THE ROLE OF REVIVALS IN THE GREAT COMMISSION

RICK JAMES

Writing history is a beast. In the old days, you were fed dates and places and remembering them had the thrill of swallowing a sales receipt. This system for organizing events was based on strict chronology: such and such happened on this and that date.

Modern histories tend to reject this approach. They probably have academic reasons for doing so, but I wouldn’t underestimate economic incentives: who buys a history book or elects a history class if it’s nothing but facts and dates. And so modern histories tend to be sexier, organizing events and facts around more romantic subject matter like people, places, themes or events. The life of a Benedict Arnold, for example, is much more interesting tree for hanging the ornamental facts of the American Revolution.

What we need here is a picture, or history of you will, of the spread of the gospel between roughly 1700 (where our last chapter left off) to the late 20th century. And you’ll be happy to know that I’ve rejected facts and dates as the notes to present you the symphony of God’s handiwork in the last 300 years. I have instead selected ‘revivals’ as the organizing principle, and as I describe it to you, I think you’ll see it’s a pretty good one. For revivals and missions are inseparable. Of course my file folders will be of no use to you if you don’t know what revivals are so let’s begin there.

WHAT IS REVIVAL?

When I say ‘revival’ any number of things might come to mind: televangelists, snake-handling, exotic haircuts, faith healing, or preachers with the ecclesiastical names of Jethro, Jedd or Billy Bob. Whatever your thoughts, this is not that.

In the book of Acts we read of the Holy Spirit powerfully descending upon the insipient first century church and empowering them for the fulfillment of the Great Commission:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:1-11)
This historic event is known as Pentecost. It could also be called a ‘revival’ or ‘awakening’ for while it was unique, something quite like has been repeated in modern times, on a much larger scale, under the titles ‘revival’ and ‘awakening’. In fact from the period of 1700 to the present something much like Pentecost has occurred approximately six times.

**Great Awakening** (1726-1756): Effecting Germany, the U.S., Wales, England and Scotland

**Second Great Awakening** (1776-1810): Effecting the U.S., Canada, Scotland, Wales, England, Finland and Norway

**Transatlantic Revival** (1813-1846): Effecting Germany, Switzerland, Holland, France, Norway, Sweden, the U.S., Scotland, Wales, England, South America and the Pacific Islands

**Layman’s Prayer Revival** (1857-1895): Effecting the U.S., Canada, Scotland, Wales, England and South Africa

**Global Revival** (1900-1939): Effecting the U.S., Wales, England, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Scandinavia, India, Ethiopia, East Africa, Korea, Norway and China

**Evangelical Awakenings** (mid twentieth century): Canada, the U.S., Taiwan and the British Isles

During these periods, God’s Spirit was poured out upon the church, in dramatic, miraculous, life and history altering ways. A primary result of which was missions or world evangelization, just like in the first Pentecost.

When I say that God’s Spirit overflowed in a dramatic overpowering fashion, you can’t possibly imagine to what extent, so let me give you some idea.

In the Layman’s Prayer Revival of 1858, as ships drew within 100 miles to the ports of the American cities experiencing revival, they “seemed to come into a zone of the Spirit’s influence. Ship after ship arrived with the same tale of sudden conviction and conversion. In one ship a captain and the entire crew of thirty men found Christ out at sea and entered the harbor rejoicing.” Imagine the scene, in New York harbor, of 1,000 men kneeling on the bottom deck of the battleship North Carolina, weeping and shouting for mercy.

As the revival spread from city to city in the U.S. the entire metropolitan area was swept up into prayer meetings like, here, in this account from Philadelphia:

> At first, only the small room was occupied, with a few in attendance. Then it became overflowing, and the meeting moved to the main saloon, meetings starting there on the tenth of March. Twenty-five hundred seats were provided, and were filled to overflowing. The sponsors next removed a partition from the main floor space and platform; next, the floor platform and lower gallery, then floor platform and both galleries filled up, fully six thousand people gathered daily.

> For months on end each separate church was opened at least each evening. Some of them as often as three and five times a day and all were filled. Simple prayer, confession, exhortation and singing was all that happened, but it was so honest, so solemn, the silence so awful, the singing so overpowering, the meetings were unforgettable.

