

# Reformation and Revival, 1

by Ian Murray

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*Ian Murray's sermon explores the complexities of the term 'revival' and emphasizes the need for a biblical understanding of its significance in the Christian faith.*

**Duration:** 39:09

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 1:10

**Topics:** "Revival Theology", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of revival and its connection to the preaching of the word of God. He emphasizes the importance of both evangelism and personal repentance and holiness in bringing about revival. The speaker references the writings of Jonathan Edwards, who emphasizes the need for spiritual evidence and obedience to the revealed will of God. He also mentions the year 1800 as a time of great revival, characterized by the abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Overall, the sermon highlights the belief that revivals are times of extraordinary communication of the Holy Spirit, granted by Christ for His own glory.

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## Transcript

Well, I thank you for your very kind welcome. It's a great joy for me to be here. I've looked forward earnestly to it, and I truly believe I'm going to look back to it as a highlight in my own life.

I bring you the greetings of many Christian friends and pastors in Britain who would love to be here on this occasion, remembering us at this time. I have to tell you that the bonds that exist across the Atlantic are very precious to us. For these 30 years or so, they have been increasing.

A number of you have been across. We have heard you preach. You have encouraged us.

We read the Founders' Journal. We are deeply thankful to God for the strength that comes from a wider unity, and we do believe that that unity is given of God, and we prize it. And I bring you the greetings of these many friends in Great Britain who would also love to be here, counted a privilege as I did.

I was thinking this evening at our first meeting what Spurgeon would have felt to have seen this gathering. You know, when Spurgeon died in 1892, he was a comparatively lonely man. The faith which he loved had fallen on hard times, and he said, not long before his death, the next 50 years I may be eaten of dogs, but the more distant future will vindicate me.

And it's wonderful how that has been seen. Now, this evening I want to seek to speak on how do we understand revival. And as I begin, I remind you of something that I'm sure you know, and that is that the word revival is one of the most confused words in our Christian vocabulary.

It has all kinds of various meanings. And I think the right starting point then is to ask the question, is there a definite meaning, and what is it? Now, not everybody would agree with that starting point, because some people, understandably, would say, the word revival, after all, is not strictly a biblical word. Certainly isn't a biblical word in the technical sense of the word.

And so why not drop the word? If it's a subject of so much confusion, why should we not simply use substitute words? And sometimes the argument is added, the word revival has become discredited. It's an additional reason to drop the word. So in reply to that thought, I think we need to say that the confusion isn't actually simply about the word.

It's the thing itself which is in confusion, the phenomenon itself. So simply by changing the word, we don't actually remove the confusion. I'm ready to accept that it's not a biblical word, and I think it's good to remember that.

But on the other hand, it is a word that's come down to us at least from the 1740s, and we have a rich history associated with it. Seems to me, therefore, better to ask the question, what was its original meaning, and how was that justified from Scripture? I think there's an advantage in doing that. We drop the word, and we continue to read the heritage that we have.

We'll constantly come across the word. Why don't we then seek to understand what it means, and what it originally meant? As we approach the subject, I think there's one qualification that we need to give at the outset, and that is to remember that all are agreed that the subject of revival has to do with the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. And anything that is of God is something that reminds us that we, by contrast, are sinful, and fallible, and finite.

And if revival is something that we can easily understand, then it's surely not the thing that the Bible would teach us that it is. Behold, Scripture says, God is great, and we know Him not. Our Lord warned Nicodemus that we who simply don't understand how the wind may blow, we have to look on with wonder at the work of the Spirit in the regeneration of one individual.

It's therefore no surprise that when we come to the subject of revival, we see that God's ways are unsearchable. And it behoves us to have a humble mind, and a humble spirit. We do not know how the Holy Spirit brought Christ's birth to pass in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

We do not know how the Holy Spirit enabled men to write inerrant Scripture. We do not know how the Holy Spirit dwells in our bodies and in our spirits, and how He will raise these same bodies at the day of resurrection. There is so much that is incomprehensible to us.

And all who have had any experience of true revival have all, I believe, been humble men and women. And we must have humility of mind. You remember how Samuel Davies, who lived in the era of the Great Awakening, the first Great Awakening, wrote the words, Great God of Wonders, all thy ways are matchless, godlike, and divine.

Theodore Tyler of New York in the last century wrote this about revival. After long pastoral experience and frequent labors in revivals, I confess that there is much that is utterly mysterious in regard to them. Our

God is sovereign.

