

Alternatives to Revival

by C. William Fisher

The sermon emphasizes the importance of genuine revival in the church and warns against alternatives that may seem easier but are ultimately less effective.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Proverbs 15:29, Matthew 9:37, Acts 2:1, Romans 12:11, Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 5:16

Topics: "Church Revitalization", "True Revival"

Description

C. William Fisher addresses the changes in evangelism over the years, noting a decrease in genuine prayer and personal involvement, challenges in creating an evangelistic atmosphere due to building constraints, and a shift towards shorter, less impactful meetings. He highlights four major trends in evangelism today that are steps away from real revival, including a focus on preaching-mission meetings, reliance on union meetings, preference for shorter meetings, and the substitution of visitation for true revival. Fisher emphasizes the importance of genuine revival in revitalizing the church for effective evangelism and personal involvement in soul-winning.

Transcript

One of the most frequent questions asked me these days is this: "What changes do you see in our evangelism today from what it was when you went into the field twenty-five years ago?"

There are several changes that should be obvious to even a casual observer. For one thing, there is a percentage decrease in the number of people who will come to pray with seekers. There are still numbers who will come down and kneel around the altar during the altar service, but too often they will yawn or look through their fingers, or will get up and sit on the front seats after they have "said a few words." The percentage of those who will really get under the load and pray until real victory comes gets smaller.

And, in some cases, why not? How often are pastors shaking hands and visiting while seekers are praying in the altar? It is hard for the laymen to feel burdened at the altar when their pastor is just visiting at the door.

Another change is the increasing difficulty in creating an evangelistic atmosphere. Many things have contributed to this, not the least of which is the type of building some of our churches have put up. It is almost impossible to create a sense of rapport, of audience participation, of "closeness" necessary to Nazarene-type services when there are a hundred and fifty people in an auditorium seating eight hundred.

It is not just weeknight revival services that are affected; the same difficulty exists in regular Sunday night services and in prayer meetings. Some of the buildings we're building are absolutely destructive to what we say we're trying to do. One Nazarene church built a sanctuary seating almost nine hundred, and even on the night of their dedication, with a general superintendent preaching, there were 180 present.

Another change, not as definable but just as observable, is the lessening mood for personal involvement. An increasing percentage of people will attend rather faithfully, will listen attentively, will be very gracious socially, but are not willing to get involved in the hard, sweaty business of the actual work of the church. Any number of people are willing to sit in the grandstands and cheer, but fewer and fewer are willing to get down in the arena and grapple and bleed and agonize over souls and the real spiritual problems and potentials of the church.

Some might mention small week-night attendance. But it has always taken promotion and planning and effort to get even an appreciable number of outsiders. And why expect the outsiders when it is impossible to get many of the members to attend?

I have talked with those who were very active in the field of evangelism during the twenties and thirties and, while the reports varied from less than half to more than the Sunday school attendance, the consensus seemed to be that if they had an average week-night attendance of from one-half to three-fourths of the average Sunday school attendance in that church they felt they weren't doing too badly.

Even in the big city-wide campaigns, with hundreds of churches participating, it has always taken tremendous planning and publicity and promotion and prayer to have crowds. In his Detroit campaign, Billy Sunday decided to do away with the "special nights," but after the third night the crowds had fallen off so terribly that he told his staff to go back to promoting the special nights. The Graham crusades today depend heavily upon special nights and special delegations and unprecedented outlays for publicity.

But these changes are not the most important or the most disturbing. I would like to suggest four major trends in our evangelism today that, in my opinion, are important and are disturbing.

Dr. Harold W. Reed did his doctoral dissertation on the forces that shape churches, and I asked him once if in his research he discovered any church, in which the trends away from its original mission had become pronounced, that had ever swung back. His answer was significant: "No," he said, "but I did come to the conclusion that if we knew the steps down we could deliberately refuse to take those steps."

The four trends that I mention are, in my opinion, steps down and away from real revival. Any one of them, if used exclusively, or as a substitute for revival, will eventually drain the dynamic and urgency from holiness evangelism in any church.

