

Characteristics of Revivals

by Richard M. Riss

A revival is a sudden and powerful movement of God's Spirit that brings about a deep sense of conviction, repentance, and renewal in the lives of individuals and communities.

Scripture: Proverbs 18:17, Matthew 5:11, Acts 2:1, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 6:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:19, James 1:5, 1 Peter 4:14, Revelation 22:12

Topics: "Revival History", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

Historian Richard Riss delves into the misrepresentations surrounding revivals, emphasizing how false reports and negative attitudes hinder people from experiencing the forgiveness, love, and joy available through a move of God. Drawing from Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney's experiences during the Great Awakening and Second Awakening, Riss highlights the common phenomenon of misunderstandings and opposition faced during times of revival. He explores the characteristics of revivals, including the rise against spiritual decline, conviction of sin, freedom and reconciliation, and the controversy and decline often witnessed during outpourings of God's Spirit.

Transcript

Historian Richard Riss has written books on revival including *A Survey of 20th-Century Revival Movements in North America* (Peabody, 1988) and *Images of Revival* (Revival Press, 1997). His doctoral research at Drew University includes study of the current awakening.

Revivals and Misrepresentations

During the course of my study of revivals over the past twenty-three years, one of the things that has fascinated me is the extent to which they are misrepresented. These misrepresentations are usually widely believed, creating stumbling blocks which prevent many people from partaking in the forgiveness, love, joy, refreshing, healing, reconciliation,

character development, and other benefits which are freely available through a move of God of this kind.

Jonathan Edwards wrote of this phenomenon in connection with the outset of the Great Awakening, which began at his church in Northampton, Massachusetts in December of 1734. In the introductory portion of his *Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, he said that the Great Awakening was being "exceedingly misrepresented by reports that were spread . . . [to] distant parts of the land." These reports were spread

by other Christians, many of whom were in positions of leadership in the churches. Edwards wrote that, "When this work of God first

appeared, and was so extraordinarily carried on among us in the winter, others round about us seemed not to know what to make of it, and there were many that scoffed at and ridiculed it; and some compared what we called conversion to certain distempers. "Because people really didn't understand what was happening, they began to say negative things about it.

These bad reports spread throughout the entire country, and this had a lasting effect on peoples' willingness to accept that what was happening was a work of God. He wrote, "A great part of the country have not received the most favorable thoughts of this affair, and to this day many retain a jealousy concerning it, and prejudice against it." Unfortunately, when people begin to become predisposed against something, it is no longer an easy matter for them to benefit from it, and they will sometimes attempt to put a stop to it.

In the concluding remarks of the same work, Edwards referred again to "the innumerable misrepresentations which have gone abroad" concerning the revival that began in his church. He stated that because of this, it had been necessary for him to go into great detail about what God was actually doing within the context of the beginning of what we now know as the Great Awakening.

One of the reasons that people misunderstand revival is that it tends to create a great deal of chaos and disorder. Normal church programs are usually suspended. People are caught up in

the things of God. They often fall to the ground or make unusual noises; they weep or laugh or

act as though drunk. This was as true for the Great Awakening as it was for any other revival (for details, see Images of Revivals).

During the Second Awakening in America, Charles Finney said some of the same things about misrepresentation of what God was doing. He lamented in his Memoirs that "it has been common for good men, in referring to those revivals, to assume that although they were

upon the whole, revivals of religion, yet . . . they were so conducted that great disorders were manifest in them, and that there was much to deplore in their results. Now all this is an

entire mistake."

This is a very common phenomenon during revivals. People will assume, based upon misleading reports, that there is a great deal of mixture in them and that there is "much to deplore in their results." Yet, one could be a perfect leader and still encounter storms of criticism; this is exactly what happened to Jesus Christ.

A little bit later, Finney wrote, "Until I arrived at Auburn, I was not fully aware of the amount of opposition I was destined to meet from the ministry; not the ministry in the region where I

had labored, but from ministers where I had not labored, and who knew personally nothing of me, but were influenced by the false reports which they heard." Finney found it amazing that his critics would believe so many of the reports that they had heard.

However, there is a sense in which this phenomenon is not surprising at all. The spread of false reports and negative attitudes with respect to a work of God is a sure sign that it is

genuine, because it indicates that the enemy is at work, attempting to discredit it.

