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THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF PRAYER IN AWAKENINGS

Scott Harbert

Everywhere we turn these days we hear the heart felt cry for revival. Surely, there are few churches that do not need a new touch from the Lord in awakening them from spiritual sloth and sin. Whenever a church fails to exercise discipline as discussed in the former article, a tremendous need for purging, refining and renewal prevails. Unless God intervenes with spiritual revival, Satan gains more and more control of the church organisation and God receives less and less glory.

In this article Scott Harbert documents the importance of prayer in the whole ministry of spiritual awakenings. May this article be more than a stimulating presentation. May it lead to some action in causing our church leaders to fall on their knees in repentance and prayer for a great awakening by the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to investigate the manner in which God has used prayer to bring about spiritual awakenings. My interest in this study has grown out of the past three years that I have been involved with mobilizing the Africa Inland Church (AIC) in Kenya to pray. As a missionary working alongside the Africa Inland Church, I have been involved in promoting the formation of prayer groups with a focus on spiritual awakening.

This paper is structured into three parts. To provide a general conception of what we mean by awakening, Part I defines what awakening and other like terms are. Part II examines the role that God plays in spiritual awakening. And Part III describes the role that man plays in awakening, with specific attention to the place and purpose of prayer.

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AWAKENING: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

In a general sense the terms "awakening" and "revival" have similar meanings. Awakening in its most basic sense is simply a religious renewal or revival.¹ Lovelace uses "renewal", "revival", and "awakening" synonymously for broad-scale movements of the Holy Spirit's work in renewing spiritual vitality in the church and in fostering its expansion in mission and evangelism.²

Some authors do however make distinction between a revival and a spiritual awakening. Orr sees "Awakenings in the exact sense of the word" as "discoveries of truth" while "Revivals" are "used by the Spirit of God to change the shape of things on earth as well as to win souls to heaven."³ Shoemaker says the difference between a "mission" and a "revival" is: "a mission produces a few spiritual cut flowers; a revival would strike a root and grow."⁴

Roxburgh reminds us that "renewal" is multi-faceted in its expression.

It encompasses all that God is doing in the world today and we must be careful not to see it in narrow terms of personal blessing or corporate praise. A 'renewing' person or church is one who is open to all that God offers – past, present and future. Renewal brings us to a fresh understanding of the kingdom of God.⁵

Many of the books contrast what revival "is not" with what revival "is". Most of them agreed that revival is not a series of meetings designed to stir up

¹ Donald T. Kauffman, *The Dictionary of Religious Terms* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1967), S.v. "Awakening."

² Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 21-22.

³ J. Edwin Orr, *The Light of The Nations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 264.

⁴ Samuel M. Shoemaker, *By The Power of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 121.

⁵ Robert L. Roxburgh, *Renewal: Down To Earth* (Great Britain: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1987), 29.

interest in the church.⁶ Revival is not mass evangelism. Roberts pointed out that, "Mass evangelism is work men do for Christ. Revival is work Christ does for man."⁷

Furthermore revival is not some kind of religious emotional extravaganza.⁸ I remember witnessing this first hand while staffing one of my first youth camps in the Africa Inland Church in Nyakach, Kenya. The speaker reminded me of a game we used to play as children called "Simon says." Whatever he said or did, we were supposed to say or do. This is not revival.

Even church growth is not what we have in mind when using the term revival. Roberts says:

Many churches, following carefully laid out biblical principles, are seeing consistent and exciting growth. However, if we make church growth synonymous with revival, we will miss something of the wonder and reality of the greater work God is able to perform.⁹

So, if revival is not a series of church meetings, mass evangelism, religious emotionalism, or even church growth, then what is it? In Scripture, it is always the return of something to its true nature and purpose. Charles G. Finney says:

[Revival] presupposes that the church is sunk down in a backslidden state, and a revival consists in the return of the church from her backslidings.¹⁰

⁶ Robert E. Coleman, "Revival: Its causes and conditions," *ACMC Newsletter*, Autumn 1991.