1. The first is the trend toward preaching-mission or convention-type meetings.

These are usually prestige meetings with general or district leaders as workers. No one could, or would even desire to, imply that much good is not accomplished in many of these meetings. Besides the spiritual good accomplished, it is beneficial for the church to be in close contact with the leaders of the church and to catch their vision and concern for the work of the entire church.

There is no objection here to these men holding meetings because of limiting the work available to evangelists. In fact it would be better if our general men, especially, would hold more revivals in local

churches instead of saving themselves for the college revivals and the camp meetings and the union meetings -- none of which is a normal evangelistic situation. For in each case there is a captive audience with practically a built-in response. The true picture of evangelism in the church cannot be accurately evaluated in such situations. It is only in the local church revival that one sees the true picture of evangelism in the church, for there and only there can one see Nazarenes at their most concerned, or their most complacent.

Along with this trend is the increasing practice of pastors exchanging meetings. And again, these meetings can occasionally be profitable to all concerned. But the motivation is not always the best. For meetings are exchanged for all sorts of reasons -- from paying a wife's doctor bills, to getting a free hunting trip, to paying back a friend for a favor -- or providing the obligation for one. Dr. Richard Taylor told in one of his splendid editorials in the Nazarene Preacher of the pastor who canceled a meeting on an evangelist so that he could have one of his pastor friends hold the meeting -- because the friend needed money to make a car payment!

"I see happening in the Nazarene church," said a retired Methodist preacher, "just what happened in my church -- the increasing use of connectional men and exchange of pastors for meetings. And while there was some good done in all those meetings, there was not the same urgency and all-out effort that had characterized our revivals of the past, until our laymen began to say, 'Why have revivals? -- we have the same kind of preaching in our regular services -- and sometimes it's better; we have good crowds on Sunday morning, but hardly any interest or crowds during the week.' So finally we quit even trying to have special meetings in the old revival sense."

There is no meeting, undertaken in Christ's name, but what accomplishes some good. But the pattern is clear: When the church is no longer vital enough to have revivals, or even to see the need for one, it resorts to all sorts of substitutes and it goes in for "Deeper Life Crusades," "Preaching Missions," "Exercises in Evangelism," etc. What's in a name? Nothing -- when the words are drained of their spiritual vitality! As has often been said, it does no harm, or good, to change labels on empty bottles. Of one of these "revivals," it was agreed all around that the folk had had a "nice little meeting."

May God forgive us for prostituting the cause of revival on the altars of our own selfishness or ambition or pride, and trying to hide the loss of our revival dynamic under the flimsy cloak of evangelistic "dignity" or "expediency."

2. Another trend that is a step down and away from genuine revival is the Nazarene union meeting.

That this type of meeting is used occasionally to great profit is readily admitted. But to make it the exclusive mass evangelistic thrust in a city is to weaken the revival emphasis and involvement in each of the churches participating.

Merger is not always a sign of strength; it is sometimes an indication of weakness. And in some cases the union meeting is resorted to in an abject admission of failure to have genuine revivals in local churches.

There are advantages to an occasional union meeting sponsored by Nazarene churches such as: pooled advertising, the chance to make a larger "impression" upon the community, the image of unity among the pastors and people of the various churches, the genuine development of fellowship among the Nazarenes in the community. All of these results are good and would be sufficient to merit an occasional union meeting.