> In order to continue the work, which flooded churches with inquirers and converts, a big canvas tent was bought for $2,000 and opened for religious services on May 1, 1858. During the following four months, an aggregate of 150,000 attended the ministry under the canvas, many conversions resulting. The churches in Philadelphia reported 5,000 converts thus won.

Perry Miller, the great Harvard historian, chronicles the total number of converts to Christ (and added to the churches) in the U.S. during the Layman’s Revival as one million, or 3.2% of the U.S. population. (An analogous number of converts today would be ten million.) Dr. Miller called this revival, “the event of the century.”

Now as I noted there have been six major revivals since 1700, and with every wave of revival came a thrust of missions, like labor pains pushing forward the final advent of Christ’s kingdom. Revivals do not account for all missionary activity in this period but because they are so integral to it, I have selected this as the lens by which to see missionary expansion in the modern era.

**Missions Mindset**
We should note that the century leading up to the revivals of the 1700’s was entirely absorbed with the Reformation. Prior to the Reformation the Roman church had wrongly viewed missions in a geopolitical sense: missions and evangelism were measured by whether the country was under the dominion of the Pope and Roman church. In such a distorted understanding the Crusades would have seemed like a missionary endeavor.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was a reclaiming of biblical faith and apostolic Christianity, and what this meant for Protestants at the time is that they saw missions primarily as spreading the good news of the Reformation to places under the control of the Roman church.

All this to say, when we come to the 1700’s there’s an enormous void in the understanding of most Christians of what the Great Commission was all about, and what it meant to proclaim the gospel to all nations. It just would not have dawned on your average Christian that going to foreign lands to share the gospel was something a Christian should do, or anyone sane for that matter.

And as the renaissance was a rebirth of culture after long dark ages, there is a similar awakening and rebirth to the biblical call to missions, and as the first revival dawns, we witness the Christians of the 18th century just beginning to rub the sand out of there eyes.

**THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING (1726-1756)**

The First Awakening primarily brought a renewed spiritual hunger to believers in America and England but from a missions perspective, its most profound impact was made upon a small group of believers in Germany.

Born in Dresden German in 1700, into a great family of nobility, Count Von Zinzendorf’s heart for God and missions was evident at a young age, as he began a ‘missions’ club for the expansion of the gospel with a few friends in grade school called “The Order of the Grain of Mustard.” As a godly man he used his considerable wealth and influence to expand the cause of Christ. And when persecuted believers from the Protestant wars needed asylum they knew to whom they could turn. Zinzendorf opened his estate, called Herrnhut, to beleaguered Christian refugees, particularly the Moravians (long embattled believers from Czech). This little community experienced a powerful revival, later referred to as the Moravian Pentecost, and within two weeks of the outpouring, twenty-four men and twenty-four women covenanted to pray ‘hourly intercessions,’ thus praying every hour around the clock, a prayer vigil that would go unhindered for the next 100 years.

In 1731, while attending the coronation of Christian VI in Copenhagen, the young Count met a converted slave from the West Indies, Anthony Ulrich. Anthony’s tale of the inhuman slave trade moved Zinzendorf, who brought him back to Herrnhut. As a result, two young men, Leonard Dober and David Nitchmann, were sent to St. Thomas to live among the slaves and preach the Gospel. This was the first organized Protestant mission work of the modern era, and grew rapidly to Africa, America, Russia, and other parts of the world. By the end of Zinzendorf’s life there were active missions from Greenland to South Africa. A total of 2,158 of its members going overseas, the majority of whom died within their first years of mission service. Though the Baptist missionary William Carey is often refered to as the “Father of Modern Missions,” he himself would credit Zinzendorf with that role.

The First Great Awakening spread from Europe to the U.S, as preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitfield preached to millions, a rather significant number as the entire population of the colonial U.S. was only about a million people at the time—give or take a puritan or two. This first hand account of Whitfield preaching in Connecticut provides a glimpse of the spiritual passions that were being lit during the awakening in both the U.S. and England:

> We went down with the stream. I heard no man speak a word all the way, three miles, but everyone pressing forward in great haste, and when we got down to the old meetinghouse there was a great multitude—it was 3 or 4000 people assembled together. We got off from our horses and shook off the dust, and the ministers were then coming to the meetinghouse. I turned and looked towards the great river and saw ferry boats running swift, forward and backward, bringing back loads of people, the oars rowed nimble and quick. Everything, men, horses and boats, all seemed to be struggling for life.

