

# When Christ Sends Revival

**A Biblical and Historical  
Study on Revival**

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# Contents

When Christ Sends Revival: A Biblical and Historical Study on Revival .....	4
The Premise and Purpose of the Study .....	4
The Controversy Over Revival .....	7
Revival and the Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit .....	14
True Revival Concerns Christ's Work in Greatly Advancing the Church by an Extraordinary Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit .....	14
True Revival Must Be Distinguished from the Counterfeit .....	20
Conclusion .....	23
Genuine Revival .....	25
Descriptions of Revival from History .....	26
The Distinctive Features of Genuine Revival .....	31

# When Christ Sends Revival

## A Biblical and Historical Study on Revival

Across the evangelical spectrum, the consensus seems to be that the church needs a revival. There are, however, widely divergent views of what constitutes a true revival. Most Christians are vaguely aware that God has, in the past, moved in extraordinary ways; the Great Reformation in Europe and the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America and Great Britain are reminders of this. Yet a biblical and historical understanding of revival seems to be, in great part, lacking. This study is an attempt to present a Christ-centered perspective on revival from both Scripture and history—a perspective that sees the Lord Jesus Christ advancing His Kingdom on the earth through specific yet timeless means, in periodic extraordinary movements that are “astonishing exercises of His power and mercy.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The Premise and Purpose of the Study**

As I begin, I would like to state both a premise and a purpose in writing about revival. The premise is this: the church needs more than

orthodoxy and correct beliefs. Do not misunderstand me. The church is in great need of a return to Christ-centered ministry and a return to the preaching and teaching of the basic truths of the Gospel. In fact, I do not believe there can be a revival apart from this. However, having said that, the church always has and always will need more than this. It needs the power and presence of Christ. This is, of course, nothing new. Charles Spurgeon, in his first Lord's Day sermon at the opening of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in March 1861 (the largest church in the world at the time) said,

Let God send the fire of His Spirit here, and the minister will be more and more lost in his Master. You will come to think less of the speaker and more of the truth spoken. Suppose the fire should come here, and the Master be seen more than the minister; what then? Why, this church will become two, three, four thousand strong...we shall have the lecture hall beneath this platform crowded at each prayer meeting, and we shall see in this place young men devoting themselves to God: we shall find ministers raised up and trained, and sent forth to carry the sacred fire to other parts of the globe...let God but send down the fire and the biggest sinners in the neighborhood will be converted: those who live in the dens of infamy will be changed: the drunkard will forsake his cups, the swearer will repent of his blasphemy: the debauched will leave their lusts—dry bones be raised, and clothed afresh, and hearts of stone be turned to flesh.<sup>2</sup>

Spurgeon's emphasis on the fire of the Spirit was disturbing and bothersome to some in his day. However, it mattered not to him. He was well aware that the church was desperately dependent upon Christ, that He would, in his words, "send the fire of His Spirit." So this is our premise. With Spurgeon it is recognized that revival assumes that the church needs more than correct beliefs. It needs a visitation, as it were, of power—power from Christ through His Holy Spirit.

Next is the purpose in writing. My desire is that perhaps God can use this brief look at revival to create in us what can be called a holy desperation: a sense of our great need for Christ to make His power and presence manifest in our churches. There is a great danger of imbalance, a danger on the part of some to measure themselves by doctrinal correctness alone. Then, of course, with others it is the danger of measuring themselves by displays of emotion alone. This is the age-old problem of separating Spirit and truth. Martin Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

It is a very familiar snare which traps evangelical people, and orthodox people. You can be orthodox but dead. Why? Well, because you are stopping at the doctrines, you are stopping at the definitions. [He goes on to say that]...there are, indeed churches today...perfectly orthodox yet are quite dead. Why? It is because they remain only on the level of doctrine—this intellectual concern and this intellectual correctness. It is a

terrible thing to substitute even true doctrines for a living realization of the person. [He makes a further point that]...the idea that God may suddenly visit His people, and descend upon them, the whole thrill of being in the presence of God, and sensing His nearness, and His power, never enters their imaginations. The whole thing is formal. It is smug contentment.... How often does this vital idea enter into our minds that we are in the presence of the Living God, that the Holy Spirit is in the church, that we may feel the touch of His power? ...Is there not this appalling danger that we are just content because we have correct beliefs and we have lost the life, the vital thing, the power, the thing that really makes worship worship, which is in spirit and truth."<sup>3</sup>

Of course much could be said as well of the tendency of many today to belittle doctrinal preaching and the central importance of truth. Revival is unwittingly hindered since there has never been a true revival apart from a passionate concern for truth and the great doctrines of the faith.

## **The Controversy Over Revival**

One other matter needs to be stated by way of introduction. This has to do with the controversy that exists in the church over true revival. The controversy concerns two main issues. The first is more fundamental, having to do with the nature and character of revival itself. There are two widely differing views of the nature of revival.

