowed my head to Him and said, 'Yes, Lord, I am a thief. It is I who should have died, not you' (Church 1981, 218).

Each 'Yes, Father' that Jesus uttered was an expression of brokenness, and so was the bowing of His neck at the Cross. The Christian's brokenness emulates that of his Lord. The original resistance and self-assertiveness are replaced with humility and readiness to admit and repent where we are wrong.

In a home, say, the 'self-first' attitude is crucified and in humility the husband or wife looks to the interests of the spouse and others (Phil 2.3, 4; Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 169).

Hession writing after his study of the East African Revival (Church 1981, 236) says:
. . . The first thing we must learn is that our wills must be broken to His will. To be broken is the beginning of Revival. It is painful, it is humiliating, but it is the only way. It is being "Not I, But Christ," and a "C" is a bent "I". The Lord Jesus cannot live in us fully and reveal Himself through us until the proud self within us is broken. This simply means that the hard unyielding self, which justifies itself, wants its own way, stands up for its rights, and seeks its own glory, at last bows its head to God's will, admits its wrong, gives up its own way to Jesus, surrenders its rights and discards its own glory - that the Lord Jesus might have all and be all. In other words it is dying to self and self-attitudes.
 (Hession 1950, 13).

Brokenness is yielding to what God says to you in a situation, individually or corporately. This will often be through the brethren, your wife or husband. *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"* (Galatians 2.20).

Walking in the Light

Revival leads to '*Walking in the Light*'. This is *transparency with each other in the fellowship*. *"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, ..."* (1 John 1.5-7). **Real fellowship with each other is impossible while Christians still wear masks before one another.** They may be masks of race or tribe or education or superiority or pride or whatever. **We must be unmasked to have fellowship with each other.**

In brethren's fellowship there is a segment of time allotted to 'Walking in the Light' during which, within the limits of decency, any has the freedom to share 'what God has worked in their life or put on their hearts'. In particular, each is able to share about how God has been with them in the recent past (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 166). Revival is personal before it is corporate. It is genuinely about one's life, not a 'put-on'.

Walking in the Light also means that others can challenge you about your life deeply. It is not invasion of your space; it is the love of Christ compelling them so that you walk in fellowship with others. For example, it was unthought of for a young man to find a girl to marry and resolve it independent of the brethren. Often brethren would even suggest a girl to marry.

Conversion and Repentance

Salvation is about being 'saved'. Their testimony was, "Jesus saved me" (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 155, 172, 212).

The statement "Jesus saved me" or indeed the whole question of salvation begs the question, "From what?" it is known that "the main cause of Man's problem today is sin" (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 145). *Through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ man receives forgiveness, cleansing from all sin and victory over sin's crippling power; these are the essence of this salvation.*

The Balokole never understood themselves as being sinless, as some have misrepresented them (King 1968, 161). (King 1968, 161). Otherwise they would have done away with their strong teaching on repentance even among believers.

Conversion also means victory over death, which had for centuries wrought fear in unbelieving hearts and was mourned with a feeling of helplessness among Africans. In fact funerals become opportunity for witness. No wailing in the traditional fashion was necessary; death had died at Calvary (Church 1937, 43). The funeral of a Mulokole is an extended evangelistic service with several testimonies urging the hearers to find salvation for themselves even today (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 216).

This leads us to **Repentance**. In the East African Revival *repentance is a moral act*; any definition that suppresses this fact is alien to the revival understanding of the word. *Repentance before God is followed by an actual turning from dead works and “putting things right”/restitution with fellow man*. Respectability cannot work the righteousness of God.

. . . *All sin and sources of evil must be cut and restitutions made to all parties.*

As long as stolen goods still lie on our shelves, the believer’s soul will be plagued by guilt with every sight of them. A break with past evil influences necessitates some ‘clean-up’ work so that the new Christian can have “a clear conscience toward God and toward man” (Acts 24.16).

The principle is generally applied in relationships. Any wrong done is put right even where the other partner was unaware; say, evil thoughts or lust and the like. (Katarikawe and Wilson 1975, 188).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the brethren did not require these foundational stones of their fellowship legalistically. However, they knew that fellowship with them would be at best superficial if they lived otherwise. **Interestingly, the very high moral standards did not deter, but indeed attracted unbelievers to this faith.**

Secondly, whereas one tried to first put their experience into a theological framework, their teachings, beliefs and practices were soundly theological.

Finally, Revival is first personal before it is corporate. Only the believer who sees the Lord Jesus for himself/herself, is led to the Cross where there is revival for him/her.

Amen.