Jonathan Edwards, a New England pastor, impassioned by the Great Awakening sweeping the
colonies, promoted in his writings a transatlantic (England, the U.S., Scotland, etc), concert of prayer “for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom’. But nothing would equal the effect of another of Edward’s works, “The Life of David Brainerd.” Brainerd was a missionary to the native Indians in New England, and the published account of his diary and missionary exploits inspired million. Like a generation of children wearing coonskin caps after reading the adventures of Davy Crocket, this book fired the imagination and faith of Christians in the U.S. and Europe and provided the first compelling vision for missionary service—the Great Commission was coming back on the “to-do” list of churches everywhere.

THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING (1776-1810)

One of those deeply effected by Edward’s publication of “The Life of David Brainerd” was a young man growing up on the other side of the Atlantic in Northamptonshire, England. Born a generation later than Edwards, William Carey was apprenticed by his father as a shoemaker at the age of 14. Born with a rather active mind, Carey educated himself while he worked he on shoes, teaching himself Hebrew, Greek, Italian, Dutch and French and who knows what else. With a passion for God, and boredom for shoe repair, by his mid twenties Carey had switched careers becoming a Baptist minister. Deeply moved by the writings of Edwards and the example of David Brainerd, Carey sought to engage other local ministers to partner in the cause of missions. Their response to his overtures were underwhelming to say the least, replying “When God chooses to win the heathen. He will do it without your help or ours.” Apparently not everyone was reading “The Life of David Brainerd.” But Carey did two significant things in response. First, he wrote a book called An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens which provided a theological justification for missionary activity. The second thing he did was leave for India as a missionary—that’ll show them! And frankly it did. People just didn’t leave for India and Carey’s commitment created quite a stir.

As the Second Great Awakening spread across America, the revivals most profound and lasting effect occurred on the college campuses, particularly at Williams college in Massachusetts.

As an entering freshman at Williams College (in 1806) Samuel Mills came into contact with a group of fellow Christians who were meeting weekly to pray for revival among the students on campus. Although he was a freshman Mills was also twenty-three (perhaps he took some years off to find himself) and because of his maturity and spiritual depth he quickly became the leader of these students. During the summer of 1806, Fearful of contempt and possible disruption from their peers, Mills invited the students to join him in prayer in Sloan’s meadow not far from campus. Having only the farmers Almanac for a weather guide they were unexpectedly deluged by rain and needed to continue the prayer meeting under the safety of a haystack. As they continued in prayer they felt their hearts burdened for world evangelization and before the meeting had ended each member had been moved by zeal and the Spirit of God to commit their lives to missionary service in foreign lands. The historic event became known as the Haystack Prayer Meeting. And historic it was for it began a revival that spread across Williams College, Yale, Amherst, Dartmouth, Princeton, to name a few, leading to the conversion of a third to one half of the total student bodies.”

But the students had the Williams college library at their disposal and therefore access to Edward’s writings as well as Carey’s “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens.” This translated their revival fervor into missionary zeal. As a result, Mills and other students upon graduation formed the first organizations for foreign missions in the U.S. and headed off (after training at Andover and Mount Holyoke seminary) to Calcutta, Hawaii, Palestine, West Africa and Sri Lanka—the gospel, now, beginning to get some mileage.

And so at the radical roots of modern missions we have: a crazy count named Zinzendorf (not Chocula) who sends off the first missionaries; revival awakening Europe and America out of its spiritual coma; the writings of Jonathan Edwards igniting a flame; the example of William Carey running off to India, and a publication he wrote becoming a manifesto for some zealous college students who start the first missionary society on their way to the first harvest fields: India, Hawaii, Palestine, Africa and Sri Lanka.
THE TRANSATLANTIC REVIVAL (1813-1846)

During this time at least a dozen major missionary societies were formed, and several smaller one. What’s a missionary society? Well, what happens when hundreds of students graduate and take off for India and Africa, with only $18 in their pockets. And who makes sure they are even qualified to go?

The sending of missionaries necessitated organization and so Missions Societies sprang into being facilitating the missionary sending of a denomination or the missionary sending to particular region or country.

