

REVIVAL AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Summary

Revival can mean different things to different people, including times of spiritual renewal in the believer, spiritual awakening in culture, or a heightened sense of the presence of God in the church. Examples in the Bible and church history offer various ways to understand and experience revival. This paper offers guidance on how to prepare for unique times of revival, regardless of how they might look, and offers signs of both healthy and unhealthy revivals in the modern Church.

Definition and Context for Revival

The word *revival* can encompass a range of definitions. In the narrowest sense, revival pertains to restoring God's people to a holy and prioritized relationship with Him. The term describes a period in history when something special took place, such as the Azusa Street Revival. It can sometimes describe a scheduled spiritual emphasis, like a church revival or camp meeting. People also use the term to characterize a large influx of conversions. In all these definitions, the emphasis is on a time of heightened spiritual awareness and desire, usually in a certain place at a certain time.

In a sense, revival is returning to the spiritual life where we should have been all along, living a holy life with godly priorities and ministering to those around us. Throughout Scripture and history, God has revived His people by calling those who are wavering back to complete devotion. These moments lead to a fresh surge of spiritual life marked by renewed holiness, vitality, commitment, and service when we respond to Him. On a personal level, Christians experience renewed love for God and others, conviction of personal and corporate sin, and awakening from the slumber of apathy and worldliness. In this sense, revival is returning to a more ideal spiritually devoted state with an increased awareness of God's presence.

For many, revival suggests a season of generalized spiritual renewal in the church or awakening in the community. Some would distinguish the terminology, so that "spiritual renewal" refers to a renewed commitment to God on the part of believers, while increased conversions within the larger community constitutes a "spiritual awakening." Some would restrict revival to a time of unusual awareness of God's presence within the church, which can then lead to spiritual renewal and awakening. Others would treat those terms as synonymous.

There can be a tendency to use the term *revival* as a catchall word for any unique spiritual or emotional experience or service. To do so diminishes the meaning. At its core, we can understand revival as a time when a group of believers commits again to the holy life, loving community, and divine mission God intends for His people. God calls believers to be fully devoted disciples who enjoy a vibrant spiritual life and engage in reaching the lost. A community of believers who is already healthy and alive does not need revival.

Revival in Scripture

In the Old Testament, there were periods when the people of Israel needed to renew their commitment as God's people. They cried out to God and recaptured His vision for holiness by turning away from false gods, repenting of disobedience, renewing the covenant with God, wholeheartedly seeking Him, and restoring temple worship. When Asa removed false gods from the land and restored the temple, he called everyone together to seek God. The people turned to Him "with all their heart and soul"¹ (2 Chronicles 15:1–15). Hezekiah confessed the sins of his people, purified the temple, destroyed the idols, and reestablished the priestly service and sacrifices (2 Kings 18:1–8; 2 Chronicles 29–31). Josiah read the Law in the temple and led the people in renewing God's covenant, which included removing the idols across the land, bringing reform, and celebrating the Passover (2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chronicles 34–35). Josiah turned to the Lord "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses" (2 Kings 23:25). In each of these stories, God's people learned that they were living below God's standard of faithfulness and holiness and turned their hearts back to God.

The New Testament has a somewhat different paradigm. The ministry of Jesus through the Holy Spirit was itself a calling of the people of Israel back to God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the disciples preached the reality of the kingdom of God, bringing transformation to people's lives. The Holy Spirit empowered Jewish believers to reach the lost, including Gentiles, and establish the Church.

In the Gospels, John the Baptist preached repentance and invited people to return to God and prepare their hearts for the Messiah (Luke 3:2–4). Jesus talked about the Spirit's work in bringing new life, offering people salvation by being born again (John 3:1–15). Jesus also told His disciples that those who followed Him would have "rivers of living water" flowing out of them, symbolizing the Spirit's continual work of reviving the believer and the community (John 7:37–39).

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, emboldening and empowering the Early Church through Spirit baptism. As a result, around three thousand became followers of Jesus in one day (Acts 2:41). The vibrant spiritual life of the community was marked by a dedication to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42), and led to the number growing to five thousand who were saved (4:4), followed by great multitudes (5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5). In each of these cases, the Holy Spirit empowered believers to experience spiritual renewal which resulted in leading others into the Kingdom.

