

Defining Revival

by Glenn Meldrum

Revival is a sovereign act of God that demonstrates His desire to save sinners and is characterized by a divine invasion into human lives.

Scripture: Psalm 135:6, Daniel 4:35, Hosea 6:2, Matthew 3:8, Luke 11:15, John 15:5, John 16:8, Romans 2:4, Hebrews 4:16, Hebrews 12:21

Topics: "Revival", "Repentance"

Description

Glenn Meldrum preaches about the powerful 1859 Ulster Revival in Coleraine, where a young boy's salvation sparked a school-wide spiritual awakening, leading to deep repentance and cries for mercy from students and neighbors alike. Revival is described as not a cure-all for church problems, messy and challenging, requiring evangelism, discipleship, and holiness to be sustained. It is distinguished from renewal, series of meetings, evangelistic campaigns, experiences, and mere manifestations, emphasizing the need for genuine transformation of society through repentance and new life in Christ.

Transcript

Revival broke out during 1859 in Ulster, formerly a northern province of Ireland. In the city of Coleraine, a young boy fell under deep conviction of sin while in school. The schoolmaster observed that the lad was unable to do his work so he sent the student home to seek the Lord in private. The teacher had an older boy accompany him who was recently converted in the awakening.

On the journey home the two schoolboys came upon an abandoned house and went inside to pray for the younger boy's salvation. They prayed through until the lad was gloriously saved. Joy flooded his soul and he exclaimed, "I must go back and tell." After entering the classroom he said to his schoolmaster, "I am so happy; I have the Lord Jesus in my heart."

Suddenly, boy after boy left the room and fled onto the playground. The schoolmaster looked over the schoolyard's stone wall and found them on their knees seeking God for salvation. The teacher asked the young man who had just prayed the lad through to assist these other boys in prayer. Shortly after he began praying, the boys their silent weeping turned into bitter wailing. The sound of their deep lamentation reached the remaining boys in the classroom. The Holy Spirit was overwhelmingly present. Those students also dropped to their knees in desperate cries for God to have mercy on their sin-sick souls.

The girl's school was on the second floor. The moment they heard the loud wailing from the boys they too were overcome with concern for their souls. Before long, the weeping filled the entire school. The volume was so great that it could be heard in the streets. Concerned neighbors came rushing into the building when they heard the commotion. As they crossed the threshold, grief gripped their hearts over of their own sin. "These increased, and continued to increase, till first one room, then another, then a public office on the premises, in fact, every available spot, was filled with sinners seeking God."

Clergymen labored through the evening leading the repentant to the Savior. "Dinner was forgotten, tea was forgotten, and it was not till eleven o'clock at night that the school premises were freed from their unexpected guests" (Gibson, 49-51).

Such an encounter with the Living God will do more for our children and grandchildren than immense wealth, superb educations and organized sports could ever begin to accomplish. This is the greatest legacy we could pass down to subsequent generations.

WHAT REVIVAL IS NOT

Revival is never a random act of God. Everything the Lord does is purposeful, timely and according to His perfect order. Since the Ancient of Days does not change, and the need of sinful humanity remains the same, there are certain characteristics that are consistent throughout every revival. Though these characteristics may vary in intensity and focus, they remain an integral part of an authentic awakening.

In the last chapter we examined some Biblical concepts of revival. In this chapter we will deal with those basic characteristics that are consistent in every revival. Sometimes it is easier to define a term, or idea, by telling what it is not, rather than what it is. Consequently, we will first define revival by examining what it is not and then look at what it is.

Revival Is Not A Cure-all

Revival is not a cure-all to church problems. When a spiritual awakening comes, church pews will be filled, offerings will increase, but everyone will not accept or approve of it. Revival is messy business. It awakens dead saints, angers the self-righteous, it rescues the worst of society (who bring in years of painful baggage) and changes the priorities of families and churches. Though pews may be filled and offerings increased, the challenges and problems will multiply as well.

God designed revival to accomplish specific goals-to awaken the church and save the lost. The church must continue the work through evangelism, discipleship and discipline. Holiness, prayer and evangelism are normal to Christianity and must be taught to the new converts by mature saints. New believers need to be discipled by those who have the fire of God since, spiritually speaking, children will act like their parents. When discipleship is neglected during times of revival the backsliding rate increases.

