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Reformation
REVIVAL
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REVIVAL:
A SOLUTION
OR A PROBLEM?

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Revival: Blessing or Problem?



Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr

Is revival a blessing? No. A boost in church attendance is a blessing. Ending the year in the black is a blessing. A successful staff hire is a blessing. Revival is not a blessing. It's heaven on earth.

Is revival a problem? No. A lawsuit against your church is a problem. Conflict among your lay leaders is a problem. Deciding whether to go traditional or contemporary is a problem. Revival is not a problem. It's a disaster.

REVIVAL IS A DISASTER

Revival, a disaster? Yes. When an earthquake levels a city to the earth, that qualifies as a disaster. And revival—the real thing¹—will shake a church to its very foundations. The prophet envisions:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain (Isaiah 40:4).

In other words, the moral topography of the whole world will someday be dramatically reordered by the power of the gospel. All the obstacles to the gospel will fall, all the

complications will be smoothed over, and the Word will run like lightning. This will entail massive upheaval. But then “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (Isaiah 40:5).

Do we, as pastors and church leaders, *want* revival, with all its upset? Or are we threatened by revival? Several years ago I flew to a city in the western U.S. for some preaching. A pastor from that area picked me up at the airport. He had his finger on the pulse of the churches in that region, so along the way I asked him how his brother pastors felt about revival. It seemed to him, he said, that the local pastors didn't want revival. I asked why. He said it would upset their church programs.

I hope my host was wrong. I hope those pastors, in their heart of hearts, are ready joyfully to drop everything and suffer anything for the glory of the Lord to be revealed with compelling power. But my pastor friend is not a superficial or unfair man. And that was his assessment. So what about you? And what about me? Do we want revival, or are we threatened by revival?

Revival is destructive. It breaks up the good ol' boy network controlling a church. It destroys a church's proud self-image. It diminishes the importance of denominational names. It draws criticism from the world, as formerly intimidated Christians find their prophetic voices and make Jesus the unavoidable issue in town. It exposes the inertia and self-righteousness of disobedient Christians, who then become defensive and critical. It destabilizes long-held traditions that have outlived their usefulness but retain psychological power over a church. It unleashes intensely felt yearnings and sighs and joys that have built up within the hearts of the responsive members of the congregation. It turns a church head-over-heels as the will of God, the holiness of God, and the purpose of God claim absolute supremacy over everything. And nothing can be the same again.

So let's admit it: Revival is scary. And let's admit as well the sins underlying our fears. What we call “church” can easily and imperceptibly degenerate into an institutional mechanism for reinforcing a comfortable religious status quo. It can

become a device for evading the living God while role-playing the worship of the living God. "Church" can exist for the unspoken and even unconscious purpose of self-justification vis-à-vis that pagan, liberal, dirty world out there. "We are not like *them*, thank God." Revival confronts these deep sins of the soul. Revival intrudes new questions into a church's conscience: "Whose church is this, anyway? Whose blood paid for it? Whose glory is to be showcased in it? Whose redemptive power is to work through it?" Revival reclaims a church for her rightful Lord, and in too many churches that is not an easy or simple adjustment. It is radical. It is profound. It is far-reaching. It is disturbing. How could it be otherwise? We are more rebellious than we know. And our dread of revival only evidences a deep infestation of underlying attitudinal sins.

Under revival conditions, self-admiration dies under the weight of the glory of Christ crucified. Programs are cancelled under the presidency of the Holy Spirit. Party-spirit melts into a generous sympathy for all true Christians everywhere. Boredom is replaced with urgency as true holiness is seen to be both beautiful and accessible. A coldly intellectualist faith becomes richly experiential. The cause of the gospel compels us and thrills us, and we finally get traction for world evangelization with burning passion. This new burst of energy may lay hold of our children. They may be called by God to leave their safe surroundings for risky Christian work far away, not to be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas. They may suffer for the Lord. So let's count the cost. And let's be honest. Are we ready for revival? Are we willing for its destructive power to upset our little church world, so that Christ alone is really first?

As threatening as revival is, it's also obvious that our status quo isn't working. Conventional American Christianity is a failure. Several years ago in a Sunday evening service I noticed that Dr. Robert E. Coleman, author of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, was in the congregation. (His son and daughter-in-law are members of our church.) Dr. Coleman travels the globe constantly and knows what is going on in the worldwide Christian movement. So I invited him into the pulpit for

a brief interview. One of his comments continues to grip me. He said that in the previous fifteen years, the North American church had seen zero net growth. Zero. The church in Asia, Latin America and Africa is growing rapidly. But here in North America? *Zero net growth in the last fifteen years.* And what is so striking to me about that fact is that we North American churches have so many resources to work with—schools, colleges and seminaries, publishing companies, radio stations, new translations of the Bible, men's rallies—you name it. And the net outcome over fifteen years? Zero.

Think about that with me. Let's imagine the CEO of a multi-national corporation meeting with his division heads from around the world. They sit together in the board room and he says, "Colleagues, I am leaving today for fifteen years. I will return after that time, and you will report to me on your progress. But I am entrusting the lion's share of our corporate resources to the North American division. The rest of you will have to make-do with what you have. Good-bye." He walks out the door. Fifteen years later, he returns. They meet again. The Asian head reports significant growth. So do the Latin American and African division heads. Then the CEO turns to the North American head, who reports, "Well, boss, we've been busy. Very busy, very active. But I'm sorry to report zero net growth in the last fifteen years." Now, if you were that CEO, what would you say to that person? You would say, "You're fired," wouldn't you? And wouldn't you also say to the other division heads, "And all you guys get his resources"? Wouldn't that be fair? So why shouldn't the Lord of the church fire his North American branch today?

