

# **A QUIET REVIVAL**

## **Bob Dickie**

The 9000-strong congregation listened in rapt silence as, for a full hour, the preacher expounded Psalm 51. No punches were pulled as the sermon exposed the sinfulness of the human heart so graphically typified by David's sin. Yet, equally, the gospel of God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ was declared as the only remedy for sin.

A scene from the 18th century? No, from last October. In South Korea or China? No, in Michigan, USA. At an Emergent, seeker-friendly or Charismatic church? No, the preacher is a five-point Calvinist who rejects all such aberrations.

Then was it at a widely publicised crusade or convention for Christians? No, in East Lansing's Breslin Center (where Michigan State plays basketball) - at a simple service attended voluntarily by over half the 16,000 delegates from a business conference held the previous day.

The event was just the latest landmark in a remarkable work of God's Holy Spirit that has been going on for the last six years through the ministry of Robert L. Dickie, pastor of Berean Baptist Church in Grand Blanc, Michigan.

## **The windows of heaven**

Two years ago Bob Dickie wrote, 'I have been the pastor of Berean Baptist Church for nearly 23 years. They have been wonderful years of teaching the Word of God among a small, struggling but faithful flock of believers.

'I have always maintained a strong emphasis on the gospel of Jesus Christ - and on the free grace and sovereign power of God in saving men and women from their sins. We have had blessings and a few conversions along the way, but nothing on the scale that we have seen recently.

'As we struggled to be faithful to the Bible's message, there were many voices urging us to try novel ideas and innovations. So-called church growth experts told us that if we just did this thing or that thing, we would draw a crowd. But we simply persevered in preaching "the unsearchable riches of Christ".

'Recently we have seen the windows of heaven opened and have witnessed several hundred conversions, many of them unusual. All that has happened has been by God's grace - it is his blessing alone and I desire to give all the glory to the Lord for what he has done'.

## **How did it all begin?**

There were signs of blessing ten years ago, with a small number converted. Among these was Orrin Woodward, who had left his job as an engineer at General Motors and set up a successful marketing business - but his marriage was breaking down. His wife Laurie began to attend Berean Baptist and to bring home Christian books.

One such book was the EP Welwyn Commentary on Galatians. Orrin picked it up and began to read, growing (as he said later) 'madder and madder' at the idea that salvation is God's gift and not earned by good works. Nevertheless, he read it from cover to cover, mostly in a single session.

Hooked on these new ideas, he next read D. M. Lloyd-Jones' Sermon on the Mount - and the Lord opened his heart to understand and believe the gospel. That was in April 1997. But the Woodwards, now secure in a Christian marriage, found it difficult to get friends to attend services.

However, in 2001, in nearby Grand Rapids, Orrin organised his first business conference - attended by 3000 established or aspiring business people from all over the USA. He determined to offer the conferees the option of remaining overnight after the Saturday conference to attend a Sunday morning service conducted by Pastor Dickie.

To his immense surprise some 500 did so. They heard an uncompromising gospel message emphasising that salvation is by grace alone through Christ alone. About a dozen were saved as a direct result of that sermon and some began attending Berean Baptist.

### **Steady growth**

This marked the beginning of a steady rise in attendance at the church as the new converts began to invite their friends and families. Further conversions followed through the regular ministry.

Within 12 months the congregation had increased dramatically and many made professions of conversion to Christ - from backgrounds as diverse as Roman Catholicism, atheism, agnosticism, Buddhism and nominal Christianity.

Orrin's business conferences were held two or three times a year and the numbers attending increased. By October 2006 attendance had reached some 16,000 with around 9000 remaining for the Sunday service. Several thousand copies of John Blanchard's Ultimate questions were distributed at this latest conference.

The conference services are in every respect similar to the regular services at Berean - with a simple format of traditional hymns, prayers, Bible readings and preaching. There are no bands or musical programmes, and none of the gimmicks associated with the Church Growth movement or the Emergent Church. Most of all, the preaching is biblical, reformed and Christ-centred, with a clear evangelistic emphasis.

### **Hundreds baptised**

Many more professed conversion. Not all could attend Berean because they lived far away in other states. However, at the time of writing, six or seven new reformed groups have come into being around the USA as a result of the ministry, some numbering several hundred people.

Pending the formation of new churches, the believers in these locations are being pastored remotely by sermons on CD and a constant flow of reformed literature. Under a 'book of the month' programme some 1600 copies of a selected book are mailed out each month. (Many are titles from Evangelical Press, of which Bob Dickie is a director.)

However, many of those converted through the conference ministry did find their way to Berean Baptist Church, some driving for up to two hours or more to attend. Attendance by local people also increased. Duplication of the morning service was necessitated by a shortage of car park space. Currently up to 400 attend the 10am service and up to 300 the 12 noon service.

Over the period 2000 to 2006 some 300 have confessed Christ in baptism at Berean - after attending a 15-week course of instruction in the Scriptures and Christian doctrine (including three sessions on the doctrines of grace). The baptismal class varies in size from about 25 to 60 at any one time.

The total number of professions of faith is greater, of course, because many live elsewhere in the USA. As a conservative estimate, around 600 have professed conversion through this ministry since 2001.

### **How real is it?**

But how real are these conversions? The evidence is encouraging. Very few have fallen away (probably less than 2%) and the great majority have not only remained faithful to Christ but have grown in grace, with many taking on leadership roles or becoming active evangelists. Berean has thirty men who can preach the Word acceptably.

The evidence of transformed lives is beyond contradiction. One most noticeable effect is a deep hunger for Bible truth. Book sales have been phenomenal. It is not unusual for a recent convert to carry away a pile of books to read, only to return a few weeks later for another pile.

This extraordinary hunger for the Word is also evident in the way people listen to the preaching - something that visiting preachers (including the present writer) have remarked upon. Experienced conference speaker John Blanchard said he had seldom known such hunger for the Word during nearly half a century of ministry.

### **Appetite for Bible truth**

This remarkable and sustained appetite for biblical truth is perhaps the outstanding characteristic of this work of the Holy Spirit. There have been none of the phenomena often associated with revivals.

There have been no emotional scenes - though the love and joy of the Lord is evident among this people. No prayer meetings have been constrained to continue through the night by the felt presence of the Spirit. The local community was barely affected at first, though this is gradually changing as local believers reach out to friends and neighbours.

Because of this, some may question the use of the term 'revival' to describe the Spirit's work through the Berean ministry. However, if by 'revival' we mean the manifestation of the power of God in regenerating many hundreds of sinners and grounding them firmly in the faith of Christ - where previously no such harvest had been reaped - then this is revival.

### **Peace with God**

Nor is the work devoid of emotion, but this has emerged quietly in private tears of repentance and the joy of the Holy Spirit. The evidence of transformed lives cannot be gainsaid.

Some conversions have taken place with dramatic suddenness during the preaching. In other cases the subjects have been openly hostile or sceptical and have sought out Pastor Dickie to argue against his teaching (especially the sovereignty of God in salvation).

Often Bob felt he was wasting his time with such people - only to have them return with further questions and see them gradually crushed under the weight of biblical testimony. Sometimes weeping, they have sought the way of salvation and found peace with God through Jesus Christ.

Surely, this is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.

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