But this was not a period of time where missionaries set sail for anywhere and everywhere—that would come at the end of the century. The missions of this era proceeded to fill out, reinforce and continue the labor in the locations initiated by pioneers like William Carey. And so the gospel at this point, besides the U.S. and Europe continued to make headway where it had been newly planted: South America (the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Columbia), West Africa, India, Hawaii and the Polynesian islands, Sri Lanka, Samoa, the West Indies, New Zealand, the American Indians and I’m sure a few other places I’m leaving out.

THE LAYMAN’S PRAYER REVIVAL (1857-1895)

New York City is generally recognized as the launching point of this revival and the story of its beginnings goes something like this:

Mr. Jeremiah C. Lanphier, a lay missionary in New York City, was greatly burdened for the salvation of souls. Almost daily in the lecture room of the old Dutch church on Fulton Street he would go alone to pray for a genuine revival.

The going was slow. A few families came but often Lanphier would return to his room in the church consistory weary and discouraged. At such times he “spread out his sorrows before the Lord.” And he never failed to draw new strength from his time of prayer.

On September 23rd, 1857, Lanphier committed to invite others to join him, announcing a weekly prayer meeting with a simple placard on the church door which read, “Prayer meeting from 12 to 1 o’clock—stop 5, 10, or 20 minutes, or the whole hour as your time admits.” It wasn’t until 12:30 until he heard a step on the stairs. One man came in, then another and another until there were six. Nothing remarkable took place. After a few minutes of prayer the meeting was dismissed with the decision that another meeting would be held the following Wednesday. Twenty came to the next noon-hour meeting. The following Wednesday, forty. A week later it became a daily prayer meeting; the meeting room overflowed and simultaneous meetings were held in other auditoriums of the church building. The seats were all filled, passages and entrances were blocked and hundreds were turned away for lack of room as crowds swelled to 3,000, leading to the formation of prayer meetings throughout New York City.

The revival, like several before it, went back and forth between England and the U.S. but it isn’t so much where the revival sparks, but whether those who are revived take the gospel elsewhere. And in the initial years of the Layman’s Revival there wasn’t as much missionary activity for one plane and simple reason: the college campuses were not as impacted by this revival. For no matter how great the outpouring of God’s Spirit, the average layman or businessman in not able to leave his job, house, wife and four children to hop on a boat for India—it just ain’t gonna happen. Students are the missionaries in waiting, not mortgaged stockbrokers.

But heading into the 1860’s, 70’s and 80’s missions did pick up, and there was notable progress in the gospel going to China, Japan and Indonesia. The story of missions in these years is best seen in the era’s most famous missionary, Hudson Taylor. Taylor began the China Inland Mission, seeing the need to bring the gospel to the deep ‘interior’ of the nation. Most of the previous pioneering missions had stopped in the major cities and coastlines, and following Taylor’s lead the decades to follow would see the rise of societies like the Sudan Interior Mission, African Inland Mission, and others. Not content to simply plant a gospel flag on the map, Taylor sought to saturate the entire country with the gospel, traveling to its most remote and dangerous frontiers.

Taylor also felt that missionary effectiveness hinged on indigenization. Which is a nice way to say that Taylor shaved his head, wore a ponytail and donned the traditional Chinese garments of the people he was ministering to. Or to put in Taylor’s words “Let us in everything unsinful become like the Chinese, that by...
Last, the China Inland Mission was broadly non-denominational, unlike denominational mission societies of the early part of the century, and significantly lax on divisive issues of doctrine. Basically Taylor, did everything in his power to make missions accessible to as many as would go, and make the message (through indigenization) as accessible to as many as would hear.

These were all rather revolutionary innovations in missions and would greatly aid to the success of the next generation to go out to the world. Hudson Taylor had served for 51 years, recruited 800 missionaries to join him in China, and seen some 18,000 Chinese come to Christ, before passing on to his reward at the age of 73.

THE GLOBAL REVIVAL (1900-1939)

In 1886, the first ever, Christian conference for college students was held at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts. Though used to addressing audiences in the thousands, the conference’s main speaker, Dwight Moody, agreed to come and speak to the 250, some odd, college students assembled from schools such as Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, and Cornell. Though Moody was the Billy Graham of his day, the most impassioned speech was given by fellow student and Princeton senior, Robert Wilder. Wilder challenged his fellow students to consider taking the gospel to the world as foreign missionaries. One by one, a hundred students came forward to accept the challenge. As a symbol of their commitment, students signed a pledge, which simply read:

“We the undersigned, declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the unevangelized portions of the world.”

