

Ten Marks of Revival

By Tim Keller

Over the last several decades there has been an enormous amount of scholarly attention to what have historically been called spiritual 'revivals.' These are periods in which there is an explosion of spiritual interest and growth in the Christian church. In Europe and North America, for example, there were significant revivals in the 1740s, the 1830s, and the late 1850s. The 1857 revival began in lower New York City and is often called 'the Fulton Street Revival.' By one account, during a period of about 2 years, about 10% of the population of Manhattan was converted and joined the city's churches. In the 20th century there have also been major revivals in East Africa, Korea, as well as many more localized revivals.

What causes revivals? The Spirit of God, of course—but can more be said? Indeed it can. Here are ten marks of revival, bundled together in three categories. I've distilled these over the years, both from studying the Bible example, Judges, particular Psalms, and the book of Acts), from reading church history, and from my own brief encounters with revivals personally.

Three instrumental means of revival.

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate cause of a revival, but there are three instrumental means (or 'secondary causes') that the Spirit ordinarily uses. First, there is always a *recovery of the gospel*. The default mode of the human heart is self-salvation and works righteousness, whether of a conservative or a liberal variety. Revival always proceeds around a rediscovery of the wonder of grace, the radical nature of Christ's accomplishment of salvation on our behalf. Secondly, there is always *corporate prayer*—extraordinary, kingdom-centered, prevailing prayer across the ordinary walls that divide Christians.

Third, however, there is *creativity*. No revival is just like the last one. For example, the Great Awakening was based on the innovation of itinerant preaching, including open air meetings. The 1857 revival, however, was based on lay-lead prayer meetings. In each generation, some new methods arise for getting out the gospel that fit the cultural moment.

Three parts of revival.

If the Spirit begins to bless these means, what does revival actually look like? There are at least three parts to it. First, *nominal church members get converted*. There are people who profess Christian beliefs, subscribe to Christian ethics, and are baptized members of the church. But during revivals many of these people come to realize that they have never experienced the new birth or truly understood the gospel.

Second, *sleepy Christians wake up to an immediate sense of God's love and presence*. Another mark of revival is that, especially during corporate worship, everyone experiences the reality of God's presence in a way hitherto unknown to them. They begin to have direct experience of God's love that fills them with assurance and confidence. Because of this new love for God, Christians spend time in deep repentance for idols (Judges 10) which only enhances their joy.

Third, *non-believers outside the church are attracted to the Christian community in remarkable numbers*. Because of the conversion of nominal members and the assurance of believers, the church community itself becomes beautified. Christians begin to reach out in love to their community in striking ways. The cold, tribal attitudes ordinarily present in non-revived churches melt away. Non-believers are drawn in and the church grows at an amazing speed.

Four results of revival.

If revival gets underway, there are usually four results or responses. First, there is always the *excessive fringe of the revival*. Instead of being humbled by the new sense of God in their lives, some people seem to get puffed up with pride. They become condemning of Christians not in their own party. Leaders become elevated to positions of power before they are ready and often experience highly publicized lapses. Sometimes out and out charlatans see their opportunity because of the gullibility and vulnerability of the newly converted, and put themselves into authority. Many doctrinal idiosyncrasies or outright heresies are countenanced, because spiritual experience has become the main standard of validity, not Biblical truth.

Secondly, in response to the excessive fringe, there is a *mainstream cultural backlash*. The people in the leading cultural institutions find revivals frightening and vulgar. They usually fix their attention on the excesses and point it out to the rest of the world, saying, "See? There is where this revival stuff leads!"

Thirdly, *some conservative, traditional church leaders also attack the revival*. This is partly due to warranted concern about the excesses as well as an overemphasis on experience and underemphasis on the importance of the church. It is often also due to how jealous and threatened pastors can be when other ministries in their town are growing by leaps and bounds.

Despite all this, when a revival is broad and deep enough, there is *a real impact on society*. There have always been social reforms in the wake of revivals—the repeal of child labor laws, the abolition of slavery, a decrease in crime, improvements in the institution of marriage, and many other benefits.

Where is the revival?

Revival dynamics can be local, national or international. They can be intense and over soon, or they can be much slower moving and remain present at a low level for several years before subsiding. I have personally seen two periods of fairly intense revival dynamics, one on college campuses in the year 1970-71, and the other during some eighteen months at the beginning of Redeemer's ministry, 1990-91.

No one can force a major revival to happen by pushing the right buttons. God is sovereign because he is a God of grace. You can't merit a revival any more than you can merit your salvation. Yet I have seen over the years that when we earnestly seek God for his own sake (not for ministry success), and seek to be mini-cases of personal revival ourselves, positive spiritual dynamics begin to work in the church around us. I believe God has many more revivals up his sleeve, before the final. Ultimate Revival, the Ultimate Spring after Winter, when even the trees of wood will sing for joy (Ps. 96:12)!