

The Local Church, the Centre of Revival

by James Alexander Stewart

In the New Testament we discover that God's way of revival is through renewals from within, so that our local churches become centres of blessing. A true spiritual awakening will revolutionize the spiritual life of the local evangelical churches, and then in many cases will revolutionize even liberal congregations. Any movement that fails to deliver the local church from its subnormal existence and raise it to a higher elevated position in its ascended Lord has no true marks of a New Testament revival.

How many sincere believers are ignorant of this fundamental truth! They look for revival in the great auditorium or tent, where thousands are gathered together in a glorious evangelistic effort. The heavens open and there is a wonderful sense of the Lord's presence in their midst, which has not been known for years. "Surely," they cry, "this is revival!" However, one of the acid tests of a true spiritual awakening is that this mighty spiritual atmosphere be taken back to the local churches.

For a mighty movement of the Spirit, it is not enough that a few isolated believers be revived; the evangelical local churches must be revived. Revival, as presented to us in the New Testament, is not so much an individual experience as a collective experience of born-again believers. How many times down the years we have been sadly disappointed when large united meetings, which have proved such a blessing to us all, seemed to leave the local churches untouched. The casual reader of the epistles will see that the centre of all God's thought and testimony is located in these local churches. If I heard that a mighty awakening had taken place in a certain city I would not seek for revival in some great hall, rented for the purpose of evangelistic meetings: I would go direct to the evangelical churches to see the fire of God burning there.

In the New Testament we have God's plan and purpose for His people in this dispensation of grace, even as we have in the Old Testament His plan and purpose for Israel. Pentecost marked the beginning or formation of a new body or organism which is designated by Paul as "the Church, which is His body" (Eph. 2:22-23). Having been incorporated into Christ by the new birth (2 Cor. 5:17), we are then incorporated into His mystical, supernatural body by the Spirit's baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). The finest description of the character and testimony of the Church is to be found in Peter's first Epistle: "But you are the elect race, the royal priesthood, the consecrated nation, the people who belong to Him, that you may proclaim the wondrous deeds of Him who has called you from darkness to His wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9, Moffat). This Church is composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, blessed with all spiritual blessings, sealed by the Holy Spirit individually, and baptised by the Spirit collectively.

The purpose of a body is to express the character of the person who inhabits the body. The peculiar mission of the Church is to express the character and life of the Son of God, and that is why a believer taught by the Spirit will always pray, "O Lord, send revival in the body of Christ!" We affirm once again that there can be no revival anywhere other than in the Body. The purpose of the Church is to gather, through her testimony of truth and love, a people who, saved by grace, and separated by the Holy Ghost from the world, are serving the Lord and waiting for His coming (1 Thess. 1).

The Church, which is His Body, is expressed in the local churches, the members of which have been supernaturally born again and redeemed from the penalty, power, and love of sin. In the New Testament we see the distinction between the Church universal and the “churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33). These churches of the saints manifest the unity of the one glorious Church. The local church at Corinth, for example, was one part of the whole, and thus was a local expression and representation of the whole. Its members were in living spiritual union with every other member the whole world over. What a glorious and solemn truth! The evangelical believers in the Book of Acts were not detached isolated units, but were all vitally linked in their fellowship with the “churches of the saints” in their district. “ A man’s body is all one, though it has a number of different organs; and all this multitude of organs goes to make up one body; so it is with Christ. We, too, all of us have been baptised into a single body by the power of a single Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13, Knox).

In the early pages of the Book of Acts we catch the heavenly thrill of this New Testament fellowship,

Christ! I am Christ’s! And Let the name suffice you,
Ay, for me too, He greatly hath sufficed;
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.
MEYER

There was a holy glow in the services because the living Christ was in their midst. The Son of God was absolutely everything to them. These believers were burning with love to each other because they were burning with love to their adorable Lord.

*Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. **Acts 2:41-47***

*With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. **Acts 4:33***

*Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. ... No-one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. **Acts 5:11-13***

Here is a thumbnail sketch of the type of local church that revival produces.

