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## REVIVAL: TRUE AND FALSE

by Gary North

For the last decade or so, I have heard an increasing number of Protestant religious leaders in the U.S. predict that we are on the verge of a revival. Naturally, they predict "the greatest revival in history." They may be correct, but they are also categorically incorrect, for what they call "revival" is anything but revival. **Revival means reformation**, and these leaders are not yet prepared for a reformation, nor are their followers.

I believe that revival is coming, as I said in my essay, "The Sabbath Millennium" (*Biblical Economics Today*, Feb./March 1985). I think it will begin in earnest toward the latter days of this century. The point, however, is not in the timing, except to the extent that we need to begin making preparations. The point is, have we considered what a serious revival would mean, just inside the United States?

### Room to Worship

Carl Bridenbaugh, in his study of cities in the colonies in the seventeenth century, noted that by 1650, not even half the population of Boston could have sat in church on Sunday morning, and by 1690, if every person in Boston had attempted to attend church one Sunday morning, the churches could barely have accommodated 25% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Yet this was in the Puritan era, the days of Increase Mather and his son Cotton. We think of his period as the most religious in U.S. history.

What if we really do get a revival?

Church buildings are not cost-effective. They are expensive to construct, have little resale value except to other churches, and are generally unused six days out of seven. When they are used, it is only for a few hours a week. The use of this space by Christian schools has begun to make church buildings more cost-effective, although this implicit subsidy by congregations has not made most of these schools full-cost tuition institutions. However, at least the space is being put to good use by these schools.

My point is simple: under present conditions, Bible-believing churches are struggling to buy, refurbish, and pay mortgages on church buildings. Membership is increasing, but compared to the vast number of non-attending people in the population, there is no way that the capital base in church buildings could be constructed fast enough to meet the needs of that promised revival, **unless we restructure our conception of what church buildings can be used for, and when**. At best, congregations build today in order to meet their present needs, with a few hundred square feet (maybe) available for near-term expansion. There is no way for most Bible-believing congregations rapidly to expand the

available square footage for future worship, given their financial constraints.

This being the case, how can the church as a local entity prepare for a hoped-for and long-predicted revival? How fast will this revival hit, and how long will it last?

### Past "Revivals"

In about 1735-60, there was a wave of revivals in England and in the English colonies. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield (WHITfield), and hundreds of roaming itinerant preachers criss-crossed the country and the Atlantic, bringing the gospel to hundreds of thousands of people (in a day when fewer than three million lived here). Whitefield attracted tens of thousands at a time in open air fields, both in England and the colonies. Region by region, the churches filled up . . . for a while.

Then passions waned, leaving cynicism and unwed or newly wed mothers in the wake. In the town of Bristol, Rhode Island, from 1680 through 1720, there was not a single recorded instance of a baby arriving less than eight months after marriage. From 1720-40, the percentage rose to 10%. From 1740-60, in the Great Awakening era, it hit 49%, trailing off to 44%, 1760-80.<sup>2</sup> This story was repeated throughout the colonies, according to one as yet unpublished manuscript I have seen.

There is no doubt that the first Great Awakening permanently altered colonial America. Historians argue about its political effects. Some argue that it led to a new sense of community, including political community, and a new sense of millennial vision.<sup>3</sup> But there is no doubt that ecclesiastically, the first Great Awakening shattered what was left of the New England holy commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> The ideal of theocracy—God's rule through God's revealed civil law—never recovered from the anti-denominational and anti-creedal preaching of the itinerants.

In 1800, a new wave of revivals began in the Ohio Valley, and grew to a flood in the 1820's and 1830's. This second Great Awakening led to abolitionism, perfectionism, Christian political action, cults, church splits, and eventually to the phenomenon which Charles Finney called the burned-over districts.<sup>5</sup> These districts became cold and resistant to

2. John Demos, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An Exercise in Historical Demography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXV (Jan. 1968), p. 56.

3. Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

4. Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

5. Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastical Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950).

1. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: Capricorn, [1938] 1964), p. 105.

further evangelism efforts. The churches grew rapidly, and then emptied almost as rapidly. Revivalists returned, and repetitions occurred, but by the end, the second Great Awakening produced effects very different from what its founders had expected: the Civil War and, after the war, the rise of liberalism and the social gospel movement.

