

The Responsibility for Revival

by Oswald J. Smith

Oswald J. Smith emphasizes the urgent need for modern ministers to pursue revival and produce measurable spiritual outcomes in their ministries.

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:3, John 14:13

Topics: "Revival", "Soul Winning"

Description

Oswald J. Smith passionately calls for a return to the responsibility of soul-winning in the church, lamenting the lack of revival and the alarming statistic of 7,000 churches failing to win a single soul in a year. He reflects on the lives of historical figures like John Wesley and William Bramwell, who prioritized the conversion of souls, and challenges contemporary ministers to examine their effectiveness in preaching and prayer. Smith emphasizes that true spirituality must result in tangible outcomes, such as conversions, and warns against complacency in church life. He urges believers to seek a genuine revival that produces a deep yearning for the lost and a powerful manifestation of God's presence. The sermon concludes with a call to action for ministers and congregations alike to strive for a fruitful ministry that aligns with God's will.

Transcript

AS far back as I can remember my heart has burned within me whenever I have heard or read accounts of the mighty work of God in the great Revivals of past years. The heroic missionaries of the cross in foreign lands, and the lonely men of God in the home field around whom these gracious Visitations have centered, have always been a source of untold inspiration to my life. David Brainerd, Adoniram Judson, Chas. G. Finney, Robt. Murray McCheyne--these and many others have been my bosom companions and friends. I have watched them, listened to them, lived with them, until I have almost felt the spirit of the atmosphere in which they moved. Their trials and hardships, their prayers and tears; their joys and sorrows, their glorious triumphs and victorious achievements have thrilled my very soul until I have fallen down upon my face and exclaimed with the prophet of old: "Oh, that Thou wouldst rend the heavens, and that Thou wouldst come down !" The great Awakening of the 18th century under John Wesley, the stirring Irish Manifestation of 1859, the glorious American Visitation in the 19th century under Chas. G. Finney, and in our own day the mighty Welsh Revival of 1904-05--Manifestations such as these have been my meat and drink for years past. I have heard again the uncontrollable sob and groan of the convicted, the exceeding bitter cry of the penitent, and the unspeakable expressions of joy of the delivered. And I have sighed within myself for another such Manifestation of God's presence and power.

From my boyhood it has been my delight to read more or less of God's work along these lines, but lately I have been led to lay all else aside and to literally devour everything I could lay hands on regarding Revival work. And as I studied the lives of those whom God has signally used all down the centuries, especially the labors of the Puritans, the early Methodists and others of later years, and saw how wonderfully they were owned of Him--how they worked for, expected and got what they sought --I was compelled to admit that I saw nothing like it today either in my own ministry or in the ministry of others. The average church does not aim at, let alone get, results. Men preach and never even dream of anything happening. Oh, how far away we have drifted! How powerless we have become !

It is reported that there were 7,000 churches that did not win a single soul for Jesus Christ in an entire year. That means that 7,000 ministers preached the Gospel for a whole year without reaching even one lost soul. Supposing that they preached, putting it at a low average, on 40 Sundays, not including extra meetings, that would mean that these 7,000 ministers preached 560,000 sermons in a single year. Think of the work, the labor, the money expended in salaries, etc., to make this possible. And yet 560,000 sermons preached by 7,000 ministers in 7,000 churches to tens of thousands of hearers during a period of twelve months, failed to bring a single soul to Christ.

Now, my brethren, there is something radically wrong somewhere. There is either something the matter with these 7,000 ministers or else with their 560,000 sermons, or with both.

In reading over the Twelve Rules of the Early Methodist church I was struck with the fact that they aimed at and looked upon soul-winning as their supreme task. Let me quote from one of them: "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. It is not your business to preach so many times; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness, without which they cannot see the Lord."--From "The Twelve Rules."--John Wesley.

The practical application of this rule is demonstrated in the life of Wm. Bramwell one of their most remarkable men. "He was not, as the words are commonly understood, a great preacher. But if that man is the best physician who performs the most cures, that is the best preacher who is the instrument of bringing the greatest number of souls to God; and in this view Mr. Bramwell will be entitled to rank amongst the greatest and best Christian ministers."--Memoir of Wm. Bramwell.

John Oxtoby was so used of God that he was able to say: "I am witnessing daily the conversion of sinners, I seldom go out but God gives me some Fruit."

It was said of John Smith, one of their most wonderfully anointed men and the spiritual father of thousands, that "he ceased to estimate all preaching, and indeed all ministerial labor except as it produced saving effects. 'I am determined by the grace of God to aim at souls,' he exclaimed. 'A minister of the Gospel is sent to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God!' Of that species of preaching which only produced intellectual pleasure, he had a holy abhorrence. Nothing can be more characteristic of the man than his remark to a friend, on sermons in which power of intellect or imagination is almost exclusively predominant: 'They achieve nothing, Sir.' "--Life of John Smith.

