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Reformation  
& Revival

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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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Volume 1, No. 2 • Spring 1992

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# *Reformation & Revival Journal*

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**A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership**

Published by  
Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc.  
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Carol Stream, IL 60188  
(708) 653-4144

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*Reformation & Revival Journal* is published four times each year by Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., a not-for-profit teaching ministry organized in the state of Illinois in 1991. The ministry is committed to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the infallible Word of God and is in essential agreement with the confessional statements of historic Reformation theology. The purpose of this ministry is centered in its name:

1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
  2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.
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## Information

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**Subscription rates are:** \$16 for one year, \$30 for two years. Please remit in U.S. currency only. For overseas orders please add \$4 for each year for postage. Back issues and single issues are \$5 each.

**Correspondence** concerning articles, editorial policy, books for review, suggested manuscripts, and subscriptions should be addressed to the editor. Comments are welcome.

**The conviction of the staff and editors** of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* is needed in our generation.

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### Revival: What and Why?

The term *revival* is grossly misunderstood. A contemporary has written that "There never was a day in which the term *revival* needed to be more carefully defined." At one time the term described great movements of God as in "The First Great Awakening," which occurred in the eighteenth century. In our day the term has come to refer to everything from "a movement of God's Spirit" to a series of protracted evangelistic meetings called "a revival." We have inherited, especially from the nineteenth century, a whole body of "revival methods" which are to be used in order to *reproduce* the *effects* of a previous revival meeting or campaign. What are we to make of this? Would it be better to simply drop the use of the term *revival* altogether, if not the ideas which seem inevitably to accompany the term?

In our time we also have a group of earnest and doctrinally well-taught believers who suggest that revivals have been ultimately harmful to the overall ministry of the Christian church. They see excesses and doctrinal error which have attended past revivals and deduce, "What good would revival do for us today when the doctrine and present practice of the church is so far from that of the New Testament?" Revivals, they insist, have often brought some of the very errors that we now must seek to remove from the church.

On the other hand, a more widely held view is that we can and should have revival in our generation and in our churches, if we would only do the right things and use the right methods. For these evangelicals revival may be God's gift, but it is a gift *we* can bring down from heaven if *we* meet certain conditions and *follow* the steps plainly put before us in Scripture.

In both of these responses we detect unwarranted ex-

cesses. On the one hand we see a stress upon God's use of the institution of the church through sound doctrine and proper practice. In this view this is all we really need. It is believed that the church, since it is an institution, principally needs constancy and stability. Revivals bring ferment and upset the programs and general day-to-day operational agenda of the institution. On the other hand, we have the extreme, so prevalent in America, of those who believe that *revivalism* is the same thing as revival; i.e., that methods and programs equal, or *produce*, God-given revival!

It is the conviction of this publication that the church is principally a community of believers brought into being by the reviving influences and power of the Holy Spirit. Every true conversion has in it the same power and influence present in great outpourings of the Spirit called "awakenings." Revival, by definition, is the life principle of the church. It is the power that brings life to dead sinners, and it is the power that enlivens, revivifies, and advances the cause of Christ with greater effect on both the church and the culture around it. The church stands in constant need of the work of the Holy Spirit, and if she is to advance rapidly and see great effect she must experience the work of the Spirit in revival. In the little booklet *Revival and Its Fruit*, authors Emyr Roberts and R. Geraint Gruffydd capture the sense of this in referring to the 1762 revival in Wales which saw the great influence of William Williams of Pantycelyn. They write:

