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Revivals?

Owing not least to the fact that it carries a variety of meanings, the word "revivals" makes many of us uneasy. Some long so much for genuine revival that they slump into a stupor of waiting, wringing their hands and neglecting

conferences of covenant renewal (Neh. 8-9); it is transparent at Pentecost (Acts 2) and beyond: "After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting



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to evangelize and pursue the common means of grace because they are waiting for "revival." In the South, many Christians still commonly speak of "holding revivals," by which they mean something like "holding evangelistic and deeper life meetings, preferably in the Finney tradition." Some churches even hold "annual revivals." But for most who read these lines, lying as we do in an older tradition, revivals are movements of the Spirit of God in which God's power is much more than usually displayed in conversion, transformation of life, and in a deep and reverent sense of the holiness and goodness of God. The notion of "holding" such revivals strikes us as a painful and slightly ridiculous domestication of God's majestic power and freedom. We applaud the distinction championed by Iain H. Murray's title: *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

Our nervousness when we reflect on the abuses, however, should not become an excuse for avoiding some truths that must never be far from our minds.

(1) Revival is a biblical concept. It embraces but goes beyond the truth expressed in passages such as Ps. 127:1, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain," and Zech. 4:6, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty." It recognizes that there are times when, prompted by the dearth of the age, God's people cry out, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you" (Isa. 64:1). It takes place when the Lord stirs up not only the leaders, but also "the spirit of the whole remnant of the people" (Hag. 1:14). It may manifest itself in massive Bible

conferences of covenant renewal (Neh. 8-9); it is transparent at Pentecost (Acts 2) and beyond: "After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31). Even where sin erupts and discipline is imposed, the result is salutary: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11). Not only Scripture itself, but the history of the church testifies to times of extraordinary gospel strength, when God raised up a Howell Harris or a George Whitefield or a Jonathan Edwards, and countless others.

(2) We need revival. By "we" I am not referring primarily to the culture at large, or to other Christians. I am referring to "us," the believers reading this magazine. Too many of us simply want to be nice, but have long since forgotten, at the experiential level, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Or we may be prepared to argue our corner on doctrinal matters, but our prayers are brief, perfunctory, and cold. Some of us wrestle very little with sin—not, I fear, because we are very holy already, but because we have so little grasp of holiness, and therefore we are little ashamed of our sins. Many of us can talk theology very fluently, and are quick to correct our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we have long lost the ability to articulate the gospel humbly, compellingly, and gratefully to our pagan neighbors. *We* need revival.

(3) But never are we to despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). In his own wise counsel, God raises up a Jeremiah as well as an Ezra, apostles with massively different roles (John 21:20-22), a martyred James as well as a fruitful Paul.

Press on; walk humbly; serve faithfully. And beseech God for mercy.