

The Local Church and Revival

by James A. Stewart

A New Testament revival is a collective experience of a church of born-again believers, characterized by steadfastness, doctrine, prayer, generosity, praise, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Acts 17:6, Acts 2:41, Acts 4:33, Acts 5:1, Ephesians 1:22

Topics: "Church Revival", "Holy Spirit"

Description

James A. Stewart emphasizes that true revival, as seen in the New Testament, involves renewals from within local churches, elevating them to a higher spiritual position. Revival is not merely about large evangelistic gatherings but about bringing a mighty spiritual atmosphere back to the local churches. The early Church in Acts exemplified a powerful revival, characterized by steadfastness, adherence to doctrine, fervent prayer, overflowing generosity and praise, and a demonstration of the gospel with signs and wonders, all empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

In the New Testament we discover that God's way of revival is through renewals from within so that local churches become the center of blessing. Any movement that fails to deliver the local church from its subnormal existence and to raise it to a higher position in its ascended Lord has not reached the standard of a New Testament revival.

How many sincere believers are ignorant of this fundamental truth! They look for revival in the great auditorium or tent, where thousands are gathered together in a glorious evangelistic effort. "Surely," they cry, "this is revival!" However, one of the acid tests of a true spiritual awakening is that this mighty spiritual atmosphere be taken back to the local churches.

Revival, as presented to us in the New Testament, is not so much an individual experience as a collective experience of a church of born-again believers. Pentecost marked the beginning of a new body designated by Paul as "the church" (Ephesians 1:22-23). This Church is composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, and its purpose is to express the character and life of the Son of God. That is why a believer taught by the Spirit will always pray, "O Lord, send revival in the body of Christ!"

In the New Testament we see a distinction between the Church universal and the "churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33, KJV). The local church at Corinth, for example, was one part of the whole and thus was a local expression and representation of the whole. Though a local assembly, its members were living

in spiritual union with every other believer in the world.

What a glorious and solemn truth! The evangelical believers in the book of Acts were not detached, isolated units but were all vitally linked in fellowship with the "churches of the saints" in their district. In the early chapters of Acts we catch the heavenly thrill of this New Testament fellowship. There was a holy glow in their services because the living Christ was in their midst. These believers were burning with love toward each other because they were burning with love toward Christ:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. . . . And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. . . . And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. . . . And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women. (Acts 2:41-47; 4:33; 5:11-14)

In these passages there is an overview of the type of local church that revival produces:

1. It was a steadfast church. Continuance is always the test of reality, and where a so-called revival cannot stand that test, it is wise to inquire as to the cause of the failure. The mark of a real work of God is the steadfast walk, day by day, of those affected. Backsliding is not in any sense a corollary to revival. It is only when the emotions are greatly stirred, without a deep work of grace having been wrought in the hearts of men, that backsliding is inevitable.

It is an utter impossibility to avoid deep emotion in revival because the Holy Spirit works mightily, bringing eternal realities vividly before people. But true servants of the Lord bring their emotions under the control of the Spirit of God. The work of the Spirit is quiet and deep. Saints who spend hours before the Throne know that it is when they are quietest in prayer that the Spirit of God is speaking most mightily to and through them.

So it is in the large gatherings. Excitement must not be aimed at. There must be something more solid. Although there was great excitement and noise in these early days of the church's history, the excitement was as incidental as is the dust when a woman sweeps the house clean. It is the steady walk that counts.

2. They were a doctrinal church. In Ephesians 2:20 we are told that the church was "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." This means that the church was founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

Likewise, all true revival ministry is also founded on the historic truths concerning our blessed Lord: His eternal Sonship, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His vicarious death, His bodily resurrection, and His glorious appearing. Preaching in revival times is a reaffirmation of the fundamental truths of our glorious redemption.

3. It was a prayerful church. One of the striking characteristics of the early church captured in the book of Acts is the fact that these local assemblies lived in an atmosphere of prayer. Prayer meetings were the order of the day. They prayed on every occasion. They prayed for open doors. They prayed for guidance and boldness in their ministry. They prayed before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle. They prayed that God would show them His plan and that He would frustrate Satan's plan. They prayed that He would empower and send forth workers.