The enemies of revival are often those who claimed they wanted a move of the Spirit, but found that it did not fit their theological opinions or compromised lifestyles. When God shows up, He exposes the sins of the people, many of which grow angry. Some church goers do not want to be inconvenienced by newcomers taking their seats and parking places. Others complain that the services are too long or the preaching is too confrontational. Numerous churches and ministers may condemn the move simply because it did not begin with them. Critics will seemingly come out of nowhere to pass judgment. One way or the other, revival upsets the status quo. Those who desire an awakening must be ready and willing to

deal with the trials and opposition. Problems and abuses are not the fault of revival, only of the unrefined characters of men.

Renewal Is Not Revival

Spiritual renewal is a move of God that brings life to the saints but leaves secular society untouched. It brings spiritual healing and refreshing to many saints and churches that have long been spiritually dry. There is a difference between renewal and revival. Renewal is blessing oriented, whereas revival is repentance oriented. Renewal emphasizes what you can receive from God, while revival awakens the church to transform society.

Within the renewal movements of the 1990's, God touched His people in wonderful ways. Though it predominately stayed within the church, many Christians were profoundly changed. Some of the experiences were overwhelming and left behind irreplaceable memories that are impervious to the arguments of men. Still, it was not revival. Only when the move of the Spirit transforms secular society through the conversion of the lost can it be said that revival has come. This is the single sure proof of revival.

Revival Is Not A Series Of Meetings

A series of "revival" meetings does not produce the genuine artifact. In certain parts of the country when an evangelist ministers in a church or a brush arbor, they call it "Revival." Some may erect a tent or put up a "Revival" banner and still never experience an authentic spiritual outpouring.

Churches that claim to be in revival, though they in truth are not, can be lulled into a spiritual sleep. This can be a major obstacle to obtaining a legitimate awakening. False claims of revival can spiritually stagnate a church. This in turn may cause the people to become resistant to a bona fide move of the Spirit.

Revival Is Not Evangelistic Campaigns

Evangelism is not revival. Yet when revival comes, evangelism explodes. There is a difference between the two. Biblical Christianity teaches that every believer should reach out to the unsaved no matter the spiritual climate they live in (Mt. 28:19). Evangelism is the loving, obedient response of Christians to the lordship of Christ and the needs of a perishing world. A successful evangelistic campaign does not constitute revival. This does not diminish the importance and necessity of evangelism in all of its various forms. Yet evangelism cannot compare to the incredible results produced when God rends the heavens.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in revival creates a divine magnetism that sweeps hundreds, even thousands into the kingdom in a moment. Without revival we plead with men to yield to Christ and struggle to see them walk with Him. When the Spirit is poured out, men flee from the wrath to come by running to the foot of the cross.

The 1859 Ulster Revival in Coleraine is a perfect example of the converting power of revival. One twenty year old man with his face to the ground was "uttering a peculiar deep moan, sometimes terminating in a prolonged wailing cry." The pastor enquired as to why he cried so. In misery of soul he bawled out, "Oh! my sins! my sins! Lord Jesus, have mercy upon my poor soul!" The young man was "filled with one idea--his guilt and his danger." There was no comfort a mortal could offer.

After the minister arose from praying for the man he began going from person to person, to pray the repentant through to Christ. It was late at night when he was finally able to head home. He soon discovered that the work which began in the market-square was rapidly spreading through the community. People were watching for him to come by so he could help pray the "stricken ones" through. His mission was still not completed when the sun began to rise. The minister testified, "I was wandering from house to house, on the most marvelous and solemn errand upon which I have ever been sent" (Davis, 33-35).

Rev. John Stuart from outside of Coleraine stated, "Hundreds have been converted to the Lord; some 'stricken' down when the Spirit came upon them like a 'rushing mighty wind'; others converted when He spoke to their consciences by the 'still small voice.' The first effect of the revival was, that 'fear came upon every soul.' Then our church was filled to suffocation, and we were obliged to take to the open fields to declare the message of mercy to a hungry and thirsting population. Of all the stricken ones, I do not know of one backslider" (Davis, 37, edited).

