

Revival in Durban

by J. Edwin Orr

A revival broke out in Durban, South Africa, in 1936, leading to a significant number of conversions and a renewed sense of purpose and passion among Christians.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 9:37, Acts 3:19, James 5:16

Topics: "Revival", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

J. Edwin Orr recounts the powerful revival that took place in Durban, emphasizing the city's diverse population and its historical context. He describes how the initial meetings sparked a deep spiritual awakening among ministers and congregants, leading to heartfelt confessions and a collective desire for revival. As the campaign progressed, many individuals publicly accepted Christ, and the atmosphere of unity and fervor among Christians set the stage for a significant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Orr highlights the transformative impact of the revival, noting that over three hundred people made decisions for Christ, marking a new chapter for the city. The revival's success was attributed to the earnest prayers and the central message of the Crucified Christ.

Transcript

NATAL, the Province in which Durban is situated, lies about the 30th degree of south latitude: that is to say, about the same latitude south as South Australia, and equivalent in the northern hemisphere to the position of Egypt. It has the same longitude east as Leningrad. The climate is sub-tropical: for example, we visited Natal in the middle of winter, July, and found it warmer than the English month of May. The population of Natal comprises a million and a half natives; 200,000 Europeans; 200,000 Asiatics and coloured.

On Christmas Day, 1497, three Portuguese ships sighted the coast of Natal, the name being given by the commander, Vasco da Gama. It became a stopping place on the route to India. About the beginning of the last century Natal was populated by about a million Kaffirs of Bantu race, divided into ninety-four tribes. The rise of Chaka, the bloodthirsty Zulu conqueror, brought about the desolation of Natal and surroundings, multitudes being put to the sword by the 100,000 Zulu warriors under his command. In 1824 a small party of Englishmen was welcomed to Natal by the great Zulu king: many natives fled to them for protection. Chaka was murdered by his brothers, and as he was stabbed to death by them, he prophesied "You think you will rule this land when I am gone; but I see the white man coming, and he will be your master." Dingaan assumed leadership. Captain Allen Gardiner arrived at Durban in 1835: and a year later,

the Boers entered Natal. Dingaan massacred some of them: then the Dutchmen took revenge on 26th December, when Pretorius and 460 farmers crushed the tyrant. A year later the Republic of Natalia was proclaimed, becoming the British colony of Natal in 1844. It is now considered the most British of the four provinces. In 1879, the Zulu War broke out, Cetewayo being crushed after much bloodshed. Fire and sword came to Natal again during the Boer War at the beginning of this century.

Durban is now a city of quarter of a million, one third of whom are of European descent, one third Indian and coloured, one third native. The port is a busy, prosperous place: and the city is beautifully situated. Looking down upon the harbour, from above Glenwood, reminds one strongly of Wellington, New Zealand. Rickshaws are very well known throughout the world as a feature of Durban life. Almost every picture of Durban shows a rickshaw, so the outsider would think.

On Sunday evening, the 26th July, 1936, I arrived back in Durban from the north. I greatly regretted to hear that the Rev. Thomas Chapman, an indefatigable organiser of the campaign, had been called away south on account of serious family illness. Mr. Victor Clark was deputy as secretary, and his wife made me welcome at their home.

The Durban campaign had been organised by a committee of ministers and leaders of the various denominations. All were of the opinion that the city needed revival sorely indeed: but during my first short visit I felt that not all of the leaders were wholeheartedly behind me-I excused them in my own mind because of their obvious ignorance of what I preached.

The first meetings were held in the afternoon, and made a good start. The big, general meeting over-crowded the Central Baptist Church, and on that very first occasion, a real expectancy of revival was created. The meeting lasted for two and a half hours. Nevertheless, in my own heart there was not much hope of blessing - I felt dry and mechanical.

But it so happened that I was sitting at the piano next morning when memory suggested the beautiful chorus learned in Auckland when revival began there:

Calvary covers it all -

My life, with its guilt and shame:

My sin and despair,

Jesus took on Him there:

And Calvary covers it all

I felt that I could not go on playing, so I slipped away to the secret place. "Calvary covers it all" - the wonder of it dawned on my soul. I am not ashamed to say that I wept and prayed for about an hour-over my own hardness, subtle backsliding, in the face of the need of souls. Thank God for revival then.

On Tuesday morning, I had the privilege of addressing the ministers at their fraternal. I felt that this was a key meeting, and so, after I had spoken about revival generally, I dealt with the necessity of revival in the heart of the minister of the Lord. It was refreshing to see that the Word was gripping hearts, prejudices were being discarded, heart-searching was going on.

Then we got to prayer: deep confessions of the faults that hindered blessing were made: fervent prayer ascended: and truly there was revival among us. I heard only two prayers which were not in the Spirit. All the others were real prayers. Several ministers came along afterwards and told me of reconciliations, private apologies, restitution of things spiritual, and hope of revival.

And so the atmosphere was prepared for the revival to spread to the people. In the afternoon, after speaking to Christians, I asked those who wished to make decision to confess publicly. Several sinners decided. In the evening, an even greater crowd came to hear the message, overflowing into anterooms. The message was meant to follow up the previous subject, "Why cannot we have revival in Durban?" The Christians were reminded that on the previous evening they had stood up one after another to declare, "If God shows me anything in my life which hinders revival, by His grace I will confess to Him and forsake the sin." The hindrances to revival were pointed out, and a tense atmosphere resulted. When we finally got to prayer, several men and women stood up and brokenly asked for prayer for deliverance from their sins. The meeting continued in such strain until some eighty Christians had thus got right with God. Then there was a general turning to the Lord for forgiveness, prayers ascending, faces being wet with tears. In the midst of this prayer meeting, scores of sinners repented of their sin and accepted Christ as Saviour.

