

What is Revival?

As individuals and churches are renewed they prepare the way for revival in the land. A spiritual awakening touches the community when God's Spirit moves in power. Often this awakening begins in people earnestly praying for and expecting revival.

Arthur Wallis (1956:20,23) observes: Numerous writings .. confirm that revival is Divine intervention in the normal course of spiritual things. It is God revealing Himself to man in awesome holiness and irresistible power. It is such a manifest working of God that human personalities are overshadowed and human programs abandoned. It is man retiring into the background because God has taken the field. It is the Lord .. working in extraordinary power on saint and sinner. .

Revival must of necessity make an impact on the community and this is one means by which we may distinguish it from the more usual operations of the Holy Spirit.

Edwin Orr's research indicated that 'A spiritual awakening is a movement of the Holy Spirit bringing about a revival of New Testament Christianity in the Church of Christ and its related community. .. It accomplishes the reviving of the Church, the awakening of the masses and the movements of uninstructed people toward the Christian faith; the revived church by many or few is moved to engage in evangelism, teaching and social action' (1975: vii-viii).

Roy Hession (1973:11,23) noted that the outward forms of revivals do, of course, differ considerably, but the inward and permanent content of them is always the same: a new experience of conviction of sin among the saints; a new vision of the Cross and of Jesus and of redemption; a new willingness on man's part for brokenness, repentance, confession, and restitution; a joyful experience of the power of the blood of Jesus to cleanse fully from sin and restore and heal all that sin has lost and broken; a new entering into the fullness of the Holy Spirit and of His power to do His own work through His people; and a new gathering in of the lost ones to Jesus..

Revival is just the life of the Lord Jesus poured into human hearts.

Bible Revivals

Scripture gives a constant call for individual and communal repentance issuing in righteousness and justice.

Wilbur Smith notes seven revivals in the Old Testament in addition to the one with Jonah. These revivals involved:

1. Jacob's household (Genesis 35:1-15),
2. Asa (2 Chronicles 15:1-15),
3. Joash (2 Kings 11-12; 2 Chronicles 23-24),
4. Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:18; 2 Chronicles 29-31),
5. Josiah (2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chronicles 34-35),
6. Haggai and Zechariah with Zerubbabel (Ezra 5-6),
7. Ezra with Nehemiah (Nehemiah 9:16; 12:44-47).

He noted nine characteristics of these revivals:

1. They occurred in times of moral darkness and national depression;
2. Each began in the heart of a consecrated servant of God who became the energising power behind it;
3. Each revival rested on the Word of God, and most were the result of proclaiming God's Word with power;
4. All resulted in a return to the worship of God;
5. Each witnessed the destruction of idols where they existed;
6. In each revival, there was a recorded separation from sin;
7. In every revival the people returned to obeying God's laws;
8. There was a restoration of great joy and gladness;
9. Each revival was followed by a period of national prosperity.

" The early church lived in continuous revival. "

The early church lived in continuous revival. It saw rapid growth in the power of the Holy Spirit from the initial outburst at Pentecost. Multitudes joined the church. At Pentecost 3,000 were won in one day (2:41). Soon after that there were 5,000 involved (4:4). Then great multitudes (5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24 and 16:5).

Those Christians were dynamic. Not faultless, as the epistles indicate, but on fire. They were accused before the civil authorities as 'these people who have been turning the world upside down' (Acts 17:6).

Revival makes that kind of an impact in the community.

Various renewal and revival movements stirred the church and the community throughout history. The eighteenth century saw the first great awakening, and powerful revivals have spread world wide since then until the astounding developments now.

18th Century Revivals

The Moravians

The Moravians, a refugee colony from Bohemia on the estates of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf at the village of Herrnhut in Germany, experienced a visitation of God in 1727 which launched revival with 100 years of continuous prayer and 100 missionaries sent out within 25 years.

On May 12th, 1727, they entered into a covenant together 'to dedicate their lives to the service of the Lord Jesus.'..

A period of extraordinary prayer followed, which both preceded and followed the outpouring. It started in early July of that year, but already, for the best part of two years, there had been prayer and praise gatherings in the homes of the people. In July they started to meet together more frequently.. Some spent whole nights in prayer..

