



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

## THE SPARK THAT IGNITES • Robert Coleman

The Psalmist prayed: “Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?” (Psalm 85:6). He recognized that the people of God were spiritually impotent, the fires of devotions were burning low, their joy was gone. “Revive us,” he cried, but what did he mean? What is “revival?”

Many today think of “revival” as a series of meetings designed to whip up interest in the church. Others think of it as some kind of religious emotionalism. Yet, I doubt that these popular associations of the term ever entered the mind of the psalmist.

### Revival: Restoring Life’s True Purpose

“Revival” means to wake up and live. The Old Testament word for revival comes from a word meaning “to live,” which originally conveyed the idea of breathing, inasmuch as breath is the expression of life in all animate beings. Hence, it could be said of the dry bones: “I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live” (Ezekiel 37:4; cf. 37:6, 14; Job 33:4; 1 Kings 17:22). Revival, or life, was “breathing in the breath of God.” As used here the word underscores that the source of this life is in God.

The comparable New Testament word means, “to live again” (Revelation 20:5; Romans 14:9; cf. 7: 9). As Jesus used the term, it denotes the change in the life of a penitent prodigal who returns to the father’s house, in the sense that the son who was “dead” is now “alive again” (Luke 15:24,32). Other words liken revival to the rekindling of a slowly dying fire (2 Timothy 1:6), or to a plant which has put forth fresh shoots and “flourished again” (Philippians 4:10).

The basic idea of revival is always the return of something to its true nature and purpose. In terms of redemptive history, revival can be seen as that “strange and sovereign work of God in which He visits His own people, restoring, reanimating, and releasing them into the fullness of His blessing.” By its power, “vast energies, hitherto slumbering, are awakened, and new forces—for long preparing under surface—burst into being.” In the wake of revival comes life—life in its fullness, life overflowing with the love and power of God.

Not everything about this new life can be fully explained, of course. Being a supernatural work of the Spirit, there is always the element of mystery about it. But one thing is clear—in revival, men and women come alive to the life of God.

### Personal Transformation

Revival becomes evident by the change wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit. The extent of its penetration will vary, and there will be differences in its mode of expression, but revival is manifest whenever you see (spiritual life) rising from a state of comparative depression, to a tone of increased vigor and strength.

The most immediate transformation is in the renewal of individual Christian experience. When one responds fully to divine grace, there is a wonderful assurance of sins forgiven; the heart is clean; the soul is free. Faith does not stagger at the promises of God. Prayer pulsates with the fragrance of heaven. Love fills the heart with singing, and there is spontaneous praise. There is still suffering and temptation, but amid it all, is the light of God’s face shining in the inner man. Christ is real; His peace sweeps over the soul; His victory overcomes the world.

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From the standpoint of New Testament Christianity, there is nothing unusual about the revival experience. It is the way a person should always live. In the words of Roy Hessian:

“It is just you and I walking along the highway in complete oneness with the Lord Jesus and with one another, with cups continually cleansed and overflowing with the life and love of God.”

Or as Charles G. Finney explains, revival simply “consists in obeying God,” which is the most elemental duty of man.

Revival in this personal sense should be a constant reality. The idea that revival is a “thing of special times and season” comes from the inconsistent nature of man, not from the will of God. Unfortunately, most of us experience those times of spiritual sluggishness which make revival necessary. But if we lived in the continual fullness of the Spirit of Christ, as God desires, revival would be an abiding state.

### New Vitality for the Church

Yet, revival involves more than personal blessing. As individuals come alive to the reality of Christ, and this experience is multiplied in the lives of others, the church feels a new unity of faith and purpose—a genuine fellowship in the Spirit. For when believers are brought near to the living Head of the body, they are “brought nigh to each other in holy love.” This does not imply lockstep agreement on every issue, but to a remarkable degree, revival creates an environment whereby sincere disciples of truth come together, and minor differences are resolved in the larger commitment to a common mission.

The love of Christ filling our hearts, moves us to care for those whom God loves, and for whom He gave His Son. Out of this compassion, the dynamic for a compelling evangelism is born. The commission to make disciples of all nations cannot be ignored. In the same spirit, social concern is quickened for oppressed and afflicted people. Duty becomes a joy. Love naturally overflows when hearts are full.

Society inevitably feels the impact of renewal among Christians. As the gospel goes forth in Word and deed, the world takes note that men and women have been with Jesus. Sinners are moved to seek the Savior. Restitutions are made. Broken homes are reunited. Public moral standards improve. Integrity makes its way into government. To the extent that the spirit of revival prevails—mercy, justice, and righteousness sweep over the land.

### Human Hindrances

Of course, there are human factors which can hinder revival—materialism, for example. Or it might be cultural prejudice that refuses to yield to the new spirit of love. For that matter, any perversion of righteousness will hinder revival. And because society is infiltrated completely by human depravity, revival will always have an uphill battle.

Opposition will be most pronounced from those who do not want a spiritual dimension of life. Some will be repelled by the personal moral changes called for by the revival; others will resent its social implications. Whenever practical holiness is manifest, antagonism can be expected from the carnal mind that is against God. Such antagonism may even come from within the religious community.

