

Satan's Subtilty: Revivalism

Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease. Wilt thou be angry with us for ever? wilt thou draw out thine anger to all generations? Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee? Shew us thy mercy, O LORD, and grant us thy salvation. (Psalm 85:4-7)

O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy. (Hab. 3:2)

Such words have uttered the heart cry of God's people in their desolations. And God has been pleased to visit His people with wonderful refreshings from above at seasons according to His Own choosing.

Archibald Alexander, Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary during the time of the Great Awakenings, wrote on the nature of true revival in 1832:

In some cases revivals are so remarkably pure, that nothing occurs with which any pious man can find fault. There is not only no wildness and extravagance, but very little strong commotion of the animal feelings. The word of God distills upon the mind like the gentle rain, and the Holy Spirit comes down like the dew, diffusing a blessed influence on all around. Such a revival affords the most beautiful sight to behold ever seen on earth. The impressions on the minds of the people in such a work are the exact counterpart of the truth; just as the impressions on the was correspond to the seal. In such revivals there is a great solemnity and silence. The convictions of sin are deep and humbling: the justice of God in the condemnation of the sinner is felt and acknowledged; every other refuge but Christ is abandoned; the heart at first is made to feel its own impenetrable hardness; but when least expected, it dissolves under a grateful sense of God's goodness, and Christ's love; light breaks in upon the should either by a gradual dawning, or by a sudden flash; Christ is revealed through the gospel, and a firm and often joyful confidence of salvation through Him is produced: a benevolent, meek, forgiving, humble and contrite spirit predominates . . . the love of God is shed abroad . . . and with some, joy unspeakable and full of glory fills the soul. A spirit of devotion is enkindled. The word of God becomes exceeding precious. Prayer is the exercise in which the soul seems to be in its proper element, because by it, God is approached, and His presence felt, and beauty seen; and the new-born soul lives by breathing after the knowledge of God, after communion with God, and after conformity to His will. Now also springs up in the soul an inextinguishable desire to promote the glory of God, and to bring all men to the knowledge of the truth, and by that means to the possession of eternal life. The sincere language of the heart is, "Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do?" (Lectures on Revival, Sprague, Banner of Truth, apndx p. 4-5)

Historic revivals as described above occurred in Wales, Scotland, England, and in the United States until the 1830's. It seems the earliest revivals in this country began about 1726 in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey, under the ministry of Dutch Reformed minister Theodore J. Frelinghuysen. The Tennents, John, Gilbert, and William Jr., were then used mightily of God among Presbyterians from 1727 – 1730. These were the beginning of what is known as the American Great Awakening, which began to attract widespread attention in a revival during the ministry of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1734 to 1737. The momentum of this Awakening was carried forward by George Whitfield in the period between 1739 to 1770. No buildings could contain the crowds that came to hear him, and vast numbers assembled in open air meetings.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, before Charles G. Finney's conversion, revivals were again occurring. Finney was converted in 1821, and began his preaching ministry about 1885, and became the most noted figure in these revivals.

This has been called the "Second Great Awakening," and it differed dramatically from the First. Up until then, men had considered revival to be God's work, God's gift, God's mercy poured out upon men; and as such, it was to be prayed for, waited for, while they occupied themselves with the faithful preaching and teaching of God's word. With the advent of the Second Awakening came the concept that revival is not God's work at all, but man's, and as such, was to be promoted with whatever means that seemed to be most effective. Finney taught that God was ready to give revival at any time, and that men had only to meet His conditions. His book, Lectures on Revival, describes in detail how a revival is to be produced. Yet it is an ironic and significant fact that this man, who since his time has been considered the authority on revival, marks the end of the true revivals that preceded him. In fact, they ended about 1832 during his ministry, and he was unable to promote them himself with his own methods. His latter years were spent teaching at Oberlin College.

Perhaps the old school was right. Maybe revival *is* God's work. The scriptures and prayers of the prophets seem to indicate this. Reason dictates that it b. Why should we pray to God for something we can ourselves effect? But the concept of promoted revivals has seized and captured the minds of evangelical Christianity, and since that time we have not had revivals, but Revivalism.

Revivalism can be separated into two distinct camps, based on the methods used for promotion of the revival. Both of them have had a devastating effect on the churches where they have been used extensively.

The rise of popular revivalism and the decline of sound doctrinal preaching coincided with the period from Finney to Moody and on down through various personalities until today. Under Moody's highly organized campaigns, present day Revivalism was

brought to its full fruition. A report of 13,000 plus “decisions” as the fruit of a massive campaign in a city where I once pastored provoked a great question when I could not find in that city a church with one sound convert as a result of that meeting. It is a lamentable fact that, although the revivals of the Great Awakening added great numbers of sound converts to the churches, the crusades of Moody had almost no effect on the increase of church membership. (Religion in America, Hudson, p. 233, Charles Scribners’ Sons). Moody, a successful businessman, believed that God’s business was to be conducted like any secular business, and proceeded with all his energy and zeal to do so. Today’s modern evangelistic campaign still operates under the Moody methods, which have their roots in Finney’s theology. Massive advertising, paraded personalities, sensational events, special days, generated enthusiasm, rousing music, are all slanted to appeal to the lower flesh nature so as to attract the largest possible crowds. The idea, then, is to make a subtle transformation from the fleshy to the spiritual, and, while men are excited about the carnal, preach the gospel to them, using worldly momentum to impel them into the kingdom of God. How sad!