He often seems to withhold His converting power at the very time when, according to our calculations, we ought to expect it. I have had many disappointments of this kind. On the other hand, he says, several copious showers of heavenly blessings have descended when we were not expecting them.

So here is a profound, wonderful, mysterious subject. We stand on holy ground, and we pray for the help and the light of the Holy Spirit. Now you remember how in the first chapter of the first epistle of Peter, we have this sequence of statements.

The apostle speaks of the great things that were foretold by the Old Testament prophets. Now he says, announced to you through preaching with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, which things the angels desire to look into. That is to say, with all their faculties so high above ours, they cannot fully comprehend the magnitude of the grace of God revealed in the Gospel.

And then the next verse says, wherefore gird up the loins of your minds. That is to say, although these things are profound and difficult, we have to make every effort in dependence upon God to look into them and to understand them as best we may. And I think that word of exhortation, to gird up the loins of our minds, is probably particularly necessary this evening.

A lot of us have travelled a good way. It's been a long day, getting weary, and here am I in this first session going to give you my most difficult address. And yet it has to be the starting point.

It may be more pleasant, more interesting, more uplifting, simply to describe revivals. But I am certain the primary need is that we should understand what we mean when we talk about revival. Otherwise, ultimately, we make no progress.

I'm going to put before you then three current views on the meaning of revival. And these are contradictory views. I hope nobody will suggest to me that they can be combined.

I do not see how they can be combined. With the greatest love or will, they are differing, colliding views. The first is this.

The first view says that the whole idea of occasional, extraordinary revival is not a biblical idea. And they say that because, they point out, that in the Old Testament the Church prayed for revival, and God promised that He would revive His people by the outpouring of the Spirit in the latter days. And that promise has been fulfilled.

So that our Lord, you remember, says, I will pray the Father and He will send you another Comforter, and He will abide with you forever. So, they say, the Holy Spirit is part of the present inheritance of the Church. Isn't it true, if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.

By one Spirit we're all baptized into one body. And therefore, they say, our business should not be looking for, or awaiting, or thinking of some future revival, but we should realize what is our present inheritance. And they think that any other view is a serious mistake.

Now, I hope you follow that position. The view that's been widely held, often held in Reformed churches, defended by some notable theologians, found in such recent, recent books as Frederick Bruner's book on the Holy Spirit, Bruner says, there are no replicas of Pentecost. There are no little Pentecosts.

God has fulfilled His promise, what we have to do now is to realize by faith what is ours. That's the first view. Second view is quite different.

The second view holds that the presence, or the absence, of revivals is conditional upon the behavior of Christians. Now, they admit revivals might be permanent if only Christians did what God calls them to do. But they're not permanent, and they're not permanent, they say, because of our fault and failure.

Now, this view that revival is conditional upon our obedience, it can be divided into two groups. The first group put their emphasis upon evangelism. They say if we pray and witness and preach the gospel, faithfully, there will be revival.

So, Charles Finney argued that we might have the millennium within three years if only Christians were obedient to the Great Commission. The other group, under the same view, put the emphasis somewhere else. They don't talk so much of evangelism, but they talk of the necessity of personal repentance and holiness.

To quote you the words of Jonathan Goforth, missionary in China, beginning of this century, he said, if God the Holy Spirit is not glorifying Jesus Christ in the world today as at Pentecost, it is simply we who are to blame. After all, what is revival but simply the Holy Spirit fully controlling the surrendered life? It must always be possible then when man heals. The sin of unyieldedness alone can keep us from revival.

Pentecost is within our grasp. If revival is being beheld from us, is being withheld from us, it is because some idol remains enthroned. So far, Goforth.

And a more recent writer, Reverend Duncan Campbell, middle of this century, has a book called *The Price and the Power of Revival*. How is it here that revival carries? Is there any reason why the Church today cannot everywhere equal the Church at Pentecost? And he went on to say, we have only to regard and observe those laws and limits with which the Holy Spirit acts, and we shall find His glorious power at our disposal. The great thing he said is a clean hand and a pure heart.

Complete and full surrender is the price of revival. With that view, as I'm sure you know, 2 Chronicles 7 and verse 14 is so very often quoted. If my people which are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will heal their land.

That's a promise. Now, let's stop at this point to consider, as briefly as we can, this second view. That revival is conditioned upon our obedience.