⁷ Richard O. Roberts, *Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982), 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Halifax: Milner and

Revival in a personal sense, according to Finney, simply "consists in obeying God."¹¹ Revival should be a constant reality for every Christian. Coleman adds:

The idea that revival is a thing of special times and seasons comes from the inconsistent nature of man, not from the will of God. Unfortunately most of us experience those times of spiritual sluggishness which make revival necessary. But if we lived in the continual fullness of the Spirit of Christ, as God desires, revival would be an abiding state.¹²

Roberts defines revival as "an extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results."¹³ He sites three occasions of when God has taken ordinary men and has himself moved in extraordinary ways. Pentecost was one of those occasions. Another was the great sixteenth-century Reformation. And finally the great awakenings in America and Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In defining what revival is we conclude with what Roxburgh has discovered. He says, "Revival is only a part of God's entire work among a people."¹⁴

If a church fails to grasp this, it can become introspective and ultimately stagnate in a pool of self-indulgence. Revival rains might stir the pool adding fresh water for a time as in the Welsh Revival of the 1900's, but if the pool is to be clear and fresh we must make a way now for a channel so that when revival comes the pond will flow clean. That channel will be made by earnest, intelligent, prayerful outreach, not by waiting for God to do for us what he has already clearly commissioned us to do

Sowerby, 1862), 8.

¹¹ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 1.

¹² Robert E. Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1989), 21.

¹³ Richard O. Roberts, *Revival*, 17.

¹⁴ Robert L. Roxburgh, *Renewal: Down To Earth*, 49.

ourselves – evangelism.¹⁵

So there is a certain element of mystery about revival. It's a supernatural work of God with men and women coming alive to the life of God.¹⁶ It includes the hard work of implementing dreams through organisations, structures, and strategies through the empowering and enabling of the Holy Spirit. So that leads us to ask the question what is God's part and man's part in revival?

AWAKENING: GOD'S PART

God and Awakenings

God alone sends revival. The Bible shows that God is the initiator. In II Chronicles 7:14 God initiates the effort to see awakening come. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." Whiston has said:

In praying, as in every religious action, the first and central agent is never man, but always God. Long before we begin to pray at all, God has already been acting in and upon us, preparing the way for our response.¹⁷

As pointed out earlier, Roberts, in contrasting mass evangelism and revival, stated: "Mass evangelism is work men do for Christ. Revival is work Christ does for man." Arthur Wallis adds:

There is a wealth of difference between missions or campaigns at their best and genuine revival. In the former man takes the initiative, it may

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Robert E. Coleman, "Revival: Its cause and conditions," *ACMC Newsletter*, Autumn 1991.

¹⁷ Charles F. Whiston, *Teach Us To Pray* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1949), 21.

be with the prompting of the Spirit; in the latter the initiative is God's. With the one the organisation is human; with the other it is divine.¹⁸

Awakening is not the consequence of some committee's planning. And although human factors are involved, in the end the origin of awakening must find its place in the heart of God who loves his people and yearns to bless them.¹⁹

Revival is the work of God: He is sovereign; He sets the conditions; and it is a work of the Holy Spirit.

Sovereignty of God

God's sovereign work in awakening is based on his perfect character and strengthened by his infallible promises. Coleman states:

As a display of sovereign grace, [revivals] are entirely supernatural. Yet God does not violate his own integrity in sending them. Revivals must be consistent with God's Word.²⁰

God Sets Conditions

When we meet God's conditions we can be confident that revival will come. As Billy Graham put it:

I believe that we can have revival any time we meet God's conditions. I believe that God is true to His Word and that He will rain righteousness upon us if we meet His conditions.²¹

¹⁸ Arthur Wallis, *In the Day of Thy Power* (London: Christian Literature Crusade, 1956), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰ Robert E. Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites*, 35.

²¹ Billy Graham, "We Need Revival," in *Revival In Our Time*, (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1950), 76-77.

Meeting God's conditions means committing ourselves to remove any impediment in our lives that would hinder revival.²²

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The crucial issue for revival is the dynamic life of the Spirit within it. The Spirit of God is sovereign and moves however and whenever He pleases to convict the lost and restore the backslidden. No means or methods can automatically and simply bring about revival.²³ Revival is about the work of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, it must be always remembered that "times of refreshing...come from the presence of the Lord." (Acts 3:19). Revivals are always God given. But while revival remains in God's sovereign control, care must be taken to preserve a proper balance. That God is sovereign in initiation and in the work of awakening does not minimise man's part in awakening. In every awakening there is both a divine side and a human side. In the next section man's place in awakening will be considered.

