

# Chapel of the Air - Characteristics of Revival

by J. Edwin Orr

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*Revival is an awakening in or of religion, characterized by a great burden of prayer, conviction of sin and repentance, and holiness of living.*

**Duration:** 12:15

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Matthew 6:6, Matthew 9:38, Luke 15:7, Acts 1:14, 1 Timothy 1:15, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Revival Theology"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the impact of revivals in the past and what he would like to see God do among the American people. He emphasizes the importance of having a burden for prayer and the need for prayer meetings to be more lively in churches. The speaker also highlights the significance of promoting explicit agreement and visible union among different denominations in order to experience a true revival. Additionally, he mentions that personal righteousness and confession of sin are key characteristics of revival, but cautions against public exhibitionism and the temptation to outdo each other in sharing past sins.

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## Transcript

The Chapel of the Air is pleased to present the first of three special broadcasts on a subject that ought to be of prime concern to every Christian. That subject is revival. I'm Ted Seeley, and it was my privilege to record these programs in Oxford, England, with Dr. J. Edwin Orr, a church historian who is recognized as the world's leading authority on the history of Protestant revivals.

Dr. Orr was in Oxford leading a conference of international scholars in the study of evangelical awakenings. John D. Jess and David Maines asked me to visit him and talk about revival so that you, our chapel family, might be encouraged in your prayers and expectation of revival. The word revival has been used and misused.

I asked Dr. Orr what was his definition of the word. The earliest definition came in about the 1700s. A revival was an awakening in or of religion.

And that is the standard dictionary definition, although in American dictionaries there's a secondary meaning. It says a week of meetings, especially in the South. Now, the word revival is used in a very careless way.

I saw a sign outside a church in the San Fernando Valley which said, Revival every Monday. I don't know what they do during the rest of the week, but I knew what the preacher was doing because five miles away in Burbank there was another sign outside a church that said, Revival every night except Monday. Now, that's not what we mean by revival.

I was talking to a Baptist pastor in Waco in Texas and he said, Brother Orr, we had a revival here last fall and nobody got revived. I said, Then obviously you didn't have a revival. Oh yes, we did.

He told me the name of the evangelist and the name of the song leader and how much money they put into publicity, but he's been never let off the ground. Now, the word revival is used in the United States for a week or a special series of meetings, and that's a misuse of the word, and we can blame it on a very godly man, Charles Finney, who said revival is nothing more than the right use of the appropriate means. He said also it's something for man to do.

Whereas Jonathan Edwards took an opposite viewpoint, I would like simply to say that the scriptural use of the word revival is, wilt thou not revive us again? God is the author of revival. Revival is the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Revive thy work in the midst of the years.

Now, most Americans, when we use the word in the evangelistic sense, they may sometimes say we were having a revival when a real revival broke out. Well, I think the word should be used for a real revival and not for what's the opposite of a real revival. Can you go back into American history and give us some examples of a real revival? Well, take the year 1858, probably one of the greatest years in American Christianity.

Prayer meetings began in September of 1857. It was just half a dozen men in a little meeting in Manhattan on Fulton Street downtown and increased in number until, by the early part of 1858, there were every church, every downtown building in New York was opened and filled at noon with praying men. Women were not in business in those days.

In fact, Horace Greeley, the great American editor, sent a reporter with horse and buggy racing around just for an hour. You can only go so far with a horse and buggy in an hour to see how many men were actually at prayer. And he counted 6,110.

And the news of that caused a landslide. And then the blessing flowed into the churches and they were having 10,000 conversions a week in New York. That movement spread throughout New England, went up the Hudson, down the Mohawk.

The Baptists had so many candidates for believer's baptism, they couldn't get them into their churches. They went down to the river and broke the ice in the river and baptized them in the cold water. And when Baptists do that, they're really on fire.

In thinking about revivals and what would characterize them, in your study, and certainly you've studied revivals more than any other living person today and perhaps any other person in the history of the church, are there one or two characteristics of a revival? And what I mean is, without these particular things, we can be pretty sure that we won't have a revival. I would say that although the events at Pentecost were unique in some ways, it was the birth of the church. Nevertheless, the events at Pentecost are the prototype of revivals.

First of all, they continued with one accord in one place, in prayer. Every great revival is marked by extraordinary prayer. I remember the title of a book written by Jonathan Edwards, A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of All God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of the Church and the Extension of Christ's Kingdom Overseas.

I believe that one of the first marks of revival is a great burden of prayer. Matthew Henry put it this way, when God intends great mercy for His people, He, first of all, sets them a-praying. But then the next thing that comes in is a conviction of sin on the part of Christians.

