

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Things

How God Brings Revival

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**PART VI WILL THERE BE A
REVIVAL NOW?**

CHAPTER 13: A TIME OF DECLENSION

In the previous chapters we have considered the history of revivals in our country. There have been four periods of revival: the Great Awakening that lasted approximately from 1735 to 1741; the Second Great Awakening began in 1799 and extended to the early 1840s; the Great Revival of 1857-1858, the effects of which continued after the Civil War; and the renewed interest in religion that came after World War II. One of the goals of working on this book was to find out what the common denominators are in these periods of revival. In other words, what do these times of renewed interest have in common with each other? Is there a means that God uses in His sovereignty to bring about a revival in this country that is quantifiable? In the next few chapters I want to focus on a few commonalities from which we can learn. There are at least four factors that recur in these periods of history:

1. They are preceded by a time of religious decline, sometimes referred to as declension, in the country.
2. God's people then feel called to pray;
3. Prayer leads the church to confession and work that allows the Holy Spirit to break out in power;
4. The revival then produces leaders who continue the revival spirit and create new methods of evangelism or refine old ones.

Declension in History

Each of the previous periods of renewal and revival were preceded by forces that limited the influence of Christianity in our country. Prior to the Great Awakening, we've seen, there were doctrinal controversies that left many dissatisfied with the church, such as the "Half-way Covenant" that allowed the uncommitted membership status in the churches. There were Indian wars that sapped the life-blood of the colonies. And the preaching turned to jeremiads, or condemning preaching, as preachers harangued people to return to faithfulness. Renewal was needed, and God sent His Spirit to effect an awakening.

The Second Great Awakening was preceded by a series of events that once again caused a period of spiritual decline. The Enlightenment influence caused a questioning of long-held beliefs about the centrality of the earth in the universe and the intervention of God in controlling the universe. This caused some to question their faith and others to develop liberal Christianity. The financial struggles of the post-Revolutionary War era also led many to turn to drink and crime in

an effort to deal with the uncertainty of the times. At a time when only about five to ten percent of the country was Christian, God convulsed the nation with the Second Great Awakening.

The Great Revival of 1857 occurred in the context of a changing nation. Industrialization, urbanization and immigration were all factors that had changed the character of the nation and had altered the way the church was viewed as well as limiting its influence. Prosperity had people feeling that this world was home rather than a place of sojourn. In addition, the political and social problem of slavery and the unsettling preaching of groups like William Miller's Adventists raised doubts among many churches. Things looked bad for the church when Jeremiah Lanphier and five other men gathered to pray in that small room in New York. But God opened the windows of heaven and showered down an awakening.

Evolutionary teaching, historical criticism, wealth and immigration again led to decline in Christianity and its influence as the 19th century came to an end. We have seen that God responded by preserving Bible teaching through the fundamentalists and by preparing the soil for future renewal through the beginning of Pentecostalism.

During and after World War II there was a renewal, but it was not national in the same way that previous revivals had effected the entire country.

Where Are We Today?

What has happened in the intervening years? Are we poised for a revival today? Let's take a brief look at the years since World War II.

The period from World War II to the present has been mixed in regard to revival and renewal. It began with twenty years of uninterrupted growth for the church of Jesus Christ. The years from 1945 to 1965 show yearly gains in the numbers of people in the churches, as well as rising expenditures on social issues. The peak came in 1957 when a Gallup poll showed that 96% of Americans identified with some religious tradition. However, in the 60s, we see once again the decline in influence and extent of Christianity. Beginning in 1965 denominations began to report a decline in membership. The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reveals that between 1965 and 1988 the United Methodists declined from 11 million to 9.2 million; the PCUSA went from 4 million to 3 million. The Disciples of Christ declined from 2.1 million to 1.1 million and the Episcopal Church experienced a loss from 3.4 million members to 2.5 million, or a loss of 16.7%. The Lutheran Church in America declined by 5% and the Presbyterian, U.S. Church lost 7.6%. In 1968 the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church, but the merged denomination continued to lose members and influence. The number of missionaries in the United Methodist Church numbered 1,453 in 1958, but in 1971 there were only 1,175 reported overseas.

The loss of influence has been so great that in the early 2000s we are told by observers of society that we are facing a post-modern and post-Christian society in the United States. The statistics from the 2000 census combined with those from the Emmanuel Gospel Center are especially challenging and troubling. They indicate that while the United States population increased by 11% (almost 25 million new people in the decade), communicant membership in the Protestant churches has decreased almost 10%. (1) In fact, North America is the only continent in the world today where Christianity is not growing.

What caused this great decline in the Protestant Churches of our country? Though the history of this period is rather recent and therefore difficult to analyze, there were events and movements that we can see in retrospect as contributing to this decline.

Forces of Decline

First of all, in the latter part of the 60s the social fabric of our country was stretched to the breaking point. The peaceful 50s were replaced by a time when leaders were assassinated, beginning in 1963 with President Kennedy's death. The murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King followed in 1968. Violence against such nationally prominent figures convulsed the nation.

In addition to the violence of assassination there was the violence that accompanied the civil rights movement. Although the movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King was peaceful, by 1965 many blacks were dissatisfied with the speed at which progress was being made. Therefore, more radical leaders began to get a hearing. The result was the urban violence of the Watts riot in 1965, followed by rioting in Detroit, Newark, Chicago and many other smaller cities. The American dream, it seemed to many, was coming apart. As people questioned the American dream, it appears that they also began questioning the role of the church, because they left it in droves.

Another powerful influence on the decade of the 60s was the Vietnam War. In the early years of our involvement most preachers seemed to support the decisions of the government. However, as more and more lives were lost in battles to attain objectives that seemed less and less clear, many became disillusioned. This war was also called "The Living Room War," because nightly the violence in Southeast Asia was transported into our living rooms via the television. The government's claim that we were there to stop the spread of communism began to wear thin, and protests multiplied. It didn't seem to be worth the price being paid, and questioning of our purpose as a nation followed.

Theological developments also led to a decline in church influence and membership. During the 60s the "Death of God" theology was developed, leaving many to wonder what happened to the traditional values with which they had grown up. The major proponents of a theology that became known as Christian Atheism were men like Thomas Altizer, who said that modern man had lost his sense of anything sacred, and that God no longer had any relevance for mankind today. Harvey Cox, professor at Harvard University, made this new theology popular with his 1965 book, *The Secular City*, in which he proposed that God did not give meaning to life. Rather, men and women create their own meaning as they piece together all of the parts of their world. So we should not look beyond ourselves, but within for meaning and happiness.

These theories caused a reaction among faithful Christians at that time, of course. Bumper stickers came out with sayings like, "If your God is dead, try mine," and "God is not dead, I talked to Him this morning." But popularly there was a decline as many questioned the basics of religion. The news media encouraged the questioning by giving exposure to this theology. *Time* magazine mentioned the controversy in its October 22, 1965, religion section. The April 8, 1966, issue of *Time* was devoted to the topic as the cover emblazoned the question for its readers, "Is God Dead?"