AWAKENING: MAN'S PART

Man and Awakening

God has a definite purpose for man in salvation, and that is that he might have him as his co-worker.²⁴ We know that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan are vehemently opposed to one another. Yet Satan cannot, and God will not, control a life without the person's permission. Each person chooses whom he will follow and serve and thus becomes a co-worker with

²² Robert E. Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites*, 36.

²³ Theological Advisory Group, *The Roots of Christianity in Africa* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), 14.

²⁴ Watchman Nee, *God's Work* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1974), 6.

either Satan or with God in the carrying out of one or the other's purposes.²⁵

God has taken his people into partnership with himself, honouring them and binding himself, and made their activity through prayer a measure of the working of his power. Part of the church's task is to recapture God's lost dominion. Because while the world belongs to God and all the people belong to God, Satan has temporarily usurped what is rightfully God's. The world is enemy-occupied territory. This calls for warfare.

Man's place in the process of awakening is vital. Hallesby states:

...that it is impossible for God to bring the world forward to its goal without man. The attitude which man takes is the vital factor in determining whether the world shall attain its goal or not. God has voluntarily bound Himself to man in His government of the world. From the very beginning of the history of revelation we see that God has established His kingdom only where He could find men who would voluntarily permit themselves to be used by Him. It thus becomes evident that God has voluntarily made Himself dependent also upon our prayer.²⁶

The Place of Prayer in Awakenings

In an age when missionary technology and strategies receive increasing emphasis, and not illegitimately, it is well to remind ourselves of the place of prayer in awakening. S. D. Gordon articulated this well: "The greatest thing any one can do for God and man is to pray. It is not the only thing but it is the chief thing."²⁷

Prayer always plays a prominent role in the preparation for and development of revival. In the Bible we have the awakening as told to us in the book of Nehemiah. In this awakening, prayer was involved from the beginning individual prayer of Nehemiah through the months of perseverance.

Other awakenings which took place in the Old Testament involving

²⁵ S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer* (Chicago: Revell, 1904), 43-46.

²⁶ O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1931), 156.

²⁷ S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer*, 12.

prayer are: The Mizpah revival of I Samuel 7. It had its beginning earlier in the prayer of Hannah. Or the revival under Asa in II Chronicles 14:1-15:19.

In the New Testament in Acts 1-2 the early church was launched and expanded through the prayers of 120 men and women praying for 10 days in an upper room. As we go through the book of Acts we find that prayer was also a very essential part of the life of the early church. At Caesarea according to Acts 10, the place of prayer in this awakening is seen in Peter and Cornelius. They were both actively involved in prayer during the time before the actual awakening (Acts 6:4; 10:2,9). And later awakenings that occurred in Samaria, at Antioch, and in Ephesus were a result of continuing prayer in the early church (Acts 8:4-24; 11:19-26; 19). Again and again throughout the book of Acts, we read about prayer in the life of the church.

E.M. Bounds writes:

God's Word is a record of prayer – of praying men and their achievements, of the divine warrant of prayer and of the encouragement given to those who pray. No one can read the instances, commands, examples, multiform statements which concern themselves with prayer, without realizing that the cause of God, and the success of his work in this world, is committed to prayer.²⁸

Post-Biblical history has also clearly shown what happens when God's people take God seriously in a movement of prayer. Over the past 300 years whenever and wherever God seeks to pour out His Spirit on His people, He begins by stirring up His people to pray.²⁹ There are the great awakenings of 1790 and 1859 in North America and Europe.³⁰ Or the East African Revival of

²⁸ E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 66.

²⁹ David Bryant, ed., "Concerts Of Prayer Signal New Hope For The Nations," in *Prayer Pacesetters!* (Minneapolis, MN: Concerts of Prayer International, 1989), 16.

³⁰ Theological Advisory Group, *The Roots of Christianity in Africa*, 2-8.

1936-37.³¹

God in desiring to bless his people always raises up a few believers to pray for revival. Finney writes:

I have been amazed to see such accounts as are often published about revivals, as if the revival had come without any cause – nobody knew why or wherefore...Now mark me. Go and inquire among the obscure members of the church, and you will always find that somebody had been praying for a revival.³²

Still, at this point we would do well to remember that prayer is not the only arsenal of God's weapons in the work of missions. In Ephesians 6:10-20 we are told to "put on the whole armor of God."