But there are at least two distinct disadvantages of making this type of meeting the exclusive means of mass evangelism in a town or city:

a. The illusion that because of the larger crowds more good is being done. The man in charge of counting the crowds at one Nazarene union meeting of 7 churches said that the average crowd for the seven nights was 356 -- in other words, an average of 50 per night per church attending the meeting. If the 7 churches had engaged in simultaneous meetings, and had averaged only 50 per night in each church, they would have considered it a failure; but because they had averaged 356 per night with 7 churches, they considered it a "success." One of those churches participating, when it went in for real revivals, had averaged over 200 per night in week-night attendance. But in the union meeting it took 7 churches to average 356. Is that progress?

b. Another disadvantage of the Nazarene union meeting is that some of the smaller churches participating in the union meeting simply cannot pay their budget for the union meeting and then be able to afford a revival in their own church. All of this tends to reduce the necessity for personal involvement in the matter of soul winning. And anything that reduces that sense of personal involvement and commitment and responsibility is ultimately harmful to the total evangelistic task of the church and is a step down and away from real revival -- which, by its very nature, is a renewal of the sense of personal involvement in the evangelism of the church.

I attended a breakfast with a group of pastors one month after they had closed such a union meeting. Not all of the participating pastors were there but there were ten present, and not one had, up to that time, received one new member as a direct result of the union meeting. The meeting had cost over five thousand dollars, and three of the churches were not having a revival in their own church that spring because of the expense of the union meeting. If the same amount of time and planning and money and prayer had gone into simultaneous meetings, there would have been more personal involvement on the part of the members, which, had there not been even one "outside" seeker at the altar, would have been beneficial.

"It is at the local church level," says Martin Marty in his book *The New Shape of American Religion*, "where the church's encounter with the world can be most violent, and most productive -- and where opposition from worldly Christians can become most intense ... [And while] the church revival, being on a more personal basis and challenge, does affect the morality and attitudes of fewer people, [it] affects them at greater depth."

And Marty continues with this analysis: "The local church is the front line. It is the cutting edge against the world. If that cutting edge is thought of as an institution that circles the globe, it will be impossible to hone or sharpen. But a local church can be honed, it can be sharpened, it can become more effective -- and if enough local churches are honed, or revived, then it will make a more effective contribution to the total task by being more effective in its local task."

The occasional use of the union meeting has merit, but to sacrifice the revival in the local church to the union meeting is a step down and away from that revival emphasis that has been the central thrust of the most effective Nazarene evangelism.

3. Another trend in our evangelism, and definitely a step down and away from real revival, is the one toward shorter meetings.

It is not surprising that many pastors and churches like this idea of shorter meetings. For one thing, it is cheaper; and for another, the normal life of the church is not, as they say, "disrupted" for as long.

It is also not surprising that evangelists find this arrangement more financially profitable. For almost any two one-week meetings will pay more than the average two-week meeting. And if there are books or records to sell, the shorter meetings mean just that many more "exposures."

But if the church is looking for the cheapest way out, it should dispense with special meetings altogether. And if evangelists are in the field merely for the money, they're in the wrong field.

No one will deny that one can usually see as many results in the altar in a one-week meeting as in a longer one. But, for that matter, in certain circumstances one can see as many seekers in a weekend, or even in a Sunday service, as in a longer meeting. But are numbers in the altar all we're after? Is this all that a revival should mean to a church? Revival, remember, is exclusively an experience of the church; evangelism is what the church does about its reviving. Are these shorter meetings really long enough to "let the plow down," and allow the Holy Spirit to do His work until there is genuine sense of need, of neglect, of coldness and leanness and growing indifference -- with the resultant cry for renewal and reviving and fresh warmth and movement of the Spirit within the hearts of the church members? Is the church really revived and renewed spiritually enough to conserve whatever evangelistic results may have been seen in the altar? Are the shorter meetings really revival? -- or just bits of evangelism? Of course a longer meeting is not always a revival either, but at least there is more opportunity for its becoming one.

We are creating many of our own problems and frustrations. For as shorter meetings produce less and less real change in the spiritual tone of the churches, increasing numbers of pastors and laymen are asking, "Why have revival meetings at all?" But that's just it: these meetings may not be revivals at all. They may be just bits of evangelistic activity -- and like one man said about aspirin: They don't cost much; they don't do much; and they're not worth much.