The first view, which is the prevalent one today, is the legacy of Charles Finney. It is the belief that man is responsible for producing and promoting revival. Although many would not state it as such, their heavy emphasis on techniques and methods betrays their belief that man is ultimately responsible for revival. Finney said it like this:

Revivals were formerly regarded as miracles. For a long time, it was supposed by the church that a revival was a miracle, an interposition of Divine Power with which they had nothing to do.... It is only within a few years that ministers generally have supposed revivals were to be promoted by the use of means designed and adopted to that object.<sup>4</sup>

Finney believed that the right use of specific, external methods were all that were necessary for people to receive Christ or for God's people to be renewed. It was not a matter of God moving (a divine interposition); it was men and their efforts in getting sinners to come forward or to make some visible indication of a decision or dedication. Therefore, with the right use of means and methods, man can produce a revival. A further quote from Finney shows this. He said, "If the whole church as a body had gone to work 10 years ago...there might not now have been an unrepentant sinner in the land."<sup>5</sup> It would not be an overstatement to say that this belief has taken over evangelicalism. Techniques, methods, and pressure tactics are predominant.

The other view of revival is the historic and, I believe, biblical view. It is the belief that God sovereignly and suddenly sends revival. Man cannot produce it. Of course, neither can he sit around passively and wait for it. The church must earnestly seek it and be spiritually and doctrinally fitted for it. Lloyd-Jones describes it this way:

A revival is a miracle. It is a miraculous, exceptional phenomenon. It is the hand of the Lord, and it is mighty. A revival, in other words, is something that can only be explained as the direct action and intervention of God.... Men can produce evangelistic campaigns, but they cannot, and never have produced a revival. Oh, they have tried to do so many times, and they are still trying. Alas, Finney has led the whole Church astray at this point by teaching that if you only do certain things, you can have a revival whenever you want it.... But not only can men not produce a revival, they cannot even explain it, and that again is most import. I would lay this down as part of a definition. If you can explain what is happening in a church, apart from the sovereign act of God, it is not a revival.<sup>6</sup>

It is this view of revival which this study will attempt to show is biblically based. It is this view that has moved men in history to be earnest in their seeking after the power and presence of the Spirit of God. It is the view of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and men like them—men who were instruments and witnesses of movements of the Spirit of God that

greatly advanced the Kingdom in the world.

The second area of controversy regarding revival has to do with the role of the miraculous sign gifts. Some insist that sign gifts are necessarily connected with the demonstration of the power of the Spirit of God in revival. Others believe that the sign gifts have no direct bearing on revival and the experience of the Spirit's power. An "either/or" mindset seems to have developed in the minds of many. Either you believe in the continuing validity of sign gifts and therefore are open to the power of the Spirit, the felt presence of God, and biblical supernaturalism, or you do not believe in the continuing validity of the sign gifts, and are therefore closed to these things. In other words, the cessationist's position (those who believe the sign gifts have ceased) is often portrayed as necessarily rationalistic, non-experiential, and closed to seeking the sensible presence and power of God. To many, this connection is assumed. It must be granted that it is a fact that this is often the case. Cessationists are often marked by a strong aversion to any expression of emotion, a belittling of terminology that implies anything experiential, and by a disregarding of teaching that emphasizes the sensible presence and power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> I believe this is an imbalance that ignores church history and fails to deal adequately with large sections of the teaching of Scripture. It is a mindset that often unwittingly creates a dispassionate, intellectualized form of Christianity.

Having said that, however, it is a fact that historically this has not been the case. No connection was made historically between seeking the power of the Spirit, intimacy with God, and a cessationist position. It simply was not and is not true. Nearly all the major leaders of revivals were cessationist. The most renowned, of course, was Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards was an ardent defender of experimental Christianity. He, himself, was an instrument and a witness of supernatural displays of the power of God in advancing the gospel. Speaking of revival in New England he wrote, "It is astonishing to see the alteration that there is in some towns."<sup>8</sup> On another occasion he said,

Neither earth or hell can hinder God's work that is going on in the country, Christ gloriously triumphs at this day.... By what I can understand, the work of God is greater at this day in the land than it has been at any time. What cause have we, with exulting hearts, to agree to give glory to Him who thus rides forth in the chariot of His salvation, conquering and to conquer.<sup>9</sup>

On another occasion he also wrote,

Near the conclusion of the discourse, one or two persons that were professors were so greatly affected with a sense of the greatness and glory of divine things, and of the infinite importance of the things of eternity that they were not able to conceal it, the affection of their minds overcoming their strength, and having a viable effect upon their bodies.... Many others at the same time were

overcome with distress, about their sinful and miserable condition; so that the whole room was full of nothing but outcries, faintings and the like.<sup>10</sup>

Jonathan Edwards hungered and sought for what he called the “pouring out of the Holy Spirit.” Speaking of revival in his time, Edwards could say, “So it is in some degree whenever there is an extraordinary pouring out of the Spirit of God more or less so in proportion to the greatness of the effusion.”<sup>11</sup> My point in quoting these references is this: Edwards was a cessationist. He believed the sign gifts ceased with the apostles. However, he did not believe that the power of the Spirit, the felt presence of God, or the experiential intimacy with God ceased with it. He made no necessary connection between the two as is often assumed today. Here is Edwards’ position on the gifts. It states his cessationist position clearly:

But after the resurrection and ascension, was the most full and remarkable effusion of the Spirit in his miraculous gifts that ever took place, beginning with the day of Pentecost, after Christ had risen and ascended to heaven. And in consequence of this, not only here and there an extraordinary person was endowed with these extraordinary gifts, but they were common in the church, and so continued during the lifetime of the apostles, or till the death of the last of them, even the apostle John, which took place about a hundred years from the birth of Christ; so that the first hundred years of the Christian era, or the first century, was the era of miracles. But soon

after that, the canon of Scripture being completed when the apostle John had written the book of Revelation, which he wrote not long before his death, these miraculous gifts were no longer continued in the church. For there was now completed an established written revelation of the mind and will of God, wherein God had fully recorded a standing and all-sufficient rule for his church in all ages. And the Jewish church and nation being overthrown, and the Christian church and the last dispensation of the church of God being established, the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were no longer needed, and therefore they ceased.<sup>12</sup>

Many quote Edwards to defend the validity of ministry associated with sign gifts. In so doing, they make an association between sign gifts and the power of God in revival. The fact is there is no necessary association.<sup>13</sup> So here we have the other controversy about revival. The controversy of sign gifts. I believe they are not an issue in dealing with the subject.

