

The Place of Revival in Nazarene Evangelism

by C. William Fisher

Revival is essential for the spiritual growth and renewal of the Church of the Nazarene, and its neglect is a spiritual problem that must be addressed.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Habakkuk 3:2, Acts 3:19, James 4:8

Topics: "Revival Evangelism", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

C. William Fisher emphasizes the importance of revival as spiritual renewal in the hearts of Christians, leading to dynamic evangelism as a natural response. He highlights how revival has been central to Nazarene evangelism since the inception of the Church of the Nazarene, with a strong call to maintain a revival atmosphere for continued success. Fisher addresses the criticism and neglect of revivals within the Church, pointing out that disparaging revivals is a spiritual problem that hinders the church's mission and vitality. He urges Nazarenes to uphold the tradition of holiness evangelism through revivals, as it has been a key factor in the church's spiritual growth and impact.

Transcript

If we can agree, then, that revival is spiritual renewal in the hearts of Christians, and that evangelism is the natural and inevitable response and expression of that renewal, we may discuss more knowingly, I trust, the place of revival in Nazarene evangelism.

No one, surely, could read anyone's history of the Church of the Nazarene without realizing that revival has been the central thrust of Nazarene evangelism from the very beginning of the church.

As has often been said, the Church of the Nazarene was born in revival fires; and from the time Dr. Bresee organized the first Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles in 1895, it was a place of revival fire and evangelistic zeal. The story of the Church of the Nazarene in its finest conquests and victories is the story of its repeated revivals and its dynamic evangelism. And, thank God, the church has never lacked for men to remind it of its origin and its destiny.

B. F. Haynes, for instance, the first editor of the Herald of Holiness, said in one of his early editorials in 1913 "To preach and testify and push the work of holiness, so that men and women are sanctified wholly, is the work to which the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene is called ... To do simply the ordinary routine of forms and ceremonies does not demand this movement ... A professed Church of the Nazarene which is just beating time had as well be wiped off the face of the earth. We come to bring fire ... This is our

calling."

It was Dr. R. T. Williams who said: "We were born in a revival atmosphere and we must continue to live in such an atmosphere if we hope to live at all. It is a genuine holiness evangelism that brought the church into existence and the same type of evangelism is essential to our existence and success. Let there be no tendency to substitute programs and sentimentalism for old-fashioned, Holy Ghost, God-sent revivals."

Dr. J. B. Chapman, in editorials, in sermons, and in books, repeatedly brought the church face-to-face with the primacy of revivals in its evangelism. "Our principal business," he said, "is to promote revivals. The one striking feature of the Nazarene movement is intense revival fire." And in an editorial in the Preacher's Magazine of March, 1940, he asked, "What is the proper program of the church?" and he answered: "The program of the church is a revival program ... The direct fruitage consists of saved souls, but in the process of saving souls, the church itself is saved."

And who could ever forget the memory or the influence of this same man, eighteen years a general superintendent, standing in Kansas City in January of 1946, pleading with the leaders of the church, and through them with Nazarenes everywhere, to go "all out for souls"? Listen to those words that still scorch our complacency and pride: "Let us get off our high horses and pay the price for revival ... A revival that, like a summer shower, will purify the atmosphere of our churches everywhere, and which will awaken dormant forces of our people young and old ... A revival that will make this namby-pamby, soft-handed, compromising, cringing sort of holiness as obsolete as Phariseeism was on the Day of Pentecost ... I want that kind of revival because it takes that kind to really revive me."

In the general superintendents' address to the General Assembly of 1936 were these words: "It is not enough for any generation to be told about the great revivals of the past. There must be a fresh baptism with fire for the sons and daughters, and the atmosphere of revival must prevail in every new day until the Son of Man shall come."

And in the General Assembly of 1940, the general superintendents said: "It was genuine holiness evangelism that brought the church into existence and the same type of evangelism is

essential to our existence and success ... We want more than protracted meetings. We want revivals -- revivals that stir our people to the depths of their souls."

