

Revival and the Local Church

by Dr Robert H Lescelius

Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto LORD. Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as destruction from the Almighty shall it come (Joel 1:14-15).

The situation in Joel's day was desperate. The judgment hand of Yahweh was upon Judah in the form of a devouring locust plague (chap. 1). But an even greater judgment was coming (chap. 2). The LORD's call through the prophet was to repentance, not just individual, but corporate repentance. The call was for a *solemn assembly*:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts; let the bridegroom go forth from his chamber, and the bride out of her closet. Let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD, and give not thy heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God? (Joel 2:15-17).

Joel 2:18 marks a change in the book of Joel from judgment to an oracle of salvation. The LORD heard their corporate lament and reversed their situation. From a present experienced judgment to a future expected one the message was changed to a promise of immediate deliverance from their present devastation and danger (2:18-27) and an impending future blessing: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: (2:28-32). The revival of Joel's day was as far reaching in its results as Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21), our own day, and yet future.

Note that the call was for *corporate* action, not just individual, though it was that as well (2:12-14). The leaders, elders, ministers, and priests, were involved; the congregation was called in its entirety, with no one exempt (even honeymooners). Many see the parallel situation in our day. We are in a time of spiritual declension and desperate need of spiritual awakening. The Church must see the situation as the judgment of God, not just upon our nation, but upon the Church itself. In a booklet Richard Owen Roberts sets forth the necessity of seeing the corporate sins of the Church as the cause of God's judgment and the imperative of corporate repentance for the church's corporate sins:

As soon as it becomes evident that immorality is on the increase and spirituality is on the decline, the biblically sound and spiritually lively Church will not foolishly blame the world but will recognize its own complicity. The Church must first repent, for the righteous judgment was not against the world but against the Church. Therefore, in times of spiritual declension and moral decadence, the great duty of every Christian is both to discover those sins which have caused the judgment and to put them away by that method God has chosen. The method God has chosen is the Solemn Assembly. Corporate sin must be dealt with by corporate repentance according to divinely ordained methods. [1]

The need is not just for personal renewal but a visitation of the Spirit upon our local churches. The need is for,

I. REVIVAL AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE.

1. The expectation of corporate revival. What about the local church? Can we expect *corporate* revival? It is a prospect: *Wilt thou not revive US again?* (Psalm 86:5). We believe revival ought to be sought and expected by the pastor and the people of every true assembly of the saints. Revival is a church word. James A. Stewart writes:

Revival is an assembly word. From the pages of the New Testament we see God's plan and way of revival is through the local churches. Do not pray for revival to break out so much in a public hall, rented for mass meetings, but rather cry to God for a movement of the Spirit in the New Testament churches. In the New Testament we discover that God's way of revival is renewal from within, so that our assemblies become the centre of blessing, resulting in the evangelization of a lost and dying world. If I hear that revival had broken out in your city, I would not seek it so much in the great mass meetings, as in the spiritual life of the local companies of the Lord's people. How wonderful it would be to again see revival fires spontaneously leaping from assembly to assembly throughout the land, until the whole "general assembly and church of the firstborn" were all aflame with the fire from Heaven!

2. The experience of corporate revival. History has recorded the fact of local churches in revival blessing even in seasons of general spiritual declension. It has often proven to be God's purpose to prepare instruments in these local visitations for reaping in future revival outpourings. Whatever the sovereign purpose of God, every church ought to want to be New Testament in doctrine, practice, and *power*. Ponder these words of Charles Spurgeon as to the necessity of corporate revival:

Death and condemnation to a church that is not yearning after the Spirit, and crying and groaning until the Spirit has wrought mightily in their midst. He is here: He has never gone back since He descended at Pentecost. He is often grieved and vexed, for He is peculiarly jealous and sensitive, and the one sin never forgiven has to do with His beloved Person; therefore, let us be very tender towards Him, walk humbly before Him, wait on Him very earnestly, and resolve that there should be nothing knowingly continued which would prevent His working in our midst. Brethren, if we do not have the Spirit of God, it were better to shut the churches, to nail up the doors, to put a blank cross on them and say, "God have mercy upon us!" If you ministers have not the Spirit of God, you had better not preach, and you people had better stay at home. I think I speak not too strongly when I say that a church in the land without the Spirit of God is rather a curse than a blessing. This is a solemn word: the Holy Spirit or nothing and worse than nothing.[2]

For this to be true there is need for,

II. REFORMATION IN THE PULPIT.

Joel called for the elders, ministers, and priests to repent and to lead in intercession for the people, not only to be delivered from judgment, but to no longer be a reproach before the world and for the sake of the LORD's name (reputation and glory: 2:17). The need for our time is for reformation and revival in our pulpits. There must be