IT WAS A STEADFAST CHURCH

These new-born babes continued. They continued steadfastly. Continuance is always the test of reality, and where a so-called revival cannot stand that test it is wise to inquire as to the cause of

the failure. Sometimes a great desire to secure converts for publicity reasons robs the Gospel message of its drastic note. If we preach all the implications of the Evangel we may have fewer conversions but we will have genuine new-births. As Mr. Spurgeon said to his students, "If God enables you to build three thousand bricks into His spiritual temple in one day, you may do it, but Peter has been the only brick-layer who has accomplished that feat up to the present. Do not go and paint the wooden wall as if it were solid stone, but let all your building be real, substantial, and true, for only this kind of work is worth doing. Let all your building for God be like that of the Apostle Paul" (1 Cor. 3:9-15).

The true mark of a real work of God is the steadfast walk, day by day, of the new-born babes. *We cannot allow that backsliding is in any sense a corollary to revival.* It is only when the emotions are greatly stirred, without a deep work of grace having been wrought in the hearts of men, that backsliding is inevitable. It is an utter impossibility to avoid deep emotion in revival, as the Holy Spirit in them works mightily, bringing eternal realities so vividly before the people. But the true servants of the Lord must have their animal natures crucified, so that the emotions are under the control of the Spirit of God. The work of the Spirit is quiet and deep. Any true saint who spends hours before the throne will know that in his closet intercession, it is when he is quietest in prayer that the Spirit of God is speaking most mightily to him. So it is in the large gathering. Excitement must not be aimed at. There must be something more solid. Although there was great excitement and noise in these early days of the Church's history, the excitement was as incidental as is the dust when a woman sweeps the house clean. It is the steady walk that counts.

THEY CONTINUED STEADFASTLY IN THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE AND THE APOSTLES' FELLOWSHIP

The Apostles' doctrine was the doctrine they taught and preached concerning the person and work of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. It is also called "The doctrine of Christ" in 2 John 1:9. The apostles' fellowship consisted of all those who believed the apostles' doctrine. It is not possible to be a true member of a New Testament church without believing in the apostles' doctrine. On the other hand, if one member of the assembly denies the historic fundamentals of the Christian faith that assembly ceases to be a New Testament church. *All true revival ministry is founded on the historic truths concerning our Blessed Lord: His eternal Sonship, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His vicarious death, His bodily resurrection, and His glorious appearing.* All preaching in revival times is a reaffirmation of the fundamental truths of our glorious redemption.

Vinet, in his *Outlines of Theology*, declares:

If you learn in a general way that there has been a revival in a place, that Christianity is reanimated, that faith has become living, and that zeal abounds – do not ask in what soil, in what system, these precious plants grow. You may be sure beforehand that it is in the rough and rugged soil of orthodoxy, under the shade of those mysteries which confound human reasoning... The revival has preached the total depravity of man and his powerlessness to save himself. The revival has preached salvation by grace and not by works, the necessity of the new birth in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and the absolute dependence of man in regard to God. The revival has preached the plenary and essential deity of Jesus Christ as well as His perfect and entire humanity; it has declared that God was in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself and that it is in Jesus Christ alone that we have remission of sins and access to the Father; and that whosoever abideth not in Him abideth in death.

In Ephesians 2:20 we are told that the Church was *“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone”*. This means that the Church was founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the Church was founded upon doctrine. So in a New Testament church the Word of God will be honoured and obeyed. Such will be not only a Bible-believing but a Bible-loving church. Its leaders will expound the truths of the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation. Its members will have a deep appreciation and spiritual penetration into divine Truth. Their Christian life will not be based merely upon their own experiences. They will be deep students of the Word. They will not remain babes, but will rather become giants as they digest the strong meat of the Word. How sad it is today to see around us so many believers who hardly spend a half-hour a day studying the Word for themselves. How few believers can even give a clear explanation of the truth of “adoption”, and yet this is one of the most vital truths in the Christian life. Too many of our church members remain immature, babes, requiring to be spoon-fed by their pastors for many years.

IT WAS A PRAYERFUL CHURCH

When I was a young convert the first thing that struck me when I was reading the Acts of the Apostles was the fact that these local assemblies lived in the atmosphere of prayer. Prayer meetings were the order of the day. They prayed on every occasion. They prayed for open doors. They prayed for guidance and boldness in their ministry after they had passed through the open doors. They prayed before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle. They prayed that God would show them His plan and that He would frustrate Satan’s plan. They prayed that God would raise up workers. They prayed that God would empower workers. They prayed that God would send forth workers. They prayed in prison. They prayed in their homes and they prayed in their church gatherings. They prayed in their private circles, and they prayed before the Sanhedrin. They lived on their knees. In order that the apostles might *“give themselves continually to prayer”* they appointed seven men of honest report to administer the secular business of the church. So mighty were they in prayer that they *“turned the world upside down”*.