John Piper in his article, "Prayer: The Power That Wields The Weapon", cautions us:

We have to walk carefully, lest we, like others, overstate the case. Prayer is not *the* work of missions. I believe *the* work of missions is the proclamation of the gospel.³³

However, Piper, throughout his entire article is calling people to unite in prayer: "If God's work depends upon His word, then His word depends upon the prayers of His people."³⁴

Prayer does fill the place in awakening as the indispensable means by which man in cooperation with God makes it possible for God's desire for awakening to be fulfilled. Lovelace concludes:

Manuals on the technology of revival from Finney's *Lectures on* have stressed the connection between corporate prayer and the outpouring of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

³² Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 27.

³³ John Piper, "Prayer: The Power That Wields The Weapon," *Mission Frontiers*, June-July 1989, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

the Holy Spirit. Ask Evangelicals what the most essential condition of revival is, and they are most likely to point to prayer.³⁵

The Purpose of Prayer in Awakenings

Upon examining nearly 300 prayer passages in the Bible, I discovered that the prayers fall roughly under three categories: (1) prayers of adoration, worship, and praise to God; (2) prayers for ourselves, the church, and the people of God; and (3) prayers for the world.

Worship (Celebration). Prayer is intended to be the means by which God is glorified in this world. Worship, as in the combining of hymns, choruses and spiritual songs, along with answers to prayer and prayers of praise, is an important aspect of prayer. E. M. Bounds writes:

Prayer, praise and thanksgiving all go in company. A close relationship exists between them. The Scriptures join these three together...As prayer brings things to us which beget gratitude and thanksgiving, so praise and gratitude promote prayer, and induce more praying and better praying.³⁶

Praying for Spiritual Awakening. "Fullness" is a popular word that describes awakening or revival. David Bryant in defining *fullness praying* explains it this way:

By fullness, I mean what God does in the church as he wakes us up to the fullness of the person of Jesus Christ and causes the life of Christ to fill his people with his presence and glory.³⁷

It seems to me that *fullness praying* is very much a part of what Scripture

³⁵ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 152-153.

³⁶ E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer*, 96.

³⁷ David Bryant, ed., "Concerts of Prayer Signal New Hope For The Nation," in *Prayer Pacesetters!*, 19.

teaches. As we study the prayer of Jesus in John 17, we recognise that God must *first* do a work in us before he can do a work through us. In effect the ones entrusted with the burden for awakening must themselves first be awakened and revived before the work can spread.

Praying for World Evangelization. If we are going to have a biblical prayer life, our praying cannot remain focused inward, however. Revived Christians are not the end result of a revival. We refer back to the prayer of John 17. The prayer of Jesus ends with verse 20 and 21: "...that the world may believe..."

David Bryant calls this fulfillment praying:

Fulfillment refers not to the fulfillment of our own desires or plans, but rather to the fulfillment of what God has purposed to do by Christ Jesus throughout our society and among the nations.³⁸

In the nineteenth century, as a result of a revival movement, missionaries moved out with a more dynamic Gospel and a clearer missionary purpose.³⁹ Roxburgh concludes in his book, *Renewal: Down to Earth*: "I believe that true renewal must focus more on the harvest than the machinery."⁴⁰

If we are going to have balanced intercession when we pray, then praying for spiritual awakening (fullness) and world evangelization (fulfillment) must be included in prayer for awakening.

So we should look at prayer for awakening from three perspectives, see it in three dimensions: (1) Celebration (Worship); (2) Fullness; and (3) Fulfillment.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 247.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Roxburgh, *Renewal: Down To Earth*, 246.

CONCLUSION: A DEMONSTRATION OF AWAKENING

God's purpose in calling some to pray for awakening is not only that God might work in their lives but that He might have channels with which he might richly bless others inside and outside the church. While my purpose in writing this article has been to show the important place of prayer in awakenings, it has been my hope that by showing the importance of prayer in awakenings a growing number of Christians will devote themselves to extra ordinary prayer for renewal among themselves and their churches. Finney states:

I have not commenced this course of Lectures on Revivals to get up a curious theory of my own on the subject...It is not my design to preach so as to have you able to say at the close, '*We understand all about revivals now,*' while you do *nothing*...But I wish to ask you a question. What do you hear lectures on revival for? Do you mean that whenever you are convinced what your duty is in promoting a revival, you will go to work and practice it?⁴¹

Coleman adds: "People respond to a *demonstration* of revival, not an *explanation*. You be that person!"⁴²

At the beginning of this paper I noted that I have been a missionary working alongside the Africa Inland Church, involved in promoting the formation of prayer groups with a focus on spiritual awakening. We have already been bringing together church leaders to be trained in prayer renewal. Now the time has come to think about bringing together practitioners – both the opinion leaders and the change agents that really make things happen in the church.