On the other hand, if we think of the church as a community of people brought into being by the reviving influences of the Spirit and the Word—in other words, a community of believers—then revival, by definition, is the very principle of her life. The power that brings to life is the very principle of her life. The power that brings to life is the power that sustains life. The church as a body of believers stands in

continuous need of the reviving Spirit of God. As a people quickened and made spiritually alive, the very secret of her survival is that the same Spirit of life continues to breathe on her and through her. This has always been so. Even in the Middle Ages, when the church as an institution was at its strongest, these spiritual breezes breathed upon choice individuals. As they blew here and there in Europe, they brought into being companies of believers such as the Lollards in England, the Waldensians in Italy, the Albigensians in France, and many movements in Central and Eastern Europe. These movements at their beginnings were most often biblical and evangelical, even though some of them later inclined to heterodoxy and error. Since the Protestant Reformation, however, when the Word of God was set free, there has scarcely been a time when the breezes of revival have not been felt to some degree in various parts of the world and, up to the beginning of this century, in Wales most of all. During the period subsequent to the great Methodist Revival of the eighteenth century—between 1785 and the beginning of this century—Gomer M. Roberts has counted no less than sixteen periods of revival in Wales.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Author of Revival

It is our conviction that revivals are God-given and cannot be staged! Humans, who long for revival to come, cannot bring them through their own energy or wills. We cannot bring revival any more than we can breathe life into one dead sinner. We can, and we must, preach the gospel to that sinner. We can, and we must, pray for God to work, but we cannot bring life! The author of revival is God, and God alone!

God is absolutely sovereign in the granting of all His gifts. This is as true of revival as it is of any great redemptive work. Yet we would not, for a single moment, respond to this truth by doing nothing and by passively waiting for the Spirit to work without our asking and pleading the person

and work of Christ, by the Spirit, for the church and her ministries. James says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (Jas. 4:3). We must ask, and we must continually seek to do so with right motives, according to the Word of God.

We cannot program revival, but we must seek the face of God for a fresh outpouring of His Spirit upon our labors and His church. His judgment upon the church in the West can be removed if He should relent and send us fresh downpours of blessing!

#### **What Is Revival?**

Just a few years ago a famous Scottish theologian said, "No one born after World War I has witnessed a genuine revival." I believe that this statement is debatable in one sense. Both local revivals and more culturally narrow movements of revival have taken place since World War I. If one gets outside of the West the story is surely quite different. Yet, on the whole at least, we have not seen wide-scale awakening or revival since the early part of the century. This very statement underscores the need to answer the simple question, "What do we mean by revival?" This journal is committed to teaching the subject and to encouraging widespread prayer and preparation for revival; thus it is imperative that we define our subject clearly.

At the very outset I believe that it must be understood that this generation does not understand the nature or subject of revival for several reasons. As already noted, we have uncritically and inaccurately used the term, and we have done this for over a hundred years. In addition, we have created a kind of evangelical subculture in which we have come to believe that any major activity that we undertake for God, be it a massive crusade for evangelism, an important social program in the name of Christ, a major television blitz for the gospel, or a major "church growth"

thrust, is part and parcel of revived, awakened, and powerful ministry. Have we not confused *response* and *approval* with revival and true reformation?

In a culture that has between 35 and 40 million professed born-again Christians, and more than 70 million adults who fully expect to get to heaven because of their Christian beliefs, we should not be surprised to see that large numbers of such church members have no real idea of the need for true revival when the life-style of large numbers of these same people falls radically short of the demands made by the gospel of Christ. It seems that evangelical Christianity has never been more outwardly prosperous and yet more inwardly weak. Indeed, the very term evangelical has lost both its historical meaning (i.e., committed to the gospel of grace as the center of its thrust and ministry) and its ethical foundation. We are no longer sure what an evangelical really is or what he/she believes. Even cults often claim the title in the last decade of our century.

The description of the church at Laodicea, in Revelation 3:14-22, surely fits the church of our own time in North America. Our Lord rebuked this historic church for saying, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." His evaluation of them was quite different from their evaluation of themselves. He said, "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." All of this, as you know, is based on the simple fact that this church was "lukewarm" in its affection for Christ and His work! The Lord thus counsels these professors of His name, "Be earnest and repent." He says to them, if I might paraphrase it, "Get hot! And start with repenting!" When our profession and practice are contrasted to and compared with Christian faith and practice in other parts of the world in our own time, and with times of *high tide* in the past, we can readily see how "lukewarm" we have truly become.