No one could possibly read the history of the formative period of the Church of the Nazarene without coming to the inescapable conclusion that revival, real Holy Ghost revival, was absolutely central and primary in the Nazarene evangelism of yesterday.

But that was yesterday. And yesterday is history. And even though the exploits of yesterday thrill us, and the passionate commitments of those who shaped that day inspire us, we cannot turn to that church today, for that was the church that was.

But today is our day, and while we can determine better where we are by knowing where we've been -- for churches, like persons, are never wholly independent of their origins -- yet we live and work in the church that is.

While I know of the evangelism of yesterday only by hearsay and reading, I speak of our evangelism today out of experience, because my entire ministry has been during the years of the early forties to the present time. I am now (1966) in my twenty-fifth year of continuous evangelism and have conducted over six

hundred revival meetings around the world.

Nazarenes today are asking in varying degrees of criticism or concern, "What is wrong with our evangelism?" or, "Whom can I get for an evangelist?" There seems to be the implication that three hundred evangelists wholly determine the state of evangelism in the entire church. Forgotten is the fact that there are over eight thousand other Nazarene preachers, and over four hundred thousand Nazarene church members, everyone of whom either helps or hinders the cause of evangelism in the church.

But the question is not new. For years now there have been those who have asked sincerely, and with a spirit of earnest quest, why Nazarene evangelism was not more effective, and how it could be made so.

Dr. D. Shelby Corlett, for instance, in an editorial in the Herald of Holiness of January 2, 1937 -- or twenty-nine years ago -- asked, "Are our evangelistic efforts successful? Are we reaping the largest possible results from our evangelistic meetings? These questions are being asked by pastors and laymen." And in an editorial entitled "Are We Reaching the Unsaved?" which appeared in the Herald of December 28, 1942, he said: "Not long since, an evangelist said that during a ten-day evangelistic meeting there were six services when every person present professed entire sanctification -- not an unsaved, unsanctified or backslidden person present in sixty percent of the meetings ... This situation is causing many to question the advisability of conducting evangelistic meetings." And that was twenty-four years ago!

In the Preacher's Magazine for March of 1938, Dr. Chapman wrote: "I realize that there are many who say that the time of revivals is past." And that was twenty-eight years ago! And even farther back, in an article by B. T. Flanery in the Herald for February 9, 1921, under the title "Are the Days of Mighty Revivals Past?" his opening sentence was, "We are often met with the statement, You cannot have an old-time revival in these days." And that was forty-five years ago!

"It is hard work to get a crowd," said E. O. Chalfant in an article in the Herald of February, 1941; "it never was easy, generally speaking. I know it has been for fifty years. There has always been the remnant of the faithful few, but to get the unsaved even to listen has always been a difficult task." And that was twenty-five years ago!

And in March of the same year, 1941, A. S. London wrote: "We have discovered that our revivals are very unsatisfactory. It is estimated that we are having five thousand revival efforts each year in our denomination. They are reaching but few new people. It is a warming over of the same six and half dozen in too many instances ... General leaders, pastors, evangelists and laymen are discontented with our average revival." And please remember that those words appeared in the Herald twenty-five years ago!

And as for evangelists and their prestige and image, P[ascal]. P[erry]. Belew had an article in the Herald of Holiness, September 23, 1931, under the title "Shall We Abandon the Revival Meeting?" in which he said: "For several years the writer has observed a growing tendency to depreciate the office and work of the evangelist. At conferences and assemblies he seldom gets more than a passing recognition while at preachers' meetings he is most unfavorably discussed. The evangelist has long been considered a 'necessary evil,' but is coming to be considered an evil that is unnecessary." And that was thirty-five years ago!

But perhaps the most revealing example of the persistence of these questions is found in Dr. D. Shelby Corlett's message to the first evangelism conference ever held in the Church of the Nazarene -- held in

Kansas City in January of 1947. In that message Dr. Corlett said: "It has been an apparent fact that for some time we have been reaching few new people in our revival meetings. We need a revival!