Another theological development of this period that contributed to the decline came to be known as Liberation Theology. This theological position taught that the only significant Christian action was to seek justice for oppressed peoples. Thus those who espoused this belief stood up for the poor in Third World countries, particularly Latin America. The emphasis of its proponents was on social work rather than evangelism. This change in priorities, from evangelistic outreach to social action, had an impact on the influence of the church in the United States as well. In a 1972 study entitled, "Why Conservative Churches Are Growing," sociologist Dean Kelley, an official of the National Council of Churches, shared his findings about the loss of church membership in most denominations. He found that during the decline of mainline denominations, theologically conservative churches (like the Southern Baptists, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Assemblies of

God, etc.) continued to grow. Why was this true when mainline denominations were undergoing massive decline? His conclusion was that people turn to religion in order to answer the big questions of life: Why we are here? What will happen when we die? What is the meaning of life? etc. Theologically conservative churches offered time-tested, dependable answers to these questions, as well as affirming values that were distinctive from the world. This was attractive to those who were feeling the world crumble around them and who believed their church was waffling on the important issues.

In addition to the social and theological developments of this period, there were also political decisions that contributed to the decline of religion. Several Supreme Court cases put limits on the authority and influence of the church. Modern historians point to 1962 as the turning point in a process that continues today. In that year the Court considered the case of *Engle v. Vitale*. The suit was in regard to a practice in New York of having public school children recite a prayer at the beginning of the day. The prayer was written by the Regents of the State, and its recitation was required. The court decided that this was in violation of the First Amendment, which said, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion..." Justice Hugo Black, writing for the majority opinion, said that the practice of this prayer was "Wholly inconsistent" with the First Amendment because the State was promoting a religious viewpoint. Reactions to this decision were negative on the part of the religious establishment, and even several major newspapers voiced their disapproval. But the process of removing a Christian understanding of God from public life had begun.

The following year saw another case, *Abington v. Shempp*, which raised even more concern on the part of Christians. The conclusion of this litigation was that Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's prayer in a school setting also were unconstitutional. The justices that year said that the Bible could be studied, religion could be studied, but "the exercises here do not fall into those categories. They are religious exercises, required by the states (Maryland and Pennsylvania) in violation of the command of the First Amendment." (1) About 150 proposals for amendments to the Constitution to allow these activities were suggested in Congress after this ruling, but none garnered the necessary votes to become law. As late as 1984 this subject was still on the agenda for Congress as they considered the Reagan Amendment, which said that "Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prohibit individual or group prayers in public schools or other public institutions." Even though the vote was 56 for and 44 against, the amendment did not become law since a two-thirds majority is required for constitutional amendments.

Schools were also the venue for controversy about the content of education material. In 1961 a U.S. district judge in Arkansas declared a law unconstitutional entitled, "Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science Act". Creationists, the judge said, "take the literal wording of the Book of Genesis and attempt to find scientific support for it." Since that practice advances a particular religion, it is unconstitutional.

In 1968 the matter came to the Supreme Court, as another Arkansas law was challenged. The rule that prohibited teachers in public schools and public universities from teaching anything that suggested the evolution of man was found unconstitutional. A replacement law was considered again in December of 1981. In the way this trial was reported, we see the bias against Christianity that has developed in these years. On December 21, 1981, the *Washington Post* reported on the trial this way:

The ACLU and the New York firm of Skadden Arps attacked the Arkansas law with a powerful case. Their brief is so good that there is talk of publishing it. Their witnesses gave brilliant little summaries of several fields of science, history of sciences, history and religious philosophy.

Contrast that description with the one given of the believers in creationism. They were

described as,

impassioned believers, rebellious educators and scientific oddities. All but one of the creation scientists came from obscure colleges or Bible schools. The one who didn't said he believed diseases dropped from space, that evolution caused Nazism, and that insects may be more intelligent than humans but are hiding their abilities.(2)

Charles Colson, modern-day prophet, refers to this event as one more piece of evidence that the church has indeed lost influence and even respect in this country.(3)

In this way the schools have been forced to step back from anything religious in character. Only "facts" can be taught. Today the situation in most public schools is such that God cannot be mentioned, and no mention of the Christian history of our country is allowed. Therefore, schools have stepped back from any moral education. S. Barton Babbage described the erosion of morality in our education system this way:

If you want a bomb, the chemistry department will teach you how to make it; if you want a cathedral, the department of architecture will teach you how to build it; if you want a healthy body, the department of physiology and medicine will teach you how to tend it. But when you ask whether and why you should want bombs or cathedrals or healthy bodies, the university is dumb and impotent. It can give help and guidance in all things subsidiary but not in the attainment of the one thing needful.(4)

Other cases have come to the courts in our country where the church and its beliefs have been limited. In 1984 a jury in Tulsa awarded \$390,000 to a woman who had been disfellowshipped from her church because of continuing adultery. The church, the Collinsville Church of Christ, adhered to the guidelines of Matthew 18:15-17 in confronting the woman in question. Eventually, since there was no repentance on the woman's part, an announcement was made to the church that all of their counsel, encouragement, prayer and exhortation had not restored her. Therefore, they were going to withdraw fellowship from Marian Guinn. The jury's reasoning in this case was put this way by one juror, "I don't see what right the church has to tell people how to live."(5)

In Evansville, Illinois, another case was decided in 1981. Mary May, a teacher at the Harper Elementary School was told that she and her fellow Christians could not meet in the school for Bible study and prayer prior to the beginning of school on Tuesday mornings. When Mary May sued the board of education, saying that her First Amendment rights had been violated, the court found against her. The argument was that elementary school children might be negatively affected by an authority figure like a teacher carrying a Bible.

In 1984 there was a ruling against a city crèche display. The city of Pawtucket, RI, each year had an annual Christmas display that had Santa Claus with sleigh and reindeer, Christmas trees, and a manger scene. The crèche was challenged. The Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, said that the city had a right to display the crèche because, in the words of then Chief Justice Warren Burger, the scene served a "legitimate secular purpose...a neutral harbinger of the holiday season, useful for commercial purposes, but devoid of any inherent meaning."(5) How far the church has fallen in influence!

The most far-reaching decision of the court has been the decision of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, allowing abortion on demand. In spite of the alliance of many church leaders, abortion is still available at this writing, and life has become described as tissue.

Immigration has certainly had an impact as well. Immigrants now come from many different countries, and the church has not effectively begun enough new churches to receive and assimilate the varieties of peoples coming into our country.

Internal Decay

Another contributor to the decline of the church in the United States has been the “fall” of well-known Christian figures. The admission of sexual misconduct by Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggert had a devastating effect on religious television. From 1986 to 1988 viewership of religious TV declined from seven million to three million as people lost faith in Christian leadership.

Political Activism

In the 1980’s and 90’s there was another stream of activity that drained spiritual fervor from the churches and the country. Simply put, the church turned to politics as the answer to moral decline. This movement began in 1976 with a series of “I Love America” rallies across America. These were initiated by Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. The theme for the rallies was not conversion to Christ, but a call to return the country to basic morality. The movement went national very quickly, and began to have political impact as they took on the name, *The Moral Majority*.