Having said this, we still need to approach our consider-

ation of, and prayer for, revival with an accurate understanding of the meaning of the term and the truths that it puts before our minds and hearts. Put very simply, what is revival?

The prophet Habakkuk writes, "Lord, I have heard reports about You, what You've done, who You are, and I stand in awe. I fear You" (Hab. 3:2b, my paraphrase). I believe that nothing so distinctly causes the people of God in any generation to "stand in awe" as the hearing of the great works of God in powerfully awakening sinners in large numbers. And I might add, nothing drives out the fear and awe of God like the contemporary health and wealth message of the prosperity ministries. In these kinds of ministries the *focus* is plainly upon how we cooperate with the "laws of prosperity" and thus bring blessing.

To answer our question, it is important that we comment briefly upon what revival is *not*. First, we say, revival is not great excitement, per se. Nor is it large numbers of professions of faith or increased numbers of attenders at mega-churches. It is not church planting or "church growth" efforts. Simply put, great and increasing numbers of professions of faith do *not* equal true, God-sent revival. We have some areas of North America, such as the so-called "Bible Belt," or countries like Puerto Rico, where the sheer numbers of evangelical professions of faith would fill every existing church building many times over. Many churches have membership rolls four and five times their number of attenders. Even many super churches often baptize and add large numbers of "new members" annually and yet often see very little net gain in attendance at regular church meetings. If we believe that large numbers of people and large numbers of professions of faith equal revival, we will always settle for something less than what God gave in other eras, and something less than He desires for us to ask Him for in our era. If we think this is "success," then we will

continue doing it and merely perpetuate more of the same from generation to generation until we finally realize, perhaps too late, that we were merely doing the work in our energy and power and with little lasting effect.

Further, revival is not a united or city-wide crusade for evangelism. This kind of effort might be useful and has led to the conversion of sinners, but it is not revival.

Revival, furthermore, is not an extended series of special meetings at a local church, called somewhat regularly to "stir up" the folks for the gospel and to reach the lost. Again, we must understand that revival is something God does for us, not something we do for God. Therefore, we do not schedule a revival. It is an *interruption*.

One further negative note is needed before we turn directly to the positive side of our answer. Revival is not synonymous with the manifestation of any particular spiritual gift or gifts. For nearly a century we have had movements which stressed particular gifts, most often those associated with the "signs of an apostle," as evidence of revival and divine power. Out of these same movements some of the greatest moral scandals, and some of the most bizarre doctrines in our American church experience, have arisen. This is not to deny that the Spirit will work as He pleases and where He pleases, but to state very plainly that gifts may be present, even with displays of power, but revival may be absent.

What, then, is revival? William B. Sprague, who wrote one of the finest treatments of this subject ever penned, said, "Whenever, then, you see religion rising up from a state of comparative depression to a tone of increased vigor and strength; wherever you see professing Christians becoming more faithful to their obligations, and behold the strength of the church increased by fresh accessions of piety from the world; there is a state of things which you need not hesitate to denominate a revival of religion."<sup>2</sup> Richard Owen



Roberts, whose book *Revival* is reviewed in this issue, says revival "... is the extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results."<sup>3</sup> The late Dr. J. Edwin Orr has written, "The best definition of revival is the phrase, 'times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.'"<sup>4</sup> Henry C. Fish, a Baptist of the last century, adds, "Revivals, then, are seasons when Christians are waked to a more spiritual frame, to more fervent prayer, and to more earnest endeavors to promote the cause of Christ and redemption; and consequent upon this, seasons when the impenitent are aroused to the concerns of the soul and the work of personal religion."<sup>5</sup> One contemporary author adds, "Revival is a renewing and a reformation of the church for action." (Here we get a glimpse of the close relationship that exists between revival and reformation. For an understanding of the sense of how they relate properly read the article in this issue titled *A Better Way*, by Dr. Thomas Nettles.)