The first Great Awakening had been characterized by a spirit of optimism. God was working a great work in the midst of His people, the leaders believed, and this great work would eventually change the moral character of the people. This moral change, in turn, was expected to lead to a period of prosperity and social advance. A similar spirit characterized the second. Both Great Awakenings were noted by their close connections to the idea of progress. To some extent, both the American Revolution and the Civil War can be explained in terms of the preceding revivals.

Nevertheless, both were sidetracked. If the second Great Awakening was necessary, as its supporters argued, where had the first one failed? If the rise of the social gospel was not what the founders had expected or desired, where did the second one fail?

There are several explanations. A major one is their **failure to deal with the doctrine of the church**. Itinerant preachers, as in the Reformation, roamed the villages calling men to repentance, and they challenged the lifeless preaching of the ministers in the churches. The two revivals were essentially anti-ecclesiastical to a great extent, and even when they were pro-church, the churches could not handle the disciplinary problems that immediately arose (as mentioned earlier, an increase in pregnant unmarried women). The new members were enthusiastic at first, but they did not prove to be long-term builders of the kingdom.

A second factor in the wane of both revivals was a **de-emphasis on theology and creeds**. The itinerant preachers were generally untrained, self-appointed preachers, and their attitude was very often hostile to "book learning." They wanted to allow the Holy Spirit full control. The problem was, who was to test the prophets or their words? Who was to test the spirits? In each case, there was a decline of historic orthodoxy. The various creeds—the Westminster Confession (Presbyterian), the Savoy Declaration (Congregational), the Philadelphia Confession (Baptist)—had little or no influence in the thinking of the revivalists. Neither did church discipline. In short, the basic terms of the covenant—theological presuppositions, defined rules of conduct, enforceable obligations, disciplining hierarchy—were not spelled out or established.

The third factor of the revivals was an **absence of biblical law in their sermons**. There was no attempt to propose an integrated world view based on revealed law. Some believed that the world would be transformed by the conversion of men. Somehow, the very presence of converted people, in and of itself, was supposed to transform the world.

Charles Finney's preaching went to the other extreme. His error was not antinomianism, but rather perfectionism.<sup>6</sup> But his moral theology was not combined with a revival of interest in Old Testament law, nor did he personally propose a program for political transformation. His followers did, and out of Oberlin College and other Finney-influenced organizations came the Western abolitionist movement. The perfectionists and evangelicals joined in the abolitionist crusade with New England's Unitarian radicals, and the result was the Civil War.<sup>7</sup> Historian Timothy Smith even devotes a chapter to "Evangelical Unitarianism."<sup>8</sup>

### Revivalism and Its Cure

It was the focus on the **revived individual** and the **de-emphasis of the covenant** which undermined the first two Great Awakenings. A revival which fails to spell out clearly what the personal, moral, financial, and civilizational commitments are for the redeemed man or woman inescapably has placed the individual above the community. The biblical social viewpoint is based on the doctrine of the Trinity—the equal ultimacy of the persons of the Godhead—meaning the equal ultimacy of the one and the many, the individual and the community of saints.<sup>9</sup> Any attempt to elevate the individual and his concerns above the community and its concerns is **anti-covenantal**. If extended to a first principle, this emphasis on individual salvation (and healing) would destroy both church and society. It is not just the person who is healed, but also those covenantal institutions that are produced by redeemed people acting in concert.

Yet it is not sufficient to say that the society will be healed by the mere presence of redeemed men. Men are **redeemed for something** (Eph. 2:10). They are redeemed from a fallen way of life, which involves working in and through rebellious institutions. People are to live differently. They are to evaluate their actions by a new standard. But to say this is to raise that age-old question: **By what standard?** By arguing that redeemed people have external social influence and therefore the potential for transforming their society, the preacher is implicitly calling people to a program of **reconstruction**, both personal and institutional.

Preaching a **comprehensive gospel** means confronting a fallen world with a vision and program for **comprehensive redemption**.

This initially reduces the appeal of a simple "save me!" gospel, for it asks that people implicitly ask God: "Save me for your purposes!" By seeking to avoid the inhibiting effect that a realization of vast new responsibilities will have on the listeners—inhibiting apart from the Holy Spirit—revivalists have offered a watered-down version of the gospel. It is a gospel without **covenantal responsibilities**. What they ignore is that God's Spirit saves men wholly by the power of God. He does not save proportionately more people because the gospel message has been watered down. He saves just as many as He had chosen "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

What happens, then, is that far more people initially commit to God publicly, only to be weeded out (or "thorned over": Matt. 13:22) later. Worse, some of them take root in the churches, and are able then to clamp down on the minister's preaching later on. Jonathan Edwards, the eloquent and early defender of the first Great Awakening, was eventually forced out of his pulpit by the congregation. He was seen as too rigid on moral issues.