A true New Testament church will always be mighty in prayer. Said George Mueller, when writing to Hudson Taylor in China, “If you are going to take that province for Christ, you must go forward on your knees.” One of our desperate needs is the revival of the week-night prayer meeting. How often I have heard the remark, “Only a prayer meeting.” What is inferred by such a statement? Surely it implies that there is nothing important or interesting doing, as the Christians are only going to talk with God! One of the mightiest manifestations of the Spirit in revival power is the resurrection of dead prayer meetings. The majority of pastors would be pleasantly shocked and surprised if even 50 per cent of their congregation turned out for the week-night prayer meeting.

IT WAS AN OVERFLOWING CHURCH

They overflowed in liberality and praise. They overflowed in liberality because they overflowed in love. Their cups ran over with love to the Lord Jesus. They knew the significance of the high cost of their redemption. Gazing at Calvary, they could not hoard up their money and hold on to their lands and houses. The original text reveals that they continued to sell their property and goods and *continued* to bring the money and place it at the feet of the apostles. It was not mere passing excitement, or the flush of a first love; it was a deep realization of the glory of their salvation that caused them to give so generously. If they had lived in our day, they would have sung heartily:

*Everybody should know – everybody should know,
I have such a wonderful Saviour, that everybody should know!*

What a great challenge to us today! *If these Christians in the first century needed to sell their possessions for the evangelisation of a lost and dying world, how much more we who live in the twentieth century!* While vast continents still lie in midnight darkness, and hundreds of millions have never heard the Gospel, surely if our hearts were filled with His love and His passion we would show forth the same response. "I warn you", said A.J. Gordon, "that it will go hard with you at the judgment seat if He finds your wealth hoarded up in needless accumulations instead of being sacredly devoted to giving the Gospel to the lost."

They overflowed in *praise*. Their whole life was flooded with praise. The assembly gatherings were characterised by praise. They praised God for His glorious salvation. They praised Him that they were counted worthy to be ambassadors of the Lord Jesus. They praised Him that they could suffer shame and reproach for His glory. They praised Him that they had something to sacrifice for the spread of the Gospel. Deep spirituality and worship go hand in hand. Read the hymns of past centuries in English, French, German, Russian, Scandinavian, and Latin. Read the hymns that were born with deep spiritual insight and simplicity of adoration to Christ.

O God, I love Thee; not that my poor love
May win me entrance to Thy heaven above,
Nor yet that strangers to Thy love must know
The bitterness of everlasting woe.

But Jesus, Thou art mine, and I am Thine;
Clasped to Thy bosom by Thine arms divine,
Who on the cruel cross for me hast borne
The nails, the spear, and man's un pitying scorn.

No thought can fathom, and no tongue express
Thy grief, Thy toils, Thy anguish measureless;
Thy death, O Lamb of God, the undefiled –
And all for me, Thy wayward sinful child!

How can I choose but love Thee, God's dear Son,
O Jesus, loveliest and most loving one!
Were there no heaven to gain, no hell to flee,
For what Thou art alone, I must love Thee.

Not for the hope of glory or reward,
But even as Thyself hast loved me, Lord
I love Thee, and will love Thee and adore
Who art my King, my God, for evermore.

How little praise there is in our churches today! How refreshing it would be for a group of churches to come together for a united praise meeting. Such words related to the word "praise" as price, prize, precious, appraise, appreciate, etc., help us to understand better the full meaning of the term. The saints bursting forth spontaneously into songs of adoration and worship is one of the glories of revival. Song leaders are not necessary during such times, as the huge congregations sing

over and over again the songs of Zion which spring from their hearts. I remember once dismissing an immense congregation in Czechoslovakia twice in a single evening without any success. I had finished preaching and pronounced the benediction twice, but the believers went on praising the Lord for over an hour after I had left the building. In times of revival the Holy Spirit inspires a great number of hymns to be written. For every John Wesley there is a Charles Wesley:

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and king,
The triumphs of His grace.