In each of these short definitional statements we can note the idea that revival always includes that which is *extraordinary*. It is a work of God, sovereignly given. It invades man's efforts, makes God seem very near to multitudes of people, and has profound and powerful effects upon the church and ultimately the culture in which the church exists. The results of such a powerful visitation are seen, can be studied to some extent, and markedly alter the direction of a people, at least for some time.

In order to consider this subject both biblically and historically let us look at the matter more directly from these two observation points.

#### A Biblical Sense of the Term

Biblically, the word *revive* comes from the Hebrew *haya* and the Greek *amazao*. Both terms mean literally, "to come back to life from the dead." Dr. F. Carlton Booth, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, writes:

Even when this is not the meaning, the word carries greater force than it bears to us today, for we have confused revivalism with evangelism. Evangelism is good news; revival is new life. Evangelism is man working for God; revival is God working in a sovereign way on man's behalf. To speak of "holding a revival" is a misnomer. No human being can kindle the interest, quicken the conscience of a people, or generate that intensity of spiritual hunger that signifies revival. All spiritual life, whether in the individual or in the community, in the church, or in the nation, is by the Spirit of God. No man can schedule a revival, for God alone is the giver of life. But when darkness deepens, when moral declension reaches its lowest ebb, when the church becomes cold, lukewarm, dead; when the "fulness of time" is come and the prayer ascends from a few earnest hearts, "Wilt Thou not revive us again that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?" (Ps. 85:6), then history teaches it is time for the tide of revival to sweep in once more.<sup>6</sup>

Later, in this same book, Dr. Booth adds, "While revivals do not last, the effects of revival always endure."<sup>7</sup> I believe a great deal of very wise counsel is found in these words.

#### A Historical Sense of the Term

History reveals much to us concerning the meaning of our term as well. Here we see, in both biblical and extra-biblical accounts, the workings of God in what we have called "revivals."

This country was the scene of many such visitations of God in its earliest times. Revivals were fairly normal. Low points, spiritually and morally, were quite often followed by high tides of blessing and powerful, sudden change. Some of the material in this issue is meant to provide some sense of this reality. The bibliography will point the reader towards materials which will define and explain revivals of various

kinds and in various and sundry places. It is sufficient to say that revival brings extraordinary results in its wake.

In his most helpful book, *Revival*, Richard Owen Roberts devotes several pages to some of the extraordinary results of revivals. Some of the characteristic results and evidences of revival that he lists are as follows:

1. An intense spirit of conviction, is known and felt.
2. Deep agony over sin will be present.
3. Long standing habits of self-indulgence will be broken.
4. Sins long ago forgotten will be dealt with seriously.
5. Confession of sin will become the order of the day.
6. Renewal of interest in the Word of God will be evident.
7. Prayer becomes a delight.
8. Agony for perishing souls will become normal.
9. Holiness will become the prime object of the awakened person's life.
10. A revived people will be the instruments of revival.
11. Social concerns will take on new meaning and effort.
12. And the most wonderful aspect of it all is that this breaking and remaking is all of God—He does it!<sup>8</sup>

True revival will use true scriptural means without resorting to gimmicks, manipulation, or man-centered growth schemes. Serious reflection upon the Word of God will lead to true meditation and thus new, deeper understanding of biblical truth. Judgment and eternity will take on new meaning. Heaven and hell will become concerns of multitudes. And the fruit of such a revival, if it is of God, will have lasting effect. If the work of reformation attends the blessing of revival, then the results will be deeper, more permanent and more health-giving for the church. In such seasons of revival, discernment is called for, and wisdom is a must. Leaders need to prepare themselves and seek the Lord!

#### Some Obstacles to Revival

In William Sprague's classic book, again out of print, he

lists several obstacles to revival. He maintains that ignorance and misunderstanding are at the top of the list. If this is true then it is important that we have right views about this subject. In addition, he adds that the following are also obstacles:

1. The spirit of worldliness among professing Christians.
2. The lack of a sense of responsibility among Christians.
3. The toleration of gross offenses in the church.
4. An absence of brotherly love between Christians.
5. Erroneous or defective presentations of Christian truth.