Seeing God’s hand at work, Wilder spent the next year traveling to over one hundred and fifty campuses, giving the same challenge, and by the same time the following summer an additional 2,106 students had signed the Pledge. The movement and momentum grew and the exodus of college students to foreign missions would last for the next fifty years. This became known as the Student Volunteer Movement and it disbursed a total of 20,500 missionaries to the far-flung reaches of the globe, the greatest missionary endeavor in the history of the church.

20,500! To give you some idea how big a number that is, picture a town...with 20,500 people in it...it was that big. Sorry, I couldn’t think of a good analogy.

While the starting date does not coincide with the heart of this revival, I mention the Student Volunteer Movement here, because a vast number of missionaries that went out, did so as the fruit of the Global Revival that took place around the turn of the twentieth century.

By the time Global Revival subsided in the 1930’s almost every country on the map could claim some missionary activity. The motto of the Student Volunteer Movement had been “The Evangelization of the world in this generation” and one can only say in amazement that they came pretty darn close. Well, almost, which I’ll explain in the last section.

EVANGELICAL AWAKENINGS (MID 20TH CENTURY)

In June of 1947, at the Forest Home College Briefing Conference the evening’s main speaker, Henrietta Mears, gave an impassioned plea for total commitment and availability to Christ. Several men were so moved by her words that they asked to meet in her cabin later for prayer. Mears’ biographer would describe the ensuing prayer meeting in these words:

“As they knelt they were overcome by a sense of helplessness and inadequacy. They prayed on into the late hours of the night. There was much weeping and crying out the Lord. At times no one prayed as God spoke to them.

Then the fire fell. However it can be explained. God answered their prayer with a vision. They saw before them the college campuses of the world teeming with unsaved students, who held in their hand the power to change the world. The college campuses—they were the key to world leadership, to world revival.

One of the men attending that prayer time was Bill Bright, a new Christian for all of a few months. Dr. Bright would go on to found Campus Crusade for Christ in response to this powerful revelation. Billy Graham was also at this conference and several weeks later began his Los Angeles Crusade, which would launch the Graham Crusades and make him international figure overnight. A year later the newly formed campus ministry Intervarsity would hold their first missions conference called Urbana, which
continues today gathering over 20,000 students triennially for the cause of world missions. Youth for Christ also began at this time as did Navigators and dozens of other student ministries pulsing a new generation of missions and missionaries out to the world.

Well, if the Student Volunteer Movement brought the gospel to nearly every country on the planet what was the purpose of this latest missions thrust? Oh, yeah, about that...

Well, seeing the finish line in sight, missiologists, as the name would imply, became somewhat more scientific in their study of missions. What they found is what most missionaries intuitively knew to be true. Countries do not define just one people group or language. I mean, tomorrow Chile could take over the entire world, and we would have but one country. But that would really be an illusion for flying under one flag would be hundreds and thousands of people groups and languages.

I know. You’re frustrated. Why did those missiologists have to put the whole thing under a microscope anyway? Just say to yourself, “reality is my friend.” It will help, especially when I tell you that while there are 194 countries in reality there are thousands of people groups and languages contained in those 194 countries.

So all that to say, thank God for the new movement of missionaries coming forth in the mid twentieth century and continuing to this very day. And thank God for one more thing: technology.

For the modern science of missions has also created modern tools, that have allowed us to make enormous progress in reaching every people group with the gospel.

Take for example the Jesus Film, produced by Campus Crusade for Christ. To date it has been viewed by 6 billion people and has been translated into 900 languages. And so the likelihood of seeing the evangelization of the world and fulfillment of the Great Commission in this generation is actually quite good. But that depends on many things, not least of which is the decisions you make concerning missions.

For now you have enough facts and figures, but in the end of Section Two of this book, we will revisit the current state of affairs and see exactly where we are in relation to reaching every people groups in the world with the gospel, and where we need to dedicate ourselves in order to complete the task.

Let me end on this final note of good news. If you have been tracking along with your calculator you will also notice that historically revivals seem to occur roughly every forty to fifty years. That would make us overdue. And in light of where we stand in the fulfillment of Christ’s command to take the Gospel to all nations, it would seem that a revival today, particularly among students, would be about all we need to “Get er done.”

Rick James is on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ and serves as the publisher of CruPress.