It's so important here to understand what the question is and what it is not. The question is not whether God uses means in revival, that is to say whether prayer and preaching are parts of revival that God uses. That isn't the question.

The question is, is what we do by way of prayer and preaching the cause of the revival? Is revival the effect? Is one the cause of the other? That's the question. The question again is not whether evangelism will be blessed. It will.

Nor is the question whether personal devotion to Christ, greater humility, prayer, whether these will lead to greater health in the church. That is not the question. That is certain.

The question is whether either of these things, more evangelism, more sanctification, will guarantee and ensure a revival. That's the question. It's certainly true that before some revivals, these things have sometimes been in evidence.

But the question is, is there any promise that where these things exist, there is going to be a revival. Now take the argument that revival depends upon greater evangelism. Surely the mistake there is to do with the assumption that Christ has promised that our preaching will always be accompanied by some remarkable success.

He hasn't surely promised that. Our activity is not the controlling factor. When Peter preached at Pentecost, three thousand were converted.

Paul, by the river at Philippi, one woman is brought in. Was Paul less faithful than Peter? Of course not. The scriptures teach that one may plant, one may water, but God gives the increase.

It is neither he that watereth nor he that planteth, but God that giveth the increase. Now that doesn't mean that we are excused from evangelism. Of course not.

But the controlling factor is the gracious purpose and hand of God. So we can say that the evidence of history is against the idea that the revivals are dependent upon evangelism. Look at it like this.

In 1740, George Whitefield was here in America on his second visit. Of course he was visiting his own country in those days when Americans were wise members of the... I had to get that in somewhere. I mustn't distract you with patriotic thoughts.

What I was going to say was that he was here in the Thirteen Colonies for his second visit. And as you know, 1740 was the beginning of the Great Awakening. His preaching was wonderfully used.

Open air meetings in Philadelphia, many other places, many, many souls brought into the Kingdom of God. Whitefield came another five times to America. Never saw the same results again.

Was he less faithful? Was he less true as a preacher? Not at all. Or take Spurgeon. 1857, three years into his ministry in London, Spurgeon could say that he had seen a thousand converted and added to his own then comparatively smaller church in London.

He never wrote that again. He preached for another thirty years. God blessed his ministry further, but never with the same results.

So we cannot say that what controls the success is the extent of our endeavours. Some of the most earnest endeavours that have ever been put forth in the spread of the Gospel by missionaries and others have seen comparatively little fruit. So what are we to say to the idea that more repentance and holiness would secure revival? Well, again, it doesn't fit the facts.

All of you who've read missionary biographies will know that people like Henry Martin, some of the godliest Christians that ever lived, they didn't see revival. Whitefield was a more mature spiritual Christian after the Great Awakening, but he didn't see the same fruit. We cannot make the work of God dependent on our conduct.

It simply doesn't fit, I believe, either the Scripture or the facts. I think it comes about, this view, this second view, it comes about often by a confusion of thought between Old and New Testaments. Let's think about

the promise in 2 Chronicles 7, 14, for a moment.

If my people that are called by my name, you know the text. What is it that's being promised in that text? Well, I think we have to say it cannot be revival for this good reason, that it was something to be realised by penitent believers in the time of Solomon. And the whole of the Old Testament makes clear that the blessing of the Holy Spirit was a blessing that still lay in the future.

All the prophets, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Joel, speak of the blessing that is to come. And John's Gospel, chapter 7 and verse 39, tells us very clearly that the Holy Spirit was not yet given, for Jesus was not yet glorified. Now, if a revival is an outpouring of the Spirit of God, by definition it is not something that belonged to the Old Testament Scripture.

So it is a confusion of thought to take a text such as the text in 2 Chronicles and make it applicable to revival. What does 2 Chronicles 7 then mean? Well, it surely means this, that God requires obedience and holiness of life of all who profess his name, and that that obedience will not be unrewarded. But the nature of the reward is not identical in Old and New Testaments.

Listen to the words of an old Scottish writer, Thomas McCree. He says, The peculiarity of the divine government of Israel, or as it is commonly called, a theocracy, consisted in general in two things. In a system of laws which was immediately given unto the people from heaven, and in the exercise of a peculiar providence in supporting and sanctioning that system by conferring national mercies and inflicting national judgments, often in an immediate and extraordinary way.