I might add, again, that each of these obstacles ought to be removed through the work of reformation whether or not God grants wide-scale revival. Long-term commitment to building according to the truth is needed, not short-term pledges which generate what we have called "success."

#### What Can We Do?

If the Holy Spirit is the Author of revival, and we cannot cause extraordinary visitations of the Spirit, then what can we do? What should we do? And why?

As previously noted, we must *not* passively wait and do nothing. What is the proper action then? I have two responses to this question.

First, we must do exactly what God has commanded us to do, regardless of whether or not we see a major awakening in our generation. We must be *obedient*. We must labor for reformation, and we must bring our entire practice and ministry under the authority of God's Word. The Bible must be both our message book and our method book. Revival is the experience, in the sense of Psalm 1, in the life of each believer who obeys the Lord. At the same time, I must pray, "Lord, send a revival, and let it begin in my heart, my home and my church." I must seek God, with my whole heart, do away with passive response to His Lordship, and love Him with my whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Second, I should use all the influence I have, both personally and corporately, to urge other believers to beseech God for revival. I should strive to influence them as well regarding genuine reformation. I must realize that the fact that God is sovereign in His dealings does *not* mean that He is arbitrary. He uses means, i.e., some of the God-given instruments of revival are tied up with human response. I refer to ordained means, such as the following:

1. The faithful preaching of the Word of God, the whole counsel of that Word, including those truths in particular that my generation may not wish to hear, at least not initially.
2. Private and corporate prayer, especially joined with fasting and seeking after God for revival, must be encouraged and practiced.
3. Regular, faithful teaching in both the basic and profound truths of the Word of God must be a part of my life, especially those truths which surround the mystery of salvation and the greatness of sovereign grace.
4. Faithful fulfillment of all parental duties in the home and believer-priest duties in the church must become a major concern.

Apathy, lukewarmness, lethargy, and prayerlessness betray our true state in this generation. In this light we need to carefully consider the teaching of Psalm 119 afresh. Consider these verses:

I am laid low in the dust; preserve (or revive) my life according to Your word (v. 25).

Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve (or revive) my life according to Your word (v. 37).

How I long for your precepts! Preserve (or revive) my life in Your righteousness (v. 40).

Preserve (or revive) my life according to Your love, and I will obey the statutes of Your mouth (v. 88).

I have suffered much; preserve (or revive) my life, O Lord, according to Your word (v. 107).

Hear my voice in accordance with Your love; preserve (or revive) my life, O Lord, according to Your laws (v. 149).

Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve (or revive) my life according to Your promise (v. 154).

Your compassion is great, O Lord; preserve (or revive) my life according to Your laws (v. 156).

See how I love Your precepts; preserve (or revive) my life, O Lord, according to Your love (v. 159).

Again and again the Psalmist cries to the Lord that He would preserve his life through the reviving of his heart and soul. He longs for the Word of God to be received not in word only, but also with power and in the Spirit. May the reader make this cry to the Lord. "Revive me, O Lord, that I might live in the experience of Your glory revealed to me."

The late A.W. Tozer once wrote a small personal tract on revival in which he said the first and most important step in the direction of real revival is, "Get thoroughly dissatisfied with yourself." To that I can only say, "Amen!"

*John H. Armstrong*

- 1 Emyr Roberts and R. Geraint Gruffydd, *Revival and Its Fruit*, pp. 5-6.
- 2 William B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revival*, pp. 7-8.
- 3 Richard Owen Roberts, *Revival!*, p. 16.
- 4 Stephen F. Olford, *Heart Cry for Revival*, p.13.
- 5 Henry C. Fish, *Handbook of Revivals*, p. 13.
- 6 Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 460.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 460.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, Roberts, pp. 15-24.