

Triumphs of the Spirit in Manchuria

by Jonathan Goforth

The Revival in Manchuria was a spiritual movement that brought about a breakthrough in prayer, confession of sin, and transformation, resulting in a deeper relationship with God and a lasting impact on the community.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 51:10, Matthew 6:14, Luke 15:7, Acts 3:19, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:32, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Revival Movement"

Description

Jonathan Goforth preaches about the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit in reviving spiritually dead churches, leading to intense prayer, confession of sins, and a deep desire for forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite initial doubts from missionaries, the churches experience a profound transformation as individuals openly confess their sins, seek forgiveness, and express a newfound willingness to forgive others. The revival spreads to outsiders, leading to repentance and a desire for reconciliation even among those who had been involved in criminal activities. The movement highlights the importance of genuine repentance, forgiveness, and the transformative power of God's grace.

Transcript

SHORTLY after my arrival at Kwangning one of the missionaries said to me: "Reports have come to us of the meetings at Mukden and Liaoyang. I thought I had better tell you, right at the beginning, that you need not expect similar results here. We're hardheaded Presbyterians from the north of Ireland at this place, and our people take after us. Even our leaders won't pray unless you ask them to individually. And as for women praying -- that's quite unheard of!" "But I never ask any one to pray," I replied; "I only expect a man to pray as the Lord moves him." "Very well," said the missionary, "be prepared for a Quakers' meeting."

The following morning, after I had given my address, I said to the people: "Please let's not have any of your ordinary kind of praying. If there are any prayers which you've got off by heart and which you've used for years, just lay them aside. We haven't any time for them. But if the Spirit of God so moves you that you feel you simply must give utterance to what is in your heart, then do not hesitate. We have time for that kind of praying. Now, the meeting is open for prayer." Immediately eight men and women got up, one right after the other, and prayed. The missionaries were astounded. They confessed they had never seen anything like it. After the evening address, that same day, over twenty men and women followed one another in prayer. Next day even the schoolboys and schoolgirls were taking part.

On the third day the eagerness to pray was so strong that no one could get started unless he began his prayer before the one preceding him had said "Amen." Once a lady missionary whispered to me: "The men are praying so rapidly that the women can't open their mouths. Won't you tell them to hold back for a little while and give the women a chance?" I replied that at the close of every address I, as far as possible, committed the control of the meeting to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and therefore did not feel justified in interfering. Presently, however, a woman did get started, and for fifteen minutes or so the men had to hold their peace. After one such meeting a visiting missionary was heard to remark, "I've never heard such praying as that before. Why, it just seemed as if it had suddenly dawned upon those people that a way of access had been opened to the Throne of Grace, and they were eager to get in all their confessions and petitions before the day was closed."

After the evening meeting, on the third day, a few of us missionaries were conversing together. "I can't understand how it is," said one, "that our Chinese leaders are so silent these days. So far all the praying has been done by the ordinary church members. In the prayermeetings that were held before Mr. Goforth came the leaders didn't hold back at all. Why, then, should they be so silent now?" "I think you can count upon it," I said, "that there is a hindrance among your leaders. It is sin that makes them dumb." Immediately one of the lady missionaries took me up. "Oh, come now, Mr. Goforth," she said, "you surely don't expect us to believe that there are such sinners among our leaders as there were at Mukden and Liaoyang. Why, we would be ashamed of ourselves, if there were."

On the fourth day we began the afternoon meeting about four o'clock. Following my address the same deep intensity in prayer became evident. After prayer had continued for about half an hour a strange thing happened. More than half the congregation went down on their knees. Strange, I say, because it was a Presbyterian Church, and the people had always been accustomed to stand while praying. Feeling, however, that it was the direction of the Spirit, I intimated that they might all go down on their knees if they wished - and they did.

Then an elder stood up and said to another elder, who was seated on the platform: "In the session meetings it was always my bad temper that was the cause of trouble. Please forgive me." And the elder who was thus addressed cried back: "Please don't say any more. I'm just as much at fault as you are. It's you who should forgive me."