Falwell credited the action of Moral Majority members for the election of Ronald Reagan. It was the activity of registering church members to vote that swung the tide toward Reagan, a political conservative, he claimed—with some justification. Reagan, in response, appointed officers of the Moral Majority as advisors to his campaign.

By the end of Reagan’s second term, however, the organization was in decline. Contributions decreased, and eventually the group was disbanded in 1989. The reason given was that the goal of a firmly established “religious right” had been reached.

Despite the official end of the Moral Majority, a change had come in the understanding of the church. The way to bring about change in the country was now seen in political terms. A familiar theme was that we need to “Take America Back,” back to the faith of the founding fathers, back to a time of morality, or take it back as in take back power.

This change in the role of the church had a huge impact on those who were not part of it. In 2007 David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons published a book with the title *UnChristian*. (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2007) It was a report on surveys done with people outside the church, especially young adults. One of the critiques of Christians was that we are “too political”. In other words, they saw it as a “major problem” that Christians are expending time and energy on trying to impact legislation in the political realm rather than working on trying to improve lives. And that political activity makes them suspicious of the agenda of the church, and therefore they were uninterested. As one writer, Dan Kimball put it in the title of his book, *They Like Jesus, But Not The Church*. (Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus, but Not The Church*, Zondervan, @2007).

The suspicion of church with a political agenda led to the marginalization of Christianity as a force in America.

Signs of Renewal

During this same period, however, there has been also a strain of religious renewal in our country. The charismatic movement was part of the means that God used to excite people about Jesus Christ even while mainline denominations were on the decline. This movement has generally been dated from 1960, when Dennis Bennet, rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, said that he had experienced what the Pentecostals called Spirit-Baptism. He began to advocate speaking in tongues. The unique aspect of Bennet’s experience and others in the church

who shared it with him is that they expressed no desire to leave their denomination. Bennet resigned, however, and took the pastorate of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Seattle. At the time, the congregation was on the decline, but under his leadership turned around and began to grow.

Other church leaders in other denominations also became spokesmen for renewal in the charismatic sense. Larry Christenson (Lutheran), Harold Bredesen (Reformed) Howard Ervin (Baptist), J. Rodman Williams (Presbyterian), all advocated a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit, but did not encourage people to leave their denominations. In February, 1980, a poll taken by *Christianity Today* showed that about 29 million Americans consider themselves to be charismatic.

After the charismatic movement there came what is being called "The Third Wave." C. Peter Wagner, professor at Fuller Seminary, coined the phrase to describe those who desire a deeper experience of the spectacular spiritual gifts such as healing and involvement in spiritual warfare, but do not require speaking in tongues as the evidence of the Spirit's presence. The emphasis that such movements have placed on the immediate experience of God has been one means of preserving the church.

As mentioned earlier, conservative churches also increased in membership during this period of time. With the social upheaval that has characterized the period, it seems that many did not want to leave the consistency of the traditional values behind them. In 1976 much was made of Jimmy Carter's evangelical beliefs and his claim to be "born again."

In the 1980s people from the Boomer generation "returned to church." As this generation aged, married and began to have children, they returned to their moral roots. However, often their return was not to the church of their youth. Many times it was to the growing phenomenon of Megachurches. These churches, with more than 2,000 in membership, have grown in influence in the Christian world of the United States. With an emphasis on excellence, on non-denominational ministry, and on contemporary music and relevant preaching, these churches have grown while mainline denominations have continued to decline during the 1990s. The best known of these, Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, IL, has even formed an association of like-minded churches.

Another sign of renewal was a movement among Christian men. It was called "Promise-Keepers". In keeping with our theme to this point, this national movement was begun by a football coach. Bill McCartney, then the head football coach at the University of Colorado, had the vision for a gathering of men with an agenda "for training and teaching on what it means to be godly men." The first gathering was at the University of Colorado's event center. From there the vision was for a series of meetings across America in stadiums. The first of these was in July, 1991. A considerable group of 4,200 attended. But soon stadiums were filling around the country, often with 45,000 to 50,000 men gathering to hear speakers, sing songs of worship, and to make promises to be godly men, faithful husbands and good fathers.

The high point for Promise Keepers came on October 4, 1997 with a gathering in Washington, D.C. It was thought that a million men came for these event, though numbers are difficult to verify.

In 1998 financial difficulties arose as attendance dropped at regional rallies, and soon the organization drifted into unimportance on the national scene. In evaluating this movement we can say that the regional rallies produced some excitement, but, as far as we can tell, they did not contribute to the growth of the church in the United States.

So there have been signs that the church is not dead, but it is not strong, either. The emphasis on self-realization has left our society without absolute values. This is true to such an extent that when people determine what is best for them, according to Robert Bellah's 1985 study, *Habits of the Heart* (7), they look either for self-fulfillment or self-realization as the highest of values. In other words, our decisions are made, not on the basis of what is right, but on the basis of what

will be best for us. Even the religious activity of our day and age is seen in those terms. Commitment to a church is often defined by what it does for us, and when it no longer fulfills us, we feel free to move on.

The lack of Bible knowledge indicates that there seems to be little motivation for Christians today to learn about their faith. Many studies have shown that Christians are, generally speaking, biblical illiterates, with few being able to name more than four of the ten commandments, name the gospel writers, or knowing whether stories cited are found in the Old or New Testament.

Yet, in spite of all the forces of declension, there are signs that a revival could be starting. A Gallup poll in 1988 reported that 84% of Americans believe in the divinity of Christ, an increase from 78% in 1978. *Newsweek* magazine in 1990 reported on the phenomenon of baby boomers going back to church. John Naisbitt, in his book, *Megatrends 2000*, reports, “The last time the U.S. experienced such a deeply religious period was during the 19th century, when the country’s economy changed from agriculture to industry.”(8) He goes on to say, “In this century we have watched the ideal of progress give way to the return of faith. The worship of science and the rational to a great extent has been thrown over for a religious revival that specifically values the emotional and the nonrational.”(9)

In other words, forces seemed to be at work to awaken us spiritually. The Spirit seemed to once again be making headway in the battle against apathy. But at the time of the publication of the second edition of this book in 2012, things look rather bleak for the future of the church. Consider the following statistics that characterize what is happening spiritually in this country:

- 20% of Americans now claim no spiritual affiliation.
- 30% of adults under 30 claim no spiritual affiliation.
- It is widely reported that somewhere between 78% to 88% of “churched young people,” those who grew up and were nurtured in the church, drop out when they go away to college.
- Attendance at church (or synagogue), long considered to be 40 to 44% of the people in the country is now estimated to be 17% to 19%

That last statistic needs some explanation. In surveys that have been done by the Gallup and Barna organizations, the question has been asked like this: “Have you in the past seven days attended religious services?” Consistently about 44% of the population has answered “yes”. But in recent years the dependability of that figure has come into question as a result of follow-up. After surveying an area, the further step was taken of going into the area on Sunday and counting the people in all the churches. The result is that only between 17 and 30% are attending church on any given weekend. (see <http://www.gallup.com/poll/117409/Easter-Smaller-Percentage-Americans-Christian.aspx> and http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm). Further, for the first time in the history of the United States those who identify themselves as Protestants are in the minority.