At about noon on Sunday August 10th, 1727, the preacher at the morning service felt himself overwhelmed by a wonderful and irresistible power of the Lord. He sank down in the dust before God, and the whole congregation joined him 'in an ecstasy of feeling'. They continued until midnight engaged in prayer, singing, weeping and supplication.

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On Wednesday August 13th the church came together for a specially called communion service. They were all dissatisfied with themselves. 'They had quit judging each other because they had become convinced, each one, of his lack of worth in the sight of God and each felt himself at this communion to be in view of the Saviour.' They left that communion at noon, hardly knowing whether they belonged to earth or had already gone to heaven. It was a day of outpouring of the Holy Spirit. 'We saw the hand of God and were all baptized with his Holy Spirit .. The Holy Ghost came upon us and in those days great signs and wonders took place in our midst.

Scarcely a day passed from then on when they did not witness God's almighty workings among them. A great hunger for God's word took hold of them. They started meeting three times daily at 5 am, 7.30 am, and 9 pm. Self-love and self-will and all disobedience disappeared, as everyone sought to let the Holy Spirit have full control.

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Two weeks later, they entered into the twenty four hour prayer covenant which was to become such a feature of their life for over 100 years.. 'The spirit of prayer and supplication at that time poured out upon the children was so powerful and efficacious that it is impossible to give an adequate description of it.' Supernatural knowledge and power was given to them. Previously timid people became flaming evangelists. (Mills 1990:2045).

The Great Awakening

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the preacher and scholar who later became a President of Princeton University, was a prominent leader in a revival movement which came to be called the Great Awakening as it spread through the communities of New England and the pioneering settlements in America. Converts to Christianity reached 50,000 out of a total of 250,000 colonists. The years of 1734-35 saw an unusually powerful move of God's Spirit in thousands of people. Edwards described the characteristics of the revival as, first, an extraordinary sense of the awful majesty, greatness and holiness of God, and second, a great longing for humility before God and adoration of God.

Edwards published the journal of David Brainerd, a missionary to the North American Indians from 1743 to his death at 29 in 1747. Brainerd tells of revival breaking out among Indians in October 1745 when the power of God seemed to come like a rushing mighty wind. The Indians were overwhelmed by God. The revival had greatest impact when Brainerd emphasised the compassion of the Saviour, the provisions of the gospel, and the free offer of divine grace. Idolatry was abandoned, marriages repaired, drunkenness practically disappeared, honesty and repayments of debts prevailed. Money once wasted on excessive drinking was used for family and communal needs. Their communities were filled with love.

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The power of God seemed to descend on the assembly 'like a rushing mighty wind' and with an astonishing energy bore all down before it. I stood amazed at the influence that seized the audience almost universally and could compare it to nothing more aptly than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent.. Almost all persons of all ages were bowed down with concern together and scarce was able to withstand the shock of astonishing operation. (Pratney 1984: 15).

On November 20, he described the revival at Crossweeksung in his general comments about that year, which had involved horse riding over 3,000 miles to reach Indian tribes in New England: He notes that revivals have been criticised as scaring people with hell and damnation, but this great awakening, this surprising concern, was never excited by any harangues of terror, but always appeared most remarkable when I insisted upon the compassions of a dying Saviour, the plentiful provisions of the gospel, and the free offers of divine grace to needy distressed sinners.

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Their pagan notions and idolatrous practices seem to be entirely abandoned in these parts. They are regulated and appear regularly disposed in the affairs of marriage. They seem generally divorced from drunkenness .. although before it was common for some or other of

them to be drunk almost every day.. A principle of honesty and justice appears in many of them, and they seem concerned to discharge their old debts.. Their manner of living is much more decent and comfortable than formerly, having now the benefit of that money which they used to consume upon strong drink. Love seems to reign among them, especially those who have given evidence of a saving change. (Howard

1949, 239251).

