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Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

**REVIVAL:
A SOLUTION
OR A PROBLEM?**

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 11 · NUMBER 3 · SUMMER 2002

FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

Revival is clearly needed in our time. So few understand what it is and fewer still pray earnestly for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. There are a number of reasons for this present state of things. One is the sheer bad name given to revival by some Christian scholarship. The most common way this is done is in confusing revivalism with true revival.

In the new *InterVarsity Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (1999) I discovered this entry (102-103):

Revivalism: A historical movement within the church that finds its roots in the Reformation, Pietism and English Puritanism but reached its zenith in the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. Revivalism emphasizes the involvement of the emotions as well as the rational dimensions of the human person in a personal event of conversion as the appropriate response to hearing the gospel and receiving the gospel. Revivalism as a type of religious practice often includes mass meetings with gospel music and biblical preaching, and with a strongly emotional appeal for a personal, subjective and public response.

This definition is fairly representative of modern thought among academically equipped writers. The problems with it are numerous. The first sentence is fairly good. True revivals are part of the entire history of Christianity but they became particularly prominent after the Protestant Reformation. The second sentence is somewhat accurate. Clearly revival includes both emotion and rational thought. And it is not to be doubted that revival calls people to conversion, often in dramatic ways. And the final sentence is not altogether wrong either. Then what is so wrong with this definition?

For one, it places the emphasis in revival upon "emotion" and "subjective public response." This has been true in some revivals but not in others. Revivals vary about as much as people, cultures, and climates vary. The diversity to be seen in true revival is beyond such a simplistic explanation.

Second, this definition wants to equate emotion with personal conversion. Again this misses the bigger issue. Revival clearly marks out people and singularly brings them to conviction and conversion, but to equate it simplistically with such is a categorical mistake.

Finally, to equate revival with mass meetings and gospel music is also a narrowly Western version of the truth. Because nineteenth-century American revivalism produced this kind of response does not mean every true revival will follow the same pattern.

Much better is an older dictionary explanation of revivals of religion. The old reliable source, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1907), notes that "revivals of religion" should be "ordinarily applied to the spiritual condition of a Christian community, more or less limited in extent, in which a special interest is very generally felt in respect to religious concerns, accompanied with a marked manifestation of divine power and grace in the quickening, and conversion of the unregenerate" (Volume 10, page 9)

Think about it. If revival really is God powerfully at work among his people then why would you expect one set of responses to fit all such seasons of blessing? If it is God, you will see several common denominators, e.g., Christ-centeredness, the preaching of the gospel, heart-felt conviction of sin, and lasting ethical and moral fruit. You will also see various things that are more cultural than doctrinal; e.g., styles of music, types of response to the gospel, ways in which people come under conviction, etc. Modern Christian leaders need to realize afresh that the Spirit moves where he wills and does as he pleases. When definitions of revivalism, a fairly predictable American style of evangelicalism, replace the idea of a true revival which comes "from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:20), the church is poorer for the replacement.



Scripture indicates consistently that a number of characteristics generally *precede* true revival. These include repentance, humility, and fresh obedience. This begins, on the human level, when God's people begin to really long for the renewal of their own lives and that of their churches. "To revive" (biblically) means something that has once known life is now refreshed with newness of life from God.

I am often asked if revival is a realistic solution to our present spiritual malaise in the West? Understood properly, it most certainly is the answer. Perhaps a better way to say it in our time is that we need a *reformational* revival. Since basic Christian truths have been lost or abandoned by the church, a reforming work is desperately needed. If we experience revival showers without reforming the visible church biblically then we might, as one old preacher put it, make a lot of ditches filled with mud.

The great hope is that God does not need multitudes of people to begin a real work of his Spirit. And he delights in using weak things to do this work since that gives the glory to him alone (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Isaiah put it simply: "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him" (Isaiah 59:16).