Having said that, I return to the purpose of writing on revival. It is my desire that God will use this to create in us a great sense of our own powerlessness and need. To study revival is to remind ourselves that we need more than we can produce with our own power and wisdom. Hopefully, this study will drive us to our knees under the conviction that, once again in the words of Edwards, we may see “remarkable communications of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>14</sup> as Christ advances His Kingdom in the world.

## Revival and the Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit

Understanding how God moves in revival is not an academic exercise. Knowledge of how God moves often incites the Church to hunger and seek that He would do it again. It causes the Church to focus on those things which God honors in true revival. Things such as Spirit-anointed, Christ-centered preaching, earnest prayer, and dependence on the power of the Spirit. In short, it causes the Church to focus on a Christ-centered ministry: a ministry centered around the great doctrines of the grace of God with a dependence on the Holy Spirit. A Church preoccupied with technique, relational sermons, and a therapeutic recovery model borrowed from the world will not see revival. It may see large churches and much activity and commotion, but not true revival.

**True Revival Concerns Christ's Work  
in Greatly Advancing the Church  
by an Extraordinary Pouring Out**

## of the Holy Spirit

Understanding true revival begins with a basic knowledge of how Christ builds His Church through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. In other words, there are certain realities about Christ and the Holy Spirit which are central to the concept of revival. To start with is the fact that Christ is alive. He Himself advances and builds His Church. Christ said, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Notice, Christ did not say He would begin it, but that He would build it. Christ is the source of the Church's growth, authority, and power. It is Christ who, from on high, advances His Church in the world! Moreover (and this is critical) Christ, in building His Church, subjects the ministry of the Holy Spirit to His sovereign direction. The Spirit works and operates at Christ's bidding to accomplish His purposes and to glorify His name (John 16:14). Christ communicates His power and advances His Kingdom as He sovereignly directs the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

This fact is clearly seen in the manner in which the Holy Spirit's ministry is referred to by Peter in the book of Acts. After the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-4, many are amazed as they hear the disciples speaking and preaching in their native languages, languages that the disciples did not know (Acts 2:5-6). In response to the question "What does this mean?" (Acts

2:13), Peter explains that what has occurred is the work of the Holy Spirit. He says, "But this is what was spoken of through the Prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days God says, that I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind.'" (Acts 2:14, 15) Peter says that these events can be explained as a fulfillment of what was prophesied by Joel: "I will pour forth My Spirit." But this is not all. He takes it further when he explains what has occurred is the work of Christ Himself. Notice verses 32 and 33 where he says, "This Jesus God raised up again to which we are witnesses. Therefore, having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear." Peter's final explanation of the events of Pentecost is that it is the result of the work of the ascended Christ. Christ, Peter says, "poured forth this." Peter's point is this: it was Christ who sovereignly sent forth the Spirit to accomplish His work in the world. This, of course, is consistent with the overall tenor of Scripture. It is Christ who is building His church. It is Christ who is advancing His Kingdom, and consequently, it is Christ who directs the work of the Spirit in doing it.

The reference in Acts 2 has to do with the initial coming of the Spirit to reside on the earth at Pentecost. Therefore, someone may say, "This 'pouring out' of the Spirit occurred only at Pentecost and is not to be repeated." In one sense this is true. The coming of the Spirit to reside on

the earth in an unprecedented fulness is not to be repeated. However, in another sense, this is not true. There is an ongoing pouring forth of the Holy Spirit by Christ every time a person is saved. This "pouring out" is from the point of view of the person saved. A look at the account of Cornelius' salvation in Acts 10 and 11 will show this. To set the context, notice Acts 11:13-14. Cornelius is told, "Send to Joppa and have Simon who is also called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved and all your household." Clearly, Cornelius was not yet a saved man. The account says, "He shall speak words by which you shall be saved." The account then goes on to say, "While Peter was still speaking, these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message, and all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also" (Acts 11:44, 45). Here is an incident after Pentecost in which Luke describes conversion as the result of the fact that the Holy Spirit had been "poured out." Paul uses the same terminology in speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation when he says, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5, 6). Notice that once again the Spirit is said to be "poured out" at salvation.

Clearly, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is an ongoing work of Christ as He builds His Church. It must be noted also that He sovereignly fills His people with the power of the Holy Spirit in His sanctifying influences as well, emboldening them to live holy lives and to preach and witness (Acts 4:31). When these occur together in a great degree, there is revival. It is this pouring out of the Holy Spirit that the church must earnestly seek. It is this awareness of Christ's sovereignty in building His church through the Spirit that has moved many in the past to plead that He would, to use a common term, "visit" His Church again.