If there was ever a need for revival, it’s now. So what should the church do in the face of the moral decline and the seeds of spiritual awakening? In the next chapters we will see what the church can be doing to encourage the movement that is going on, as well as become an effective channel of God’s power to broaden the scope of the renewal that has been taking place.

Notes:

1. Emmanuel Gospel Center, “Why Start New Churches (in the U.S.): PowerPoint online presentation by ACC Consulting. www.egc.org/churchplanting links, 7 March 2003.
2. Edwin Scott Baustad, *A Religious History of the United States* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 321.

3. "Creation Trial: Less Circus, More Law," *Washington Post* (December, 1981), A-3-b.
4. Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 215.
5. S. Barton Babbage, "Secularism in the Schools," *Christianity Today* (April 12, 1974), p. 57.
6. *Ibid*, p. 210.
7. Colson, p. 207.
8. Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Los Angeles: University of CA Press, 1985).
9. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), pp. 271272.
10. *Ibid*, p. 295.

Chapter 14: A Call to Prayer

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, was once puzzling over two missions over which he had oversight. In each mission was a man who was gifted in evangelism and cared for the people. Each community seemed open to the gospel message. Yet one mission was thriving while the other was just hanging on. What caused the difference? It was while Taylor was on a tour in the United States, garnering new supporters and encouraging old ones, that he saw what was behind the flourishing mission. At one of the meetings a couple had questioned him about the mission where people were regularly committing their lives to Jesus Christ. When Taylor asked why they were wondering about that particular mission, they replied, “We pray for that mission and that missionary every morning and evening.” That, Taylor realized, was what was making the difference.

The impact of prayer is not something that is limited to China. Prayer is another of the common factors in the periods of revival that have characterized our history in America. We do not have specific evidence about the prayer of the church that preceded the Great Awakening. However, we do have a plea of Jonathan Edwards. In 1746, when the Great Awakening had waned and the number of converts was on the decline, he wrote a classic booklet on prayer entitled, “An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer, for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time.” In that day and age the title of a book was supposed to describe the contents of the book, not be a “hook” to get people interested, and that explains its length.

Edwards recognized, in this 140-page booklet, that there was a connection between the Spirit of God bringing about awakening and the prayer of God’s people. Therefore, he pleaded for people to join together in prayer. To our knowledge, not much happened with this plea until the end of the century.

The Second Great Awakening, as we have seen, began with the “Concerts of Prayer.” These times of agreement and visible union were the channel that opened the way to renewal and revival in the country. Then, in the ministry of the revivalists, prayer circles and prayer meetings became prominent as the people began to recognize the connection between prayer and people coming to faith.

The Prayer Meeting Revival of 1857, of course, had prayer at its heart. As those first six men gathered with Jeremiah Lanphier to pray for each other and people they knew in the business district of New York, God answered with a national awakening. The ministry of Dwight L. Moody and other revivalists who became prominent during the post Civil War period also recognized the

necessity of prayer prior to holding mass evangelism meetings. Dwight Moody fine-tuned the new measures of Charles Finney, and appropriately gave much attention to prayer.

The ministry of Billy Graham also has had a great emphasis on prayer as the primary means to prepare for revival. One of the key members of the Billy Graham crusade team in the early revival meetings was Willis Haymaker, a Presbyterian minister who became a “front man” for Graham. He would travel to cities prior to the crusade and organize the publicity, the committees, and the prayer ministry. In the Great Columbia Evangelistic Crusade of February, 1950, Haymaker covered the city with home prayer meetings. Thus, Haymaker said of that successful crusade, “Billy stepped right into a revival. It had been ‘prayed down.’”(1)

The Call to Prayer

If we are to see revival in our day, the church must respond to the call to prayer. Prayer has always been an important part of the life of the church. Early Christians were taught to pray at 9:00 a.m.,

12:00 noon, and again at 3:00 p.m. By the turn of the first century the Didache, a Christian teaching document, emphasized the need for prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hours of the day (the times mentioned above). Hippolytus of Rome, who lived around A.D. 215, taught stages that this prayer should go through:

At the third hour, also one should recall how Christ was crucified; then at the sixth hour how darkness supervened and Christ prayed on the cross with a loud voice; so too at the ninth hour it should be recalled how water and blood issued from his side and how God sent his word to the saints to enlighten them that Christ’s death heralded the beginning of his resurrection. (2)

Other early church fathers indicate that prayer during the hours mentioned above, as well as in the morning, evening, and often at midnight, was at the heart of a vital relationship with God. It was the means that God used to release His power during a period of growth for the church. And gradually, during the early history of the church, the pattern of prayer was developed into an intricate system. An early church document whose author is unknown, *The Pastor of Hermas*, gives us an insight into how prayer became systemized. Joseph Jungmann reports on the prayer section of this document in this way:

In the Pastor of Hermas we find prayers related to the author’s treatment of visions, mandates and parables, prayers for forgiveness of sin, prayers especially in which God is thanked for his benefits... In a comprehensive prayer the inmost soul of the writer is revealed; its range reaches to the creator whose providence controls and orders all things and to Christ his beloved son who has chosen and sanctified us. Then follow prayers of intercession for all in distress, for the poor and the sick, for the hungry and those astray. Finally his horizon widens in a prayer that all peoples may recognize “that you alone are God and that Jesus Christ is your (divine) Son and we your people and the sheep of your fold” (c. 59,4). And a renewed intercession for the leaders of the community ends in a note of praise offered to God “through the high priest and leader of our souls Jesus Christ through whom he is glorified forever” (c. 62,3).(3)

This was the pattern in the early church.

Every major renewal in the history of the church has been preceded by a time of intensified prayer, beginning with Pentecost (Acts 2). Prior to that first general outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we read that “They all joined together constantly in prayer...” (Acts 1:14). Before the great missionary journeys of Paul, we read that the church in Antioch was gathered together for fasting and prayer, and it was in that context that the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:1). The Reformation period was preceded by Martin Luther spending significant time in prayer. In the winter of 1512 he locked himself in

the tower of the Black Monastery in Wittenburg and prayed about the things that he was discovering in his study of Scripture.

The Methodist revival in England was ushered in by the earnest seeking prayer of the Holy Club in which John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield were involved. And, as we have seen, the revival times in the United States involved earnest, focused, persistent prayer. God's promise in Scripture to Solomon at the time of the dedication of the temple has proven true throughout the years. His promise was, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

What is happening in the church today in the area of prayer? The evidence in the past few decades has been mixed. Two surveys done in the 80s indicated that prayer was not a priority for Christians. One survey done in England in 1984 indicated that the average Christian spends one and a half minutes in prayer each day.(4) Ministers did not do a great deal better. The statistics gathered indicated that 56% of the clergy pray for less than 15 minutes per day. Only 1% said that they pray for more than 30 minutes per day. Surveys in the United States produced similar results. One pastor did a survey that indicated that people in the U.S. churches spend less than five minutes per day in prayer, ministers about eight minutes per day. Is it any wonder that we are not experiencing the power that the early church saw, or the revival that we seem to desire so greatly?