I believe that is a true statement. But in the New Testament, the church is not connected with any country in a theocratic manner. We belong to the Jerusalem which is above, the heavenly Jerusalem.

There is no promise in the New Testament that if Christians will humble themselves and pray, God will heal the land. Think of the apostolic age and how faithful the Christians were, and you know what happened to Israel in A.D. 70. It's a different day has dawned.

Our Lord surely underlining that again when he says in John 16, It is expedient for you that I go away. If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you. So, revival is in the Old Testament in terms of promise and prophecy, but not in terms of experience.

And therefore I believe a lot of confusion arises because people turn to Old Testament texts and from those texts they make it a basis of understanding what they say is revival. That needs perhaps some more discussion. I think it's an absolutely fundamental point.

I'm not saying of course that we don't draw from the Old Testament many illustrations of the supernatural marvellous working of God. We do, but if we begin to identify that with our pourings of the Spirit, we are leading to theological confusion. So much for the second view, the view that says revivals are conditional upon us.

The third view then is this, and it's the view that once prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic. It's the view that was certainly prevalent for at least a hundred years after 1740. And it rests upon the person of Christ as the exalted head of the Church.

Christ is the Anointed One, the One to whom the Spirit has been given without measure for the work of redemption. And when that work was completed, Christians, believers, enter into Christ's inheritance. We

too are anointed.

We too receive the Holy Spirit. Acts chapter 2, He, Christ, has shed forth this which ye now see and hear. So the third view agrees with the first at this point, that Pentecost was a decisive event in the history of redemption.

Christ fulfilled his promise. The comforter was given to the Church, and given to the Church not temporarily, not for a year or two, but to abide with the Church forever. That is agreed.

The difference comes here. The third view says the measure in which the grace and power of the Spirit was given at Pentecost, that measure is not uniformly present through the ages. Two things happened at Pentecost.

There was the giving of the Spirit to abide with us, but there was also a largeness of degree in his manifested presence and power, which is not permanent. So it was not permanent that 3,000 people would be converted every time the Gospel was preached. It was not permanent that fear would come upon every soul.

These were extraordinary things. See the argument. Two things then at Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is given to abide, but the degree, the measure in which he was given was not permanent. Now what's the supporting argument for that? Let me give you three. It is surely clear from the book of Acts that all Christians did not remain permanently filled with the Holy Spirit.

I say that is clear because from Acts 4.31, you remember, we read of the same disciples who were at Pentecost, that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And we read further in Acts 6 that when certain men were to be chosen for the service of the Church, they were to look out for men full of the Holy Spirit. If being filled with the Holy Spirit was permanently true of all Christians, then that would not make any sense.

So we believe, as the larger catechism of the Westminster Assembly states, that the Holy Spirit, while he is given to all Christians, his working is not in all persons nor at all times in the same measure. Now some people still object. They say, if the Holy Spirit resides in a Christian, how can it be only part of the Holy Spirit? He's a person.

And if the Holy Spirit is present, he's wholly present. Now at this point, I think we have to come back to the qualification at the beginning. There is so much we do not understand.

But let me just remind you that while John 7 says the Holy Spirit was not yet given, we know that the Holy Spirit was in the Old Testament, don't we? Psalm 51 and so on. So what the Scripture must teach there is that there's a great difference in the degree of his manifested presence and influence between Old and New Testament. And you know, there's a great difference in degree, in his manifested presence, between what we are now, when we have the first fruits of the Spirit, the down payment, and what we shall be in glory.

We now are indwelt by the Spirit of God, that is true, but not in the way in which we shall be in eternity. These are things beyond our comprehension. But I believe they help us to see that there are what you call degrees or measures of the Spirit's manifested presence and power.

And further, in a new era, the work of Christ in bestowing the Spirit is not uniform, but there are seasons when, in his own grace and power, he more abundantly makes manifest the Spirit's grace and presence in the church. Now a third line of proof, I think, comes from church history. Supposing the first view was true, all we have to do is to realise what's our inheritance.

How do you explain the Reformation? Supposing the Church was, I'm sorry, supposing the Holy Spirit was always permanently indwelling the Church in the same way. How do you explain a century like the 16th when there was such a glorious change? It wasn't that men sat down and said, ah, we are going to realise what we already have. It wasn't that.

Something happened. That's right. Something happened to them.

John Knox puts it perfectly. He says, God gave his Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance. That's it.

