

INTRODUCTION

The Reality of Revival

But there have been certain seasons called revivals—when God has “poured His Spirit out on His people.” These times—also called awakenings—occurred when the presence of God is experienced in powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

J. Edwin Orr

The evening prayer meeting had been over for about an hour. Students of Liberty University and members of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, were milling around the front of the sanctuary. It was late—10:30 on a Wednesday night—so most of the ushers and pastors had gone home.

Suddenly a lone student rose and walked to the pulpit, weeping, to confess sins. The microphone and pulpit lights were off, but God was there. That student’s passionate repentance captured the attention of those who were still in the auditorium.

Someone began singing. Someone else ran to play the piano—softly, so as not to interrupt the sacred sound of tears. People dropped to their knees beside the altar and front pews.

Shortly, another broken person approached the pulpit to confess sins. Soon there were others. After two hours, frantic phone calls went out to the pastor and deacons: *“Revival’s hit the church!”*

Church members, awakened in the middle of the night, dressed hurriedly and drove through the dark streets of Lynchburg. All came back to the church building expecting to experience God. No neckties ... no Sunday morning dresses ... just believers eager for a divine touch. Soon the glory of the Lord flooded the church auditorium.

People stayed at the church from Wednesday night until Saturday morning. All normal activities in their lives shut down. Classes were canceled. Most of those involved didn’t leave for work; some didn’t eat. When drowsiness couldn’t be fought off, students slept in the pews in the back of the auditorium, or even under the pews.

No one wanted to leave the sanctuary, because when they left the building, they were leaving an almost tangible presence of God. They didn’t want to miss anything that God was doing.

Like the tide that ebbs and flows, the intensity of the experience came in waves. There were louder times when people were publicly confessing their sins, then quieter times of soft weeping and private prayer around the altar.

How did the revival end? Early Saturday morning one student rose to confess his sins, but he seemed to be bragging about what he had done when he had sinned; there was no shame, no brokenness. The Holy Spirit—who knows the heart—departed the meeting.

Within one hour, everyone knew the revival was over. They left, went home, and went back to their daily activities.

Revivals: A Long History

What happened in our church and university back in the fall of 1973 was just a small taste of what God has done many times in the history of the church. “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come” (Acts 2:1), the Scripture tells us, God moved in a remarkable manner among his people. He continued his miraculous movement as the church was established. In the days since, God has repeatedly moved among his people in these “special seasons,” resulting in great blessing to both the church and the secular community.

In the early centuries of Christian history, God accomplished similar works: through Gregory “the Illuminator,” resulting in the conversion of Armenia; through Frumentius, in Ethiopia; through Patrick, in Ireland; through Columba, as he preached the gospel to the Scottish Picts; and through Methodius, in his ministry among the Slavs. In later centuries, the ministries of reformers such as Savonarola, Wycliffe, and Knox revealed a similar supernatural working of God among his people. Place names such as Hernhutt, Northhampton, Fetter Lane, and Cane Ridge are still remembered by Christians as sites where a significant movement of God once took place.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, many communities experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This was the era of celebrated preachers and evangelists such as David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Charles Finney, Jeremiah Lanphier, and Dwight Lyman Moody. While these names remain well known among contemporary Christians, God used a host of others as well to bring significant revivals to churches and communities.

Some say that revival is an American phenomenon, a unique cultural event experienced only south of the Mason–Dixon line. Yet the brief history we’ve just noted argues otherwise. In fact, even those revivals best known to Americans for their fruits in this country, such as the First Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening, actually began in Europe before they spread across our continent in the North as well as in the South.

The present time in particular confirms that revival is indeed a global phenomenon. This is the age of the Asuza Street explosion, the Welsh Revival, the Korean Pentecost, and the Manchurian Revival. Great revivals have occurred in India and East Africa; in Los Angeles and the Hebrides Islands of Scotland; in East Timor, Indonesia, and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; at Asbury College in Kentucky, and in the towns of New Zealand. Although this age has declared God dead, he’s shown himself very much alive when his people humble themselves, pray, seek his face, and turn from their wicked ways.

What Is a Revival?

The eternal human quest is to know and experience God.

Some want God to split open the heavens and descend to earth so they can see him. Others want God to write his message in the sky or on a mountain so they can see it

and know for sure what to do. Still others want to hear the voice of God shouting like thunder. And still others want God to “zap ‘em” so they’ll quiver on the floor or jump like a kangaroo. Though most won’t admit it, in one way or another they want God to quit playing hide and seek, to come show himself, to visit his people.