In the city of Ballymana, ". . . worldly men were silent with fear. Careless men sobbed like children. Drunkards and boasting blasphemers were awed into solemnity. Languid believers were stirred up. Ministers who had often toiled in heartfelt sorrow suddenly found themselves beset by inquirers, and wholly unequal to the demands which were made" (Davis, 36). Though evangelism is a necessary part of Christian life it cannot compare to the awesome force of revival.

Revival Is Not An Experience

We were created to experience God, but experience does not constitute truth or revival. Some Christians have become self-absorbed with seeking new spiritual experiences and then define Christianity according those experiences. There is a grave danger here. The prize of Christianity is Jesus, not experience. We were created to know the Lord on a personal basis. He commanded us to love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus went to the cross to make us God seekers, not experience or blessings seekers.

To seek spiritual experiences can become a form of idolatry. How tragic when we reduce relationship with the Living God to little more than another spiritual or emotional high. It is far easier to chase after the latest movement or experience than to seek God's face and cry for Him to pour out the fires of revival in a local church and community.

When the Lord steps down out of heaven people will experience His presence in profound ways. The spiritually dead will be raised to life and the lost will be found. The effects can even be terrifying. Men and women may tremble and weep under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. Some will cry out with agonized pleas to the Savior for mercy as the reality of their sin overwhelms them. Yes, revival does incorporate experience; it is impossible for it to be otherwise. However, experience does not equal revival. As stated earlier, the proof of revival is the transformation of secular society through the power of God, not spiritual experiences.

Revival Is Not About Manifestations

We can develop a nice, neat theology of what it means to do everything decently and in order until God shows up. Then He blows all of our order and theories to pieces. What is decent and in order in an earthquake differs greatly from the normal, daily routines of life. Genuine revival always produces some form of physical manifestation. Those moves of the Spirit that are less emotional will have weeping or

trembling. Others have included more intense experiences such as falling, shaking, groaning, trances and visions.

Whether or not physical manifestations fit into our theological framework is for the most part irrelevant. The Lord is God, and He does as He pleases, whether we like it or not. In addition, individuals can react differently when supernatural power falls upon them. Revival is about the revelation of God's glory, a divine invasion into the lives of frail humanity. Spiritual awakenings are not about manifestations; however, when the Holy Spirit falls upon these bodies of flesh, there will be some form of outward response.

Dr. Schofield accurately addressed this issue when he said, "One thing to be borne in the mind is that since the days of Pentecost there is no record of the sudden and direct work of the Spirit of God upon the souls of men that has not been accompanied by events more or less abnormal. . . . We cannot expect an abnormal inrush of divine light and power, so profoundly affecting the emotions and changing the lives of men, without remarkable results. As well expect a hurricane, an earthquake, or a flood, to leave nothing abnormal in its course, as to expect a true Revival that is not accompanied by events quite out of our ordinary experience" (Jonathan Goforth, *By*, 9).

Those who concentrate on manifestations miss God. Whether a person is a critic of them or an experience seeker, they both are in error. The critic will be judgmental of the spiritual outpouring no matter what takes place because his theology leaves no room for a God of signs and wonders. The experience seeker takes his eyes off of Jesus by being consumed with manifestations and judges spirituality according to experience.

Manifestations are never proof of revival. Nor can a move of the Spirit be discredited because they are evident. As Jonathan Edwards wisely wrote, "A work is not to be judged by any effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud cries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength (Scripture gives no support for them or against them)" (Edwards, *Revival*, 91).

CRITICS AND ABUSES

Critics of revival can be like armchair athletes: they ridicule those on the field while never playing themselves. It is one thing to have opinions about revival and totally another thing to experience it. People can judge according to their own experiences, or lack thereof, and then manipulate the Bible to agree with them. Such an approach to understanding and explaining the work of the Holy Spirit is thoroughly flawed.

Some of the greatest foes of spiritual awakenings are religious people who walk in self-righteous pride. They point the finger at others while never examining themselves. Jonathan Edwards faced this problem during the First Great Awakening. He wrote, "There is a great aptness in persons to doubt of things that are strange; especially the elderly persons, to think that not to be right which they have never been used to in their day, and have not heard of in the days of their fathers" (Edwards, *Revival*, 90).