The temptation to belittle the work of God is greatest among those who might have a tendency to feel that they would have something to lose if people were allowed to partake in it. There are strong temptations to jealousy even among Christian leaders. Those who yield to such temptations are in danger of undermining the work of God by belittling the very thing that is bringing life and blessing to those who love Him.

God, in His wisdom, has His own reasons for allowing false reports to arise concerning His work. The stumbling blocks will therefore inevitably come, but woe to those through whom the stumbling blocks come.

The following summary indicates characteristics common to revivals and awakenings.

Characteristics of Revivals and Awakenings

1. How Awakenings Arise

- a. They always emerge against a backdrop of very serious spiritual decline or intense spiritual dryness.
- b. They are the product of intense prayer.
- c. When people pray for reawakening, God seems to give the answer to their prayers in places that they least expect it.
- d. At the beginning of an awakening, there is often an exhilarating sense of expectancy.
- e. Revivals are often brought about by telling people about the revivals of the past.
- f. There is often a specific point in time at the outset of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit at which God's presence is suddenly recognized by the people. The power of God falls spontaneously.
- g. Revivals of this kind seem to emerge at the same time in many different places.

2. Who becomes involved?

- a. The Lord breathes new life into the Church.
- b. He brings multitudes of new believers into His body.
- c. Those who are already Christian enter more deeply into the fullness of salvation.
- d. People recognize a similarity of the revival to any previous revivals they have experienced.
- e. Backsliders are reclaimed.
- f. People often come out of curiosity or skepticism and become believers.
- g. There are conversions of ministers.

3. The Spread of the News

- a. At the outset of revival, there is very little organization.
- b. Advertizing is largely by word of mouth.
- c. People are sometimes drawn to the scene of revival by an irresistible power.
- d. People come from miles away.
- e. People flock from everywhere.
- f. There are crowds.
- g. It is contagious.

h. There are often secular newspaper accounts of an awakening.

4. Conviction of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment

- a. Revival is characterized by widespread repentance and brokenness.
- b. There is a great deal of meditation upon God's character.
- c. There is an awakening of conscience.
- d. There is conviction of sin.
- e. People are given an immediate revelation of God's glory and of their own sinfulness and inadequacy before him.
- f. In some cases, people for blocks around are confronted with their own sin and God's majesty.
- g. People suddenly become deeply convinced of their lostness.
- h. An awesome fear of God and His judgment comes upon everyone.
- i. Revivals bring the individual face to face with the eternal questions of one's nature and destiny.
- j. People suddenly become aware of the terrors of hell.
- k. This is accompanied by deep distress over one's wickedness.
- l. The urge to pray, especially for salvation, is irresistible.
- m. There are sometimes manifestations of shaking or trembling.
- n. There are often strange manifestations of emotion in people in response to these experiences, including laughter, weeping, barking or yelping, and roaring.
- o. People therefore seek forgiveness from God through Christ's shed blood.
- p. They then find redemption in His blood; they are given assurance of forgiveness of sin and of salvation.

q. This is accompanied with joy and peace.

r. Even the skeptical and stubborn will also grieve over their sins until they find assurance.

5. Freedom & Reconciliation

a. God frees people from bondage to sinful habits, bad attitudes, and emotional disturbances, breaking the power of 'cancelled sin,' as Charles Wesley put it.

b. Old prejudices are changed radically.

c. Broken homes are reunited.

d. There is widespread reconciliation.

e. There comes a depth of love for one's brothers and sisters in Christ beyond measure.

f. People receive a fresh sense of the unity of believers in all times and places.

g. It puts an end to cursing, blasphemy, drunkenness and uncleanness in a town. There is a cessation of fighting, clamor, bitterness, and so forth.

h. Rather, joy and peace become predominant in a place that has experienced an awakening.

6. Heaven Upon Earth

a. People become so preoccupied with the things of God that they don't want to talk about anything else.

b. There is an unusually vivid sense of God's presence, and of joy, love and peace.

c. There are sometimes manifestations of laughter and speechlessness.

d. There is a completely different, refreshing atmosphere where God is present.

e. People experience heaven upon earth.

f. Meetings are often of protracted length. Time passes very quickly.

g. There is a feeling of release, or freedom in the Spirit.

h. People feel refreshed. There is a new lilt to everyone's steps.

i. People suddenly have an intense enthusiasm about the things of God.

j. There is considerable praise to God.

k. There is singing in the Spirit of such harmonies as are almost never heard on earth.

l. There is dancing in the Spirit.

m. There are manifestations of spiritual gifts.

n. Children prophesy.