True believers want God to intervene in their humdrum experiences. But for most, God can’t be felt or touched. Many feel that God isn’t with them.

A Working Definition

One way God responds to this basic human longing is to manifest himself in a revival. But what exactly do we mean by that term? A variety of definitions have been offered by pastors, theologians, and historians, but we would describe it this way:

An evangelical revival is an extraordinary work of God in which Christians repent of their sins as they become intensely aware of his presence in their midst, and they manifest a positive response to God in renewed obedience to the known will of God, resulting in both a deepening of their individual and corporate experience with God, and an increased concern to win others to Christ.

This view of revival recognizes several distinctives, common to historic revivals, that we should keep in mind as we study them:

- An extraordinary work of God should be distinguished from the more ordinary work of God in the life of the believer.
- The realization of the unique presence of God during times of revival is consistently reported in the testimonies of the revived.
- Revivals naturally lead to a significant evangelistic outreach and harvest of souls in the community touched by the revived church.

While there may be isolated exceptions, these are the manifestations connected with the normal experience of a Holy Spirit outpouring as we read about examples of it in Scripture.

Nine “Faces” of Revival

All people have the same basic facial features, yet these features are arranged differently. In a similar way, revivals display the same essential features as they reflect God’s presence, yet they have different “faces”; that is, revival is expressed in different ways. The nine “faces” of revival have been described in an earlier book, *Rivers of Revival* (written by Elmer Towns with Neil Anderson, Regal Books, 1998; see pp. 116-17). That list of revival types, each with its characteristic focus, is worth repeating here:

- The *repentance revival* emphasizes a moral cleansing of individual lives and of society as a whole.
- The *evangelism revival* focuses on winning souls to Christ.

- The *worship revival* centers on magnifying God.
- The *deeper life revival* emphasizes the experience of God's indwelling.
- The *spiritual warfare revival* devotes its energies to battling Satan and the other demons.
- The *Holy Spirit revival* is characterized by extensive manifestations of the Spirit.
- The *reconciliation revival* leads to the removal of barriers to racial and ethnic harmony.
- The *liberation revival* focuses on gaining freedom from corporate and personal bondage to sin.
- The *prayer revival* displays considerable efforts at intercession and other forms of prayer.

Though any given revival may manifest several of these characteristics, most revivals tend to display one trait more prominently than the others. Just as the face of a child often reflects a blending of the faces of both parents (and grandparents), so the "face" of a particular revival often reflects a blending of two or more of the revival types listed above.

Choosing the Ten Greatest Revivals

Choosing the ten greatest revivals in history was no easy task. We began by setting criteria for our choices. Five questions were asked of each revival, and the answers helped guide us in our selection.

Guidelines to Ranking Revivals

- Does the experience fit the biblical portrait of revival?
- Was there a demonstration of God's presence?
- Was the larger body of Christ awakened to its New Testament task?
- Was the surrounding culture impacted positively by the revival?
- Are there reliable sources that demonstrate the greatness of the revival?

First, *does the experience fit the biblical portrait of revival?* In other words, does it fit the definition we've already given based on scriptural accounts?

Second, *was there a demonstration of God's presence?* Since revival happens when God pours himself on his people, those involved typically experience an extraordinary yet unmistakable sense of the divine presence. Sometimes this is called "atmospheric revival," in which people give testimony to feeling, experiencing and sensing that God is present. However, a revival that fits the New Testament pattern is never measured by feelings alone; there must be a demonstration of New Testament fruit as well.

We should note that strange and controversial phenomena are often associated with revivals: the “jerks,” shouting, being “slain in the Spirit,” speaking in tongues, barking, dancing in the Spirit, and more. Since none of these extraordinary manifestations have appeared in all revivals, we conclude that none of them are mandatory for a spiritual awakening. True revival can happen without them.

Nevertheless, most of these unusual phenomena occur more than once in these accounts. What, then, do we think is the cause of such occurrences? We agree with those observers who have concluded simply that when the divine is poured into the human, we can expect the human to react in extraordinary ways.

Some of these phenomena, we believe, are prompted by God. At other times they are just the exuberant expressions of those who are experiencing God’s presence. For that reason, we offer a few words of caution to those who read about the various displays of emotions while they pray for revival in our own day.

First, don’t seek the extraordinary signs of revival, for these unusual expressions are not what revival is about. Second, don’t measure the success of a revival by the number or intensity of extraordinary signs; if you do, you’ll miss the whole purpose of a revival. Third, seek the Lord, because it is he who revives our hearts.