The good news, however, is that things seem to be changing. An issue of the "National & International Religion Report" began with this headline: "The Most Hopeful Sign of Our Times: A Growing Prayer Movement Points America Toward Spiritual Revival." Here are some of the highlights from that report:

Times Square Church recently shut down all local programs in order to concentrate exclusively on prayer for the desperate needs of New York City. The 5,000-member urban church led by evangelist David Wilkerson is one of America's fastest growing. Hundreds of thousands of believers gathered at municipal buildings to pray for America on May 7, the National Day of Prayer, just days after tragic incidents of racial violence erupted in Los Angeles and other cities. The American Family Association said the "meet at City Hall" events were organized in more than 2,500 locations. Groups of 70 pastors each gathered in four different cities (Spokane, Wash., Minneapolis, Cleveland, and Colorado Springs) last fall to pray for nationwide revival. One group met for just half a day, while another spent four full days in prayer and fasting.

No one in any of the groups knew that similar meetings had been planned at the same time. Last fall, an estimated 1 million junior high and high school students prayed for revival during "See You At the Pole," a prayer event sponsored by national youth ministries. A prayer movement has been brewing in Cleveland, Ohio, for almost nine years. In the last two years, between 6,000 and 7,000 people (including 1,000 teenagers) have taken part in city-wide prayer rallies. In Minneapolis, 300 congregations have committed themselves to pray for revival for seven years, just "to see what God will do." In Los Angeles, between 300 and 1,000 pastors gather every quarter to spend half a day in prayer for their city and the nation. Just days after the recent LA riots, about 700 area pastors from assorted backgrounds united in prayer at First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood. In New England, a prayer movement is growing on many levels in a five-state area. Some region-wide prayer rallies have attracted thousands of participants.(5)

C. Peter Wagner, noted authority in the area of church growth, has said that the increase in prayer activity in the 1980s in our country points to a revival within ten years.(6) And there certainly seems to be a return to spirituality after the events of 9-11. The Sunday after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York saw a 40% increase in church attendance. Prayer meetings around the country were well attended as Christians and others sought the comfort of a sovereign God in the midst of a confusing event.

Prayer Focused Outward

What is the prayer life of your church like? What is your prayer life like? If it is somewhat typical of what we have become in the United States, the prayers of the church are primarily focused inward. This was noticeable during a Wednesday evening “Prayer Meeting” that I attended. There was a time for prayer requests, which took up most of the time. Prayer was only occasionally offered for an individual that was present; most requests were for brothers, aunts, parents, uncles, etc., for healing of health problems, change in economic circumstances, for a house to be sold, for restoration of a marriage, and the like. No one prayed for the unbelievers in the community or in the world.

In 1997 *Newsweek* magazine did a story on prayer (March 31, 1997). One part of the article lists the kinds of things for which people pray. Here’s some of that list:

- 82% pray for health and success in life
- 75% pray for strength for life or to overcome a personal weakness.
- 72% pray for special needs like a job search.

What I found interesting in reading those statistics is that our prayers, generally speaking, are incredibly self-centered. Who is praying for unbelievers to come to faith?

One of the great changes in the character of prayer during the periods of revival is that they began to focus outward rather than inward. Far too often we treat God as some cosmic vending machine--we put in the right amount of prayer and feel like we’re pushing the right buttons to get what we want. Instead, we need to see prayer as something that prevails upon the Lord to send power that His will may be accomplished in this world.

An idea that could help to focus our prayers outward, and has helped to give renewed energy to some churches is the prayer triplet idea that was developed in England. During the preparation for Billy Graham’s visit there in 1985, a man named Brian Miller was given the task of developing a means of motivating people to pray for the country. As he prayed, meditated, and studied the Scriptures, he developed what has become known as the prayer triplet. In essence it is three people covenanting to pray together for unsaved friends, family and acquaintances. Each person in the triplet lists three people that they want to see come to salvation. Brian Mills sums up the scheme this way:

Three people agree to meet for prayer regularly; Each shares the names of three others and the group is thereby committed to pray for nine people who would not consider themselves Christians; The group prays for all the known needs of the nine and especially that they may discover the reality of God’s love in Christ; The group prays for each other in their relationships with the nine; The group prays for spiritual awakening throughout the land. The three people then look for opportunities to relate and witness to the people on the list.(7)

Prayer can take place anywhere, and need not be for a long period of time. Some triplets found that they could meet at work during a coffee or lunch break. Others met in homes in an evening. The results were astonishing, and a great encouragement to those who prayed. The Billy Graham Association adopted the principle as its means of preparing the soil for a Billy Graham crusade.

Another idea that has been used in a church setting is that of praying people in. The intercessors in the church get together once each week to pray about the needs of the neighborhood. They divide the area around the church into north, south, east and west of the building. They then take a visual tour of the area in prayer, asking that God will bring contact with

a church member, or motivate the people in that area to come to church. One of the intercessors in a church using this method went so far as to spend time driving through her district, stopping at the homes with “For Sale” signs up, praying that God would bring someone into that home that her church could touch. Then, when the house was sold, she would pray that the people coming in would be touched by the Holy Spirit. She would then report the new neighbor to the calling team of the church, and two people would be sent out to make a welcome call.

Another congregation became outward focused in its prayers by having all of its neighborhood Bible studies engage in unique prayers prior to their meetings. The members of the study would go door-to-door through the neighborhood just prior to beginning their study, asking people if there were any needs in that house that they could pray for that evening. Often requests about health, job-related problems, or relationship concerns would be shared. The Bible study would then begin with prayer for these shared needs, and the person who lived in that neighborhood would then follow up prior to the next meeting to see how God answered the prayer.

As prayers were answered, people would be interested in the power that was displayed and the caring that was extended. Several came later to the Bible study, and many of those came to church. Paul Yonggi Cho, pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, largest church in the world, shares how he disciplines his outward prayer:

I sit before the Lord and begin to thank Him for His goodness...After thanking, praising and worshipping God, I can ask His blessing on every appointment, counseling session and meeting I will have that day. In detail, I ask God’s blessings upon my associates (I have over three hundred associate pastors); our missionaries (who are in forty countries); and my elders and deacons. I then inquire of the Lord for His direction on every decision...After praying for each department of my church, each government official and our national defense, I pray for my family, naming their needs clearly and specifically to our Lord. Then, using my imagination, I travel to Japan where we have an extensive ministry...Leaving the shores of Japan, I travel the great Pacific Ocean to America... I pray for the President, the Congress and the other institutions in the United States. I pray for the Christians in America that they may experience revival in their churches...I pray for the thousands who send their prayer requests to our New York office...I travel south and pray for Latin America...I then travel across the Atlantic Ocean and pray for Europe...Eastern Europe is a particular concern to me because of the oppression and opposition which exists. God is most concerned about each Christian who is meeting secretly in Eastern Europe and I must pray for their safety and success. Africa, Australia and New Zealand are also areas where God desires to move...Then there is my own continent of Asia...(8)

I have quoted Dr. Cho’s prayer life at length here to give an example of what outward focused prayer looks like, and to point out that the practice is possible. This was written some years before the drastic changes in Eastern Europe that have opened the windows for the Christians living in that area of the world, and the doors to further mission work. This, I am sure he would say, was a direct answer to the prayers that he and other faithful intercessors have been praying.