In the Epistles, Paul told the Ephesian church to be *continually* "filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). As Pentecostals, we believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit brings us

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into a life of spiritual renewal or personal revival. We can build ourselves up by praying in the Spirit and bring encouragement and gifts to others to build them up (1 Corinthians 14:4).

We are also warned about the possibility of needing to be spiritually revived after all this. Paul warned us not to “grieve the Holy Spirit” by living in ways that diminish our spiritual life (Ephesians 4:30). John wrote to the Church, not unbelievers, that if we “confess our sins,” Jesus will forgive us and cleanse us from all that is in the way of us having a right relationship with God (1 John 1:9). James assured us that if we will “draw near to God, he will draw near to us” (James 4:8). Finally, Jesus warned the church in Ephesus that even after they’ve done everything right, they had still lost their first love (Revelation 2:4). Even the New Testament churches could be in a spiritual state that warranted revival.

Historic Revivals

Church history includes a variety of revivals and spiritual awakenings. The first 1,500 years saw small pockets of revival, such as in monastic communities, and large movements that impacted nations.² The Reformation provided one type of revival (though it was not always healthy).

After the Reformation, there were several revivals of prayer and evangelism. The work of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians produced nonstop prayer for over a hundred years and the sending of 2,400 missionaries. The cultural and spiritual revival of the First Great Awakening affected both sides of the Atlantic under the leadership of John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and others. The Second Great Awakening started in the early 1800s with the Cane Ridge Revival, continued under leaders like Charles Finney, and made evangelism primary.

The modern Pentecostal Movement is the fruit of several revivals at the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1904 Welsh Revival under Evan Roberts saw more than one hundred thousand conversions. The 1906 Mukti Mission Revival in India, led by Pandita Ramabai, saw an explosion of evangelism among women and a renewal of spiritual gifts. The Azusa Revival (1906–1909), pastored by William J. Seymour, launched the Pentecostal revival globally. In the first two decades, Pentecostals led missions and revivals in Africa (Lucy Farrow, John G. Lake, et al.), Europe (T. B. Barratt, Lewi Pethrus, et al.), Oceania (Smith Wigglesworth, et al.), Asia (A.G. and Lillian Garr, et al.) and South America (Daniel Berg, Gunnar Vingren, R. Edgar Miller, et al.).

The Assemblies of God owes its beginning to revivals and revivalists throughout the United States who decided to cooperate to bring revival to every community and every nation. There are also recognizable revivals that have taken place in modern days. In these historic revivals, God has used many willing and humble hearts to bring transformation and new life to His Church throughout the ages. God seems to stir revival in each generation, calling believers back to their faith and reaching new people with the gospel.

² For a more elaborate demonstration of Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions, see the appendix titled “Pentecostal and Charismatic Timeline” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

How Do You Prepare for Revival?

Preparing for revival involves a blending of divine and human activity. First, we recognize that revival depends upon the Lord since human beings cannot produce it on their own. Since revival is about moving hearts toward God, we recognize that the Holy Spirit is the prime mover, administrator, and initiator. At the same time, most biblical examples included people who recognized that they were living below God's standard and called out in repentance. God's answer to that cry is a revival of His mercy with His restoring love and power.

A commitment to prayer is one element regularly seen in revivals. Many Christians have relied on the wording of 2 Chronicles 7:14³ as a guide to revival. God's people must be willing to humble themselves, pray for God to come near, seek His face (restoring relationship), and turn from their wicked ways. This is very similar to James's admonition that we should submit ourselves to God and humble ourselves (James 4:7–9). We should "come near to God," and He will draw near to us when we wash ourselves and renew our commitment to the Lord. This attitude of continual submission to God brings about the personal revival we desire.

Another sometimes missed element is the preparation needed for a community to steward a revival. Are churches ready to accommodate crowds larger than the building's design planned for? Are there available workers on all levels to handle the crowd (greeters, parking attendants, children's workers, altar ministers, etc.)? Have churches planned how to follow up on an influx of new converts and disciple them to Christian maturity?

How Can Leaders Prepare Their Churches for Revival?

Some pastors have tried to cultivate a spiritual environment in order to replicate revivals from other places. This is a mistake. Our priority should not be to create a revival that mimics what is happening elsewhere but to cultivate a healthy spiritual environment where experiencing God becomes normal. Some of the ways churches can foster that environment are as follows.