"I cannot tell how they get their time over who can drag on and see no Fruit. Were that so in my case I should be ready to conclude that I was out of my place."--Thos. Taylor.

"If your hearts be not set on the end of your labors, and you do not long to see the conversion and edification of your hearers, and do not study and preach in hope, you are not likely to see much fruit of it. It is an ill sign of a false, self-seeking heart, that can be content to be still doing, and see no fruit of their labor."--Richard Baxter.

Then I compared the results of my ministry with the promises of God. In Jer. 23:29, I read: "Is not My Word like a Fire, saith the Lord; and like a Hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" And in Eph. 6:17, "The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." But the more I pondered over it, the more I was convinced that in my ministry the Word of God was not a Fire, a Hammer, and a Sword. It did not burn, break and pierce. There was no execution. Heb. 4:12, declares that "the Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." I had never seen it so. John Wesley saw it. John Smith was a constant observer of it. David Brainerd witnessed its sharpness; but I did not. "So shall My Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." (Isa. 55:11.) And I knew that this wonderful promise had not been fulfilled in my preaching. I had no evidence such as Paul, Wm. Bramwell and Chas. G. Finney that it did not return void many and many a time. And I had a right to the evidence. Was it any wonder that I began to challenge my preaching?

And not only my preaching, but my prayer life as well. This also had to be challenged and tested by the Outcome. And I was forced to admit that the confident assertion of Jer. 33:3, "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not," was not realized in my experience. The "great and mighty things" were almost daily witnessed by Evan Roberts, Jonathan Goforth and others, but not by me. My prayers were not definitely and daily answered. Hence, John 14:13-14, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do," and "If ye shall ask anything in My name, I will do it," was not real in my case. To me these promises were not vital since I asked for many things that I did not receive, and this was not according to the promise.

Thus I came to realize that there was something radically wrong with my prayer-life. And in reading the autobiography of Chas. G. Finney, I found that he, too, had experienced the same failure. "I was particularly struck," he relates, "with the fact that the prayers that I had listened to, from week to week, were not, that I could see, answered. Indeed, I understood from their utterances in prayer, and from other remarks in their meetings, that those who offered them did not regard them as answered.

"They exhorted each other to wake up and be engaged, and to pray earnestly for a Revival of religion, asserting that if they did their duty, prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit, and were in earnest, that the Spirit of God would be poured out, that they would have a Revival of religion, and that the impenitent would be converted. But in their prayers and conference meetings they would continually confess, substantially, that they were making no progress in securing a Revival of religion.

"This inconsistency, the fact that they prayed so much and were not answered, was a sad stumblingblock to me. I knew not what to make of it. It was a question in my mind whether I was to understand that these persons were not truly Christians. and therefore did not prevail with God; or did I misunderstand the promises and teachings of the Bible on this subject, or was I to conclude that the Bible was not true? Here was something inexplicable to me, and it seemed, at one time, that it would almost drive me into scepticism. It seemed to me that the teachings of the Bible did not at all accord with the facts which were before my eyes.

"On one occasion, when I was in the prayer meeting. I was asked if I did not desire that they should pray for me. I told them no, because I did not see that God answered their prayers. I said, 'I suppose I need to be prayed for, for I am conscious that I am a sinner; but I do not see that it will do any good for you to pray for me; for you are continually asking, but you do not receive. You have been praying for a Revival of religion ever since I have been in Adams, and yet you have it not.'"

When John Wesley concluded his message he cried to God to "confirm His Word," to "set to His Seal," and to "bear witness to His Word." And God did. Sinners were stricken immediately, and began to cry for mercy under fearful conviction of sin, and soon after, in a moment they were set at liberty, and filled with unspeakable joy in the knowledge of a present Salvation. In his wonderful journal he sets down what his eyes witnessed, and his ears heard in the following words:

"We understood that many were offended at the cries of those on whom the power of God came; among whom was a physician, who was much afraid there might be fraud or imposture in the case. Today one whom he had known many years was the first who broke out in strong cries and tears. He could hardly believe his own eyes and ears. He went and stood close to her, and observed every symptom, till great drops of sweat ran down her face, and all her bones shook. He then knew not what to think, being clearly convinced it was not fraud, nor yet any natural disorder. But when both her soul and body were healed in a moment, he acknowledged the finger of God."

Such was also the experience of the Early Church. "Now when they heard this they were pricked in their hearts, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37.) Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the name of the Lord, which gave testimony unto the Word of His grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands." (Acts 14:3.) They prayed "that signs and wonders" might "be done." (Acts 4:30.) And Paul declared that the Gospel is "the power of God unto Salvation." (Rom.1:16.) Yet all this was utterly foreign to my work.