We need to train church members in our country to pray with a view that goes beyond the walls of the church and the intimacy of the home. The movement to prayer that has begun is of the Holy Spirit. However, in order to channel the power that is released, we should begin to train people in our churches to pray with an outward focus. When you read through the gospels, it becomes clear that one thing Jesus taught His disciples was to pray. He did not teach them to preach; they were expected to pick that up as they followed Him, and to be empowered for it as

the Holy Spirit enriched their life. However, He did take the time to teach them to pray, giving them the Lord's Prayer as a guideline.

The pattern of Jesus is in contrast to that in the typical church today. We spend time teaching people to teach, to preach, to counsel, to lead small groups, to witness to their friends and neighbors, but very few classes exist that teach people to pray with an outward focus. There are many resources coming into the Christian market, however. The church can use them well.

Begin to pray for yourself and your church, that God may motivate you to outward-focused prayer. Pray for the attitude of

A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Missionary Alliance Church. Once a visitor in his home arose early in the morning. On his way to the kitchen for breakfast, he passed Simpson's study. He stopped as he heard the earnest prayer of this man of God, asking for peoples and nations to come to the Lord. He traveled in his prayer from nation to nation, naming them as he turned the globe before him. Then, in climax to his prayer, he embraced the entire globe, and with tears on his cheeks prayed for God to open up the world to good news

Spiritual Warfare Prayer

We need to recognize also in prayer that when we are praying for revival and renewal in our churches and country, we are engaging in spiritual warfare. Paul closes his letter to the Ephesians with the reminder to

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:11, 12)

When Paul looked at the problems facing the church, he saw them not only in terms of interpersonal difficulties, but in terms of the spiritual battle that was going on behind the scenes. The battle is referred to elsewhere in Scripture as well. In Daniel 10 we are told of a vision that Daniel received. He immediately began to pray and fast, asking for insight into what he was to do with that vision. After twenty-one days of fasting and prayer, a man appeared to him. Among other things, he indicated that the answer to Daniel's prayer had been delayed because of a spiritual battle that took place:

Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. (Daniel 10:12-13)

Commentators believe that the reference to the prince of the Persian kingdom is a reference to some demon or demonic power that was resisting the things of God in that area. People of God, there are demonic powers out there. They have a goal of keeping your friends, your family, your country from experiencing the knowledge and blessing of God. If we are going to see a revival occur in our day, we are going to have to learn to do spiritual warfare on behalf of those who are unbelievers. We are going to have to do spiritual warfare against unjust structures in our land and country.

How do you do spiritual warfare? Begin by putting on the armor of God that Paul lists in Ephesians 6: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes that demonstrate a readiness to share the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God. Be prepared to meet the enemy by having these qualities and abilities as a part of your life. Then, in your prayer, when you sense that the country or

neighborhood, or person you are praying for is under the influence or oppression of the evil one, command him to be gone.

One of the signs that revival is on the horizon is a new understanding of how spiritual warfare prayer relates to the mission enterprise of the church. God is raising up leaders who are making us aware of the fact that any evangelism that is done involves warfare. We are, in the sharing of the gospel, raiding the Enemy's territory, and we should be aware that he won't give up his property without a fight. John Dawson, director of "Youth With A Mission" in Los Angeles, is one of those leaders. He writes:

Unless you understand biblical warfare you will be frustrated, angry, confused and ineffective in your ministry to the city. You may be attempting to coordinate Christian concerts, pioneer a church or reach businessmen. The principle is still the same: We need to bind the strong man and gain a place of authority over Satan before we will see the full fruit of our labors...If we are not using our biblical spiritual weapons, we are failing the people we are attempting to serve.(9)

Dawson goes on to say that there is evidence in Scripture for the existence of territorial spirits, demons that are deployed by Satan over a region. To be effective in doing the work of the kingdom, we must identify these, he says, and battle them with prayer and fasting, commanding in the name of Jesus, praising God, meditation, and a godly lifestyle.

This same theme is echoed in a book edited by C. Peter Wagner. *Engaging the Enemy* (10) is a gathering of essays by well-known practitioners in the outreach of the church of Jesus Christ, each one dealing with some aspect of spiritual warfare and how it applies to evangelizing the world.

As God opens our eyes and our hearts to increased prayer, directed toward the unbelieving world around us, the answer should come in revival. Are you praying for the unbelievers in your circle of friends and family?

Notes:

1. John Pollock, *Billy Graham* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 69.
2. Joseph A. Jungman, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries*, trans. By John Coyne (New York: The Missionary Society of St. Paul, 1978), p. 10.
3. Jungman, p. 13.
4. Brian Mills, *Three Times Three Equals Twelve* (Eastbourne: Kinsway Publications, 1986), p. 49.
5. David Bryant, "The Most Hopeful Sign of Our Times: A Growing Prayer Movements Points America Toward Spiritual Revival," *National and International Religion Reports* (July, 1992), pp. 1, 2.
6. C. Peter Wagner, statement made in a workshop on prayer.
7. Mills, p. 180.
8. Paul Yonggi Cho, *Prayer: Key to Revival* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), pp. 136-138.
9. John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God* (Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1989), p. 70.
10. C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Engaging the Enemy* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991).

CHAPTER 15: LEADERSHIP

There was nothing outstanding about him that would have caused you to identify him as a future leader in the church. In fact, he had nothing that we often associate with people of influence: an extensive education; a family connection; or sums of money. No, he began his life in very humble circumstances, born on the family farm in Sibley, Iowa, on March 8, 1917. During the dustbowl years he was sent to California by the family to earn money there to be sent home. That began a cycle of activity that defined the next two years of his life: off to California in the winter, back home for weeks of planting, then back to California for the summer, and back home for harvest.

When the family financial crisis was past, he decided to stay in California, and ended up buying a herd of cows and beginning his own dairy. He worked hard on the dairy, began a family that eventually included 7 children, and he became a leader in his local church.

His name was Hubert. I came to know him in 1983 when I became pastor of his church. I say “his” church, because in many ways it was. Hubert was someone who had tremendous influence in this congregation. I met him first in the search committee. I was being interviewed as a potential staff pastor for the growing congregation. Hubert chaired the search committee. Through the process of questioning on both sides we came to the conclusion that we could work together, because we saw something of the same future for the church: outreach and continued growth. He had a passion for people still not in the church and sensed something of the same concern in me. So for 18 years, until his death, we worked together to grow the church numerically and spiritually.

I begin this chapter on leadership telling you something about Hubert because this study of revival periods has reminded me that God has a tendency to choose ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. Think about the prominent people in the Bible. God could call someone like Gideon, a coward hiding from the Midianites, a “mighty warrior” (Judges 6:12), and an important battle against overwhelming odds was fought and won. A forgotten son, David, is called to be king and becomes the man after God’s own heart. A bumbling, uneducated man like Peter is called to serve as one of the foundations stones of the church.

This same tendency on the part of God is played out when we consider the revival periods of the United States. God calls ordinary people from unexpected places to do extraordinary things as they became leaders in the church.