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "But Ray, so many Christian leaders from around the world come to the States for training. So many American dollars go overseas in missions, etc." And you're right. Things aren't as simple as my imaginative scenario might imply. But still, can we believe that the Lord considers our recent outcomes acceptable? Can we deny that many of our churches are failing to meet the challenge of our generation? So why are we defensive for our status quo? Why aren't we ashamed of it? Our status quo

doesn't *deserve* protection. We're dysfunctional, compared with the New Testament. So, for one thing, let's change the way we pray. Let's stop asking God to bless what we are presently doing and start to pray along these lines: "Lord, I don't care what changes and adjustments and upheaval I must go through. But Lord, my church and I can't go on without a new visitation of your empowering presence! We can't go on without breakthroughs to reality with you! So what do you want from us? What new steps of faith do you want us to take? What do we need to repent of? Whatever you want, we'll do it—if you will help us to follow through. But for your own name's sake, save us from ourselves and our mediocrity, before our generation drifts beyond recovery!"

REVIVAL IS HEAVEN ON EARTH

Revival is a disaster, reordering us and our churches more to God's liking. But it is more. It is the most wonderful disaster imaginable. It is *worth* the anguish and change. It is a taste of heaven on earth. The psalmist exults in it:

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

Psalm 85:10-11

Peering out from our little fortresses of misguided self-protection, we might think revival will ruin everything. We might fear it will unleash every loony impulse in our churches. But if we can put those emotions aside just long enough to view revival without prejudice, the Bible portrays revival as flooding the world with everything worthy—steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace. In revival these beautiful gospel realities come together. They resonate in our hearts. They stand forth with clarity and beauty in our midst. They enter into our experience. They overrule our timidity. They set us apart from the world. They render us fruitful. We finally "get it," and heaven and earth are in harmony.

The psalmist's prophetic vision reaches so far out into what God can do that his imagery may seem surreal to us. But even that has a positive exegetical function. God wants to stretch our thinking out into new categories—not what we can accomplish but what only he can accomplish. He wants to replace the best that we can do with the best that only he can do. Isn't that the new covenant? Isn't that the logic of the gospel itself? Revival is not a problem; it is normal Christianity fully functioning. If we don't want it, why are we Christians at all? What are we Christians trusting God *for*, if not revival?

What Psalm 85 does not say, but what the rest of the gospel tells us, is that it's the finished work of Christ on the cross and the active presence of the Holy Spirit that bring these potent realities down into our experience, awakening in us a new responsiveness and sensitivity and awareness of God. Such things do not just happen. They are certainly not the outcomes of our church programs. The psalmist is painting a portrait of revival outcomes as God activates his salvation among his people, according to his Word:

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us! . . .
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation.

Psalm 85:4, 6-7

Strong language. What is it calculated to accomplish? Clearly, the psalmist wants to ignite in our hearts such a courageous desire for salvation—for all that "salvation" means—that that new desire outpaces our old desires for control, sameness and face-saving. And if this is the biblical author's aim, then it is also God's intention for us. Therefore, everyone whose heart is unsatisfied with our present state of affairs will, with the psalmist, pray for our generation of Christians, stuck in the ditch as we are, to get traction in salvation—no matter what the cost.

The heavenliness of revival is recorded movingly by Jonathan Edwards, who, with his wonted perspicacity, described his wife's experience of God in these terms:

The person has more than once continued for five or six hours together, without interruption, in a clear and lively view or sense of the infinite beauty and amiableness of Christ's person and the heavenly sweetness of his transcendent love, so that (to use the person's own expressions) the soul remained in a kind of heavenly elysium and did as it were swim in the rays of Christ's love, like a little mote swimming in the beams of the sun that come in at a window. The heart was swallowed up in a kind of glow of Christ's love coming down as a constant stream of sweet light, at the same time the soul all flowing out in love to him, so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and reflowing from heart to heart.²

If we love the Lord at all, won't Edwards' remarkable account, along with the promises of the Bible, open our hearts to the wonderful disruption of heavenly revival coming down into our earthly weariness, for God's greater glory, our richer joy and the salvation of the nations?

Author

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Notes

1. I note gratefully the similarities between John Armstrong's understanding of revival and my own. In *When God Moves* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1998), John defines revival as "a sovereign intervention of the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of Pentecost, powerfully sweeping across the visible church in blessing the normal ministry of the Word of God, and prayer, in the lives of both believers and new converts. It is best understood as an extraordinarily intense season of blessing upon that which is normal New Testament Christianity" (22). And in *When God Comes To Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), I propose that "revival is a season in the life of the church when God causes the

normal ministry of the gospel to surge forward with extraordinary spiritual power" (9).

2. Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979 reprint), I:376.

*“There Shall Be
Showers of Blessing”*
(Based upon Ezekiel 34:26)

“There shall be showers of blessing” —
This is the promise of love;
There shall be seasons refreshing,
Sent from the Savior above.

“There shall be showers of blessing” —
Precious reviving again;
Over the hills and the valleys,
Sound of abundance of rain.

“There shall be showers of blessing” —
Send them upon us, O Lord;
Grant to us now a refreshing,
Come and now honor Your Word.

“There shall be showers of blessing” —
O that today they might fall,
Now as to God we’re confessing,
Now as on Jesus we call!

Refrain:

Showers of blessing,
Showers of blessing we need;
Mercy drops round us are falling,
But for the showers we plead.

DANIEL W. WHITTLE

*R*evival makes the ideal real within the church of God.

ARTHUR SKEVINGTON WOOD

*T*he collective value of revivals in terms of godless lives changed for time and saved for eternity, godless communities “cleaned up,” and missionaries sent out and God honored in the worship of hundreds and even hundreds of thousands of new converts cannot be disputed.

BRIAN EDWARDS