Many critics have attributed revival to the work of the devil because of abuses, whether perceived or genuine. Even Jesus was accused of doing miracles through demonic powers by the Pharisees of His day (Lk. 11:15-19). "There are some of these things which the devil would not do if he could," Edwards penned. "Thus he would not awaken the conscience, and make men sensible of their miserable state by reason of sin, and sensible of their great need of a Savior; and he would not confirm men in the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of sinners, or raise men's value and esteem of him: he would not beget in men's minds an opinion of the necessity, usefulness, and truth of the Holy Scriptures, or incline

them to make use of them; nor would he show men the truth in things that concern their soul's interest; and give them a view of things as they really are. And there are other things that the devil neither can nor will do; he will not give men a spirit of divine love, or Christian humility and poverty of spirit; nor could he if he would. He cannot give those things he has not himself: these things are as contrary as possible to his nature" (Edwards, Revival, 118).

Abuses can take place in revival, but God is not the cause of them--people are. This is due to our flawed nature and lack of understanding about the move of the Spirit. Because some people exploit and misuse such spiritual phenomenon does not invalidated its authenticity. The benefits exceedingly outweigh any abuses. Far better is it for a church to have the organized chaos of a hospital emergency ward than the tranquil order of a cemetery. Better to have some wild fire in the midst of having the real fire than to have no fire at all. This is why a revival needs pastoring so abuses are kept to a minimum.

WHAT REVIVAL IS

Charles Finney defined God as "one pent-up revival" (Ravenhill, Why, 139). The Lord is aching to manifest His grace through the wonder and power of spiritual awakenings. When saints live in the reviving power of God's presence, the world takes note that there is a God, we have been with Him and His name is Jesus.

Revival demonstrates the Lord's desire and ability to save sinners from the power and love of sin. Spiritual awakenings are the positive work of the Spirit that deals with the negative character traits of sinful humanity.

Revival is God's self-disclosure. It speaks of a Savior who yearns to dwell in the midst of His people. Hosea prophesied, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence" (Hos. 6:2). To live in His presence is the prize of Christianity and the purpose of an awakening.

We now turn to five points that will help further define authentic revival.

Revival Is A Sovereign Act Of God

There is a great tension in Christian theology over the sovereignty of God and man's free will. God's sovereignty means that He has the absolute right to do anything He desires and super-abounds with the power to accomplish His good pleasure. "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6).

The struggle we face with this issue lies in our understanding of man's free will and how that free will works in conjunction with a sovereign Being. The Creator, in giving mankind the gift of a genuine free will, does not cease to be sovereign. How this works is known only to the mind of God. This is a mystery that no man or denomination will ever solve.

Revival is a sovereign work of God. No one can force His hand to act or else He would not be the Almighty. "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35). Yet the Lord has chosen to place the responsibility of revival in the hands of men (2 Chr. 7:14). This means that we have a legitimate ability to move the heart of God so He will act on our behalf (Heb. 4:16; 10:19-22).

This is the great mystery of revival: the Lord sovereignly moves and yet acts in accordance to the prayers of His people. To say that revival is exclusively the act of God implies that man can do nothing to bring revival. This reduces His commands to pray and seek His face to meaningless acts. However, to assert that revival is solely the responsibility of men places too much upon the shoulders of flesh. This degrades the magnificence and infinitude of the King of kings. The Lord is able through His infinite wisdom to make His sovereignty work with and through our humanity.

For revival to come we must comprehend that in and of ourselves we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5). Yet, our responsibility is real. This means that a cooperative effort between God and man takes place for the Spirit to be poured out. The Logos of God has given us the privilege and responsibility of securing revival through those means He has established in His written Word. The Spirit moves the hearts of men to move the heart of God--a mystery indeed.

Revival Is A Revelation Of God's Holiness

God is holy! His self-disclosure means that people will encounter His holy character. Time and again the Scriptures unfold the response of men to divine visitation. Isaiah said, "Woe to me" while the apostle John fell at Jesus' feet "as though dead." When Moses saw God descend on Mt. Sinai, the sight was so terrifying that he proclaimed, "I am trembling with fear" (Heb. 12:21).