Leadership

They became leaders in the kingdom. What is a leader? There are many different definitions of this activity, as you might expect. The most simple is leadership guru John Maxwell’s: “Leadership is influence, or the ability to get followers.” (1) In this sense, everyone is a leader. But some people, like those in our study, rise to unusual levels of influence, touching thousands and

millions of lives and changing the face of Christianity in this country. What is it that they do? Rather than just talk about leaders, I prefer to talk about the process of leadership. This definition describes what happens in this thing called leadership. Leadership is a dynamic process that includes these elements: A **leader** (with all his character pluses and minuses, his particular gifts, strengths and weaknesses) interacts with the **culture** (the traditions and patterns of a group of people) to produce a **vision** (a view of a preferable future, or how the culture can be changed in order to better relate to the present realities) and introduce the **actions** necessary to make the vision become a reality.

In each major revival period there was a leader or two who has become identified with the period. This person was responsible for bringing about changes necessary so that ultimately the culture was changed by new actions or plans. Let's look at each of them and think through their contributions to the changes in our history.

Jonathan Edwards: As noted in chapter 2, Edwards was groomed for ministry from his childhood. All of his education was geared toward following his father's footsteps into the pastorate. He received the best education available to someone in the colonies in that day. Yet he was not considered a dynamic leader, one who would influence a generation of people and the character of religion in this country. He read his sermons, speaking with no gestures or dramatics. He had no overarching long-range plan for revival; in fact, the coming of revival surprised him as much as anyone. Yet what happened supernaturally through his ministry was so powerful that people were drawn to Northhampton to learn the "secret" of revival. He was responsible for giving the Great Awakening its beginning through his preaching and for developing the theology of the revival.

George Whitefield: Whitefield was the dynamic speaker that Edwards was not. He was also ordained in the church of England. He was, in many ways, the first itinerant evangelist to be involved in revival in this country. He took revival from the church to the field.

Charles Finney: Born on the frontier, educated in one-room schools, and ignorant of spiritual things. No formal theological training until after he had been involved preaching in revival meetings. This is a different kind of spiritual leader than Jonathan Edwards! Yet he, too, influenced a generation of believers in this country as he became the model and the focus of spiritual energy during the Second Great Awakening. Finney is best known for the techniques of revival, especially the use of the "new measures."

Jeremiah Lanphier: Businessman turned evangelist, though very unsuccessful in his early attempts to build up the church he was serving. He is remembered for giving up the organizational techniques and moving the church toward a deeper understanding of prayer as the power for revival. He had no theological education, and only a basic understanding of the techniques of revival.

Dwight Moody: Moody was an uneducated shoe salesman when his career as an evangelist was launched. Not only was he uneducated, but he was not eloquent in the way of Charles Finney, nor theologically astute as Jonathan Edwards. Yet his skills as a salesman were used mightily to bring the gospel to millions. He was especially known for emphasizing God's love rather than judgment, and was known for advancing the organization of the revival meetings by making them city-wide crusades.

Billy Sunday: Though only one of many revivalists during the period when revivalism reigned in America, Sunday is also worth noting. Once again, he had no theological education, and, in fact, was a professional baseball player. Yet, he is known for making social issues the focus of revival meetings, especially the sale of alcohol and the practice of gambling.

Billy Graham: Billy at least had some education in Bible School, both in Florida and then at Wheaton college, though no official seminary training or ordination. Billy built upon the work of

Moody, but has been especially known for his ability to give an invitation to Christ in a power-filled way.

It's quite a list of people, isn't it? When I first finished reading and researching for this book a friend asked me, "What did you learn?" My immediate response was, "We're too old and too educated for God to use to bring about revival." In retrospect, that was a bit of an overstatement, since God can use whomever He wishes. However, it does seem to be a pattern that God will often use people that we human beings wouldn't think of as we plan and prepare for revival. This pattern continues today in the lives of some people that God has used to make a significant impact in the growth and development of the kingdom. Consider these people:

Coach Bill McCartney: The interdenominational movement called Promise Keepers traces its beginning to March 20, 1990, as reported in the previous chapter. Here's the fuller story of this movement begun by an ordinary person used to accomplish extraordinary things. Bill McCartney, then head football coach for the University of Colorado, was traveling to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting in Pueblo, CO with his friend Dave Wardell. On the way they began talking about Christian discipleship, especially as it related to men. How could they help Christian men grow spiritually? They envisioned thousands of men gathering in sports stadiums across the United States for worship and prayer, and then sending them out to live the Christian faith together in supportive relationships. Later that year, in July, a meeting of seventy-two men planned the first conference, a gathering of men to take place at the University of Colorado at Boulder in July, 1991. That first conference drew 4,200 men. At the gathering the men were asked to bring 12 men to the various conferences in 7 different locations. That next year, 1992, almost a quarter of a million men attended Promise Keeper stadium events. Over the next four years more than two million men attended the expanding Promise Keepers events around the country. This huge success led Bill McCartney to resign his position as head coach of the University of Colorado in order to devote his time more to his family and more to the organization.

Promise Keepers soon went beyond the stadium events to developing resources for Bible study and discipleship. Promise Keeper organizations also expanded in 1995 to the world, with the opening of offices in New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

In 1998 a decision was made to offer all the conferences at no charge, so that there would be no hindrance to men hearing the gospel. That year, in spite of a severe cash crunch, 450,000 men attended stadium and arena events in 19 different locations.

Since 1998 the impact of Promise Keepers seems to be on the wane, with fewer resources in the pipeline of publication and fewer men attending the events (by their estimate, 176,000 in 2002). However, this movement is one of the closest things we have to a revival in that it came in the midst of a spiritual lull, and the church was experiencing a renewed prayer movement. This movement had a national and international impact on the spiritual lives of over 5 million men who attended the conferences. Probably many more men were affected by those who carried the movement back to their own churches..

Where did the leadership for this renewal come from? Not from the official church. The leadership was focused in a man lovingly referred to as "Coach," Bill McCartney, a man with no theological training and no position in the church that would qualify him for becoming a spokesman.

Let's look at another person who has had widespread influence in the church in the 1990s: **Bill Hybels.** Hybels pastors one of the largest Christian churches in the United States, Willow Creek Community Church. In the early 1970s Bill was the Youth Pastor in the South Park Church in a suburb of Chicago. Using creative dramas, contemporary music and messages that were highly relevant to the culture of the youth of that area, the ministry grew from a handful of teenagers to an estimated 1000 per mid-week service. Hybels, a student at Trinity College, with a major in

Biblical Studies, was inspired by the challenge given by one of his professors to be involved in the church. The professor, Dr. Gilbert Belizikian, said,

Do any of you students want to do something truly great with your life? Do you want to sign up for the most compelling, far-reaching challenge in this world? Do you want to discover real excitement? Then commit yourself to Jesus' vision of establishing communities of God here on this earth. Devote yourself to the church!

