

Essential Characteristics of Genuine Revival

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We need to preserve a very clear view of what genuine revival is and in so doing to appreciate afresh just how marvellous such a work of grace is. Those who have themselves witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in revival hardly need written descriptions and definitions to help them. However, those who have never known the reality of revival are more prone to settle for something less.

Many believe that revival is linked to the restoration of supernatural gifts to the church. The major revivals of the past have indeed been noted for phenomena, but these have not been of the kind seen in many modern movements. This distinction is vital and underlines the importance of careful definition of what constitutes revival.

Four basic essentials can be observed at Pentecost which characterize all revivals of this epoch. We shall examine each of these in turn.

1. The sense of God's nearness and especially an awareness of His holiness and majesty.

This first feature is vital. It consists of what is sometimes referred to as the 'Shekinah glory' of God's presence. In Exodus 40:34 and II Chronicles 7:1 we read of the cloud of the Lord's presence filling the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filling the temple. There may not be any visible cloud, but in all true revival, the presence of the Lord is sensed in an awesome way.

This phenomenon is important because it focuses on the fact that revival is God coming down on mankind, with the result that they are humbled. There are religious movements in Africa which involve huge numbers of people who sing in a very impressive way. One can easily get the impression that a great revival is in progress. But it is always essential for us to use our minds and analyse what is going on (Rom. 12:1-2). Some consider such questioning to be sinful, but it is not. I do not mean that we should be censorious, rather, that we are duty-bound to test everything by Scripture.

When there is great emotion, we need to ask ourselves about the source of that feeling. Is it something that has been worked up by manipulators who are experts in controlling crowds, or is it something which is from heaven? Is there a glorying in patriotism, or nationalism, or tribalism? Often religion is used as a veneer to cover what is, in essence, idolatry.

Many modern-day religious movements are characterized by a strong emphasis on the emotions. In mass meetings, there is sometimes a deliberate attempt made to bring great crowds to a high point of excitement and exuberance. This is emotion worked up from within, whereas revival is the Holy Spirit coming down. When He comes down, there is a prostrating effect; the awesomeness and glory of God's holiness are felt in an overwhelming way.

We see this illustrated in the personal experience of the patriarch Jacob when the Lord met with him at Bethel. Jacob's response was expressed in these words: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven' (Gen. 28:17).

An awareness of the nearness of God is the chief characteristic of all true revivals (Ps. 80; Isa. 64; John 14:17; 1 Cor. 14:24,25).

At Pentecost everyone was filled with awe (Acts 2:43). A realization of the holiness of God is also one of the hallmarks of revival. The initial experience of fear of God and conviction of sin is followed by intense joy and love.

The felt sense of the presence of God is reflected by this description of the revival at Northampton in 1735. Edwards writes, 'Presently upon this, a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion, and the eternal world, became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages. The engaged-ness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid; it appeared in their very countenances. It then was a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell.'

This sense of the fear of God is a vital element of true revival. It is the feature which is missing from contemporary evangelicalism.

2. A greatly intensified work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin and giving repentance and faith.

The second essential characteristic of genuine revival points us to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

This is illustrated by the description given by Edwards of the revival in Northampton: 'There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who were wont to be the vainest and loosest, and those who had been most disposed to think and speak slightly of vital and experimental religion, were not generally subject to great awakenings. And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did, as it were, by flocks come to Jesus Christ.'

Yet by no means all who in times of revival profess to have faith and repentance prove to be genuine. Time alone proves whether they are or not. Satan seeks to counterfeit revival, and he is very active in genuine revivals to sow false seeds and promote false professions. Having witnessed revival, first in his own church in 1735, and then later, on a wider scale in the Great Awakening of 1740, Jonathan Edwards realized the need to provide principles by which we can distinguish the true from the false. He wrote two crucial works on this theme: the first, a short work, was called *The distinguishing marks of a work of the Spirit of God*, and the second, a much fuller and more detailed book, was entitled *The Religious Affections*. The latter, which is regarded as his best work and the most profound book ever written on the subject, is really an enlargement of the first. Edwards proceeds in a straight-forward way to describe what are not signs of true revival and then goes on to show what are the signs which characterize a true work of God.

In brief, Edwards shows that none of the following are true signs of a work of God: great emotions; great effects on the body, such as tears, groanings, loud cries; agonies or prostrations; an appearance of love, joy, or great excitement; much time and zeal spent in duty; great expressions of praise or moving testimonies. Edwards observed that people can exhibit all kinds of emotions and yet fall away after the true revival. So what then are the true signs?

A true sign of a work of God is a delight in the excellency of God, His holy character and His truth. True religious affections are attended by what Edwards calls 'evangelical humiliation.' The believer has a sense of his own utter insufficiency and the hateful nature of his own sin, from which he turns, coming to depend on God's provision of righteousness. One of the true signs is a change of nature, the new birth, the creation of a new disposition which has the likeness of Jesus. A vital sign is fruit in Christian practice.

3. A marvellous increase in the numbers added to the church.

In the Great Awakening in 1740-42, it is reckoned that 50,000 were added to the churches of New England, and about 300,000 across all thirteen colonies. In what we now call the 'forgotten revival' between the years 1790 and 1840, 1,500,000 people were gathered into chapels in England and Wales alone. That constituted one out of every ten people in the country being converted. In the revival in 1859, around 100,000 were added to the churches in Ulster and 50,000 to the churches in Wales. It is estimated that in the 1859 revival in the USA over 2,000,000 were added to the churches.

Revivals are times of God's personal intervention in great power. True revivals always have a powerful effect on society as a whole in turning back the tide of immorality and vice. True revivals are bad news for breweries and distillers and for the gambling industry. True revivals will bring down the divorce rate and heighten society's view of the sanctity of life.

4. Powerful preaching of the gospel.

The primacy of preaching in revival is seen in the book of Acts. Where is power for preaching to be found? The only way of power suggested in the New Testament is with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven (1 Thess. 1:4,5). That is unlikely to be our experience if we misrepresent what the Holy Spirit has inspired in the Word of God by faulty exegesis or shoddy expository workmanship. The apostles summed up the dual needs of prayer and hard study when they explained the necessity of the appointment of deacons: 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables . . . We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word' (Acts 6:2).

It is easy to forget that the power lies in the Word of God. But 'the Word of God is living and active' (Heb. 4:12). Paul exhorted Timothy, 'Preach the Word' (2 Tim. 4:2). This is so basic, yet it seems that many ministers cease to believe that preaching the gospel is 'the power of God' (Rom. 1:16). They direct their principal energies to activities of all kinds, to the neglect of study combined with prayerful meditation. The life of piety, combined with evangelistic enterprise and constant work in God's Word, is vital. It is as we continue fervently in that way that we intercede for and look for revival today.