In the Irish Revival of 1859, "signs and wonders" were seen on every side. Among the Early Methodists they were of daily occurrence. But with me the Gospel was not "the power of God unto Salvation." God did not "confirm His Word," "set to His seal," or "bear witness to His Word," when I preached. And I knew I had the right to expect it for Jesus Himself had given the promise. "The works that I do," He declared, "shall ye do also and greater works than these shall ye do." (John 14:12.)

Then one day I read the Acts of the Apostles to find out if God's servants in the Early Church got results wherever they went. And I found as I read that they aimed at, worked for, expected, and never failed to get Fruit. Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 responded to that first appeal. There was a definite Outcome. With Paul it was the same. Follow him from place to place, and wherever he goes churches spring up. See how repeatedly the results are noted throughout the book. "They were added unto them about 3,000 souls." (2:41.) "Many of them which heard the Word believed, and turned unto the Lord." (11:2.) "Much people was added unto the Lord." (11: 24.) "A great multitude believed." (11: 1.) "Some believed, of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few." (17:4.) "Many believed." (17:34.) "Some believed." (28:24.) And Paul was able to declare "what things God had wrought by His Ministry." (21: 19.)

Oh, how far short I fell! How fearfully I had failed! failed in the very thing for which God had called me into the Ministry. How seldom I could write after having preached that "a great number believed and turned unto the Lord," or even that "some believed." Nor was it possible for me to declare with Paul "what things

God had wrought by my Ministry."

God clearly and emphatically states that it is His will that every servant of His should bear Fruit. "I have chosen you and ordained you," he affirms, "that ye should go and bring forth Fruit." (John 15:16.) Too long was I content to sow and evangelize, using the excuse that I left the results with God, thinking I had then done my duty. When people are saved and greatly blessed they will say so, and if they don't there is reason to doubt the reality of an Outcome. George Whitefield sometimes received hundreds of letters after he had preached telling of blessing and conversions.

"Go into the public assembly with a design to strike, and persuade some souls there, into repentance and salvation. Go to open blind eyes, to unstop deaf ears, to make the lame walk, to make the foolish wise, to raise those that are dead in trespasses and sins to a Heavenly and Divine life, and to bring guilty rebels to return to the love and obedience of their Maker, by Christ Jesus the great Reconciler, that they may be pardoned and saved. Go to diffuse the saviour of Christ and His gospel through a whole assembly and to allure souls to partake of His grace and glory."--Dr. Watts.

There are men who feel they have special talents for the edification of believers, and so they give themselves entirely to building up Christians in the Faith. This was where I was side-tracked. I felt that I had special gifts for teaching and speaking to young Christians on the Deeper Life, and so I prepared a number of addresses with the idea of devoting my time to this work, until God mercifully opened my eyes and showed me how far I was astray. There is nothing that will deepen Christian experience, edify believers and build them up in the Faith so rapidly and thoroughly as seeing souls saved. Deep Holy Spirit meetings where the power of God is working mightily in the conviction and Salvation of sinners will do more for Christians than the teaching of years without it. Such was the experience of David Brainerd. In writing of the Indians among whom he labored he says, "Many of these people have gained more doctrinal knowledge of Divine truths since I have first visited them in June last, than could have been instilled into their minds by the most diligent use of proper and instructive means for whole years together, without such a Divine influence."

An incident is related of Wm. Bramwell: "Several local preachers," it states, "had said that their talents were not to awaken and arouse careless and impenitent sinners, but to build up believers in the Faith. Mr. Bramwell endeavoured to prove that such reasoning was frequently used as an apology, for the loss of the life and powers of God. That although some preachers might have a peculiar talent for comforting and edifying believers, yet that Christ's true servants, those whom He sent into His vineyard, could do all sorts of work. They could plough, dig, plant, sow, water, etc., and he earnestly entreated the preachers not to be satisfied without seeing the fruit of their labors, in the awakening and conversion of sinners."

"The building up of believers in their most Holy Faith was a principal object of Mr. Smith's ministry; but he never considered this species of labor successful, except as its results were indicated in the conversions of sinners."--Life of John Smith.

"He most certainly and perfectly edifies believers who is most ardently and scripturally laborious for the conversion of sinners."--Life of John Smith.

Work among believers of itself will not suffice. It matters not how spiritual a church may profess to be, if souls are not saved something is radically wrong, and the professed spirituality is simply a false experience, a delusion of the devil. People who are satisfied to meet together simply to have a good time among themselves, are far away from God. Real spirituality always has an Outcome. There will be a

yearning and a love for souls. We have gone to places that have a name of being very deep and spiritual, and have often found that it was all in the head, the heart was unmoved; and there was, not infrequently, hidden sin somewhere. "Having a form of Godliness but denying the power thereof." Oh, the pathos of it all! Let us then challenge our spirituality and ask what it produces; for nothing less than a genuine Revival in the Body of Christ resulting in a true Awakening among the unsaved will ever satisfy the heart of God.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/oswald-j-smith/the-responsibility-for-revival/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net