Revival is a "person or a community saturated with the presence of God . . . an invasion from heaven which brings to man a conscience awareness of God" (Olford, 60). This awareness of God includes the revelation of His holiness. The beauty of His holiness will always illuminate our sinfulness, which subsequently produces tremendous conviction of sin. When we look at our sin through the presence of God, we begin to understand how hideous our transgressions actually are. This is Christ's goodness revealed to a race of rebels (Rom. 2:4).

While preaching during the First Great Awakening in Lyme, Connecticut Jonathan Parsons described the scene: "...many had their countenances changed; their thoughts seemed to trouble them, so that the joints of their loins were loosed, and their knees smote one against another. Great numbers cried out aloud in the anguish of their souls. Several stout men fell as though a cannon had been discharged, and the ball had made its way through their hearts . . . people had to be carried from the meeting house" (America's Great Revivals, 19). This has often been the result of the revelation of God's holiness to unholy people.

Revival Produces Deep Heartfelt Repentance

When the Holy Spirit descends He convicts the "world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (Jn. 16:8, NKJV). Tremendous conviction of sin brings masses of people to repentance, which transforms individuals who then transforms society. Heartfelt repentance produces a change in character, and a change in character produces a change in lifestyle. History demonstrates that according to the depth of conviction will be the depth of repentance and according to the depth of repentance will be the depth of the revival.

John the Baptist told the people to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Mt. 3:8). What is the fruit of repentance? It is holiness and love for God. Revival is always a move of the Spirit that produces repentance and personal holiness. It cannot be otherwise.

Revival Is New Life

Heartfelt repentance and a passion for holiness imparts new life to the saved and unsaved. When the spiritually dead come alive, babies can be born. The river of living water that pours forth from the throne of God gives life wherever it flows (Ezk. 47). When that river flows through the church there will be power and desire to reach the unsaved. When it sweeps through the streets of our cities, radical conversions will abound.

New life produces new priorities. The light of God's brilliance illuminates the meaninglessness of worldly pursuits. Compromise falls off as love for the Savior replaces the depraved love of the world and the twisted love of self. Vibrant worship and prayer become the norm for those who have tasted of that heavenly river and are now alive in Christ. There is no room for dead and worthless formalism. The self-righteousness that possessed many professed believers is exchanged for a holy zeal that is the love of the God ablaze in the soul.

New life in the soul means new life in relationships. When men and women abandon themselves to Jesus, the result will be transformed lives that affect every relationship they have. Marriages and families are restored as godly virtues replace wicked character traits. When rebellious teens are genuinely converted, their rebellion ceases. The power of God delivers the fornicator, adulterous spouse or homosexual from their demonic sexual addictions to live in pure and holy freedom. Revival is literally new life for individuals, families, churches and nations.

Revival Is A Spiritual Revolution

"Revival is a divine method of operation in human history...an instrument of spiritual revolution" (Autrey, 14, 16). This spiritual revolution is birthed through radicals and martyrs who reproduce after their own kind. They see the world through the eyes of Christ and are willing to lay down their lives for the One who laid down His life for them. This is the place of desperate love and surrender to Jesus, where sacrifice ceases to be a burden.

An explosive missionary spirit is always a byproduct of revival. The Lord uses common saints who live in the light of eternity to turn the world upside down. They comprehend that people are eternal creatures that will live forever in heaven or hell. So they joyfully abandon themselves to the cause of Christ to rescue a self-destructing world no matter the cost. This is normal Christianity! Since "revival should be the normal condition of the church. A church that is not in revival is a sick church" (Wright, 21).

The radicalness of revival is demonstrated through the transformation of nations. "To the extent that the Spirit of revival prevails, mercy, justice and righteousness sweep over the land" (Coleman, Dry Bones, 16). Some of the most profound and compassionate laws that have ever been passed were the results of far-reaching and deeply penetrating revivals. Gerhard Lohfink asserted, "It is true that Jesus never called for a political, revolutionary transformation of Jewish society. Yet, the repentance which he demanded as a consequence of his preaching of the reign of God sought to ignite within the people of God a movement in comparison to which the normal type of revolution is insignificant" (Brown, Answer Book, 272).

Radicals begin and advance revival. Without these radicals to press forward Christ's kingdom, nations fall deeper and deeper into rebellion. The manifest glory of God is the greatest hope for the salvation of our loved ones, the most effective means of restraining the wickedness that is sweeping America, and the only power that can transform cities and nations.

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