It is real revival that we need if our evangelism is to be meaningful and the fruits of it conserved. It is when Zion travails that souls are born. And travail can't be turned on and off like a spigot. Real spiritual births are a result of this travail. We can have religious "abortions" without it, but there can be no spiritual birth without it. The conversion of sinners -- not just people in the altar, but genuine conversion of sinners -- is a result of the revived condition of the church. It is precisely because we do not go in for real revival as often as we should that we have so much frustration and sense of futility in much of our evangelistic activities.

There are discount houses where one can buy merchandise; there are dealers who will sell cars for practically wholesale; but no one -- absolutely no one can cut the price of revival. There are no markdowns on the price tag of revival -- and when we think we've found a "bargain" in revival, we may find out that all we bought was a shoddy substitute.

Dr. Chapman once said that if Finney were alive very few Nazarene pastors would call him for meetings, because he didn't go in for quick results. It was a fundamental conviction with Finney that the church first had to be revived before there could be any worthwhile evangelistic results. He would labor for days to produce a revival in the church, and when the church was revived then sinners would come crying, "What must I do to be saved?"

But we want quick results. Let's see something happen quickly -- no matter whether it lasts; let's get action. Our insistence on something happening quickly might be because we are afraid that if we tarried

beyond the frenzy and the hubbub we might get down to our real needs and have our real shams exposed and be confronted with our real selves. And when that began to happen, we might lose part of our crowd. But would that be a tragedy?

In those ten days preceding Pentecost, the disciples began to lose their crowd until it got down to 120. Think of it -- three-fourths of the crowd had left! If some of us had been there we would have said, "Let's get a quartet in here, or a Hollywood singer -- we're losing our crowd. Let's at least get somebody in here to crack a few jokes and liven things up a bit. Let's get this show on the road."

But the 120, renewed and filled, did more in one day than they had done before in three years. And it is conceivable that one-fourth of our church members, if truly revived and filled, would accomplish far more than the over four hundred thousand Nazarenes we have on the rolls.

General Superintendent Walker said once that it was "possible to have a revival of God's work and have fewer in the church when the revival was over than when it began," and then he quoted John Wesley as saying, when he visited a society and found it "not strong": "We dismissed thirty members. Glory be to God."

Martin Marty suggests that "a willingness to step off the statistical treadmill for a moment, to lose status among the families of competing denominations, may be the better mark of stewardship and evangelism in the present moment."

There is no such thing as instant revival. And there is no such thing as instant evangelism. Revival is hard, sweaty business. And those who are interested in quick results are never interested in paying that kind of price. It is so much easier, and more sophisticated, to go around asking, "Do revivals pay?" or, "What's wrong with our evangelism?" than it is to get down on our knees before God and pray and agonize and cry and fast until revival comes.

A short meeting can be profitable occasionally, but when it becomes a steady diet it fails to nourish the church and is a step down and away from real revival.

4. The last trend I will mention is not as widespread as yet, but if resorted to exclusively, or as a substitute for revival, is definitely a step down -- and that is the substitution of visitation or personal evangelism for revivals.

But one is never a substitute for the other. Genuine revival, in fact, will make personal evangelism far more productive and necessary than any talk or series of talks about the advantages or methods of personal evangelism. Our people need not only the know-how; they need the wherewithal -- and revival can be the time of that motivation and dynamic.

It is a growing conviction that if our meetings are going to justify the time and expense and effort put into them, they simply must be times of reviving and renewal of the church members, with the inevitable increase in the effectiveness of visitation and personal evangelism after the revival. Most calling programs, in fact, would receive greater support and would produce more spiritual fruit if promoted after the revival rather than preceding it. It is not enough for us to be

what's the difference? An evangelistic church is one in which the pastor preaches evangelistically occasionally and promotes two or three evangelistic meetings a year. But an evangelizing church is a church filled with men and women who are so alive with the reality of Christ and so alert to their

soul-winning opportunities that they will go day after day from house to house, or from heart to heart, and witness effectively to the reality of Christ in their hearts and lives. And the major task of every preacher -- whether pastor or evangelist or superintendent -- is to produce, with God's help, an evangelizing church. Real revivals are times of refreshing from the Lord, and those experiencing that refreshing not only see the need to witness -- they have a want-to in their hearts. All the knowledge about "ought to" and "how to" will not make any person a soul winner -- unless his heart is warmed and filled with God's Spirit.