A brief look at some references in Acts will show how Christ Himself through the Spirit was the reason for the Church's extraordinary growth. Acts 6:7 says, "And the Word of God kept on spreading and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." The reference to the Word of God spreading is explained earlier in Acts 2:47 where it says, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." The Word of God spread because Christ the Lord made it effectual through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as He Himself added daily to the Church. Acts 19:20 says, "So the Word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing." Here it is—the Lord's Word that grows mightily and prevails. The term for "mightily" is a term that is often used of an overpowering force, as when a person in

authority seizes or arrests someone (Matthew 14:3). It indicates a superior prevailing power that subdues. It is translated "dominion" in I Peter 5:11. It is a fitting term to describe Christ's power exercised in conversion. The context in Acts 19 is significant. It describes people delivered from the occult and Satanic practices (Act 19:18, 19). Therefore, revival occurs when the Spirit is poured out in such an abundant manner that Christ is clearly demonstrated to be superior to Satan and sin, as His Gospel triumphs in the world.

The reality of the pouring out of the Spirit was understood and sought by leaders of revivals in the past. George Whitefield, the great Calvinistic evangelist said, "Intersperse prayers with your exhortations, and thereby call down fire from heaven the fire of the Holy Ghost." This phraseology was common to all the leaders of the great revivals. Whitefield on another occasion when he had seen the beginning of the Great Awakening said it was "an earnest of future and more plentiful effusions of God's Spirit in these parts."<sup>15</sup> Leaders of the church must be earnest in seeking the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the preaching and teaching ministry of the Word. Jesus said, "The flesh profit nothing, the Spirit gives life" (John 6:63). Unless the Spirit is present, the ministry of the Word is ineffectual in subduing the hearts of sinners and captivating the hearts of saints. Jonathan Edwards said, concerning the coming of a revival,

Whenever this is accomplished, it will not be effected by human learning, or by the skill or wisdom of great men. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ saith the Lord of hosts.” It will not be by the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but by the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. [Accordingly, throughout Edwards’ writings the need is emphasized in his words]...to be much in seeking the influences of his Spirit.... I longed for a Spirit of preaching to descend and rest on ministers, that they might address the consciences of men with closeness and power. I saw God “had the residue of the Spirit” and my soul longed it should be “poured from on high.” [Elsewhere Edwards says,]...We who are ministers, not only have need of some true experience of the saving influence of the Spirit of God upon our heart, but we need a double portion at such a time as this. We need to be as full of light as a glass that is held out in the sun.... The state of the times extremely requires a fulness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no rest till we have obtained it.<sup>16</sup>

If the need for the Spirit were true then, how much more now! How we need a sense of our great dependence on Christ to see His cause and name glorified in the world! How we need, with those in the past, to pray earnestly for Christ’s power through the Spirit in the ministry of the Word!

**True Revival Must Be Distinguished  
from the Counterfeit**

One other matter is of importance when dealing with the concept of true revival. This concerns the problem of discerning the counterfeit. Satan's greatest ploy has always been to mix the false and with true, and in so doing, to produce a counterfeit. He incessantly works to plant tares among the wheat. Edwards, lamenting the corrupt mixture that had occurred in many places during the Great Awakening, said,

It is by the mixture of counterfeit religion with the true not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and Kingdom of Christ.... Here most evidently, has been the main advantage Satan has had against us; by this he has foiled us.... In the midst of this confusion the devil has great opportunity to advance his own interest...and by what I've seen of the terrible consequences of this counterfeit, when not distinguished from the true religion, God's people in general have their minds unsettled in religion, and know not where to set their foot, or what to think, and many are brought into doubts, whether there be anything at all in religion, and heresy, infidelity and atheism greatly prevail.<sup>17</sup>

Edwards' words might just as easily been written about today's church. There is an amazing willingness to accept everything of an extraordinary and sensational nature. There is a mad rush for what has been called "the getting up of revivals": revivals that are the result of the

feeding of emotions and not rooted in the Spirit's work in the heart through the Word of God and prayer. There is really nothing new under the sun. Spurgeon, commenting on the hasty tendency to identify excesses as revival, said,

Things are allowed to be said and done at revivals which nobody could defend.... If, for a moment, our improvements seem to produce a larger result than the old gospel, it will be the growth of mushrooms, it may even be of toadstools; but it is not the growth of trees of the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

A good guideline of distinguishing the true and false was stated by Gardner Spring when he said, "Revivals are always spurious when they are got up by man's device and not brought down by the Spirit of God."<sup>19</sup> Excessive music and emotional display, (we must be careful not to diminish the vital role of emotions and music), doesn't necessarily indicate revival. These things have always been, and still are, wrongly identified as sure marks of revival.

True revival concerns the issue of how Christ builds His Church. It concerns what we can and cannot do to advance the Kingdom. It, therefore, concerns what we are entirely dependent on Christ alone to do. Man's efforts simply cannot produce what Christ alone through the Word and Spirit can produce. They can only produce a substitute synthetic counterfeit that has no lasting impact.