A decision was made to make the ministry more than a youth ministry. It was time to start a church, one patterned after Acts 2:42-47. Hybels and his group did a survey of the community, seeking to determine why unchurched people didn't attend. They used the information gathered to form the ministry plan for a new congregation, a church for the unchurched. The first service was held in a rented movie theatre on October 12, 1975. Only 125 people showed up. The next week the number had dropped. But then things began to take off, and within three years there were more than 2,000 attenders per week.

Hybels' influence, along with the church's, has been expanded through the creation of the Willow Creek Association. For \$249 per year a church with a similar vision to reach the unchurched can join this organization and have access to the many resources that the church produces, as well as the many conferences that are sponsored.

Megachurches, of which Willow Creek is one of the most visible and influential, represent a change in the church culture in America. Churches of over 2000 members represent less than 1% of the congregations in the United States, and yet have become the definition of what a local church should be. Lyle Schaller, in his book, *The Very Large Church*, notes that the culture has changed. There has been a move to "bigness" in stores, in schools, in the culture in general. People are used to a "one stop shopping" experience in the world, and they are looking for it in the church. As Schaller reflects,

Instead of preparing children for a life in a world of small institutions, for the past half century the American culture has been equipping people to live in a world of big institutions. This new culture organized around big institutions is governed by a different rule book from that which was used in the old culture composed largely of small institutions.(3)

Because this new culture looks for larger churches, new leaders had to emerge, people who were trained not just to be scholars and shepherds, but to be leaders.

So who would God call to become a foundational leader in this process? A man like Bill Hybels. A graduate of college (with a major in Biblical Studies), but not a theological school; a man groomed to be involved in the family business, but who felt a call to do business for God.

There are many others that we could point to as well, people who had a traditional theological education and many who did not. What do we learn about leadership? Several things, I believe. First, we learn that God can and will call leadership from surprising places. The next leaders in revival in your church and our world may come from the world of business, or agriculture, or from the church. God is a specialist in picking ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Secondly, I believe that we learn that God empowers people through the prayers and support of God's people. Tony Campolo once told the story about his church seeking a new pastor. When the news was published that the search committee was recommending a recent seminary graduate, Campolo went to the chairman of the committee to express his disappointment. He indicated that their church was a large, influential church. It should look among the "stars" of the church to invite to be pastor, someone who has the experience to qualify him for success. A young man just out of school may not ever become great. It's too great a risk for the church. The chairman of the

search committee let Campolo talk for awhile, and then said, “But Tony, we’re going to pray him great.”(4). This leader understood something very important about leaders: God chooses them, prepares them, calls them, and then grows them, often in response to the prayers of people. Think of how Billy Graham became a leader in response to prayer.

Thirdly, we learn that leaders usually are the result of revival. You see this in the life of Finney, of Graham, and of Moody. The revival had started, and people from the harvest became leaders in the harvest. This is an important fact of which the church should take note. This means that if you aren’t experiencing renewal in your church, a new leader may not be the answer. Rather, you should begin with prayer, seeking the powerful flow of the Holy Spirit. Then, once the power of God is flowing, see who He calls to be a part of it.

Leadership is a vital part of the history of these revivals. It will be for the future. Who will God call? That’s up to Him. Our task today is to prepare the soil with our prayers.

Notes:

1. John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*, Thomas Nelson Publishers (Nashville, TN), 1993, p. 1.
2. Bill and Lynne Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 46.
3. Lyle Schaller, *The Very Large Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 14
4. Tony Campolo, from a talk.

CONCLUSION

So what do we say to that search committee that we met in the introduction? You will remember that they wanted someone who would lead the church to growth and revival. So what should they prioritize? There are several things that any leaders and any church should be aware of as they think about and plan for the future.

1. Pray

This seems almost too simple to mention, but it is crucial. The average Christian church does little in the area of prayer. Surveys have shown the Christians in American depend on “arrow prayers” uttered in crisis for their spiritual lifeline. Congregations often don’t prioritize prayer either. A few years ago I gathered a group of volunteers to contact the larger churches (more than 2,000 people in worship) in Southern California to ask one simple question: what do you do in prayer ministry? We were shocked when we gathered to report our findings. Most of the larger churches, names you would recognize, do little in the way of organized, focused prayer for revival and for the church. One of the things that we have learned in our study of revivals is that renewed church prayer is vital to opening the way for revival. So I would say to that search committee that they should immediately, prior to contacting any candidates, begin a variety of prayer initiatives in the congregation. These might include a search committee prayer time, a fasting group that combines this discipline with prayer for the church and for the provision of the right pastor to lead them, a prayer retreat, prayer partners for leaders, prayer triplets, etc. If they truly want to experience revival it will begin with prayer, not with a new program.

2. Keep an open mind

One of the things we have seen as we have studied revival is that God sometimes anoints people that we wouldn’t expect to be chosen as leaders for the church. Who would think of a Dwight Moody or a Charles Finney for church leadership? Tony Campolo’s comments we referred to are instructional for the church, I believe. The search committee should keep an open mind, considering a larger list than those who have been “successful” in leading other ministries. The committee should also have interview questions that get at a person’s commitment to prayer and things of the spirit.

3. Prepare the congregation for change

Change is difficult for any established organization. However, change is necessary in the church if it is to remain relevant to the new realities of culture. A familiar pattern in churches like

the one seeking a new pastor is to look for someone who will lead the church into the changes necessary for growth. However, they do not prepare the congregation for those changes. And so, the new pastor expects a willingness to change and meets great resistance instead. After a couple of years of battling over major and minor issues, the pastor leaves disillusioned and the congregation seeks a safer alternative. One of the realities of revival is that it has always brought change. Sometimes those changes were in the styles of worship. At other times the changes were more profound, such as the marginalization of the church itself as revivals went to stadiums. The search committee would serve the congregation well if they began identifying things that might require change prior to the arrival of a new pastor. This may require the engagement of a consultant who will help them examine the community around them, the church and its structure, and begin to strategize about the future.

4. Study to know the times

A fourth thing that I would say to that search committee is that it would be a wise activity to study their community to determine where God is preparing revival. Has there been a decline in spirituality? As we have seen, that always precedes revival. Where is there a renewed interest in spiritual things? Some time ago the congregation that I serve decided to begin a daughter church in the growing Spanish-speaking community around us. The plan was to begin a church within our own building. However, interviews with the leaders of Spanish-speaking churches in our city showed that they weren't growing. For some reason, the Hispanic population in our city was resistant to the gospel. Right near us, however, was a city that had several growing Hispanic churches. We began a daughter church there, and it has grown to independence and has planted a daughter church itself. Where is God at work? Rick Warren, pastor of one of the largest churches in the United States, says that church growth isn't all that difficult. You simply have to find out where God is creating a wave, and then ride it for all it's worth.⁽¹⁾ Where is God at work in your community? Is there a growing openness among the young adults? Seniors? Single parents? Young families? The way to determine this is to look at the demographics of your area to determine what kinds of people God has called you to serve. Then interview other congregational leaders in your community to learn what kind of people are joining their churches. This community evaluation can give you a picture of what kind of pastor might serve best in your congregation as well.

Get ready. I believe that God is going to do a great thing in our day. The stage is set. Revival is coming. Will you and your church be ready?

Endnote

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 15

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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