We can, of course, knock on doors and invite to Sunday school and church without that renewing and refreshing from the Lord. And it is better to do that than to do nothing. But Fuller Brush salesmen or Avon callers can, and do, knock on doors and "witness" to the desirability of their product. And if we are to be anything more than religious peddlers we must have our hearts warmed and stirred and refreshed and filled periodically -- if our witness is to be spiritually productive. "Ye shall receive power" -- when? -- when we knock on doors? When we hand out Heralds? When we invite our friends? No. "Ye shall receive power" when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. Then whatever form your witnessing takes, God will make it spiritually meaningful and your evangelistic activity will advance His cause.

"Ye shall receive power ... and ye shall be witnesses unto me" everywhere you go. We can be witnesses without that power. We can be witnesses to a certain doctrine or a certain standard or to a certain church or to a certain preacher or teacher, or to the beauty or adequacy of a church plant -- we can be witnesses to all of these without any help at all from God. But if our witnessing does not find its center in Christ, we are off center. And to be an effective witness unto Christ takes more than knowledge, takes more than signing a calling pledge, takes more than human enthusiasm; it takes warm and full hearts -- warmed and filled by the fresh movement of His presence and power.

We evangelists are no Johnny-come-latelies to this idea of personal evangelism. Every evangelist I know emphasizes its importance. One of the most practical helps in personal witnessing that we have had is a little book called *Win Them*, written by Dr. Jarrette Aycock -- and he wrote it as an evangelist.

In my own meager attempts at writing, my first article in the *Herald of Holiness*, which appeared in August of 1942, was titled "Evangelism in a Changing World," and it was primarily a plea for personal evangelism, in which I said, "If an individual is really a follower of Christ he will soon realize that all of his religious work cannot be done in the church. Instead he will find himself bragging on Jesus and witnessing for Christ, wherever he goes -- in the home, in the shop, in the store, on the street -- in such a way that others will see Him and want Him and accept Him as their personal Lord and Saviour!"

I am just as convinced that that is the only effective method of evangelism that really meets the challenge of a changing world as I was when I wrote those words twenty-four years ago. But I am more convinced now than I was then that we must have revival, real revival, if all our witnessing and going is to be meaningful and spiritually productive. Every book that I have tried to write except one has emphasized this truth, and three of them have been exclusively about personal involvement in soul winning.

And yet there are some today who feel they are springing something new on the church when they advocate personal evangelism. But as long ago as 1932 the Young People's Society adopted this as its primary emphasis, and in 1948 the entire church launched its "Crusade for Souls," which had as its primary emphasis this matter of personal soul winning.

So the Church of the Nazarene has been busy promoting personal evangelism long before some of those who are advocating it as a substitute for revival were even born. And the method didn't start with us; it

started on the Day of Pentecost. But then, as now, it was not a substitute for but a supplement to the public proclamation of the gospel. All those who think they are suggesting something new should remember that every discovery in evangelism is a recovery.

Each of these evangelistic emphases can be profitable in its place, but whenever any one of them is promoted as a substitute for genuine revival it is a step down and away from that revival emphasis which has been the central agency of our most effective evangelism from the very beginning of our church. And if we fail to recognize the danger and insist on taking those steps down, then we will be led down that well-travelled road that leads to an evangelism wherein, as one put it, "the conference table replaces the mourners' bench, the planning session replaces the prayer meeting, the organizers replace the agonizers, and the promoters replace the passion-filled."

That may be evangelism, but that is a juiceless, tearless, powerless, emasculated evangelism that is a mockery and a denial of that vigorous and effective evangelism the church engaged in when the tides of revival were running strong.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/c-william-fisher/alternatives-to-revival/>

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