Therefore, to understand revival is to be able

to discern the arm of the flesh and man's own efforts that create temporary excitement, but bear no marks of the Christ-centered and Word-centered work of the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

A number of things can be said at this point. First, to understand true revival should cause us to hunger for Christ's glory in the Church and then in the world. It should cause us to rely on those Christ-ordained means apart from which there has not been, and never will be, revival—to rely on prayer, the power of the Spirit, and Christ-centered preaching. It should move us to seek to preach the central truths of the Gospel: sin, grace, and the glory of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, to hunger for true revival should cause us to rely both on the Word and the Spirit. We must remember that true revival comes from Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Therefore, revival can only come when there is a love for truth and for the great doctrines of the faith. A church that neglects the great themes such as sin, salvation, and judgment, and instead is preoccupied with relational preaching, will not see revival. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of Holiness. Therefore, revival can only come when sin is dealt with and the standards of Scripture are honored irrespective of whether it affects church attendance. A church that tolerates

scandal and sin will not see revival. Finally, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, revival can only come when Christ and His glorious all-sufficiency is made the center of preaching and ministry. Revival can only come when the Church is convinced that Christ is all it needs. The Spirit was sent to glorify Christ, not to make men successful, nor even to meet his felt needs. The fact is that God often allows men's felt needs to go unmet to drive them to Christ so they can find their truest, deepest needs met in Him to His glory. In other words, true revival will not come unless there is something on the altar (so to speak) for the Spirit to fall upon. Preaching a glorious, all-sufficient Christ, together with earnest prayer for a pouring forth of the Spirit, has caused God to move in the past. Perhaps, by His grace, He will do it again.

## Genuine Revival

Revival means different things to different people. Yet the fact is, there is only one concept of revival that is rooted in Scripture. Therefore, the question of the nature of genuine revival must be fully addressed. Speaking of revival in a general sense, we have attempted to show that revival is the result of the Lord Jesus Christ (who said He would build His Church) greatly blessing and honoring His Word, through the Holy Spirit, as He advances His kingdom in the world in an extraordinary manner. Having said that, the question remains: how and on what basis does Christ greatly advance His Kingdom in a revival? Does He do something new? Does He incorporate new methods and innovative ideas as many seem to think today? In this study, we want to take a fuller look at the concept and characteristics of genuine revival, looking at it from both scriptural and historical perspectives. As we have said, studying revival often helps put our focus and dependence on Christ and on those simple, Christ-ordained aspects of ministry that

He has honored in the past. In the final analysis, we are either Christ-dependent or self-dependent, Word-centered or man-centered. The conviction behind this study is that a return to Christ-centered, Christ-dependent ministry is needed if the church is to see God's blessing.

## **Descriptions of Revival from History**

A good place to begin is to take a brief look at descriptions of revivals from history. The sheer supernaturalness of it all is what is striking. Gripped by Christ, men earnestly preached, prayed and sought the Lord, and God in His sovereignty chose to move. The following are brief descriptions by eyewitnesses. Thomas Prince, for example, writing of the Great Awakening in Boston gives some idea of the degree that the churches were affected. He says,

The more we prayed and preached, the more enlarged were our hearts, and the most delightful the employment. And O how many, how serious and attentive were our hearers.... Now was such a time as we never knew. The Rev Mr. Cooper was wont to say, that more came to him in one week in deep concern about their soul, than in the whole twenty-four years of his preceding ministry. I can also say the same as to the numbers who repaired to me. By M. Cooper's letter to his friend in Scotland, it appears he has had about six-hundred different persons in three months' time: and Mr. Webb informed me, he has

had in the same space about a thousand.<sup>20</sup>

Jonathan Edwards, writing of the initial awakening in Northampton, said,

Immediately after this, the minds of the people in general appeared more engaged in religion, showing a greater forwardness to make religion the subject of their conversation and to meet frequently for religious purposes, and to embrace all opportunities to hear the word preached. In about a month or six weeks, there was a great attention in the town, both as to the revival of professors and the awakening of others. By the middle of December a considerable work of God appeared among those that were very young and the revival of religion continued to increase, so that in the Spring an engagedness of spirit about things of religion was become very general amongst young people and children, and religious subjects almost wholly took up their conversations when they were together.<sup>21</sup>

Robert Smith, in his account of an awakening in 1788 shows the degree that people were concerned with Christ and the things of eternity:

The half was not told to me of the display of God's power and grace among them; no, not the tenth part.... Not a word scarcely about politics; but all religion in public and private. They run far and near to sermons, sacraments and societies. They have six or seven praying societies, which meet every Wednesday and Saturday evenings and at College on Sabbath evenings also. Two hundred and twenty-five hopeful communicants have been added to the Lord's table among John

Smith's people, in the space of eighteen months, chiefly young people. When they go to sermons or societies, they commonly go in companies, either conversing on spiritual subjects or singing hymns. When they arrive at the place of worship, they enter the house and sing hymns till the minister enters. Such sweet singing I never heard in all my life. Dear young Christians, how engaged, how heavenly, how spiritually and innocently they look and speak. I have seen an hundred wet cheeks, some deeply penetrated with convictions, come fainting with love-sickness as it were, in the Saviour's arms, and others rejoicing for the day of God's power and grace, all under the same sermon.<sup>22</sup>

It must be kept in mind that these accounts describe only a few churches in a widespread movement. It must be remembered also that the revivals described here came after a period in which there was much complaint about the deadness of churches and great concern for a lack of genuine conversions. One contemporary of the Great Awakening said of the churches in general, "Religion lay as it were a-dying and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church."<sup>23</sup> In fact, Isaac Watts, writing in his preface to Edwards' "Narrative" of the awakening in Northampton, said, "There has been a great and just complaint for many years... that the Spirit of God in His saving influences is so much withdrawn from the ministration of His word."<sup>24</sup> What occurred was self-evidently a work of God. It was without question a result of God's almighty power. Edwards said,

