

Richard Owen Roberts:

A very easy way to come to grips with the biblical teaching on revival is to approach it from the standpoint of cycles of history.

In your imagination, picture a very long line that begins with the creation of man in the book of Genesis and continues on until the end of the present age, sometimes in our unknown future. Let us call this imaginary line the norm. A cycle of history consists of crossing this line twice; once going down and a second time going up.

The Cycles In The Old Testament

Consider this question, "At the time of creation, was man above or below this imaginary line?" Every indication is that prior to his fall man enjoyed a relationship of great beauty and intimacy with God which was vastly above the normal relationship of man with God in subsequent times. But Eve sinned and Adam joined her. Suddenly their intimacy with God was lost and their relationship plunged below the line. From that point in Genesis until the close of Malachi it is possible to trace numerous cycles in which God's people experienced a return to God and a still later departure from Him.

The book of Judges provides tremendous help in understanding these cycles. Please note the pattern as established in chapter two. Stage One: The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the Elders who survived Joshua (vs.7). Stage Two: When Joshua died (vs 8), the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, serving the Baals and forsaking the Lord, the God of their fathers (vss 11-13). Stage Three: The anger of the Lord burned against them under righteous judgement, delivering them into the hands of their enemies. Whenever they went the hand the Lord was against them for evil and they were severely distressed (vss 14-17). Stage Four: When the judgement was so heavy and the oppression so great that they could no longer handle it, they groaned under the burden and cried unto the Lord (vs.18b). Stage Five: When the cry was of great anguish and from their hearts, God raised up a judge who delivered them from the hands of their enemies (vs 18a), and the people again served the Lord their God and enjoyed a season of rest. But the cycle started all over again, for when that judge died, they turned their backs on God and acted more corruptly than their fathers in following other gods to serve them, and bow down to them (vs 19). Thus, once more the anger of the Lord burned against Israel (vss 20-21).

With a little care you can see this cycle clearly repeated seven times in the next fourteen chapters:

Under Othniel (3:1-11);
 Under Ehud (3:12-31);
 Under Deborah (4:1-5:31);
 Under Gideon (6:1-8:35);
 Under Abimelech (9:1-57);
 Under Jephthah (10:6-12:7) and
 Under Sampson (13:1-16:31).

In addition to these seven, there were several other cycles during this period which are not so distinctly delineated.

Similar patterns appear throughout the other historical books of the Bible from First Samuel to Nehemiah, enabling us to say that there are many full cycles of history in the Old Testament. But what about the New Testament?

The Cross-over And Peak In The New Testament

Some, who are aware that the subject of revival is so much more prominent in the Old Testament than in the New, have concluded that revival is indeed an Old Testament phenomena and not something to be found in the New Testament nor to be looked for in this present age of grace. This error of interpretation can be easily exposed by examining the question, "How many full cycles exist in the New Testament?"

We begin by asking, "Where does the New Testament begin, above or below the norm?" We know that the New Testament was preceded by that period which has been denominated "the four hundred years of silence" -- that long stretch of time in which there is no recorded evidence of God having spoke to man. We know that John the Baptist spoke severely to the religious leaders of his day saying "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matt. 3:7). We know that Christ came to His own and His own received Him not (John 1:11). Certainly, the evidence is ample that the New Testament opened below the line.

Is it not clear that the people of God were moved way above the norm when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost? In one day about three thousand were baptized, all believers were of one mind, taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people (Acts 2:43-47).

But where, in relationship to this line, did the New Testament close, and how many full cycles appear in the New Testament? Clearly, it closed above the line and obviously, there was less than one full cycle in the entire New Testament! While we know that numerous warnings in the Epistles predict a descent below the line, and the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3) fortify these warnings, the New Testament Church remained above the norm.

There is indeed a most precious sense in which the New Testament must be described as revival at its highest and at its best. Thus, instead of concluding that revival is not at all a New Testament theme, it can be described as the grandest theme of all the New Testament -- God drawing near to His own people through Immanuel -- God with us.