1. Reformation in doctrine. A God-centred theology must be embraced to replace the man-centred emphasis that we have seen for so long. Our deficient "decisionalism" has reaped churches full of unconverted members, evidenced by no marks of sainthood. Pastors, take a look

at the disparity between your membership rolls and actual attendance. That should tell you something. Are people who don't "assemble" really a part of the Assembly? Biblical salvation, *i.e.*, "Salvation is of the Lord," must again be preached, along with biblical marks of conversion, that there may be both an objective and subjective basis for assurance. The lost note of repentance must be sounded again in gospel proclamation. Justification by faith without works must be heralded, yet sanctification must not be divorced from justification, and holiness of life must be taught as an essential, not an option. Expository preaching must be the order of the day, so that starving saints may be edified and equipped to do the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11ff).

J. C. Ryle recognised the same need in his day.

The plague is abroad. We need a revival among evangelical ministers. I repeat it emphatically, for I believe it sincerely. The first want of our day is a return to the old, simple, and sharply-cut doctrines of our fathers; and the second want is a generation of like-minded and like-gifted men to preach them. Give me in any county of England and Wales a man like Grimshaw, Rowlands or Whitefield, and there is nothing in the present day which would make me afraid. Let us ask Him who holds the stars in His right hand to revive His work among our ministers and to raise up men for our times. He can do it. Then let all who pray cry night and day to the Lord of the harvest, "Lord, send forth more labourers into Thy harvest."

May God grant the same request in our time, so that there may be a,

2. Renewal in duty. Especially is this essential among our preachers of the gospel. To the preacher Paul exhorted, "*Take heed to thyself, and unto the doctrine*" (1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 20:28). We who are messengers of the Lord will someday stand before Christ at the Judgment Seat to have our work manifested as to its quality. "*Every man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is*" (1 Corinthians 3:13). Note the context is speaking, not of the "works" of members, but the "*work*" (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 9:1; Acts 13:2) of the messengers. The commentator, Godet, gives these solemn words concerning this coming judgment:

The apostle means to speak of the religious and moral fruits produced in the church by preaching. The spiritual life of the members of the flock is, in a certain measure, the teaching itself, received, assimilated, and realised in practice. Either the pastor, by his preaching, his conversation, his example, the daily acts of his ministry, succeeds in developing among his flock a healthy religious life, drawn from communion with Christ, abounding in the fruits of sanctification and love... or the pastor, by his pathetic discourses, his ingenious explanations, succeeds indeed in attracting a great concourse of hearers, in producing enthusiastic admiration and lively emotions; but all this stir is only external and superficial; with it all, there is not real consecration to the Saviour. This faith without energy, this love without the spirit of sacrifice, this hope without joy or elasticity, this Christianity saturated with egoism and vanity, such are the wood, hay and stubble.[3]

Fee reveals how relevant this warning of Paul is to the preachers of our day:

This text [1 Corinthians 3:10-15] has singular relevance to the contemporary church. It is neither a challenge to the individual believer to build his or her life well on the foundation of Christ, nor is it

grist for theological debate. Rather, it is one of the most significant passages in the NT that warns and encourages those responsible for “building” the church of Christ. In the final analysis, of course, this belongs to all believers, but it has particular relevance, following so closely as it does vv. 5-9, to those with teaching/leadership responsibilities.

Paul’s point is unquestionably warning. It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated of merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, “pop” psychology, managerial techniques, relational “good feelings”, or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or his gospel in it. Often, of course, the test may come this side of the final one, and is such an hour of stress that which has been built of modern *sophia* [wisdom] usually come tumbling down.

But the good news of the passage is that one does not need to build badly. That which has the character of the foundation, Jesus Christ crucified and risen, will not only survive any present hour of testing, but will enter the final judgement as a glorious church; and those responsible for such a building will receive their due reward, which in itself is an expression of grace.[4]

In the light of the Judgment Seat of Christ and the need of the hour, may we see a reformation in the pulpits of the land! We pray that this will issue into the needed,

III. REPENTANCE IN THE PEW.

There is a great need for,

1. Re-evaluation of the doctrine of the church. For too long the NT truth of the local church has been neglected in many circles. The claim is made that the church has failed and that other avenues and methods must be employed. Parachurch organisations have almost defined Evangelicalism in our day. Erroll Hulse expresses the importance of the local church:

The widespread increasing stress on human activity has resulted in a proliferation of human organisations and societies, with the result that we have largely lost sight of the fact that God has commissioned only one form of organisation, which is the local church. We should seek, therefore, to establish strong local churches in which there is comprehensive teaching along the lines of systematic, expository preaching.