We are bound to rest in it as God's work; and we shall be liked to be rebuked for our arrogance if we refuse.... It appears to me the great God has wrought like Himself in the manner of his carrying on this work; so as very much to show His own glory, exalt His own sovereignty, power and all-sufficiency.<sup>25</sup>

Watts said, "Certainly it becomes us who profess the religion of Christ, to take notice of such astonishing exercises of His power and mercy and give Him the glory which is due...."<sup>26</sup> Notice what occurred in the context of slumbering and dying churches was no less than, in Watts' words, "astonishing exercises of His power." One last reference will do, to attempt to describe what occurs when Christ sends revival. This is Spurgeon's account of the revival in Waterbeach before he went to London. The town was virtually transformed by Christ through the Gospel. He said,

Did you ever walk through a village notorious for its drunkenness and profanity? Did you ever see poor wretched beings, that once were men standing, or rather leaning against the posts of the ale-house, or staggering along the street? Have you ever looked into the houses of the people, and beheld them as dens of iniquity, at which your soul stood aghast? Have you ever seen the poverty, and degradation, and misery of the inhabitants, and sighed over it? "Yes," you say, "we have." But was it ever your privilege to walk through that village again, in after years, when the Gospel has been preached there? It has been mine. I once knew just such a village as I have

pictured—perhaps in some respects one of the worst in England—where many an illicit still was yielding its noxious liquor...and where in connection with that evil, all manner of riot and iniquity was rife. There went into that village a lad, who had no great scholarship, but who was earnest in seeking the souls of men. He began to preach there and it pleased God to turn the whole place upside down. In a short time the little thatched chapel was crammed, the biggest vagabonds in the village were weeping floods of tears, and those who had been the curse of the parish became its blessing. Where there had been robberies and villainies of every kind, all round the neighbourhood, there were none because the men who used to do the mischief were themselves in the house of God, rejoicing to hear of Jesus crucified.... I do testify, to the praise of God's grace, that it pleased the Lord to work wonders in our midst. He showed the power of Jesus' name, and made me a witness of that Gospel which can win souls, draw reluctant hearts, and mould afresh the life and conduct of sinful men and women.<sup>27</sup>

These are just a few brief examples. They only begin to describe the power of God displayed in revival. This much must be recognized: genuine revival cannot be attributed to man and his marketing skills or management abilities. A revival is not something planned, anticipated, or accomplished by men. You cannot predict it. It is a sovereign work of Christ that, as it were, stuns those who see and participate in it. Spurgeon himself said God's instrument was "a lad with no great scholarship but who was earnest in seeking

the souls of men." The power is Christ's, and the weakness and smallness of the instrument prove it. In Acts, it was unlearned fishermen; in Waterbeach, it was a mere "lad." Today it seems we rely on academic degrees, dynamic personalities, skilled communicators, and technologically advanced presentations. It seems we have outgrown God. We are too strong, accomplished, educated and high-tech to be desperate enough to need God. We can grow the church ourselves. Who will deny, however, that in most cases we are powerless without significant impact in our communities?

### **The Distinctive Features of Genuine Revival**

Having taken a look at these accounts of revival, the question remains: what are the distinctive features of a movement of the Spirit? Or, as we have asked before, what are the particular things that Christ honors and the Spirit blesses? The answer is in two parts. First, generally speaking, in revival the Spirit greatly increases and enlarges His normal work. He does nothing new, He simply does far more of it! Secondly, in revival Christ honors the basics of New Testament ministry which are normally employed in the ongoing work of the church. There are no innovations. There is no new technique of evangelism, nor a new approach to assimilating members, nor a new method of

relating to people that can adequately account for it. We will look at both of these distinctives more closely.

### *The Normal Work of the Spirit is Greatly Increased*

The first feature of genuine revival is that there is a sudden and great increase of the normal ongoing work of the Spirit. That is, there is a sudden increase in the salvation of the lost and the sanctification of the saints. The increase, depending on its extent, is to such a degree that churches, cities, counties, countries and even continents are affected.

We must stop and look more closely at this since it is so foundational. As we have said, in revival the normal, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit continues but only to a much greater degree. In other words all conversions, being the work of the Holy Spirit are supernatural. They are the result of the immediate, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit through regeneration and the gift of faith. They are the result of the “pouring forth” of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:44, 45). Paul says in Ephesians 2:5, “[God]...when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” Paul is emphatic. The salvation of a sinner is the result of God’s initiative. He intervenes; He makes alive and creates anew. Paul put it this way: He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness,

but...by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Notice: "He saved us...by the washing of regeneration." The teaching is clear: salvation is God's work through the Holy Spirit. Conversion, then, while involving man's will, is ultimately the result of a direct intervention of the Spirit of God. To put it in terms of our subject, a conversion is a micro-revival. It is a miniature of what happens on a larger scale in revival. The same can be said of sanctification. It too is the result of the Holy Spirit's immediate work. The Scripture teaches that the revitalizing of the people of God, resulting in an earnest pursuit of holiness and service in Christ's kingdom, is the result of the direct influence of the Spirit of God. Philippians 2:13 comes to mind where Paul says, "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Now of course, men are involved and active, it is true. There is no passive holiness in Scripture. However, the fact remains, that ultimately it is the Spirit who revitalizes and renews God's people.