Coleman calls for ones who have the burden for awakening to find a nucleus, develop a group discipline, and minister to others who in turn can mobilize the church. He states:

⁴¹ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 16.

⁴² Robert E. Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites*, 69.

Jesus chose to concentrate his life upon developing character and vision in a relatively small group of disciples...The opportunity for a great national awakening is present, but Jesus individually cannot possibly give to all the people the personal care needed to nurture the fruit of revival. His plan is to raise up men and women who can multiply his ministry, and to imbue them with his love and vision for the world.⁴³

We must start reaching into the church to bring together influential men and women who will call others to pray with them for revival.

Shoemaker shares: "Something must happen between you and some of Christ's people. You will need a team of other people with whom to work if you are going to get anywhere."⁴⁴ He adds, "Something must happen through you and these people who are associated with you, in the places where you work and to the people with whom you come in contact."⁴⁵

We would like to conclude by proposing an approach to how we and others hope to continue encouraging other African Christians to join together in united, persistent, and extra ordinary prayer specifically for revival in the African church today.

As I listen to church and mission leaders I hear two things. One, we should work from the grassroots level up, concentrating on the local church level. Second, we should work on the national level, working from the top down.

What we all would like to see is for the Africa Inland Church, Kenya (AIC), to work towards prayer and renewal on both the national and local level. My proposal is that rather than working for prayer and renewal from a local *or* national level it could be from a local *and* national level.

Working Down from the Top

The Area Coordinator Training Programme: The aim of this programme would be for a number of Christian leaders to devote themselves to extra ordinary prayer 1) in their own lives; 2) in their own local churches; 3) by leading

⁴³ Robert E. Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites*, 56-57.

⁴⁴ Samuel M. Shoemaker, *By The Power of God*, 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

or promoting prayer fellowships for pastors and elders in their branches, districts, and regions; and 4) by training other prayer disciples.

The goal of this programme would be to train and disciple thirty (30) area coordinators throughout the AIC in Kenya who would be committed to prayer renewal. The discipling would be done by quarterly prayer conferences in four of the AIC regions. The conferences would be held for one and half days (two nights). The conferences include study, prayer, testimonies, and reports. And in between the conferences the area coordinators would be starting and leading prayer fellowships in their home areas.

Working from the Bottom Up

We could continue where we left off at developing relationships at the local level. Rely on the Spirit of God to revive His people from the grass roots level. i.e. the local church. I could continue to conduct one and two-day workshops on prayer in churches, Bible schools, and colleges. It would be then as these leaders themselves catch a vision for prayer renewal that we could begin to work together to mobilize their churches.

In conclusion we may say that these are some "working ideas". They are working ideas that we pray will provide a basis for further discussion for growth and development in prayer renewal in the A.I.C.

We have had to learn the necessity of first getting the blessing of the top denominational leadership. Without them nothing happens, nothing long-lasting, that is. So while we have had many dreams, we have had to learn the importance of being patient and sensitive in working with church leadership. It has been more profitable to work through the system, as frustrating as that could be, than to try and go against it. If not, we might have won the battle, but in the end we might lose the war.

At the same time we have also worked hard at developing relationships at the local level. It has been as those leaders themselves have caught a vision for prayer renewal that we could begin to work together to mobilize their churches. Though at times we were tempted to move too quickly – when we did, we paid the price – there is no doubt that the prayer movement is gaining momentum nationwide.

Finally, the members of TAG for prayer renewal are in favour of awakening as their commitment to research, conferences, and action in their own local and district areas of influence have indicated.

We conclude with the words of Marie Monsen, a Norwegian missionary, who learned that it takes many years of sacrifice and preparation before awakening comes.

It was an indescribable joy to discover these burden-bearers in prayer scattered throughout the whole of China. This was God's plan, the method of His choice. He needed to have all these fellow-workers with Him rightly related to Himself, before He could send, or we receive, the revival that was a work of the Holy Spirit. The period of waiting and praying brought us to the maturity that was necessary before we could receive God's answer to our prayers.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ Marie Monsen, *The Awakening: Revival in China 1927-1937* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), 54.

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