That's a revival. God giving his Spirit in great abundance. So in the next century, in the 17th century, there was a great revival in the southwest of Scotland in the 1620s.

And this is how one of the men describes it. He says, there was a very solemn and extraordinary outletting of the Spirit. God poured forth his Spirit.

Or Kentucky here in America in 1800. Men, we read, men felt as if the Lord had breathed on them. They were first affected with awe and fear.

Then they were bathed in tears, then filled with love unspeakable. The year 1800 exceeds all that our eyes ever beheld on earth. All the blessed displays of almighty power and grace, all the sweet gales of the Divine Spirit, and the soul-reviving showers of the blessings of heaven which we enjoyed before, and which we considered wonderful, were like a few scattering drops before the mighty rain.

God gave greater measure of the Holy Spirit. Now, as time is running on and we're under instructions, and we mustn't be antinomians, must we? We must keep... And you have to listen to my friend Mark Dever and we look forward to that. So I'll have to come to a conclusion very soon.

The third view then is teaching that revivals are times of extraordinary communications of the Holy Spirit. Not denying the abiding presence of the Spirit. No.

The times when Christ is pleased for his own glory to grant the Spirit in greater abundant measure. I draw two lessons then, briefly. The first is that if what we're saying is true, a revival is a heightening of normal Christianity.

If we say the Holy Spirit is always with the Church, what happens in a revival is not a different kind of Christianity, but it is an intensification, a heightening of normal Christianity. Now, what is normal Christianity? Normal Christianity is love to Christ, reverence for the Word of God, obedience to Scripture, isn't it? These are the things. And so, here's the lesson.

If we're going to test whether a revival is genuine, the first test or the only safe test is to ask, are the things that are true of normal Christianity all present but in a greater degree? More reverence for Scripture, more love for Christ, more consciousness of heaven. Now, what I'm saying is this, that if people try to prove the existence of a revival by other tests, supposing people say they fell on the floor, or they jumped with joy, or they wept with tears, or they spoke with tongues, or they saw visions and angels and whatever you have,

my friends, these are very unimportant things. The important things are more love to Christ.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. So, the real test of a revival is always, not did some extraordinary thing happen, but was the work of the Holy Spirit even more evident by the normal evidence of the New Testament? That is tremendously important, and this is why the writings of Jonathan Edwards are so stupendously valuable. Edwards says, it doesn't matter what happens physically, it's spiritual evidence you need, and without that, nothing is of any value.

The last lesson is this one. I sought to argue that we can't bring revivals by our conduct. And someone might respond by the text in Acts chapter 5, we are his witnesses, says Peter, and so also is the Holy Ghost whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Now, there's a text. And what do we say about that great text? Well, surely, that text is laying down a vital principle, not particularly in relation to revival, but in connection with all Christian living. It's axiomatic that Christians have to obey the revealed will of God, or be obedient.

And so, for a church in decline, to begin to look for revival without repentance, without obedience, is utter folly. And you know, A. W. Towson has a statement somewhat to the effect that he knew nothing more depressing than so many Christians running around seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit while they lived in moral carelessness. I picked up a book the other day by Wilbur Smith, written when he was a young man in the 1930s.

And he was talking there about how much was being said about revival, how hopeful this was, but nothing had happened. And you know, the same thing happened in Britain. In the 1950s, many of the Methodists, for instance, talked about the need for revival.

Dr. Sankstein of a quotation, he says, if Methodism has lost her true emphasis and passion, both may be restored. God will not withhold his grace from a people prostrate before him. The big thing, he says, is the revival of Methodism.

But you know, Methodism has not revived. And the answer is in that verse in Acts 5, which God has given to them that obey him. Now, that text, I believe, is saying this.

It's not saying if we act in a certain way, we'll guarantee a revival. But it will certainly bring the favour and help back to the church. That's sure.

Our Lord says, if you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love. So, my friends, it would be a great mistake for people to begin to speak of revival as a solution to our problems, as a solution to declining church membership, or trouble in our denominations, or whatever, and not to set about the earnest need of repentance, obedience to the word of God. We have to contend for the faith.

We have to do the will of Christ. So, what I'm saying is, in answer to the text in Acts 5, that's a universal rule for Christian behaviour at all times. It's not a promise that there will be an extraordinary revival if we do this or that, but it's absolutely certain that the blessing and favour of God will not be given with this moral carelessness.

Well, we must break off at that point. Thank you.

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