In 1735, when the New England revival was strongest, George Whitefield in England and Howell Harris in Wales were converted. Both were 21 and both ignited revival fires, seeing thousands converted and communities changed. By 1736 Harris began forming his converts into societies and by 1739 there were nearly thirty such societies. Whitefield travelled extensively, visiting John Wesley in Georgia in 1738, then ministering powerfully with Howell Harris in Wales 1739 and with Jonathan Edwards in New England in 1740, all in his early twenties.

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Also in 1735, John Wesley went to Georgia. Whitefield sailed to Georgia at Wesley's invitation early in 1738, but they returned to England because Wesley was frustrated in his work. Then in May that year both John and Charles Wesley were converted, Charles first, and three days later on 24th May John found his heart strangely warmed in the meeting in Aldersgate Street when he listened to a reading of the preface to Luther's commentary on Romans.

1739 saw astonishing expansion of revival in England. On 1st January the Wesleys and Whitefield and four others from their former Holy Club at Oxford in their students days, along with 60 others of whom many were Moravians, met at Fetter Lane in London for prayer and a love feast. The Spirit of God moved powerfully on them all. Many fell to the ground, resting in the Spirit. The meeting went all night and they realised they had been empowered in a fresh visitation from God.

On 1 January 1739 a remarkable love feast was held at Fetter Lane in London. There the leaders of the Revival were welded into a fellowship of the Spirit in a way similar to what had happened at Herrnhut in 1727. The Wesleys were present, along with Whitefield and Benjamin Ingham, who was to become an outstanding evangelist among the Moravians. 'About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer,' John Wesley recorded in his Journal, 'the power of God came mightily upon us insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, 'We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.' This Pentecost on New Year's Day confirmed that the Awakening had come and launched the campaign of extensive evangelization which sprang from it (Wood 1990: 449).

Revival fire spread rapidly. In February 1739 Whitefield started preaching to the Kingswood coal miners in the open fields with about 200 attending in the south west of England near the Welsh border. By March 20,000 attended. Whitefield invited Wesley to take over then and so in April Wesley began his famous open air preaching (which continued for 50 years) with those crowds at Kingswood. He returned to London in June reporting on the amazing move of God's Spirit with many conversions and many people falling prostrate under God's power a phenomenon which he never encouraged! Features of this revival were enthusiastic singing, powerful preaching, and the gathering of converts into small societies called weekly Class Meetings.

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Revival caught fire in Scotland also. After returning from America in 1741, Whitefield visited Glasgow. Two ministers in villages nearby invited him to return in 1742 because revival had already begun in their area. Conversions and prayer groups multiplied. Whitefield preached there at Cambuslang about four miles from Glasgow.

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The opening meetings on a Sunday saw the great crowds on the hill side gripped with conviction, repentance and weeping more than he had seen elsewhere. The next weekend 20,000 gathered on the Saturday and up to 50,000 on the Sunday for the quarterly communion. The visit was charged with Pentecostal power which even amazed Whitefield.

That Great Awakening in Great Britain and America, established the Methodists with 140,000 members by the end of the century, and other churches and Christians were renewed and empowered. It impacted the nation with social change and created the climate for

political reform.

Toward the end of the century revival fires burst again in England through prayer groups spreading everywhere. On Christmas day 1781 in Cornwall intercessors met to sing and pray from 3 am and God's Spirit moved on them. They prayed until 9 am and regathered that Christmas evening. Throughout January and February, the movement continued. By March 1782 they were praying until midnight. The movement spread. Churches filled and denominations doubled, tripled and quadrupled (Robinson 1992:9). By 1792, the year after John Wesley died, this second great awakening swept Great Britain and was stirring America and other countries.

In New England, Isaac Backus, a Baptist pastor, addressed an urgent plea for prayer for revival to pastors of every Christian denomination in the United States in 1794. The churches adopted the plan until America, like Britain, was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings. They met on the first Monday of each month to pray. It was not long before revival came.

James McGready, a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky, promoted the concert of prayer every first Monday of the month, and urged his people to pray for him at sunset on Saturday evening and sunrise Sunday morning. Revival swept Kentucky in the summer of 1800. Eleven thousand people came to a communion service.

That second great awakening produced the modern missionary movement and it's societies, engendered support for Bible societies, saw the abolition of slavery, and resulted in many social reforms.