"Primarily, we need a revival among all of us: superintendents, general church executives, our college men, our evangelists, our pastors, our missionaries -- all of us need to have a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us.

"We know our problem. We pretty well know what it will take to pay the price to find a solution. The question is, will we pay that price?" ...

[A portion of the text here, containing quotations used by permission, is omitted from this digital publication. -- DVM]

While there has been much criticism of evangelism in general, and revival in particular, among writers and leaders of many denominations, the Church of the Nazarene has been committed to holiness evangelism and revival as a central agency of that commitment through its history. And one need go no farther back than the last General Assembly to substantiate that commitment.

Yet there are disturbing differences in the questions concerning revivals and evangelism in the church today. For one thing, the questioning seems to be more widespread than ever before. And for another, there is a new note of cynicism in the asking. Indeed, some are not so much asking the questions; they are already convinced in their own minds -- and are trying to convince others --

that evangelism -- except their own brand -- is a spent force; and that evangelists are no longer needed in the church.

Anyone who thinks these are extreme statements simply doesn't get around and hear people talk -- even some preachers. Those who make periodic surveys are amazed and disturbed at the intensity of the feeling. And, of course, evangelists come in for more than their share of the criticism. But far more disturbing than the criticism of evangelists is the criticism of evangelism, especially in regard to revivals.

Let me cite a few examples, and I don't mention names because this is not a discussion of personalities, but principles. The principle is this: A disparagement or neglect of revival is always a spiritual problem.

A Nazarene layman, a professional man, was asked by his pastor why he was not attending the revival. "Well," he said, "just to be honest with you, as far as I'm concerned, revival-time is not the Church of the Nazarene at its best." Some months later, however, this man was reclaimed and confessed before the church that he had been backslidden for years. Now, reports his pastor, that man is in Sunday night services, prayer meetings -- and attends faithfully all services of revivals, unless he is called out by emergencies.

When I am told that certain people do not attend week-night revival services, I usually ask, "Do they attend Sunday night services and prayer meetings? Do they participate in calling programs?" And with but few exceptions, for reasons of health or demands of shift work, the pattern is the same: the very ones who do not attend revival services are careless about attending Sunday night services and prayer meetings. Those who neglect revivals will also neglect anything else that makes spiritual demands upon them.

There are those who hesitate to invite influential friends to revival services because they do not want their friends to have that "image" of the church. And yet dedicated Nazarenes, whether ministers or laymen,

have through the years felt that revival-time was the image the church should build and maintain -- if the Church of the Nazarene was to justify its existence and do the work God had called it to do.

When members of the staff of a large Nazarene church urged their pastor to have a revival, citing several indications that revival was certainly needed, the pastor replied: "We don't want or need that emotional flag-waving around here." But, since that time that pastor has stood in his own pulpit, and before his ministerial friends, and confessed that he had not been spiritually what he should have been and had become so busy with other things that he had neglected his primary responsibilities.

Another pastor, defending his criticism of revivals, said, "All right. If revivals are so important, how is it that Church took in thirty-one members on profession of faith last year and they haven't even tried to have a revival in eighteen months?" It was suggested to him that the reason was a dedicated Nazarene laywoman still true to her convictions and the urgencies of her faith and witnessing who was out there day after day, calling on people, praying with them in their homes, and talking to them about joining the church.

The neglect and disparagement of revivals also produce a distortion of emphasis that may take years to correct -- if it is ever corrected.

A young assistant pastor said to his father, who was an evangelist: "Dad, what you're doing is obsolete; it's passe'."

When that father told me that I said, "Isn't that interesting? I have quotes from two Methodist bishops whose books were published in 1898 and 1900, who used those exact words in describing the need for new evangelistic methods. The old methods, which had been used with marvelous spiritual success throughout their history, were now obsolete, they said. That was in 1900. And yet we Nazarenes came along in 1908 and picked up those very same methods of evangelism and have used them effectively in our greatest and finest spiritual conquests."

Have we really outgrown our methods, or have we outrun our spirituality? Have our methods become stale, or have we? Are our methods obsolete, or are we too depleted spiritually to use them effectively?