The significance of this for our understanding of revival cannot be overstated. First, the works and methods of men, in and of themselves, cannot produce a single conversion, nor can they effect sanctification. In fact, man's methods if they distort the gospel or short circuit the Spirit's work, can be positively harmful. Moreover (and this is central), our concept of conversion will, in the final analysis, determine our concept of revival. Clearly, if we think that conversion is

ultimately nothing more than a human choice, we will be tempted to rely on human methods to get results, much like a salesman closing a deal. But if we truly believe that conversion and sanctification are works of God, it will cause us to rely on the specific means God promises to bless.

Here is what we are attempting to say: the difference between normal ministry and revival is a difference in the degree to which the sovereign Spirit works. It is not a difference in the kind of work that the Spirit does! Revival, then, is simply the result of the abundant influence of the Holy Spirit in both regenerating the lost and sanctifying the saved. Practically speaking, this means nothing can be guaranteed or predicted as is often claimed today, when people speak confidently of “a coming revival.” Just as a true conversion cannot be guaranteed or predicted, neither can an abundance of conversions in revival. Jesus’ words concerning the sovereignty of the Spirit are crucial; He said, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going, so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). So the first distinctive feature of revival is that the sovereign Spirit greatly increases His normal supernatural work. Ultimately, it is the Spirit’s work and ministry, and therefore, must be done within the parameters of His prescribed way.

*The Normal Means of Ministry are Greatly Blessed*

The second distinctive feature in revival is that the normal means of ministry are greatly blessed. Once again there is nothing new. On the contrary, there is a return to the basic time-honored means of grace. Earnest prayer and Christ-centered preaching is pursued and relied upon with wholeheartedness, and Christ, if He so chooses, greatly blesses. As we mentioned, the first thing to note in this regard is that there are no new methods or innovations adopted. Speaking of the Second Great Awakening, Iain Murray says,

Thus what characterizes a revival is not the employment of unusual or special means, but rather the extraordinary degree of blessing attending the normal means of grace. There were no unusual evangelistic meetings, no special arrangements, no announcements of pending revivals. Pastors were simply continuing in the services they had conducted for many years when the great change began. That is why so many of them could say, "The first appearance of the work was sudden and unexpected."<sup>28</sup>

Speaking of the conviction that moved these men, Murray adds,

These men were united in the belief that God has appointed the means of prayer and preaching for the spread of the gospel and that these are the great means in the use of which He requires the churches to be faithful. There are no greater means which may be employed at

separate times to secure supposedly greater results. It's therefore the Spirit of God who makes the same means more effective some seasons than at others.<sup>29</sup>

There is no hype, no manipulation and no pressure tactics. There is a simple and complete dependence on the means of preaching and prayer. Then in the words of Acts 2:47, "The Lord adds daily as many as are being saved."

Now the nature and character of biblical preaching is critical. It is not a dispassionate cerebral preaching void of heart. Neither is it feel-good preaching that focuses merely on moralistic and relationship-oriented themes. It is preaching that focuses on Christ and all His glories, as well as His all-sufficient grace. It focuses on an all-sufficient, all-glorious Christ who redeems and delivers. The preached word then comes with power, as men aim for the heart. Here is a description of preaching that characterized the Great Awakening: "The gospel was armed by the Holy Ghost with a tremendous and irresistible individualizing power. Man was made to come forth into the light and take his appropriate place before God as guilty and accountable."<sup>30</sup> Speaking of the power and practicality of Christ-centered preaching, Spurgeon said,

There is yet another excellence about this subject, namely, that it suits all sorts of people. Are there rebels present? Preach Christ; it will suit them. Are there pardoned sinners present? What is better, to melt their hearts than the blood of the

Lord Jesus. Are there doubting Christians? What can cheer them better than the name of Christ? Are there strong believers? What is stronger meat than Jesus crucified? Are there learned, polite, intellectual hearers? If they are not satisfied with Christ, they ought to be. Are there poor, ignorant, unlettered men? Jesus Christ is just the thing to preach to them all—a naked Christ to their simple ears. Jesus Christ is a topic that will keep in all climate. Land in New Zealand in the midst of uncivilised men, move off to another post and stand in the midst of poetical Persia or fickle France, the cross is adapted to all. We need not inquire into the doctrinal opinion of our hearers. If they are high, I am sure Christ will suit them. If they are low, if they be true believers, I am sure Christ Jesus will suit them. No Christians will reject such meat as this; only prepare it, and with a hot heart serve it up on the table, and they will be satisfied and feed to the full. So that there is adaptation as well as variety in this subject.<sup>31</sup>

It is a focus upon Christ and the great doctrines of the grace of God that God honors. What this means, then, is that God's method is men, men on fire with truth and the Spirit of God. It is then that we can say with Paul, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves" (II Corinthians 4:7). God's design is to use a weak, despised method so that His greatness and His power is exhibited. Preaching is fitted to this design; therefore whenever there is revival, there is Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered preaching.