Evangelism which stems from the local church, upon a long-term basis, including oversight and discipline of those members who engage in this form of work is what we should aim at. While we continue striving for a return to the biblical pattern in regard to local churches we should, at the same time, seek a revival from heaven. We should not lose sight of the fact that God has not changed and while our ever present duty is the reformation of the church as well as fervent evangelism and missionary outreach, it is God’s prerogative to send awakening. This long-term approach may seem unexciting and unsensational to evangelicals who have been fed on the milk and misled by organisations, but I am persuaded that non-church based activities which have abandoned the local church have been a detriment to the cause of God over the past 100 years despite all their claims to magnificent results.

But as we seek to do what we can, remember that revivals are a reality. Surely the first need of the United States and the world is revival – an outpouring of the Spirit of God in convicting men of their sin and bringing them into the new life of union with the Lord Jesus Christ. Revival has a twin sister, Reformation – reformation of doctrine and structure of the church.[5]

While we labour for reformation in church doctrine, may we also pray for and seek after,

2. Revitalisation of the dynamics of the church. The late George L. Norris made this observation: Everyone is for revival. The question we must face is, what kind of revival do we want?

A revival that adds new members to a certain church without changing those who are already members is not a revival. Many Baptists, resting comfortably in their eternal security would give an invitation: “Don’t stay out in the world and sin, come into the Baptist Church and sin with us.” Surely a revival would cause us to think what it is we are inviting people to join.

May God hear and answer the prayer of those who dearly want the church of Jesus Christ to be what our Lord intended it to be: His Body in this world.[6]

Brethren, may repentance be our attitude, reformation our goal. and revival our heart-cry! Hear Leonard Ravenhill:

When the church gets a divorce from the world and worldliness, when we can ignore so-called Christian entertainers who attempt to combine Hollywood with holiness, when we cease from the striving of the flesh and recognise that the Bible written yesterday is for today and tomorrow, we shall at least have started on the road to reformation in the church which must precede the true spiritual awakening which alone can save our generation. It’s Pentecost or holocaust, revival fires or the fires of revolution![7]

What can one local church do? Remember that this age began with one local church of 120 people, meeting in a ten day *solemn assembly* in one accord and prayer. It is upon this local assembly that the Holy Spirit came (Acts 2:1-3). The rest is history. Binnie elaborates on this point:

Such is the church’s expectation. And who shall say it is unreasonable? If the little company of a hundred and twenty disciples who met in the upper chamber of Jerusalem, all of them persons of humble station, and inconspicuous talents, were endued with such power by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that within three hundred years the paganism of the empire was overthrown, one need not fear to affirm that, in order to the evangelisation of the world, nothing more is required than that the churches of Christendom be baptised with a fresh effusion of the same Spirit of Power.[8]

Roberts lists ten *Practical Suggestions* for a Solemn Assembly in the local church:

1. A Solemn Assembly is to be a time when all normal daily work is set aside.
2. A Solemn Assembly is a time when the entire body of people affected by the righteous judgment are required to be in attendance.
3. A Solemn Assembly is a time of fasting.
4. A Solemn Assembly is a time for sacrifice.

5. A Solemn Assembly is of protracted duration.
6. A Solemn Assembly is a season of earnest prayer.
7. A Solemn Assembly is a mandatory occasion for corporate repentance.
8. A Solemn Assembly is an opportunity for Spirit-anointed preaching of the searching truths of Scripture to deeply touch afresh the lives of God's people.
9. A Solemn Assembly is a most wonderful opportunity for children to see their parents and elders demonstrate Christianity in its deepest corporate levels.
10. A Solemn Assembly gives God an opportunity to respond to His people at a level He cannot possibly do when they are living in neglect of His Word or in direct violation of His commandments.[9]

A preacher was once heard to say, upon taking the pastorate of a new congregation, "There will either be a revival in the church or a funeral in the parsonage!" There was a revival in the church. "So death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Corinthians 4:12). In reality it is DEATH AND REVIVAL! May there be a funeral in the parsonages and homes of our pastors and people, experimental death to sin, self, and souliness, that there may be revival life in our local churches!

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[1] Richard Owen Roberts, *The Solemn Assembly* (Wheaton International Awakening Press), 10.

[2] Charles H Spurgeon, quoted in *The Bulletin*, Bible Baptist Church, Saxonburg, PA, October 20, 1963.

[3] F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, n.d. Reprint (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House).

[4] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 145

[5] Erroll Hulse, *Billy Graham, the Pastor's Dilemma* (Evangelical Press)

[6] George L. Norris, *The Fundamentalist*

[7] Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1959)

[8] Quoted in *The Treasury of David*, 2 Vols. (Byron Station, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., 1970), 1:208.

[9] Roberts, *The Solemn Assembly*, 10-13.