

# The Necessity of the Revival of Religion

by John MacNaughtan

I will illustrate the necessity for a revival of religion in the present condition of the church, pointing to facts and circumstances humiliating to the believer and condemnatory of the church.

**When is a Revival Required?** Wherever there are the proofs of spiritual death in, or around, the professing church; wherever there is an actual decay or dormancy in the energy or activity of its members; or wherever there is the absence of a progression in those habits and feelings and principles that distinguish the divine life there is a necessity for a revival. If, among the professors of a holy faith, we find a growing conformity to the world in its passions, its policy, or its practices a want of sensibility to the claims of God, to the glory of Jesus, or to the imperishable interests of immortal souls a deadness in devotion, a lack of spirituality in sentiment and feeling a willingness to parade a dwarfed and shrivelled Christianity before the world, as if it were the healthful and full-grown impersonation of a living and energetic faith we say a revival is necessary; and this notwithstanding any scattered and splendid exceptions of almost apostolic zeal, or seraphic fervour, that may give lustre or dignity to the age or the church with which they are connected.

There is no difficulty in determining when a revival is necessary in the world of nature: let winter protract her reign through the months of spring, and spread her mantle of snow, like a spotless winding sheet over the fields that were wont at that season to be green and gladsome; let the time for the singing of birds roll around, and no music be heard in the leafless groves; let the sower fill his hand with the precious seed, but be denied the opportunity of scattering it over the earth; and although we may witness here and there the snowdrop rearing its head, as the harbinger of vernal beauty amid the ungenial snows, we at once conclude that a revival is necessary. We long for the genial breeze, the refreshing shower, the invigorating sunbeam, that earth may escape from the blight of a long winter, array herself in all the bridal loveliness of an opening spring, and give forth the promise of a rich and luxuriant harvest. The same conclusion forces itself upon us when a cold and withering summer succeeds an early and promising seedtime, checking the advances of a needed vegetation, and almost quenching the hopes of the husbandman. The half-opened flower-bud that bends on its weakened stalk seems to plead for the reviving sunbeam to develop its hidden loveliness, and throw the blush of summer beauty on the faded cheek of a drooping world.

It is similar in the world of grace, in the great spiritual garden. When the winter of worldly conformity seems either to retard the buds of promise, or to check their growth after indications of vitality have appeared, we say that a revival is necessary. Or, to drop all metaphor, when there are few conversions under the ministrations of the church, and souls are perishing around her, unpitied and unhelped; when there is an evident suspension or withdrawal of those spiritual influences that are alone efficient to convince or to comfort; when there is a visible defection from acknowledged principle, or from attained piety, and a lukewarm formality usurping the place of a generous, devoted, living Christianity we say a revival is required.

**Circumstances That Render Revival Necessary.** Let us consider the specific circumstances of the church today that render revival necessary. The first proof is the limited extent of the visible church in the present days. If we examine the dimensions of the church, either as laid down in the covenant made with Emmanuel, or as described in the clear language of holy prophecy, we find that these are immeasurably vast, when compared with the limited territory that owns and acknowledges the sway of the Redeemer: In the one, all the kingdoms of the world are delineated as filled with the knowledge of God, kissing the sceptre, and proclaiming the praises of an adored Saviour His dominion is from sea to sea, and from the river to the end of the earth; in the other, the territorial extent occupied by the professing church of the Lord is very inconsiderable indeed.

Second, the want of zeal in the church for Emmanuel's glory, the feebleness of what has admirably been termed "the evangelistic spirit," and the lethargic unconcern with which the perdition of immortal souls is regarded, establish that a revival is necessary. Such a charge may, at first sight, appear scarcely admissible in this bustling and active age amid the numerous institutions in vigorous operation for the conversion of the world, and the splendid array of names and contributions that annually attract the public eye, and the dazzling eloquence with which every triumph on foreign shores is heralded from pulpits and platforms. It might be imagined that intrepid zeal and endless sleepless activity were the undoubted characteristics of this excited age.

But when we calmly consider the amount of energy put forth, as a means to an end as the devised and existing machinery to convert the world to Christ as the effort which is put forth in answer to the claims of God and the calls of a perishing world, we feel as if we would require to blot out such terms as sacrifice and self-denial from the Christian vocabulary altogether. If we take the Saviour's command as our rule, His kingdom as the sphere of our appointed operation, the zeal of His apostles as the model of our own, we cannot fail to be humbled and ashamed. We must be persuaded and convinced that a mighty impulse must be given to the sluggish Christianity of the times, that there must be an increase of what is called benevolence, both in spirit and in act that in fact a revival is necessary.

A third remark is that the divisions in the church demonstrate the necessity of a revival, before the Church can regain her shattered strength, and become beautified with that brotherly love which is the bond of perfection. While controversy is not always a symptom of a weak or decayed Christianity, the present contentions have been within the church itself; and its holy unity has been rudely rent by trivial disputes. Must not unauthorized schism provoke His displeasure, quench His Spirit, and result in the withholding of the grace without which the church must wither and weaken and decay?

Finally, the languor of the devotional spirit in the church proves the necessity for a revival of religion. It is one of the strange anomalies of these times, that we meet with a ready assent to all that can be urged or argued on the omnipotence of believing, importunate prayer, and yet rarely are brought into contact with the thing itself. The theory is universally accredited the act is generally neglected; just as if the clear statements of Scripture regarding the potency, the almost miraculous efficacy of prayer, were designed as a pillow on which the church might slumber, rather than as a mighty stimulus to rouse to heroic achievements and urge on to glorious efforts in the cause of the Redeemer. Ah! There is need for a revival here, that which alone will be

produced by the outpouring of the Spirit, the Spirit of grace and supplication.

**The Remedy of Revival.** Gather up these scattered thoughts: the abridged sphere of the church's efforts, and the feebleness of these efforts themselves her divided condition, and her lifeless piety and say, is there not a necessity for a revival? Shall we believe that when God's Spirit is poured out from on high, His graces, like tides of molten silver, shall first enrich His chosen ones and then roll out to the whole earth to aggrandize and ennoble its impoverished children? Shall we believe that when a revival takes place on a scale commensurate with the Church's necessities, that she shall awake from her slumber, put on her beautiful garments, and, rich in all the graces wherewith the Saviour so plenteously adorns His chosen Bride, go forth in His name to speak peace unto the nations? Shall we believe that when a revival is produced, that the hearts of Christians shall become almost visibly the habitation of God through the Spirit, and be irradiated with all the moral glory of His Divine presence?

Shall we not plead for such a time? The purest faith demands that we shall cry aloud and spare not, yea that we mourn and lament because that day is delayed. Oh, if the Church were but alive to this urgent necessity if she but felt how much of guilt attaches to her because the blessing is withheld if she but considered how her unbelief and prayerlessness stands in the way, as it were, of Jehovah's sweetest promises it would humble her to the very dust because of her sin, and her acknowledged guiltiness would be the harbinger of the day of love.

Ye children of the covenant go, weep amid the graves of perished millions weep amid the graves of buried graces weep amid the ruins which your own lifelessness has caused in the church and around it; and when the teardrop of contrition has filled the eye of the soul, look through it to a wounded Saviour, and say, "O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years in wrath remember mercy."

*John MacNaughtan was minister of High Church in Paisley Scotland. His complete article is found in Lectures on the Revival of Religion (ch. XIII), originally published in 1840. A reprint of this book may be acquired from Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, Box 21, Wheaton, IL, 60189. The excerpts were selected and edited by Lowell D. Yoder for Godliness (The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life) (chs. 3 & 19).*

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