They prayed in prison and they prayed themselves out of prison. They prayed in their homes and they prayed in their church gatherings. They prayed in their private circles and they prayed before the Sanhedrin. They lived on their knees. In order that the apostles might "give themselves continually to prayer" (Acts 6:4), they appointed seven men of honest report to administer the secular business of the church. So mighty in prayer were they that they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

A true New Testament church will always be mighty in prayer. One of our desperate needs is the revival of prayer in our local churches. How often I have heard the remark "Only a prayer meeting"? What is implied by such a statement? Surely it implies that there is nothing important or interesting about Christians coming together to talk with God! Surely one of the mightiest manifestations of the Spirit in revival power is the resurrection of dead prayer meetings.

4. It was an overflowing church. They overflowed in giving because they overflowed with love for the Lord Jesus. They knew the significance of the high cost of their redemption. Gazing at Calvary, they could not hoard their money or hold on to their lands and houses while others had needs. The text reveals that they continued to sell their possessions and to lay the money at the apostles' feet. Their motivation to give so generously was not mere passing excitement or the flush of first love but rather deep realization of the glory of their salvation.

In addition, they overflowed in praise. Deep spirituality and worship go hand in hand. They praised God for His glorious salvation. They praised Him that they were counted worthy to be ambassadors of the Lord Jesus. They praised Him that they could suffer shame and reproach for His glory. They praised Him that they had something to sacrifice for the spread of the gospel.

How little praise there is in our churches today! How refreshing it would be for a group of churches to come together for a united praise meeting. The saints bursting forth spontaneously into songs of adoration and worship is one of the glories of revival. In times of revival the Holy Spirit inspires a great number of hymns to be written. Huge congregations sing over and over again the songs of Zion that are written on their hearts.

5. It was a powerful church. They were powerful in the presentation of the the gospel. In one day three thousand souls were saved, and on another day about five thousand men and women. It is true that there are times of sowing as well as times of reaping, but every pastor and every group of believers should search their hearts industriously to see why there is a dearth of conversions.

It seems that Satan has so drugged the Lord's dear ones that they have no deep concern and anguish in their lack of spiritual results. How many assemblies accept with astonishing calmness annual reports of so few, if any, conversions! Such churches should convene special meetings in desperation before the Lord to see if there is anything hindering God's blessing His Word according to Acts 4:33, "With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."

In addition, the early church was powerful in their holiness. It was a powerful church because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was a frontal attack by Satan to deny the power of the Holy Spirit. When judgment was brought to bear upon these two, a holy awe fell upon saved and unsaved alike. So holy was this church that hypocrites and unbelievers dared not join themselves to it, yet scores of men and women who would truly believe were brought in daily.

How easy it is to receive the "right hand of fellowship" in our churches today! Without doubt, this weakness is one of the underlying causes of the subnormal church. Too many people are rushed to the altar. Too many people are rushed into church membership without careful examination and instruction. A. J. Gordon aptly warned,

The church's purity and its power depend, first of all, upon its unity so that if the Church attracts without at the same time transforming people, if she attaches them to her membership without assimilating them to her lifestyle, she has only weakened herself by her increase, and diminished herself by her additions.

At the time of the death of Ananias and Sapphira, the church had just entered upon her first conquest. The gospel was preached with a freeness and breadth unheard of before. Three thousand souls had been added to the church in a single day. The tide of success was rising higher and higher. The sect of the Nazarenes was becoming fairly popular. Multitudes were crowding up to lay their gifts at the apostles' feet. There was a danger that the infant church may have been overwhelmed in the tide of her own prosperity.

But like a lightning flash, the judgment of God fell in the midst of His mercies, and two who had "agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5:9) were killed at the apostles' feet. Here was an exhibition of God's holiness in the midst of His free grace. And before this unsheathed sword of His holiness, no sincere disciples were repelled, for the record is that "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (verse 14).

The terror of the Lord puts afar off those who have not the love of the Lord to bring them nigh. My brethren, I know of no lesson concerning the growth and development of Christ's Church that needs to be more thoughtfully pondered than this. The tendency of our times is to multiply the attractions of Christianity. No attraction can be too powerful, no charm can be too alluring that acts for the single end of drawing believers to Christ and identifying them with His Body. But the appeals that win men without transforming them, that join them to the church without bringing them into fellowship with Christ, are fatal to pure Christianity.

Conclusion

Whenever we see God's wonderful pattern for the Church so practically demonstrated in the book of Acts, we cry with Jeremiah, "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed!" (Lamentations 4:1). Yet as long as the blessed Holy Spirit, Himself the great standing miracle, abides and works on the earth, the Church's potential is the same as it was in the apostolic days.

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