We should remember, too, that there are human failings even among those who experience revival. Regrettable as it is, spiritual renewal does not make any one less a finite man or woman. Ignorance, emotional instability, personality quirks, and all the other traits of our fallen humanity, are still very much in evidence. Though the revival is not responsible for these shortcomings, it has to bear their reproach.

### The Divine Hallmark

Nevertheless, wherever the spirit of revival is felt, attention focuses, not on human weakness, but on divine power. It reveals One who makes the earth His footstool, and who sees nations as dust on the scales of His judgement. In the might of His holy arm, “human personalities are overshadowed, and human programs abandoned. In stripping away the artificiality of human achievements, revival creates a situation where the grace of God is magnified. Christ is lifted up and honest hearts bow in adoration before Him.



Overshadowing it all, is the awe-inspiring reality of “the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). This is the witness of revival which has no counterfeit—the overwhelming sense of the Holy Spirit drawing men and women to Christ and making them an instrument of blessing to others. Where this is in evidence, the world has to admit that God is alive.

#### Some Revival Accounts

Jonathan Edwards, renowned pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts, might be cited as one witness to the reality and power of revival. Describing the effect of a great outpouring of the spirit in his parish in 1735, he said:

“As the number of true saints multiplied, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them.... On whatever occasions persons met together, Christ was heard of and seen in the midst of them.... The Spirit of God began to be so wonderfully poured out in a general way through the town, people had soon done with their old quarrels, back biting, and intermeddling with other men’s matters. The tavern was soon left empty. Every day seemed in many respects like a Sabbath day.”

Edwards noted, too, that “there were many instances of persons who came from abroad on visits” to the town who “partook of that shower of divine blessing,” and, as these visitors “went home rejoicing,” soon “the same work began to prevail in several other towns in the country.”

The Korean revival early in this century is another example of what happens when the Spirit of God takes over. A missionary who attended a church meeting during the flood tide of this outpouring said:

“The room was full of God’s presence ... a feeling of God’s nearness impossible to describe.... The whole audience began to pray.... It was not many, but one, born of one spirit, lifted to one Father above.... God came to us in Pyeng Yang that night.... man after man would arise, confess his sin, break down and weep.... My last glimpse of the audience is photographed indelibly in my brain. Some threw themselves full length on the floor; hundreds stood with arms out-stretched towards heaven. Every man forgot each other. Each was face to face with God.”

As is true in every genuine revival, the overflow of God’s Spirit did not cease with the blessing of the people gathered for prayer at Pyeng Yang. The account goes on to say that when the men returned to their homes in the country, they took the Pentecostal fire with them.

Everywhere the story was told, the same Spirit flowed forth and spread. Practically every church.... throughout the peninsula received its share of blessings.... All through the city men were going from house to house, confessing to individuals they had injured, returning stolen property and money, not only to Christians, but to non-Christians as well. The whole city was stirred.

The events leading to the consecration of the new cathedral in Coventry, England, in 1962, furnish an example of a more contemporary renewal experience. Stephen Verney, an Anglican priest, tells how a group of laity and clergy got together to seek the Lord. As they allowed love, humility, and prayer to flow through them, “a deep sense of the presence of God” filled their lives.

Out of this fellowship came the idea for a deeper life mission which eventually involved the whole diocese. As Verney describes it:

“The more deeply people were involved, the more clearly was God calling them to go deeper still, and to offer Him the obedience of their whole lives.... The diocese became a person, a body alive with a spirit. We experienced an extraordinary outburst of worship and happiness.... Great services were held in the new cathedral, offering up to God every part of our daily lives.... We have seen reality break through, like the sun through a fog, sweeping away the pretenses. People have been set free, to become what they really are. We have begun to know that a whole diocese could be a fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”



### A Personal Witness

To these accounts, I might add a vivid experience of revival in my own life. In 1970 during the turmoil caused by the Vietnam War, while students on many campuses were rioting and burning down buildings, students at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky, were strangely drawn to their knees one morning to pray. Classes were forgotten. Academic work came to a standstill. In a way awesome to describe, God had taken over the school. Caught up in the wonder of it, a thousand students remained for eight days and nights in the college auditorium—not to demand more freedom, but to confess their sin and to praise their Lord.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” one veteran newscaster told his television audience. Then he asked his viewers to put down their newspapers, stop whatever they were doing, and watch the revival scene which he had filmed earlier in the day. “Though I’ve seen it,” he concluded, “I still can’t believe it.”

It began on February 3 during the routine chapel service. The speaker that morning finished early, so he invited students to use the time to testify. After one or two had spoken, a senior rose and confessed that during his years at college he had been a phoney. As the tears streamed down his face, he told of the emptiness of his Christian profession, and asked his classmates to forgive him for his hypocrisy.

No sooner had the man sat down than a young lady stood and shared a similar burden. Everyone sensed that the Spirit of God was very near. Students began coming forward to pray. They filled the altar, overflowing into the aisles and front seats. Earnest supplications erupted through tears of repentance. The bell rang, announcing the end of the period, but no one left to go to class. There was more important business at hand. Nothing mattered now but getting right with God.

