

REVIVAL - Should it be sought?

by R H Johnston

Introduction

Revival is a word on the lips of many Christians. Christian leaders encourage prayer for revival, and encourage Christians to expect revival as the answer to the serious declension of Christian belief and practice.

But is all this emphasis on revival really biblical? Is it really an answer to the problems? Or is it raising false hopes which will ultimately lead to disillusionment, a distraction from the true work of evangelism?

What is revival?

Different people use "revival" to mean many different things. Literally the word means to bring back to life something which was dead. The use of the word in a Christian context is less well defined. For some it is the bringing back of life into the church, a time of spiritual resurgence. However a more generally accepted meaning is a time of unusual moves by God which bring about the salvation of a large number of people over a short period of time, usually (though not necessarily) with some display of miraculous signs and wonders.

Because of the feeling of success experienced by those who are associated with revival, so defined, "revival" makes a strong appeal to Christians who are finding evangelism difficult and unproductive.

Revival in the bible

The usual proof texts used to justify seeking God for revival is "*Wilt Thou not revive us again O LORD that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?*" (Ps 85:6), Habakkuk 3:2 ("*Revive Thy work in the midst of the years*"), and less commonly: Hosea 6:2 ("*After two days He will revive us on the third he will lift us up*").

These scriptures certainly express the desire of the people who prayed them, but there is no particular evidence to suggest that these prayers were specifically inspired by God, or that they were answered in the spectacular way expected today.

Lessons from revivals

Whilst I have not been involved in a full-scale revival, I have enough experience of times when God blessed more intensely than normally to know that revivals are a mixed blessing.

Historically, no revival has ever lasted very long, a few years at the most. There appears to be a clear pattern to these revivals:

1. a period of gestation when a few people are really seeking God earnestly to send a revival. These people have usually sought to purify their heart attitudes with the removal of sin from their lives. There are usually a number of crises as this purification process takes place. There is usually a focus on particular Bible texts (often taken out of context) which are used to persuade God to send revival.
2. The beginning of the revival proper. This is usually the purest stage, with real conviction of sin, a great sense of the presence, power and awe of a Holy God. This stage is normally short-lived.
3. Very quickly, problems emerge in dealing adequately with the discipling needs of the new believers who have found Christ. At the same time, unstable people start to be drawn in by the spectacular elements of the revival, and these people usually cause serious spiritual difficulties and confusion. Unbiblical practices develop, and are not stopped because of a fear of quenching the Spirit. Because so much is going on which is out of the ordinary, discernment of spirits becomes a priority, but there is little spare capacity in the leadership to do this job adequately.
4. The leaders of the revival find it difficult to cope with all these conflicting demands. As a result of the overload, the leadership feels it is no longer in control of what is going on. The developing problems make them uncertain, with the result that they begin to feel the need to take control, and they start to "organise" the revival. Organisation necessarily pushes the leaders into a controlling and dominant position. As soon as this happens the revival starts to wane. God says "*I will not give My glory to another*", The Holy Spirit is grieved, and while the appearance of the revival continues for some considerable time after this because of the momentum already built up, in fact it has come to an end.
5. Once the organised phase begins, the true Work of the Spirit declines, and like Moses who covered his face so that the departing of the glory might not be seen, all kinds of expedients are resorted to in order to try to keep up appearances. As time goes by, meetings which were once so spontaneous become increasingly predictable and a form of (usually informal) liturgy develops. Counterfeit signs are especially likely at this stage as the Spirit departs but people do not know it (compare Judges 16:20).
6. As the declining phase develops, many of those touched by the revival fall away - there is probably a much higher proportion of "*those who receive the Word with joy*" (Matt 13:20-21) but have no root during revival periods than there is in normal evangelism. The problems facing the church of dealing with large numbers of new converts who need shepherding and

feeding impose great strains on a leadership who are exhausted after the great efforts involved during the peak period of the revival itself.

7. After the revival is over, most of those involved have serious difficulties in coping with the normal "hum-drum" Christian life which follows. Those who have experienced revival always seem to look back to it with a kind of wistful longing, rather than facing the more difficult task of "walking without fainting" (Isaiah 40:31).

An account of the progress and aftermath of the 1906 Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles by Frank Bartleman ("Another Wave Rolls In" by Frank Bartleman, Whitaker Books, 1962, 1970 (an edited edition of "What really happened at Azusa Street", 1925)), illustrates all these stages very clearly. It is unusual for someone so closely involved with a revival to have such a clear insight into the problems.

Normal church growth

The above contrasts sharply with the non-revival pattern of church growth. In non-revival periods, a balance can be maintained and **sustained** because the Christian workers are not overloaded, and do not become exhausted. Young Christians are nurtured and taught the whole counsel of God properly and can themselves become properly functioning members of the body of Christ capable of bringing others to Christ. Unrealistic expectations about what the Christian life is like are avoided. The church leadership does not become panicked by the sheer size of the problems which they face. There is time to exercise discernment, and the work of the church does not attract every religious crank from across the world.

Should we seek revival?

It should be clear from the above that revival (as commonly understood) should never be sought. A natural analogy may be helpful: parents find it hard enough to cope with their new-born children when they arrive one at a time (twins are harder!) and would be completely swamped by suddenly having to deal with a whole orphanage full at once. Even the basic physical needs of the orphanage children would be scarcely dealt with, let alone the more important loving, nurturing and maturing tasks which produce a mature and balanced adult. Normal church life is like the normal family, a revival is like being given an orphanage full of babies.

In addition to the practical difficulties which occur should God give into our prayers for revival, in the meantime the focus upon future revival distracts people from praying for the evangelistic opportunities which will arise today and making use of them.

Significantly, the so-called Lord's Prayer encourages us to Pray for our daily bread, and throughout Jesus' ministry He discourages our focus on tomorrow's uncertain events. The main problem about revival praying is that it focuses our minds away from the obligations of today towards an uncertain future which may never happen. We are to concentrate upon today. "*Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof*" (Matthew 6:34). James in his letter also discourages us from making plans to our own agenda which we hope to persuade God to carry through (James 4:13-16). The only look-ahead we are encouraged to indulge is the prospect of Jesus' return, and even that is with the clear intention that it should thereby shape our lives in the present.

In addition, prayer for revival contains an implicit criticism of God Himself. We are showing our discontent with His present workings with men. It is not far from saying that we do not consider that He is doing His job properly.

God has laid down clearly the conditions upon which He will bring blessing and salvation to mankind. If men will repent and be baptised, He will grant them forgiveness of sins and they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:42). There is no real problem there, and God still fulfils His side of the issue when men will simply do that. The obligation on the church is likewise clear from Matthew 28:18-20, the preaching of the true gospel will bear its proper fruit if we are faithful.

But we want shortcuts which remove these obligation from us, and which will enable us to avoid the conflict and persecution which necessarily follows the proclamation of Truth and of Jesus to a hostile world (compare Matthew 5:10-11). We think it would be much easier if God sends a revival, as it will then be much harder for the pagans to resist God. It is much easier to pray for revival than to evangelise. It is part of our desire as human beings to create machinery to do a job (in this case evangelism) rather than do the job directly.

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk) (27.7.1995, 2.9.2018)

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