A few minutes of silence followed, and then a man rose from his knees and in a clear voice, though he was bordering on tears, began to pray. For several days I had been taking note of the man, although I did not know who he was. He had a strong, intelligent face, upon which anxiety was plainly written. "O God," he cried, "you know what my position is a preacher. When I came to these meetings I determined that, come what would, I would keep my sins covered up. I knew that if I confessed my sins it would bring disgrace not only upon myself but upon my family and my church. But I can't keep it hidden any longer. I have committed adultery But that is not all. In one of the outstations a deacon committed a horrible sin which hindered Thy cause. My plain duty was to report the affair to the missionary, but the deacon bought me a fur garment, and I accepted it and it sealed my lips. But I can't wear it any longer." With that he tore off the garment and flung it from him as if it had been the plague. Then he continued to pray with glowing intensity until the whole audience was swept as by fire. Even the smallest children began to cry out for mercy. The meeting did not break up until ten o'clock that night, having lasted six full hours.

At this meeting there was an unusually large number of outsiders, their curiosity doubtless having been aroused by the strange rumours that were current throughout the district. As their numbers kept

increasing, Mr. H-became alarmed and herded them together near the door, so that if they got obstreperous he could rush them out. But his fears were groundless, for no sooner had the movement begun among the Christians than they, too, came under conviction, got down on their knees and began crying for mercy.

Another remarkable thing about the movement on that memorable evening was the way in which conviction came over certain Christians who, for some reason or other, were not able to attend the meeting. Among these was a prominent member of the session. About the time when the movement in the church was at its height, this elder began to suffer intense pain, so much so, in fact, that he became convinced that he was going to die. As he lay on his bed, writhing in his agony, his deadened conscience was stirred, and he was reminded of the time when he had been overseeing the building of the street chapel. There were so many pieces of timber and so much brick and other material which he had coveted and which he had used in the construction of his own house. Not being able to write himself, the wretched man had his son make a list of the things which he had stolen, and he made the young man promise that he would read the confession aloud to the congregation on the following day. Next morning, however, the elder was better. Courageously he went himself and gave his confession, creating a deep impression upon the whole Church.

After the meetings, bands of revived Christians toured the surrounding country. At every outstation that was visited, except one, a deep spiritual movement resulted. When the bands returned to the city this particular place was made the occasion for special prayer. Then another band was sent to the village, and a movement set on foot which quite eclipsed anything which had been seen in any of the other outstations.

In a village, not far from Kwangning, there was a young fellow who enjoyed a peculiarly notorious reputation. His father was a Christian, which fact served but to emphasise the scandal of his own life. Not to mention his other nefarious activities, he was associated with a company of bandits who made of his home a sort of headquarters where plans could be discussed and loot divided. Rumors of this finally reached the ears of the local mandarin, who had the young fellow seized and put under torture in order to extract a confession from him. Many forms of torture were resorted to, but to no avail. He would reveal nothing. At last, in despair, the mandarin invited one of the missionaries to try and see what he could do. The missionary pleaded and argued with the man, but still he refused to open his mouth. His courage, in the face of what he suffered at the hands of the authorities, was remarkable. "Go ahead and kill me," he would say to the mandarin, "but you needn't think you can make me speak. You've got a spite against me because my father is a Christian. That's your only excuse for arresting me."

So impressed was the mandarin by the bold stand taken by the young fellow that he began to doubt whether after all he was really guilty. At any rate, he decided to let him go. Not long afterwards, a revival band from Kwangning visited the district. After much coaxing the young desperado was induced to attend one of the meetings. He came under conviction and stood up before his fellowvillagers and confessed everything. Then he went to Mr. H, who was in charge of the band, and begged that he might be allowed to accompany him from place to place and tell his story. Mr. H- confessed to me later that he was a trifle dubious at first about accepting the man, so notorious had been his reputation. But, finally, he agreed to take him on. And certainly he had no reason to regret his decision. The young exbandit became the life of the band. Every one who heard his testimony seemed to be moved.