Again there were decisions in the afternoon service. On Wednesday evening a thousand people gathered together in the Central Baptist Church, some standing in the hallway and vestibules, some in the Sunday School hall listening to the amplifier, others standing outside the church windows under the canopy of heaven. In the middle of this meeting-again for Christians - one young man after another stood up before the great crowd and said, "I am willing for God's service anywhere" - "I now surrender my whole life to God," and these fifty splendid types of young manhood were followed by as many girls declaring much the same. All remained standing while prayer was offered to God.

Again strange things happened during that prayer - over fifty sinners accepted Christ as Saviour, and most were dealt with in the enquiry room and by decision card. Several people listening outside the church accepted Christ as Saviour, following the appeal through the opened windows. Till a late hour we were dealing with souls.

The meeting on Thursday night was likewise for believers. Some five hundred sought God's great blessing-the filling of the Holy Ghost. The blessing falling upon the Christians was accompanied by the Spirit in conviction falling upon the unsaved: and again scores accepted Christ as Saviour.

On Friday night, again the message was for Christians, the subject being "Soul-winning." I rebuked the people strongly for their lack of passion for the salvation of their lost friends, relatives, neighbours, workmates and schoolmates. Many tearful scenes were witnessed as, for example, a mother with a broken voice asked for prayer for her only son: daughters asked prayer for fathers and mothers: requests for prayer came from allover the building, from people in all stages of life. And again, while prayer ascended to God for lost souls' salvation, scores of sinners in the meeting signified their decision for Christ.

The young men and women who had surrendered to God on Wednesday night came together specially on Saturday night to discuss "What we can do to turn Durban upside down." It was a most informal gathering. It was decided to meet monthly as a Revival Fellowship. The meeting voted that all ministers and leaders be informed that those attending the fellowship would promise regular attendance at the Sunday services of their respective assemblies and all other loyalties. A small group was appointed to arrange open-air

work: a choirmaster volunteered to gather together all the musical talent: tract distribution was suggested: visiting of hospitals: wayside Sunday Schools: cottage meetings: prayer union letters: personal work: and a course in Bible study was arranged for. A couple of Indians spoke of the need among their folks: it was decided likewise to support by prayer the efforts going on among the coloured and native peoples. A feeling of enthusiasm and goodwill abounded. And at the end of the service, during prayer, a score of sinners professed to accept Christ as Saviour. Some 45 people attended this meeting, ninety per cent being under thirty. : The most remarkable feature of these five weeknight services for Christians was that hundreds professed to accept Christ as Saviour - a proportion of one in four of the total attendance. This proves undoubtedly what one has always preached-that when revival stirs the hearts of Christians, sinners turn to the Lord.

Here, for instance, is a letter received from and signed by seven nurses in a local hospital: "Our hospital has been represented every day at your meetings, and we do praise God for the great and mighty blessings received, and for revival begun. So far as we know, five of the nurses have already decided for the Lord." Several ministers told me of their children making decision for Christ.

On Sunday, the time was given to the evangelistic message. Two thousand people gathered on Sunday afternoon in the City Hall, and a gratifying number signified decision for Christ. Over two thousand, it was estimated, attended the evening service in the large Princess Theatre, and one was told that folks began to gather two hours before the service. In this final address, it was made patent that the centre of the message was the Crucified Christ. About two hundred people professed to accept Christ as Saviour at the end of this address, many of them being people untouched by the churches.

I felt physically tired after the campaign: but my heart rejoiced to know that revival had begun in Durban.

Over three hundred¹ all together signified publicly their decision to accept Christ. Half of these were dealt with in the enquiry rooms: but in some cases there was no scope for such dealing with souls. Over six hundred decision cards were taken.

The unity of the Christians continued right to the end, a score of ministers taking part in the farewell meeting. It is not too much to say that God had answered prayer by giving revival-the last chairman described it as unprecedented. Durban has not got a reputation for successful Christian work, but the revival which began in July, 1936, is going to continue.

One bright morning in Durban, who should roll up in a rickshaw but Dr. Howard Guinness, our old friend from the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. It was his first experience of a rickshaw, and it was mine likewise. We enjoyed the experience, and took a moving picture of each other. The Zulu rickshaw puller acted like a Hollywood star. Then Dr. Guinness and I had a long yarn. His work in South Africa, among South African students, has been well spoken of by leaders everywhere.

In the meantime, contradictory reports reached me from Sherriff down at Capetown. He sent me a telegram: "Car procured. Send £5 to Port Elizabeth for petrol." A letter from Mr. Shearing stated that Sherriff had procured a Ford. So I was left with the uncertainty of wondering "Is it a car, or is it a Ford?" After many vicissitudes of travel through magnificent scenery and over terrible roads, A.I. arrived at midnight covered with dust. He sang the praises of the Ford until the early hours of the morning, telling me that he motored up Long Kloof in top gear-from the way he talked about it, Long Kloof is either a mountain slope or the side of a house. At any rate, I was glad to see his cheerful face again, despite his fantastic notions about a Ford being a car.

1. Editor's Note by J. Edwin Orr: Although 600 decision cards were taken by enquirers, the author has decided to understate figures of professed conversions by quoting 50 per cent of the maximum estimate given by friends - and this policy is adopted almost everywhere in this book.

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