Whether for a layman, a preacher, a local church, a college zone, or a denomination, the neglect and disparagement of revival meetings is a spiritual problem. For revival is always appreciated by the spiritual, tolerated by the lukewarm, and detested by the backslidden.

But this idea that we can get along quite well, thank you, without revivals, or that our methods of evangelism are hopelessly outmoded, obsolete, and passe', has infected too many of our people. To be sure, they are not a majority, thank God, but even one is one too many. And whoever he is, on whatever level he operates, any Nazarene who disparages revival is an enemy of the Church of the Nazarene. He is tampering with the very God-blest agency that has given dynamic and thrust to holiness evangelism, which alone made our existence necessary, and which alone makes our continued existence meaningful.

When I hear those who say we need to change our methods, I ask them just what methods they'd like to change. Do they mean that we no longer need the altar call? Do they mean that we no longer need to preach for a verdict? Do they mean we no longer need times of reviving, or renewing, of coming to new levels of commitment and involvement?

If that's what they mean, other churches have already traveled that road. I attended a conference on evangelism in San Francisco. Throughout the conference, speakers were quoting one of their leaders as

saying they had lost something vital at the heart of their denomination. After the bishop, who was at that time chairman of the Board of Evangelism, had given a talk on methods, he opened the meeting for discussion. One pastor asked, "Bishop, should we ever give an altar call?" The bishop looked at the floor for a while, then answered: "Well, once in a great while, perhaps -- if you know how to use real wisdom." During the discussion the pastor of one of the largest churches said, "We all know there was a time when the altar call was vital, but we also know that that time is past. We simply cannot appeal to the intelligent people of our congregations today through the means of an altar call."

As I went away from that session I thought, Here they are saying they have lost something vital, and now they're saying the altar call is no longer vital. Is it the altar call that is no longer vital, or is it that they have lost the spiritual vitality that made it vital?

They did away with the anxious seat because no one was anxious anymore.

They gave up the mourners' bench because their preaching made no mourners.

They gave up the inquiry room because no one was inquiring about the salvation of his soul anymore.

They gave up the altar call because their preaching produced no conviction for sin and there were no seekers.

They quit proclaiming the gospel of a crucified and risen Lord and began quoting Tillich and Niebuhr and Sartre. But no one was ever convicted of sin by quoting to him Tillich or Niebuhr or Sartre. It is still the gospel, and only the gospel, that is the "power of God unto salvation."

I submit that if that is the end of the road that some would have us travel, then we should know it now. And if we are going to be nothing more than a second-rate edition of some old-line denomination, then there is no need or excuse whatever for our existence. We justify our existence only by being Nazarene churches, true to our mission of holiness evangelism.

David could do nothing in Saul's armor, and neither can we. And before we make fun of the slingshots and the stones, let's make sure we're killing Goliaths with our fancier weapons. Before we make fun of the crude, heavy nets that others have used to catch boatloads of fish, let's make sure we're able to land a few with the flimsy, gossamer nets spun out of our pseudo intellectualism and phony sophistication.

This is no plea for what was, merely because it was. But until we come up with something better, let us remember that change is not necessarily progress. I doubt very seriously that anyone is going to come up soon, if at all, with something that will make unnecessary the very methods which have been used in our finest spiritual and evangelistic conquests.

But that's just it: if these who are crying new methods -- and ridiculing, sometimes subtly, sometimes openly, the old -- were producing in the salvation of souls and sanctification of believers and the real fervor in their congregations that which characterized the old-time methods, then we could afford to listen to them.

But the sad truth is they aren't producing those results. In one area of the church a survey revealed that almost one-fourth of the churches had not scheduled a revival meeting during the entire year. Almost a third of the churches had not had a single seeker in the altar during the entire year. Is it any wonder that there was a decrease in church members, a decrease in Sunday school attendance and enrollment, and a

decrease in General Budget giving for the year? In one of our larger churches it took 35 members and \$4,622 to get one member on profession of faith last year. In another it took 75 members and \$22,132 to get one member on profession of faith, and the

church showed no gain at all in members for the entire year. In still another it took 68 members and \$10,071 to get one member on profession of faith last year. And in another church, of medium size, it took 91 members and \$19,070 to get each of the 3 new members it took in on profession of faith last year. In fact 4 churches with a combined membership of 3,350 took in only 63 members on profession of faith last year.