From the very first meeting at Chinchow a movement began to develop. There was the same intense prayer spirit, the same anxiety to get rid of hindering sin which had been so marked at the other stations. On the morning of the third day I received an anonymous letter in which the request was made that we should have special public prayer for a preacher and his wife (their names being mentioned), who, by their violent quarrelling, were hindering the work at one of the mission's most important outstations. My informant mentioned also a prominent deacon and his brother who, through the same fault, had brought the work at another station to a standstill. Emphasis was laid upon the gravity of the matter, it being pointed out that whereas many of the ordinary churchmembers had broken down and confessed, the leaders were still holding studiously aloof. My correspondent concluded with the suggestion that I should mention the offending ones by name, so that general intercession could be made for them.

While I was glad, in a way, to have some idea of where the hindrance lay, yet I realised, of course, that to follow out the suggestion mooted in the letter would be a serious blunder. I had committed the movement to the control of the Holy Spirit; it was not for me to interfere. Immediately after my address that afternoon, a man rose and offered up a heartbroken prayer of confession. It was his temper, he declared, which had estranged him from God. So violent was it, he said, that his wife didn't dare live in the same room with him. This was the preacher concerning whom my anonymous correspondent appeared to have such anxiety. As soon as the meetings were over the repentant leader went back home and made things right with his wife. And not long afterwards, I am told, a Revival broke out at his station.

Scarcely had the preacher ended his confession when another arose and declared that his temper was so vile that it was impossible for his own brother to get along with him. He had tried, he said, to manage his brother with force and anger rather than with love. At that a young man came running from another part of the church and threw himself down at the other's feet, weeping and begging for forgiveness. It was the deacon and his brother.

I will just mention one other incident. Several months before my arrival at Chinchow, the lady doctor at the mission hospital had suddenly awakened to the realisation that a considerable quantity of valuable medicine was disappearing, so to speak, right under her very nose. She called in her assistant and, pointing to the room where the medicine was kept, she said: "You and I are the only ones who have charge of the key to that room. A lot of medicine is missing. Have you any explanation to offer?" "What!" cried the girl, becoming greatly incensed, "you accuse me of being a thief!" And she left the mission, giving the impression that her proud spirit could not brook the injustice which had been done to her. The facts of the rather sordid story soon became known. It appeared that the girl had stolen the medicine under pressure exerted by her father, an old, backslidden Christian and a doctor of some note in the city. The man had attracted considerable patronage to himself by advertising throughout the city that he dealt only in "expensive foreign medicines."

Each day during the meetings a message was sent to the girl, inviting her to come, and saying that her friends were constantly remembering her in prayer. But it was not till the last day that she finally put in an appearance. She was pointed out to me at the forenoon meeting. Immediately I was impressed by her fine appearance and by the strength of character so evident in her face. She could not have been more than twenty. All through the service she sat rigidly in her seat with a defiant look on her face, as much as to say, "I have a will of my own. Say what you will, I have nothing to confess."

At the noon hour the missionaries offered up special prayer that the Lord would bring the girl back to the afternoon meeting. She was sitting in the front row when I arrived to open the service. About halfway

through my address her head went down and the tears began to flow. In the open session for prayer that followed my address the men completely monopolised the floor. Feeling that this girl simply must be given a chance to get rid of the burden which so plainly was weighing upon her, I announced a hymn. At its close I said to the men: "Do be patient, brethren, and let the women have an opportunity to pray for a little while." Then this young woman stood up and faced the congregation and said: "I have much to confess. But I'm not worthy to make my confession standing up. I must kneel." So she knelt down on the platform and poured out the whole miserable story. About two months later I learned of her death. Some internal malady had been sapping her lifeblood and had finally carried her away. What a tragedy might it have been if that young woman had resisted the Spirit of God and had gone to meet Him with the unpardoned sin.

Dr. Walter Phillips, who was present at two of the meetings in Chinchow, writes: "It was at Chinchow that I first came into contact with the Revival. Meetings had been going on there for a week, hence, I was ushered into the heart of things unprepared, and in candour, I must add, with a strong temperamental prejudice against 'revival hysterics' in every form, so that mine is at least an unbiased witness.