Measure a revival by God himself. Is God present? Focus on what he’s doing, not on what people are doing. What has God accomplished?

If we aren’t careful, the significance of the revival experience itself can work to hinder the progress of revival. Some see revival as an end in itself, rather than an opportunity to know God. When extraordinary experiences become the goal, revivals become inclusive and sectarian, sometimes even taking on cultic or occult traits.

Since the days of Pentecost there is no record of the sudden and direct work of the Spirit of God upon the souls of men that has not been accompanied by events more or less abnormal. It is, indeed, on consideration, only natural that it should be so. We cannot expect an abnormal inrush of Divine light and power, so profoundly affecting the emotions and changing the lives of men, without remarkable results. As well expect a hurricane, an earthquake, or a flood, to leave nothing abnormal in its course, as to expect a true Revival that is not accompanied by events quite out of our ordinary experience.

A.T. Schofield

The Scope and Fruits of Revival

Another important criterion of a great revival is the fruit it bears beyond the experience itself. Thus a third question to ask in evaluating a revival refers to the scope of its influence: *Was the larger body of Christ awakened to its New Testament task?*

While revivals often begin in a small group, congregation, or single denomination, every great revival spills over its natural boundaries. The Moravian Revival began in the

little village of Herrnhutt, Germany, but it touched the world. There were only about five dozen people at Fetter Lane, but it gave birth to the Methodist Church. Asuza Street was a small church by contemporary standards, but the Pentecostal movement for which it was the catalyst has exploded worldwide. Each of the revivals described in this book spilled out of its context into a broad arena.

A fourth question, also with regard to the fruit of a revival, involves its effects on the wider society: Was the surrounding culture impacted positively by the revival? When a revived church is mobilized to preach the gospel, individual lives of both believers and the unsaved are transformed by the power of God. When many individuals are brought into conformity with Jesus Christ, the culture is transformed.

The First Great Awakening in England, for example, resulted in Sunday school and educational reform, changes to labor and child welfare laws, significant prison reforms, and the abolition of slavery. During the Welsh Revival, the culture was so transformed that new mules had to be secured to work in the coal mines: The old mules wouldn't respond to miners who no longer cursed and abused the animals! In these and many other ways, revivals in England, America, and other nations have historically shaped those societies into more Christian communities.

A final question, critical to the credibility of our rankings, regards the records of a revival: *Are there reliable sources that demonstrate the greatness of the revival?* We've tried wherever possible to rely on the primary historical sources of eyewitnesses, newspaper accounts, journals, and other written observations of the revivals. When secondary sources have been consulted, we have tried to eliminate biased accounts in which writers had a reason to exaggerate, or records that were in some other way less than objective.

You may well disagree with our choice of the ten greatest revivals or with the order in which we've presented them—after all, we ourselves disagreed over these issues at times. Since we don't have complete records of revival, and no one knows everything that God did in all the revivals that have taken place throughout history, only God knows which were truly the ten greatest. In fact, there may well have been greater revivals than those described in this book—events we know nothing about because no one wrote down what happened.

Nevertheless, here are the ones on which we've chosen to focus:

- The Revival of 1904
- The First Great Awakening, 1727
- The Second Great Awakening, 1780
- The General Awakening, 1830
- The Laymen's Prayer Revival, 1857
- The World War II Revival, 1935

- The Baby Boomer Revival, 1965
- The Pre-Reformation Revival, 1300
- The Protestant Reformation, 1517
- Pentecost, the Beginning of Revival, A.D. 30

Please note that these are not listed in chronological order, but rather in the order of our assessment of their intensity and results. Keep in mind as well that these are ten revival eras, not just isolated revival places or revival events. The dates of their beginning are noted, but not dates of their conclusion, because the influence of each revival continued long after its inception.

These are called revival eras because each time God poured out his Spirit, he did so on “all flesh” (see Acts 2:17)—meaning that the revival sprang up in several places at the same time, like a stream that disappears underground only to burst to the surface at another location. In the First Great Awakening, for example, revival sprang up generally at the same time in New England under the influence of Jonathan Edwards, in England with Wesley and Whitefield, and in Germany at Herrnhutt.

When we identify the “ten greatest revivals ever,” then, we’re speaking of the ten time periods when God gave the greatest manifestation of himself through worldwide “times of refreshing ... [that] come from the presence of the Lord” (see Acts 3:19). We’ll begin our close-up studies of revival history with a look at what some scholars consider the greatest spiritual awakening of all time: The 1904 Revival.

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The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever: from Pentecost to the Present

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