When they put things right, they are not only liberated from their transgressions and from the pattern of sin, but they develop a great burden for their own friends and for the preaching of the gospel around the world. So you could say all those things are common to revival. Now, there are phenomena associated with revival.

For instance, some people weep for their sins, but you can have revival without weeping. Some people have danced for joy, but you can have revival without dancing for joy. Some of my friends say, is speaking in tongues a mark of revival? It occurred at Pentecost.

I would say there have been great revivals without glossolalia. On the other hand, there have been great revivals that were followed by glossolalia. So it's a case of seeing what seems to be essential.

I will say that common to every great movement is the great burden of prayer and the intense conviction of sin and repentance. That's the key word. Perhaps that's the missing word, too.

You've mentioned repentance, a sense of sin. Another way of referring to this might be the word holiness, and I wanted to ask you about this as a characteristic. Could we expand on this a bit? I think the word of the Lord Jesus was when he is come, he will convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment.

Now it says he will convict the world, but it's also true when there's an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers, he convicts them of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. There has to be some knowledge of the word of God, and the scriptures are God's co-master to bring us to Christ. As far as holiness of living is concerned, you find that the conviction of sin, of righteousness, that's of holiness, of course, when it comes to be applied to the believer.

And deep down in every believer's heart is a desire to live a life that's pleasing to God. So I would say definitely there is a conviction of sin that certainly involves a contrast with holiness of living. What are some other characteristics that often come with revival, things like social involvement, the phenomenon of testimony? Is this often occurring? Is there always a single person, some instrument, some person that's particularly used? What about these things? Are these common characteristics in revival? One of my friends, a professor in a theological school that's well known, said that every great awakening under God was the work of some great evangelist.

I would say the very opposite, that every great evangelist, or almost every great evangelist under God has been produced by some movement of revival. For instance, D.L. Moody got his start in the 1858 revival in Chicago. You could say that Billy Graham's success in evangelism in Los Angeles in 1949 was directly related to his deep experience in a student time of revival at Forrest Home.

It's mentioned in his biography and in his autobiographical articles. Then so far as testimony is concerned, not only testimony but confession. One of the marks of revival is confession of sin.

Now this may lead to some dangerous practices. When we saw the great time of revival in Brazil in 1952, in advance we taught them let the circle of the sin be the circle of the confession. If you've sinned secretly, confess to God secretly.

If you've sinned privately and hurt someone, put it right with that person. If you've sinned openly, let everyone that knows about it know that you've put it right. So that safeguarded people from unwarranted public exhibitionism.

Testimony, yes, people will testify what God has done for them. But one of the dangers, of course, is in some popular movements where young people try to outdo each other in telling what terrible sinners there have been in the past. That, I think, is a great weakness.

So I think the testimony should be positive. And generally speaking, it's a mark of spirituality to be ashamed of things that happened in the past. The Apostle Paul said he was the chief of sinners, but he didn't start describing what his sins were.

What about social involvement or social good coming out? Is this always a characteristic of revival? It is a little different in this way. First of all, the most immediate impact of revival is personal righteousness. In other words, a man who is a drunkard will seek to be delivered from alcoholism.

A man who beats his wife will stop beating his wife and show her some kindness. But his social attitudes, for instance, racism and attitudes regarding capital and labor and so forth are likely to take a little longer to be displaced. So you say most social advantages follow within maybe, well, some almost immediately, but some maybe 25 years later.

It took the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening some time, such as Wilberforce, to overthrow the slave trade. You have to work on the conscience socially, not merely challenge people personally. But most great revivals have had a social impact.

Dr. Royer, I'd like to ask you as we conclude today's discussion to take yourself out of the role of a historian or a chronicler of God's work in the past and just open your heart to our Chapel of the Year listeners. What would you like to see God do among us as American people? I think, of course, the first thing is a burden for prayer. The last times we've had presidential days of prayer very few people bothered.

There's no great burden for prayer. The prayer meeting is not the most lively thing in churches. We can get people to exciting meetings, but I think the burden of prayer is the most important thing.

Then, of course, if we pray, it will lead us to put things right with one another. Something further, Jonathan Edwards, when he wrote that response of his to a challenge to pray for revival, he spoke of to promote explicit agreement and visible union. Every great awakening has been interdenominational.

Some denominations have ruled themselves out, but God offers it to every denomination. A.T. Pearson once said, there's never been any great revival in any country without united prayer. I think that's one of the most needed things, whereas our evangelical Christianity seems to be so divided into partisanship and the like.

I think we need to pray together. Thank you, Dr. Orr. Tomorrow, I'll ask you for an update on revivals throughout the world.

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