A student captured something of the feeling that day as he jotted impressions in his diary:

“I sat in the middle of a contemporary Pentecost. A few moments ago there came a spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit.... The scene is abundant. Release—Freedom—Tears—Joy Unspeakable—Embracing—Spontaneous applause when a soul celebrates. A thousand hearts lifted in songs of praise and adoration to a mighty God.

For eight days and nights it lasted—185 consecutive hours without any interruption. Even when classes finally resumed, every evening after supper, students would gather in the auditorium to pray and celebrate what God was still doing. The lights in the building were not turned out for four months until after Commencement in June. Before the initial effect of the revival had subsided, practically every person in the college and seminary had felt the touch of heaven, and the witness was carried by Spirit-Filled students and faculty to hundreds of other schools and churches across the land. Fires of faith were lighted that have since spread around the world, and still are burning in many hearts.”

### Wonderful Variety

What was witnessed at Asbury could be duplicated, in some way, every time there is revival. Yet, the particular manner in which it comes will change. The spirit of the time, local circumstances, personal leadership, temperament of the people, and many other natural conditions combine to give each revival its own peculiar color. Likewise, the methods employed in revival may vary in different times and among different people.

While basic spiritual principles are common to all revivals, so different is the way these principles emerge in human situations that it is impossible to predict their precise form. God seems to delight in surprising His people with the unexpected freshness of His approach.

We can be grateful for this variety in God’s providence, for it demonstrates that He is ever seeking to make His will more intelligible to His people. Yet, it also serves to remind us that God is able, when He pleases, to confound the schemes of men. Human manipulation cannot put the Spirit in a straitjacket. What He does in revival is by His own sovereign power, and no man dare take any credit for the work.



### Revival's Key Role in Church History

No matter how revivals come, they are the high peaks in the Christian life. Whether in individual experience, or in the corporate life of the church, it is during these times of refreshing that the work of the Holy Spirit is brought into bold relief. Redemptive history could actually be written from the standpoint of these recurring revivals. Of course, in the sense that revival represents vital Christianity, it can be said, in varying degrees, that a deep revival undercurrent is always present in the spiritual life of the church. But these are seasons when this stream breaks forth in great power, affecting many people, and sometimes changing the course of nations.

This can be seen frequently in the Old Testament, but it comes to its fruition at Pentecost with emergence of the New Testament church. For three centuries, the spirit of revival continued to dominate the persecuted and impoverished Christian community. However, as the church gained in worldly prestige, eventually being recognized as the state religion of Rome in the fourth century, spiritual fervor noticeably declined.

Though somewhat smothered by the ecclesiastical policies of the church, revival fires still burned in the hearts of a faithful remnant. And from time to time this smoldering flame would burst forth. There were seasons of refreshing under such leaders as Augustine in the fifth century, Justinian and Gregory in the sixth century, and John of Damascus in the eighth century. During the dark Middle Ages (roughly AD. 1000 to 1500), the cause of revival was kept alive in such movements as those of Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Peter Waldo, John Towle, John Wycliffe, and Savonarola.

The Protestant Reformation had many ingredients of a revival, calling the church back to God and the Bible. The Anabaptists, especially, deserve recognition for their fervent spirit of evangelism, which blazed a trail of heartfelt faith across Europe. When the church became dominated by scholastic disputation, the Pietist, Puritan, and later the Wesleyan revivals, served to breathe new life upon the dead bones. From these revivals, missionaries scattered out over the world, and in many areas, the churches which they established have experienced great outpourings of the Spirit.

### Our American Heritage

To a remarkable degree, revivals have molded the course of the church in America. Peter G. Mode of the University of Chicago says that “more than any other phenomenon, they have supplied the landmark of our religious history.” William Warren Sweet has characterized these revivals as “cascades in the stream of the church, recreating the main course of its waters.” Were it not for these seasons of refreshing during several crucial periods when the very existence of the republic was in jeopardy, it is doubtful that our country could have survived.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the experience of revival has declined. Many true disciples of Christ have kept the reality alive, and from time to time, in scattered local areas there have been some general outpourings of the Spirit. Nevertheless, there has been no real national awakening in our lifetime. We cannot expect to drift much longer.

### “Lord, Do It Again”

Years ago, after the funeral of General William Booth of the Salvation Army, the sexton found a lone Methodist preacher on his knees at the altar. Still thinking of the tremendous impact of the life of this one man upon the world, the preacher was overheard to say, “O Lord, do it again! Lord, do it again!”

As you think about the great times of revival in the past, and then consider the desperate situation today, do you not find yourself also praying that God will do it again—that men and women will come forth who believe God for the impossible, and that their numbers will increase until a new and mighty demonstration of holy love sweeps across the land? God grant that it may be so! “Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?”

End

The Compass is the discipleship curriculum for Campus Crusade for Christ's Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We'd love to hear your feedback on this lesson. Please write us at [centerfield@uscm.org](mailto:centerfield@uscm.org)