"At once, on entering the church, one was conscious of something unusual. The place was crowded to the door, and tense, reverent attention sat on every face. The very singing was vibrant with new joy and vigour . . . The people knelt for prayer, silent at first, but soon one here and another there began to pray aloud. The voices grew and gathered volume and blended into a great wave of united supplication that swelled till it was almost a roar, and died down again into an undertone of weeping. Now I understood why the floor was so wet - it was wet with pools of tears! The very air seemed electric -- I speak in all seriousness - and strange thrills coursed up and down one's body.

"Then above the sobbing, in strained, choking tones, a man began to make public confession. Words of mine will fail to describe the awe and terror and pity of these confessions. It was not so much the enormity of the sins disclosed, or the depths of iniquity sounded, that shocked one. . . . It was the agony of the penitent, his groans and cries, and voice shaken with sobs; it was the sight of men forced to their feet, and, in spite of their struggles, impelled, as it seemed, to lay bare their hearts that moved one and brought the smarting tears to one's own eyes. Never have I experienced anything more heartbreaking, more nerveracking than the spectacle of those souls stripped naked before their fellows.

"So for hour after hour it went on, till the strain was almost more than the onlooker could bear. Now it was a big, strong farmer grovelling on the floor, smiting his head on the bare boards as he wailed unceasingly, 'Lord! Lord!' Now a shrinking woman in a voice scarce above a whisper, now a wee laddie from the school, with the tears streaking his piteous grimy little face, as he sobbed out: 'I cannot love my enemies. Last week I stole a farthing from my teacher. I am always fighting and cursing. I beseech the pastor, elders and deacons to pray for me.' And then again would swell that wonderful deep organ tone of united prayer. And ever as the prayer sank again the ear caught a dull undertone of quiet sobbing, of desperate entreaty from men and women, who, lost to their surroundings, were wrestling for peace."

The Christian community in Shinminfu had been terribly persecuted during the Boxer uprising of 1900. Fifty-four had suffered martyrdom. The ones who were left prepared a list, containing 250 names in all (of those who had taken part in the massacre). Some day, it was hoped, the way would be opened for them to wreak on these full and complete revenge.

The crisis was reached here on the afternoon of the fourth day. Again I had the feeling that I was a witness at a scene of judgment. After the meeting had continued for about three hours I pronounced the benediction. Immediately cries went up from all over the audience: "Please have pity on us and let the meeting go on. For days we haven't been able to sleep. And it will be just the same for another night if you don't give us a chance to get rid of our sin now." I asked a lady missionary to take the women and girls over to the girls' school and to continue with them there until the movement subsided. I did not see any hope of the meeting ever ending otherwise.

As the women and girls were filing out, one of the evangelists came and knelt down in front of the platform. He confessed several sins with seeming genuineness, but still the burden which was plainly weighing upon him appeared to be in no way removed. I said to him: "Since you have confessed your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Go in peace." "But I haven't confessed the worst sin of all," he cried brokenly. "I won't forgive." "Then, of course," I replied, "God can't forgive you." "But it is humanly impossible for me to forgive," he went on. "In the Boxer year a man came and murdered my father, and ever since then I've felt that it was my duty to avenge his death. Just the other day a friend of mine wrote to me, saying, 'Where's your filial piety? Your father has been murdered, and you are living without avenging him. You aren't worthy to be my friend!' Why, I simply can't forgive that man. I must destroy him." "Then I am afraid," I said, "that it is clear from God's Word that He can't forgive you." He did not say anything more, but just continued on his knees, weeping.

Then a schoolboy got up and said: "In 1900 the Boxers came to my house and killed my father. All along I have felt that I should grow up and avenge that wrong. But during these last few days the Holy Spirit has made me so miserable that I haven't been able to eat or sleep or do anything. I know He is urging me to forgive the murderers for Jesus' sake. Do pray for me." Another boy told how the Boxers had come to his home and killed his father and mother and elder brother. In fact, as many as nine boys got up in that way and told how their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters had been murdered before their very eyes, and how that ever since then they had lived in the hope that some day they would be able to take revenge. But they all confessed that they were utterly miserable, and asked us to pray for them that they might have grace to forgive those who had wronged them.

