

Revival's Source

by John Sale

Revival is a work of God, not the result of human plans and efforts, and it is characterized by the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the normal means that God has given to the church.

Scripture: Psalm 115:1, Zechariah 4:6, John 3:8, Acts 1:7, 1 Corinthians 3:6

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Revival"

Description

John Sale reflects on the historical significance of the church building in Northampton, Massachusetts, once served by Jonathan Edwards and other great Christian leaders who witnessed the First Great Awakening. He emphasizes the need for revival in our current times, highlighting that revival originates from God alone and is not a result of human efforts or techniques. Sale points to the importance of faithfully using the means appointed by the Holy Spirit, such as preaching the Word of God and prayer, while acknowledging that the outpouring of God's Spirit is sovereign and cannot be manipulated by human actions.

Transcript

Not long ago, I visited the site of the church building in Northampton, Massachusetts, where the renown pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards once served. Two church buildings have since been erected on that site because of fires; however, at the entrance to the current building is an old preserved stone that one must pass over, which was the original stone to the entrance of the first church building. It was across this stone that other great Christian leaders such as Solomon Stoddard and George Whitefield passed who, like Edwards, had witnessed and participated in the First Great Awakening (1740s). These were men who saw the "special effusion of God's glory" in what is called revival. As I stood on the same stone that bright Sunday afternoon, I wondered what those men would think of the three belly dancers across the street, the lesbians walking by the church with arms draped around each other, or the two men standing down the street embracing and kissing with no shame! More importantly, I pondered, "what would they do?"

These men of past revivals would readily agree that the need of revival in our day is very great. From the records of their lives, we know that in such an evil setting they would boldly proclaim the gospel truth, and strongly exhort believers to pray and fast, and to seek God's special grace. But, they would never assert that if people would only properly use the means God has given, they could secure a revival. These leaders, along with numerous other past revival leaders--e.g., Archibald Alexander, Isaac Backus, R.L.

Dabney, Samuel Davies, John Flavel, Asahel Nettleton, Daniel Rowlands--were convinced from the Scriptures and their experience that, while obedience to scriptural duties should always mark the church, the measure of present blessing is in the hands of Almighty God who has put "the times and seasons" in His own power (Acts 1:7). Fundamental to a proper understanding of the term revival is that its source is God, and not the results produced by human plans and efforts.

The way Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in John 3:8 concerning the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit--"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going..."-- is the same way we are to understand the movement of God in any work of His. This is what we read in Acts concerning the day of Pentecost. After Christ's ascension, a small number of the disciples prayed and waited, as they had been instructed. Forty days later, according to God's sovereignty and timing, "suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind," and the disciples were "filled with the Holy Spirit." This spilled over onto the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem, with an addition of approximately 3,000 to the church. Peter explains the scene as the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken through Joel, wherein God said, "I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind" (Acts 2). This event was essentially a spiritual and supernatural matter, a work of the Holy Spirit, not the results of persistent use of proper means.

While revival originates from God, the Holy Spirit has appointed certain means to be used for the advancement of His kingdom. The foremost of these is the preaching of the Word of God accompanied by earnest prayer. Yet, no amount of human endeavor can assure results. The same is true of revival: no measured amount of our activity will guarantee an equivalent blessing, for God's blessing is bestowed according to His good pleasure. Thus, in accounts of past revivals, we find statements such as, "It is not by power, nor by might, but by the Spirit of the Lord of Hosts that the interests of religion are carried on" (cf. Zech. 4:6).

The records of those used by God in the First and Second Great Awakenings consistently document that they were convinced that God used the appointed means of preaching and prayer for the spread of the gospel and for the revival of the church, and that these great means are to be practiced faithfully, but the results are to be left in the hands of our Sovereign God. This is illustrated by the ministry of George Whitefield, who was a faithful preacher of the Word and was continually used until the end of his life in 1770. As Iain Murray relates in his excellent work, *Revival and Revivalism*, Whitefield "never saw the same amazing harvest as had marked the years of the Great Awakening" in 1739-40. He was not discouraged, however, but regarded this variation as fully in accord with the workings of divine grace. To a friend in Cambuslang, Whitefield wrote in 1749 that he would be glad to hear of a revival, and then added, "but, dear sir, you have already seen such things as are seldom seen above once in a century" (p. 23).

Nevertheless, some have asserted that if we properly use the means given to the church, we can bring down revival. Preaching in the right way, praying the right prayers, gathering large numbers for prolonged prayer and fasting, can be employed to precipitate and sustain revival. In the words of one individual from a past century, "if the Church would do all her duty, she would soon complete the triumph of religion in the world." This approach has led to the use of special techniques to assist in accomplishing this purpose.

When one reads the accounts of the First and Second Great Awakenings, however, the records indisputably show that those revivals were not secured through unusual efforts, proper organization or rightly ordered meetings. Those who were instrumentally involved did not use special means to promote what happened. Pastors simply continued in the work to which they had been divinely called, preaching

earnestly and faithfully the full counsel of God, dependent upon Him in prayer and supplication. When revival occurred, these same men were preaching the same messages with the same desires, but with vastly different consequences. At such times, they often commented that what happened was a sudden and unexpected blessing.

Therefore, what characterizes revival is not the unusual means we might employ, but rather the "extraordinary" degree of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the normal means that God has given to the church. Revival is a work of God, a divine visitation, a gracious manifestation of God's glory. Jeremiah Hallock, a leader in Connecticut during the Second Great Awakening, is quoted in Porter's Letters on Revival: "As means did not begin this work of themselves, so neither did they carry it on. But as this was the work of the Omnipotent Spirit, so the effects produced proclaimed its sovereign, divine author" (p. 101).

Consequently, as the leaders in the First and Second Great Awakenings wrote and spoke of the great effusions of the Spirit during special seasons in their ministry, they did not disparage the reality of His normal and regular work in the church. They did not believe or promote the idea that true Christianity can only occur when there are revivals, or that without revival, all labor is futile. These leaders saw the duties of labor, prayer and evangelism to be constant in their ministry, and knew no biblical reason to be cast down by the ordinary. They had prominently before them, however, the possibility of revival, and affirmed that there are times when God is pleased to give the operation of His Spirit in extraordinary measure, and this may occur even when the church is in a low spiritual state.

This principle is illustrated and stated in the Scriptures. The earnest labors of Isaiah, Jeremiah and hosts of other faithful prophets and preachers of the Word did not produce immediate, extraordinary results, yet no one would dare say that their work was of no value. We must also remember the reassuring words of Jesus to His disciples in John 4:37-38: "One sows, and another reaps. I have sent you to reap that for which you have not labored..." Likewise, the Apostle Paul understood this principle, reminding the leaders at Corinth that "one plants, another waters, but God gives the increase" (I Cor. 3:6). May the Holy Scripture's assertion in Psalm 115:1-3 be a continuous source of comfort and strength:

"Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Thy name give glory because of Thy lovingkindness, because of Thy truth. Why should the nations say, where, now, is their God? But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever he pleases." Be encouraged in what God has called you to do! Be faithful to the normal means sovereignly given and do not think that you can improve them! Hope in God, and may we persistently ask Him to show us much favor and be pleased to pour out his extraordinary blessing again just as He has so many times before.

For further reading on this matter, I commend Iain Murray's recent work, *Revival and Revivalism* (Banner of Truth, 1994), which develops and documents the views expressed in this article in the two Great Awakenings and other revivals in America, illustrating as well a shift among some to dependency upon human means. As we earnestly pray and seek for revival in our day, may God find us faithful to Him, entrusting ourselves completely to Him, His ways and His timing.

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