The other primary means of grace that Christ

honors and blesses is prayer. An attitude of utter dependence upon Christ to awaken sinners and build His Church is manifest in a spirit of prayer. Speaking of the churches before the Second Great Awakening, Murray writes, "When the evidence of records from those years was composed, it was recognized that across the union, from Connecticut to Kentucky, the 1790's were marked by a new spirit of intercession."<sup>32</sup> One leader in a group of local churches wrote, "A remarkable spirit of prayer and supplication was given to Christians and a sensible, heart-felt burden of the dreadful state of sinners out of Christ; so that it might be said with propriety, that Zion travailed in birth to bring forth her spiritual children."<sup>33</sup> Prayer then is a distinctive feature that precedes and characterizes revival. Leaders renounce their dependence on their oratory or management skills or new methodologies. In some cases, they may have to repent of building the Church in their power for their name, a Church often sadly lacking whole-hearted devotion to Christ and His glory. John Knox, when addressing the Christians of Scotland who feared the brutal reprisal of the Queen who had gained the support of the French troops, spoke forcefully of the essential place of a dependent spirit manifested in earnest prayer. He wrote,

When we were a few number...when we had neither Earl nor Lord to comfort us, we called upon God: we took him for our protector, defence and only refuge. Amongst us was heard no bragging of multitude, of our strength nor policy:

we did only sob to God ... But ... chiefly since my Lord Duke his Grace with his friends have been joined with us, there was nothing heard but, "This Lord will bring these many hundred spears; that man hath the credit to persuade that country: if this Earl be ours, no man in such abounds will trouble us." And thus the best of us all hath...put flesh to be our arm ... And therefore hath God justly permitted both of them and us to fall in this confusion at once. Turn us again, O lord God of Hosts; cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved.<sup>34</sup>

Man's tendency is always to rely on the arm of the flesh, and God's response has always been to let him fail. A revival, whether or not it is in a church, a city or a country, is a sovereign act of the risen Lord Jesus Christ who builds His Church. It comes when God's people renounce their reliance on man and his strength, wisdom, resources and abilities. It comes when the Christ-ordained means are relied upon once again. Means that are in and of themselves weak, powerless and ridiculed in the eyes of the world. Is not this how God has always done it? Was not Spurgeon a mere lad? Was not David a shepherd boy when he slew Goliath? Weak men have always been God's method. The foolishness of preaching has always been His method. Prayer has always been His method. He will not change His method for the high-tech church of the twenty-first century. The words of Luke in Acts fitly describe revival and expresses what all say when Christ sends revival, "And the hand of the

Lord was with them and a large number who believed turned to the Lord." May we humbly renounce our dependence on ourselves and rely on the "hand of the Lord." Perhaps He will glorify Himself in our midst.

## NOTES

1. Isaac Watts quoted in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), Vol. 1, 344.
2. C.H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1979), Vol. 7, 223.
3. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 58, 72.
4. Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 116, 117.
5. Finney, 353, 354.
6. Lloyd-Jones, 111, 112.
7. The question may be asked, why some who hold the cessationist position at times seem to be void of an emphasis on seeking the power and presence of the Spirit and adverse to even the smallest expression of emotion. Perhaps it has come in three historic reactions to abuses. The first was an overreaction to the excesses of the Great Awakening. An overreaction of which Jonathan Edwards wrote:

The prevailing prejudice against "religious affections" at this day, is apparently of awful effect to harden the hearts of sinners, to damp the graces of the saints, to preclude the effect of ordinances, and hold us down in a state of dulness and apathy; and this undoubtedly causes many persons greatly

to offend God.... The right way, is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all: but to distinguish between them, approving some and rejecting others; separating between the wheat and the chaff, the gold and the dross, the precious and the vile. (Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, 244.)

The second is a reaction to the excesses of the Second Great Awakening—excesses of which Charles Finney’s are the most renowned. The third is a reaction to the modern charismatic movement. It seems whether it is terminology such as “pouring out of the Spirit,” or emphasis on the need for the special endowments of power by the Spirit as seen in Acts 4:31, or any small expression of emotion, it does not matter. All is viewed with suspicion. The result is often, (though not always), an imbalance in the cessationist camp.

8. Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards—A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 166.
9. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, lvi.
10. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards—A New Biography*, 171.
11. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, 660.
12. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 312.
13. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and many other men in the forefront of revivals hungered, contended for, and themselves experienced, the power of God displayed in astounding ways. They experienced clear supernatural guidance, great boldness, and intimacy with God. Yet, they made no connection of these things with sign gifts. Some go so far as to assert that those who teach that the sign gifts have ceased quench the Spirit. Perhaps, I could best respond to this with a question. Would we, who are like pygmies (to use J. I. Packer’s analogy) next to men like Edwards and Whitefield, we who have never seen or been a part, not to mention, nor have ever been the key instruments of a widespread demonstration of God’s power in revival, venture to

say that these men quenched the Holy Spirit because they were cessationist? I would hope to think the answer is obvious.

14. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, 539.
15. George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals*, 37-38.
16. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards – A New Biography*, 145.
17. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, 235.
18. C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1973), 375-376.
19. Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), xv.
20. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards – A New Biography*, 6.
21. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, vii-lviii.
22. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 98-99.
23. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards – A New Biography*, 159.
24. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, 344.
25. *Ibid.*, 366.
26. *Ibid.*, 344.
27. Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon – A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 35-36.
28. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 129.
29. *Ibid.*, 127.
30. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards – A New Biography*, 170.
31. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 7, 174-175.
32. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 129.
33. *Ibid.*, 130.
34. Elizabeth Whitley, *Plain Mr. Knox* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), 140-14.