IT WAS A POWERFUL CHURCH

It was powerful in its Gospel presentation. In one day three thousand souls were saved, and on another day about five thousand men and women. Today if a church of three thousand members won one hundred and twenty souls to Christ in one day some would call that revival! Oh, dear child of God, a church that is not a soul-winning church is not a New Testament church. It is true that there are times of sowing as well as times of reaping, but every pastor and every group of believers should search their hearts industriously to see why there is a dearth of conversions. It seems that Satan has so drugged the Lord's dear ones that they have no deep concern and anguish in their lack of spiritual results. How many assemblies accept with astonishing calmness annual reports of so few, if any, conversions! Such churches should convene special meetings in desperation before the Lord to see if there is anything hindering God's blessing His Word according to Acts 4:33, "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."

How inconsistent it is for churches back home, who very rarely ever see the Lord add to their membership, to expect a mighty harvest to be reaped by the missionaries they support labouring in hostile heathen lands! If they demand and expect a mighty manifestation of the power of the Gospel among the pagan population, should they not expect a mightier demonstration in an evangelical atmosphere?

They were powerful in their holiness. "Great awe came over the whole church, and over all that heard about this... though people extolled them, not a soul from the outside dared to join them. On the other hand, crowds of men and women who believed in the Lord were brought in" (Moffat). It was a powerful Church because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was a frontal attack by Satan to deny the deity of the Holy Spirit. When judgment was brought to bear upon these two, a holy awe fell upon saved and unsaved alike. So holy was this church that hypocrites and unbelievers dared not join themselves to it. On the other hand, crowds of men and women who were true believers were brought in.

How easy it is to receive the "right hand of fellowship" in our churches today! Without doubt this weakness is one of the underlying causes of the subnormal church. Too many people are rushed to the altar. Too many people are rushed into church membership without careful examination and instruction. In our evangelical churches of Eastern Europe and Russia, sometimes it takes from six months to a year for a new convert to be received into church membership. So holy and powerful are these churches in their gospel witness that the unsaved attending their services know that it is no small thing to enlist under the banner of the Lord and identify themselves with a company of

born-again believers.

One of the mightiest warnings of A. J. Gordon to the church is as follows:

"We dwell too much on the attractions of Christianity, but rarely stop to think of the repulsions, which are vitally necessary to its purity and permanence. If the Church of Christ draws to herself that which she cannot assimilate to herself, her life is at once imperilled; for the body of believers must be at one with itself, though it be at war with the world. Its purity and its power depend, first of all, upon its unity. So that if perchance the Church shall attract without at the same time transforming them; if she shall attach them to her membership without assimilating them to her life – she has only weakened herself by her additions. Such is the lesson that is impressed upon us by the text "and of the rest durst no man join himself to them."

The Church has just entered upon her first conquest. The Gospel is preached with a freeness and breadth of offer unheard of before. Three thousand souls have been added to the Church in a single day. The tide of success is rising higher. The sect of the Nazarenes is fairly becoming popular. Multitudes are crowding up to lay their gifts at the apostles' feet. Is there not a danger that the infant Church may be overwhelmed in the tide of her own prosperity? That upon the swelling wave of success the uncircumcised and the unclean may be born into her communion to corrupt and destroy it? But look! Like a keen lightning flash the judgment of God falls in the midst of His mercies, and the two who had "agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord" lie dead at the apostles' feet. Is God about to close the gate of mercy so recently opened, and to guard it with a flaming sword? No! Here is an exhibition of His holiness in the midst of His free grace. And before this unsheathed sword of His holiness the multitude instantly divides – a part thrust back, a part drawn nearer. No sincere disciples are repelled, for the record is that "believers were the more added to the lord, multitudes of both men and women".

The terror of the Lord puts afar off those who have not the love of the Lord to bring them nigh. My brethren, I know of no lesson concerning the growth and development of Christ's Church that needs to be more thoughtfully pondered than this. The tendency of our times is to multiply the attractions of Christianity. No attraction can be too powerful, no charm can be too alluring that acts for the single ends of drawing believers to Christ and identifying them with His Body. But the appeals that win men without transforming them, which join them to the church without bringing them into fellowship with Christ, are fatal to a pure Christianity, and in the end must put the very existence of the Church in jeopardy. In the first place, the sanctity of life and character, which Christ requires in His Church, is her most powerful defence. These, O Church of God, are thy weapons of defence and conquest! I believe that the most effective discipline which any church can have is a consecrated and devoted and unworldly piety in its members.

Whenever we see God's wonderful pattern for the Church so practically demonstrated in these pages in the book of Acts we cry with Jeremiah, "*How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed!*"