Such promoted revivals have no time nor place for sound doctrinal preaching. They are geared to produce a fast result. It takes time for sound instruction in truth, and the one or two week stands will not permit it, nor will people tolerate it. The doctrinal themes which characterized the early true revivals militate against the enthusiasm of present day revivals . . . the entire lack of holiness in all men by nature; their total depravity; the justice of God in everlasting condemnation of sinners; the exceeding sinfulness of sin; the total inability of man, by his own works, to reconcile himself to God; the necessity of the Spirit of God in regeneration and conversion of sinners; the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners; the clear exhibition of the truth that He is under no manner of obligation to save them; the sufficiency, freedom and fulness of the atonement; the duty of immediate repentance and faith in Christ; the inexcusableness of delay, and the exhibition of the refuge of lies under which wicked men hide themselves.

This sort of truth throws a wet blanket on the type of spirit that prevails in today’s crusades, and so is carefully avoided. Rather, men are told how much more fun it is to be a Christian than to be a sinner. Actors, athletes, entertainers and businessmen tell how Christ made them great. Men’s egos are inflated with a picture of God trying to save them, yet being frustrated by their own sovereign wills. They are ceaselessly persuaded that God loves them in their sins and wicked rebellion so that whatever fear of the wrath of God may have been pressed upon them by the truth in God’s word and the Holy Spirit is denied. The lie that faith less repentance will save, and that absolute surrender to the Lordship of Christ is an option to salvation is happily embraced. Leonard Ravenhill wrote in a letter to me: “Another decade of the type of evangelism we have had for the past, and our campaigns will be exclusively for idiots and certified morons.”

This brings us to consider the second camp of Revivalism. Some of us, upon considering the deplorable state of our churches, have set about to study the early historic revivals and their theology. How our hearts burned and longed for those days when God’s glory was so displayed, when the Spirit of God settled over an area, and men everywhere began to flock to meeting places, begging for the gospel; when they, smitten in their sins, began to cry out for God’s mercy. As we read the record of those gracious visitations and saw how they changed the whole moral character of a city or nation, we set our hearts on that and nothing less. The error we fell into was subtle. We saw that revival promoted in the manner described above was an illusion. We were going to abandon those methods for good. But because our thinking has been so oriented to a method or way that man can lay hold on to get something done, we still had the Finney error (that revival is man’s work) lodged in the back of our minds coloring our thinking. So we went about to promote a revival on a scriptural basis. We would fast and pray. We would repent, confess our sins and turn from our wicked ways. We would make special sacrifices. We would neglect the normal pursuits in life. We would rise up early and stay up late, spending long hours crying out for real revival. We would, in short, “pay the price” for revival. Then, we assured our people, real revival would surely come. Did not God promise it in II Chron. 7:14?

Pity the poor church which has been through that. After exhausting the people who dutifully followed us through these pious exercises, also longing for the sweet gentle rains of the blessed Spirit to fall upon our parched deserts, revival never came. This left them more defeated, despondent, and disillusioned than ever before. What was wrong?

We had fallen into an old humanistic trap . . . the idea that man can “pay a price” and buy something from God; that God acts only in response to man. Man is the prime mover and God only follows. How diametrically opposed to truth! God truly acts with the agency of man, but He, not man, is always the initiator. God moves and man responds. This is true in revival as well as anything else. Revivals are not scheduled, held or promoted; they are sent by God.

Now where does this leave us in our responsibility? How about II Chron. 7:14? Does God not promise something there? Yes, but it says nothing about revival. It is a promise that relates to Israel and their prosperity, as a nation, in the land. There is, however, spiritual truth that can be applied from it. Any believer can have personal revival himself when he meets these conditions. If every member of a local church should meet those conditions themselves, then that church would be in a state of revival. But that is not historic revival. Historic revival comes when the blessed Holy Spirit, as a life-giving Breath, falls upon an area and affects people who have not repented or done anything toward reconciling themselves to God. It is God reaching out and sovereignly drawing masses of people to themselves to Christ. Our response to the commands of Christ can effect reconciliation of ourselves with God, but cannot oblige God to draw others to Himself. That is His Own prerogative.

Evangelism is our responsibility. But the result of true evangelism, regeneration of souls, is God’s work. Repentance and personal holiness is our responsibility whether revival comes or not. Earnest intercession for the low spiritual estate of our churches and our country is the duty of all Christians. But it is no formula for revival. That is God’s gift and is provoked by His Own mercy. We are not told to revive, but to preach the gospel and disciple men, teach them, warn them, feed them. Let us give ourselves diligently to this task. And while our hearts do cry daily for God to “bring again Zion,” let us wait patiently for the times and seasons of His Own wise and good counsel. “Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain” (James 5:7)

(Note) Some may protest my statements to the effect of the cessation of true revivals in this country, imagining that they have experienced some. To those I readily acknowledge with gratitude the brief periods of respite and refreshings which some local congregations experience from time to time. But these are all isolated (they affect only that congregation and those in close contact with it), and brief (they and their effects quickly disappear). The Canadian revival was a promoted one. The Sutura twins use these methods everywhere they go, with varying degrees of success. I am not disparaging what God did there or through these men. But that is not historic revival. Historic revival spreads with a power and momentum all its own, sweeping hordes of unconverted into absolute submission to Christ, and changing the entire moral course of a country. It is such for which we pray and wait from His bountiful and merciful Hand.

- C. M.