Since the New Testament days it is easy to observe the cycles of history as it is in the Old Testament. Just in the history of the United States of America alone, several full cycles are clearly evident. The same can be said for the United Kingdom.

The Church Today At A Low Point

But what does all this teach us about where we are today, and how can it help us?

Consider again the great lesson of the Book of Judges. A season of revival brings the people of God into a restored relationship with their Father. But when that people sin and will not repent, God Himself brings them under His righteous judgement. Surely that is where the Church in the western world is today. We have sinned grievously against God. Think of the terrible pride of evangelicalism! Consider the spirit of stubbornness and rebellion that mars so much of the work of the Church in the age of decadence! Ponder the terrible unbelief that marks both the conduct and the practice of the vast portions of professed believers. Realize that millions of people have been led to a false hope of salvation by the grievously distorted and paltry teaching and preaching so popular today. Surely these sins, not to mention innumerable others, are an affront to our holy God and sufficient to have brought the wrath of God upon an entire generation.

But do the evidences of God's righteous judgements upon us -- in the form of restraining the stirring of His heart and compassion toward us (Isaiah 63:15); the withdrawal of His manifest presence and the delivering us up to the power of our own iniquities (Isaiah 74:7); the forcing us to drink the wine of His wrath to the point of spiritual drunkenness (Jer. 13:12-14); the visitation of earthquakes, floods, fires, storms, and hosts of other indicators of His wrath -- have the desired effect? Are we crying out to God for mercy? Do the groaning of our burdened hearts reach the throne of the Almighty? Apparently not yet!

Oh, to be sure, there are some individuals here and there who are under an immense burden of concern and imploring God to come among us in power. Infrequently one does learn of a local congregation somewhere that is weeping before the Lord as it seeks His face; but by-and-large the Church seems to indicate that things are not so bad but what one more committee, or one more new and innovative program, or some new approach not yet tried, will rescue us from our difficult circumstances. How much worse must things become before the whole Church begins to cry out to God?

The Lack Of A Cyclical Pattern

Have you ever wondered if there is any fixed pattern in these cycles of history? Are the moral and spiritual declines uniformed in their depths? Are the upturns or revivals consistent in the peaks they reach? Is there any uniformity in the length of the cycles and the periods of time between revivals?

For an answer, consider the history of the revivals in the United States. In the earliest days of settlement in the New England Colonies in the 1600's there were several gracious seasons of revival. A powerful movement of the Spirit gripped much of the then existing nation between approximately 1732 and 1770. Another great revival began about 1792 and continued in various waves into the 1840's. The mighty prayer revival gripped much of the nation in 1857 and 1858. Another revival occurred during the Civil War. Some parts of the nation were touched by revival in 1905-1906 as a spill-over of the mighty work of God in Wales.

Yet, since that time we have seen little more than localized movements touching small and scattered elements of our society. In truth, we have not had a large-scale nation-wide revival for considerably more than a century.

And what about the peaks and troughs? From all appearances, there is no pattern. The times, depths, and peaks vary, manifesting the creative ways of our sovereign God. We may say, however, that the current decline goes to shocking depths, so much so that many wonder if the nation can ever turn upward toward God again.

Hope And Cry For Deliverance

Ought we to despair? Absolutely not! Is there no hope? There is abundant reason for hope! The judgements we are under are gracious and remedial! Will we heed them? Will we yet cry unto God for deliverance? Indeed, what will you personally do?

Will you let the evidences of where we are as a nation move you to appropriate action? Will you, as a believing individual, cry unto God day and night, "Turn us again, Oh God, and cause Thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (Psalm 80:3,7,19). Will you encourage your church to heed the call of II Chronicles 7:14 to humble itself, pray, seek his face, and turn from its wicked ways? Will you stand firmly with others who are calling the nation of churches to cry earnestly unto God in seasons of humiliating repentance, fasting and prayer?