After the women and girls had left, the meeting continued for two and a half hours. There was just one stream of confession to the very end. And all the time the evangelist was kneeling there by the platform, weeping. At the conclusion of the meeting he finally rose to his feet and faced the congregation. His face was drawn and haggard. "My mind is made up," he cried. "I will never rest until I have killed the man who murdered my father."

I thought that that would be the last that I would see him. But when I entered the church next morning there he was standing by the platform, his face shining like the morning. He asked for permission to say a few words before I began my address. Turning to the schoolboys, he said: "Will the boys who confessed last night, and asked for grace to forgive the murderers of their loved ones, please come up here to the front." The nine boys left their seats and went and stood in a row in front of him.

"I listened to your confessions last night, boys," said the evangelist. "I heard you say that you were willing to forgive those who killed your loved ones. Then you heard me, a leader in the Church, declare that I couldn't forgive and that I would not rest until I had taken revenge on the man who murdered my father. When I went home after the service I thought of how the devil would be sure to take advantage of my example and put you boys to ridicule. People would say that you were too young to know your own minds.

Then they would point to me as an intelligent man who surely ought to know his own mind, and say 'he doesn't believe in that foolish talk about forgiving one's enemies.' So, lest the devil should mislead you, I have bought these nine hymn books and I am going to present one to each of you, in the hope that every time you open it to praise God from its pages you will recall how that I, an evangelist, received from Him grace to forgive the murderer of my father."

Just then the list containing the names of those upon whom the Christians had planned to take revenge was brought up to the front and torn into bits and the fragments trampled under foot.

A modest tombstone in Newchwang marks the resting-place of William C. Burns. It was here that he last laboured for his Lord. It seems that everywhere this great evangelist went, both in the homeland and in China, all with whom he came in contact were brought to a saving knowledge of Christ. Even the heathen carpenter, who made his coffin, was no exception, and was an elder in the Church when I arrived there.

After the Lord had moved so mightily at Mukden, one of the missionaries there said to me: "God has certainly blessed us here, but I am afraid that He won't be able to do anything at Newchwang. Why, the Church there is so dead, it ought to be buried out of sight!" I replied: "You now know the power of God. Just pray that mercy may be shown to Newchwang." At the close of the meetings at Liaoyang I heard the same story. "We praise God," the missionaries said, "for what He has done for us. But really there's no use expecting anything from Newchwang. It's really too far gone to be revived." And again I replied: "But you have seen God's power. Why not pray for it?" At Kwangning and Chinchow and Shinminfu it was just the same. Newchwang was too dead for anything. It was past hope.

Mr. Hunter of Kwangning had gone ahead of me to Newchwang to conduct a series of special prayermeetings. When we met at the dinnertable, shortly after my arrival I could see that he was bursting with news. "Strange things have been happening here," he cried, his face alight with joy. "Just that day at the prayermeeting," he said, "a woman, who had denied her Lord in 1900 in order to save her life, had been terribly broken. She had prayed that another opportunity might be given her for her to offer up her life for her Master. A Christian contractor, too, confessed in tears how he had cheated a certain concern out of \$200, and vowed that he would pay the money back before the day was out."

The meetings began the following morning. On entering the pulpit, I bowed as usual for a few moments in prayer. When I looked up it seemed to me as if every last man, woman and child in that church was in the throes of judgment. Tears were flowing freely, and all manner of sin was being confessed. What was the explanation? How was one to account for it? This was the church which had been reported to be dead and beyond all hope. And yet, without a word having been spoken, or a hymn sung, or a prayer offered, this remarkable thing had happened. What other explanation can one offer but that it was the Spirit of God working in answer to the prayers of His revived children at Mukden and Liaoyang and elsewhere, who had seen what He could do and in the light of that vision had interceded on behalf of their needy sisterchurch.

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