Revival should be understood in two senses in the Scriptures and church history. First, it refers to the reviving of the individual heart. The famous Psalm 119 refers to this idea over and over. The Word of God "revives" the heart (cf. NASB that consistently translates the same Hebrew word in this way). The Word is used by the Spirit to quicken and renew the heart regularly. Indeed, every fresh work of God's grace in us, and for us, is by the activity of the blessed Holy Spirit. In this sense we are

experiencing revival as a regular work in our lives.

But the word more often refers to the idea of a *corporate* move of God's Spirit seen in the renewing of God's covenant people. In the Old Testament this often happened after a time of apostasy and rebellion. God was petitioned to revive his people and he heard and answered in rescuing them, often at very dark times morally and spiritually.

What is perhaps most often missed in revival emphasis today, especially in the West, is the missionary dimension of this work. Passages such as Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2, joined with Isaiah 19:22-25; 45:22; 56:6-8 and Zechariah 8:20-22 all seem to point to revival mercies being directly linked with God's eternal purpose for all the nations. How can Romans 11 become reality without revival? I am not sure there is another answer that fits the evidence of this text.



The *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, quoted above, also provides a helpful section called "The Theory of Revivals." This was written by a New Light Presbyterian, Edwin F. Hatfield, who in the nineteenth century was a stated clerk of the church. Writes Hatfield:

The progress of Christianity in the world has rarely, for any length of time, been uniform. Its growth in the individual and in the community is characterized by very obvious fluctuations. Like all things temporal, it is subject to constant change, exposed to influences the most varied and antagonistic. Now it makes rapid advances in its conflict with sinful propensities and developments; again it is subjected to obstructions and reverses that effectually check its onward course, and result in spiritual declensions. Growth in grace is attainable only by ceaseless vigilance, untiring diligence, and a faithful improvement of the opportunities and means of spiritual advancement. Any relaxation in the strife with moral evil tends to spiritual retardation; the evil gets the advantage over the good; the religious fervor abates; the soul becomes lukewarm, cold, dead. As

with the individual believer, so is it with the community. A church, a sisterhood of churches covering a large section of country, by reason of the predominating influence of some worldly interests—the greed of gain in a season of great commercial prosperity, the strife of party during a highly excited political campaign, the prevalence of a martial spirit in time of war, or the lust of pleasure in a time of general worldly gaiety and festivity, or any absorbing passion for mere temporal good—may be so diverted from the direct pursuit of holiness, and the prosecution of the work of advancing the kingdom of Christ, as to lose, to a considerable extent, the power, if not the life, of godliness. The spiritual and the temporal become subordinate to the worldly and temporal. The blight of spiritual declension settles down and attaches itself with increasing persistency year by year. Such has been the history of Christian churches everywhere (9-10).

If Hatfield is correct, and I submit that he is, then by necessity revivals are called for by the sheer reality of both human weakness and sinfulness. The "appropriate remedy" he adds, is always "a season of spiritual revival." This is to be regarded as nothing less than "a special and peculiar effusion of the Holy Spirit." Since the Spirit is always actively involved in extending the kingdom of Christ and building the church, why would such "seasons" not be part of what he does in this age of Pentecost? I am honestly impressed that the one reason many will not accept this way of thinking about the history of the church is because of a rationalistic naturalism that pervades the church of the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The rise of a new generation, one that is looking at the supernatural in an entirely different way, may be the preparation for further spiritual erosion or of great spiritual harvest. Let us work and pray for the latter.



The document, *An Urgent Appeal*, which appears with an

introduction by contributing editor David Bryant in this issue, is one serious attempt to write a clear-headed, biblically informed, and modern call to revival. Its Puritan sounding full title explains the purpose that we had in writing it. It is titled, in full, *An Urgent Appeal to Christian Leaders in America for Consensus and Collaboration on the Biblical Nature and Hope of Corporate Revival*. Be sure you go to www.reformationrevival.com to read the entire document. You may download it and use it in any way that you desire as long as you do not sell it or alter it. The hope of many of us is that this resource will find its way into the lives and ministries of countless pastors and leaders across our nation, prompting them to take the lead in calling the church to repentance and prayer for true revival.

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