7. Ministry During Divine Visitations

- a. God often raises up people as instruments for bringing about revival who have few natural talents and abilities.
- b. Women and lay people find a greater place for leadership in revival.
- c. His Word goes forth in power.
- d. The Lord anoints with the Spirit the preaching, teaching, counselling, and music such that it has an ability to penetrate the hearts of the people.
- e. There is always considerable revelation upon God's Word, which takes on a new freshness.
- f. People in a revival are almost invariably orthodox theologically on the great basics of the Christian faith. There is a great emphasis upon the Bible and its teachings.
- g. There is a great stress usually laid upon the suffering, cross, blood and death of Jesus Christ.
- h. People fall under God's power.
- i. People begin to laugh or cry, or develop characteristics similar to drunkenness.
- j. Physical ailments are sometimes healed.
- k. These phenomena are accompanied by the healing of shattered lives.

8. Enthusiasm for God's Precious Word

- a. The Bible comes alive for people
- b. There is always a deep thirst for the Word of God.
- c. People hang upon every word that is preached.
- d. There are phenomenal increases in the sales of New Testaments and Bibles.
- e. Those who are used of God in bringing about revival receive far more calls to preach than they can ever answer, and are harried mercilessly.

9. Beyond Superficialities

- a. A spirit of sacrifice is often prevalent in a revival.
- b. People spend whole nights in prayer.
- c. Revival usually produces a zeal for the saving of the lost and, there, for missions.
- d. God brings revelation.
- e. People gather together to share in the faith for mutual upbuilding.

f. Superficial profession, baptism and church membership pale in significance, with an emphasis being placed upon spiritual life, of which the former things are merely tokens.

g. Old institutional forms often begin to seem inadequate to people who are experiencing an awakening.

10. The Rise of Impurities

a. Human frailty is inevitably an ingredient in any revival.

b. It is case for amazement even to seasoned preachers and evangelists to see what happens during seasons of awakening.

c. Belief in the imminent coming of Christ has characterized every movement of awakening since the first century. This has often led to the setting of dates for Christ's return.

d. Those who try to mold a revival to their own tastes or control it are usually swept aside.

e. Because so many young, inexperienced converts are involved, there will be many extravagances.

f. There is a temptation to spiritual pride, and to take ones own imagination for impressions from God.

g. In a revival, there will always be some who violate Biblical truth.

h. Belief that they alone are instrumental in the accomplishment of God's purposes often characterizes both individuals and groups experiencing revival.

11. Controversy During Outpourings of God's Spirit

a. There are always bad reports about what goes on in a revival, both true and false.

b. Many people remain aloof for this reason.

c. A revival is always accompanied with a great deal of controversy.

d. There is always intense opposition and persecution.

e. There is reproach upon every revival.

f. Revival always involves an advance of God's kingdom in spiritual warfare against the strongholds of Satan.

g. The enemy will attempt to hinder the work of God at all costs.

h. Satan attempts to discredit revival by mimicking God's work.

12. The Decline of an Awakening

a. A revival will crest to a high point and then decrease.

b. After a revival crests, offenses will come.

c. Many people will feel ill will instead of good will toward the leaders of a revival.

- d. They will begin to disapprove of what they formerly approved.
- e. They will fasten upon bad reports, true or false, in order to justify their changes in attitude.
- f. Many of those who were more or less convinced will be afraid or ashamed to acknowledge their conviction of faith.

13. The Long Term Effects

- a. A new flood of hymns and scriptures set to music gains widespread circulation and use.
- b. It has lasting, profound effects upon the lives of many of the people involved.
- c. It spawns great ministries which then thrive well past the time of the revival.
- d. There is a tremendous impact on society and many social reforms are effected.

Being aware of these characteristics can help us avoid the extremes of blindly accepting everything in a revival as from God or of resisting and quenching the Spirit by opposing what God is doing, even if the impacts of the Spirit are overwhelming.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/richard-m-riss/characteristics-of-revivals/>

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