19th Century Revivals

Various revival movements influenced society in the 1800s, but 1858 in America and 1859 in Britain were outstanding. Typically, it followed a low ebb of spiritual life. Concerned Christians began praying earnestly and anticipating a new move of God's Spirit.

Revival broke out at evangelistic meetings in Hamilton, Ontario in Canada during October 1857 with attendances at meetings reaching 6,000, and three or four hundred converted including many civic leaders. It was widely reported.

Jeremiah Lanphier, a city missionary, began a weekly noon prayer meeting in New York in September that year. By October it grew into a daily prayer meeting attended by many businessmen. Anticipation of revival grew, especially with the financial collapse that October after a year of depression. Materialism was shaken.

At the beginning of 1858 that Fulton Street prayer meeting had grown so much they were holding three simultaneous prayer meetings in the building and other prayer groups were starting in the city. By March newspapers carried front page reports of over 6,000 attending daily prayer meetings in New York, 6,000 attending them in Pittsburgh, and daily prayer meetings were held in Washington at five different times to accommodate the crowds.

Other cities followed the pattern. Soon a common midday sign on businesses read, 'Will reopen at the close of the prayer meeting.' By May, 50,000 of New York's 800,000 people were new converts. A newspaper reported that New England was profoundly changed by the revival and in several towns no unconverted adults could be found! In 1858 a leading Methodist paper reported these features of the revival: few sermons were needed, lay people witnessed, seekers flocked to the altar, nearly all seekers were blessed, experiences remained clear, converts had holy boldness, religion became a social topic, family altars were strengthened, testimony given nightly was abundant, and conversations were marked with seriousness.

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Edwin Orr's research revealed that in 1858-59 a million Americans were converted in a population of thirty million and at least a million Christians were renewed, with lasting results in church attendances and moral reform in society.

Charles Finney (1792-1875) became one of the most famous preachers of that era. A keen sportsman and young lawyer, he had a mighty empowering by God's Spirit on the night of his conversion including a vision of Jesus. During the height of the revival he often saw the awesome holiness of God come upon people, not only in meetings but also in the community, bringing multitudes to repentance and conversion. Wherever he travelled, instead of bringing a song leader he brought a someone to pray, especially Father

Nash. Finney taught theology at Oberlin College which pioneered coeducation and enrolled both blacks and whites. His 'Lectures on Revival' were widely read and helped to fan revival fire in America and England.

Revival swept Great Britain also. During September 1857, the same month the Fulton Street meetings began, four young Irishmen commenced a weekly prayer meeting in a village school near Kells. That is generally seen as the start of the Ulster revival of 1859 which brought 100,000 converts into the churches of Ireland. Through 1858 innumerable prayer meetings started, and revival was a common theme of preachers. God's Spirit moved powerfully in small and large gatherings bringing great conviction of sin, deep repentance, and lasting moral change. Prostrations were common people lying prostrate in conviction and repentance, unable to rise for some time. By 1860 crime was reduced, judges in Ulster several times had no cases to try. At one time in County Antrim no crime was reported to the police and no prisoners were held in police custody.

Edwin Orr noted that this revival made a greater impact on Ireland than anything known since Patrick brought Christianity there. By the end of 1860 the effects of the Ulster revival were listed as thronged services, unprecedented numbers of communicants, abundant prayer meetings, increased family prayers, unmatched Scripture reading, prosperous Sunday Schools, converts remaining steadfast, increased giving, vice abated, and crime reduced.

Revival fire ignites fire. Throughout 1859 the same deep conviction and lasting conversions revived thousands of people in Wales, Scotland and England.

Revival in Wales found expression in glorious praise including harmonies unique to the Welsh which involved preacher and people in turn. There too, 100,000 converts (one tenth of the total population) were added to the church and crime was greatly reduced. Scotland and England were similarly visited with revival. Again, prayer increased enormously and preaching caught fire with many anointed evangelists seeing thousands converted. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that prince of preachers, saw 1859 as the high water mark although he had already been preaching in London for five years with great blessing and huge crowds.

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