Contrast this with a survey another district superintendent made in which he found that the 7 most productive churches on his district had had at least three revivals last year, and one of them, a church of less than 50 members, had 4 revivals -- and that church took in 18 members on profession of faith.

The facts may be unpleasant, but they are clear facts, and they prove that those churches that are most faithful in running a distinctly Nazarene program are the most productive of solid spiritual results; while those churches which are trying to ape the older and more formal churches and are, by design or default, getting away from the distinctive Nazarene emphasis of Holy Ghost revivals, are the least productive and least fruitful of our entire church.

There are any number of other churches doing everything else we are doing -- except having holiness revivals -- and are often doing it better.

Building buildings? Other churches are building bigger and fancier ones than we can put up. But when has any dead man, or any dead church, been revived by placing it in a fancier and more expensive casket?

Gaining in social prestige? Other churches have had more than we'll have in the foreseeable future, and they have had it for years.

Getting bigger and more professional choirs and staffs? Others have bigger and more professional ones and they have had them for years.

Everything we're doing, you see, except having holiness revivals, the other churches are doing, and often doing it better. It is interesting to know -- and should be disturbing to contemplate -- that these older denominations have made their biggest membership gains, have built their biggest buildings, have had their biggest increase in finances, have gained their highest social acceptance and prestige -- after they lost their mission.

Some Methodist bishops were saying in 1900 that they needed new methods in evangelism -- and they got them. Then in the 1930's another bishop, Edwin Holt Hughes, was saying, "During the past thirty or forty years a marked change has been taking place in Methodism ... Not only have revival meetings been going out of vogue but the evangelistic spirit has been subsiding."

Then in the 1960's another bishop, Gerald Kennedy, said at a conference in Denver: "We have lost our mood for evangelism, and we no longer have an evangelistic expectancy."

I submit that this is an inevitable progression. Whenever any church -- no matter whether it be Methodist or Nazarene -- begins to disparage and discredit the very dynamic which made it vital and necessary, that church is on the way to losing its vision and its mission.

First, a church loses its passion and abandons its methods. Then it loses its message. Then it loses its mission. And flashier statistics do not compensate or hide that loss.

To quote statistics about increases in finances and members and churches as proof of the blessing of God can be as absurd as the president of General Motors getting up before the stockholders and saying, "Friends, God has certainly blessed us this year. We have had the biggest volume, the biggest net, the largest increase in dealerships at home and overseas, and the highest public acceptance in our history. It is truly wonderful what the Lord has done."

We need to listen well to those who warn us against the danger of using godly labels on things that are not necessarily God's. And statistics, alone, whether for a local church or a denomination, do not necessarily mean that God is blessing or that the organization is keeping true to its mission. And the greatest tragedy that can come to men, or movements, is to lose sight of their destinies.

Let me repeat: This danger is only an incipient one for us today. The great majority of our people -- preachers and laymen -- still believe in revivals and vital holiness evangelism. But it is too late to cry, "Fire!" when the house has burned to the ground. It is too late to call the termite exterminators when the building is crumbling. The time to warn and to speak and to act is when the danger first appears on the horizon.

The need is so great and the urgencies of our times are so demanding that we need all the methods we can think of. My plea is that we should not give up that which has been tried and proved productive until we've come up with something better. The doctors didn't throw away aspirin when they discovered penicillin. They didn't throw away their scalpels when they discovered Xray. And the greatest argument for revival is that no one -- repeat -- no one has ever found an adequate substitute for it. And those men and churches which feel the least need of revival are the very ones that need it most.

If we allow the fire of revivals to go out, there is no other flame to take its place.

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