Healthy Leadership

Are we, as leaders, growing spiritually and allowing others to help carry the burden and avoid burnout? A healthy church must have people who have responded to God's call and have prepared to lead and equip others to minister to people. Leaders must be willing, in preparation for revival, to lead in repentance and humility.

Discipleship

Do we provide consistent opportunities for new converts to grow and mature? Healthy discipleship systems lead people to wholeness by dealing with brokenness and sin.

³ For a longer discussion of the context of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and its application to today, see Martin Selman, *2 Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994).

Spirit Baptism

Do we create spaces for people to encounter the Holy Spirit and be filled with the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Reviver who cultivates healthy spirituality in believers.

Moving in the Spirit

Are believers prepared and encouraged to move in the spiritual gifts (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4–11)? The Spirit often moves when everyone embraces the opportunity to follow Him through gifts and encouragement to the Body.

Planning and Preparation

Have churches prepared for larger crowds and an influx of converts that come with revival? Have they planned how to accommodate the numbers with the available resources and facilities? Do they have enough volunteers and workers to help steward the revival properly and follow up with new converts for discipleship?

Signs of Healthy Revival

While every church and every believer can experience revival, we recognize that there are special times when God seems to do something unique in particular places. How are we to judge these notable revivals? Here are a few characteristics of healthy revival movements.

Stability

Various unique works of the Spirit visit some revivals. We should pursue the typical, celebrate the unique, and not quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Christ-Centered

Though revival should involve good leadership, true revival centers on Jesus, not human personalities.

Awareness of the Presence of God

While God is always present wherever His people gather, there is often a recognition that God's presence is manifested in tangible ways that change people's lives.

Repentance

One consistent characteristic is repentance, as the Spirit of God actively convicts people of sin and compromise in order to draw them back into a relationship with Him.

Alignment with the Word of God

Everything that happens should elevate the authority of God's Word and sound doctrine.

Prayer

Deeper experiences of intercessory prayer usually mark revival, where people seek God in desperation and experience His surprising work (Habakkuk 3:1–2).

Salvations, Water Baptisms, Spirit Baptisms, and Calls to Ministry

Revival should always point the Church back to the unchurched. This should mean people are saved, baptized in water, receive the baptism in the Spirit, and understand their calling into service (Acts 19:1–6).

Signs of Unhealthy Revival

While revivals have many positive effects, there is also the potential for unhealthy activity that works against what God is doing. Too often, human agendas, carnality, and selfishness can get in the way when God desires to move. In addition, we must watch for the enemy's attempts to stop what God is doing. Here are some common warning signs of unhealthy revival.

Excess

Beware of excesses and extremes, such as overemotionalism and sensationalism, which can work to divert people's attention away from God. Revival can get off track when there is an overemphasis on spiritual manifestations, miracles, sensationalism, or "new revelations" about spiritual things that lead to sensationalism.

Manipulation

Be careful of people or leaders who might manipulate the work of the Spirit or people involved for their own purposes (Acts 8:18–23). Such leaders may become controlling and draw attention to themselves and their sensational methods rather than Jesus.

Irreverence

Be careful of those who treat holy things with irreverence or contempt. Such attitudes can "put out the Spirit's fire" and stifle the work God is doing (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Lack of Accountability

Revival can thrive when there are proper boundaries. However, things get unhealthy when leaders use revival as validation to no longer be accountable.

Self-Interest

Leaders must maintain the fruit of the Spirit and not use the revival's success as a license for self-promotion.

Conclusion

If you are considering attending a revival that has gained some notoriety, watching for these unhealthy characteristics before participating is always important. Similarly, if you are in a place of leadership in a revival service, spiritual discernment in all these areas is critical to stewarding and guarding an authentic work of the Spirit. Remember to stay humble and seek the Lord; He will guide and protect His work. A leader's job is to perceive from the Spirit what God wants to do and to watch for potential situations that can get things off track.

What we often call revival is simply returning to God's best plan for us. He desires for us to live holy and devout lives, worship in healthy, spiritually vibrant churches where believers are disciplined and equipped, and reach the lost through Spirit-empowered evangelism. When we fall short of God's ideal, we must respond to Him in repentance, change our ways, and reprioritize. God will respond to our humility by reviving us. This revived state is where we should remain.

God is still reviving His people; He will pour out His Spirit upon us as we draw near. May God shake us from tolerance of sin and awaken us from our apathy. We humbly echo Isaiah's invitation, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1).