Bad theology has led most revivalists to downplay the terms of the gospel covenant in order to fill up the kingdom, only to discover that great numbers of verbal professors of faith fall away a year or two later, and those who remain in the churches can be drawn into crusades apart from biblical law's standards of holiness. This was the experience during both Great Awakenings. The watering down of the comprehensive nature of salvation for the sake of a wider hearing and a wider response inhibited the comprehensive transforming power of the gospel message. Alternative sorts of crusades eventually sidetracked the initial quest for biblical holiness. The Spirit was self-inhibited because the message preached by His servants was autonomously inhibited.

### How to Train New Converts

We do not assume that a newly converted person gets a new set of brains at the time of his conversion. He gets a

6. Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1958), ch. 4.

7. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, Ohio: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1969).

8. Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, [1957] 1976), ch. 6.

9. R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1971] 1978).

new heart and a new mind—ethically, a new way of evaluating the world—but not a new brain. Thus, people need training. Paul distinguishes milk-eating from meat-eating Christians in I Cor. 3:2. We need to recognize this distinction.

What will be the means of their training during a revival? It cannot be "one on one," for there will be too many converts for existing Christians to train. It cannot be based strictly on printed materials, for in a mass revival, worldwide, millions of illiterate people will be brought into the kingdom.

By the grace of God, **high technology instruction methods** are at last available, for the first century in man's history. Audiotapes, videotapes, laser discs, and satellite television can carry training to millions of people on a cost-effective basis. People can be taught to read and think biblically. They can receive the best training, electronically, from the best-equipped teachers of this generation and generations to come.

The ability of the visual image to transmit information is unsurpassed: moving pictures, masterful editing, outstanding lecturing, and the whole science of education and communication can now be brought together in order to produce inexpensive training programs that could not have been ~~matched as recently as 50 years ago, and which could never~~ have been produced for home use.

What we see today is a new world of technology which has been made available to Christians that they can use to conduct the largest revival in history, but more important, the largest **sustained** revival in history.

### Capital and Revival

There are costs associated with revival. These costs, by their very magnitude, cannot be met in advance. To invest in a program of post-revival church construction now is prohibitively expensive. Besides, it is highly speculative. Maybe a revival will not come before the mortgage payments overwhelm the congregation's finances. (And what if congregations want to build and grow without debt?)

Where will we get elders to monitor the spiritual lives of the people? Where will we get Christian day school teachers who are well trained and ready for service? Where will we get the school curriculum materials that are self-conscious in their vision of world-transformation? (None exists today, so far as I know, kindergarten through graduate school.)

Revival is a gift of God, but not a cost-free gift. To sustain the benefits of such a gift, the church needs to commit time, money, and vision. To do otherwise would be comparable to **squandering an inheritance**. Yet this is what has been done with **every** false revival. The spiritual inheritance has been squandered, usually within a generation. Liberalism and humanism replaced the second Great Awakening.

Somehow, those who call for revival never seem to think beyond the costs of renting a large tent. But revivals should be able to come in winter, too, in remote and freezing places, and in jungles in the summer, where tents rot rapidly. Those who call for revival never have a long-range plan for incorporating the new converts into an ongoing program of spiritual growth and cultural development, or even church buildings.

Revivals, in other words, have previously been viewed as **faster than normal "business as usual."** They have therefore never been sustained. Revivals are thought of as **discontinuous breaks into history of a non-historical process.** They are nevertheless assumed to be **self-sustaining by normal routines.**

They cannot be all three. They are discontinuities in history, not discontinuities **outside of history.** They are discontinuous breaks into history by the Holy Spirit, and to become part of the historical process, **the discontinuity must subsequently transform the operations of the church.** The churches' operations must be transformed in order to ac-

commodate the revival. In short: **new wine requires new wine skins.**

I have yet to see any handbook by any revivalist on what churches are supposed to do, institutionally, to **prepare** for the revival his ministry is sure to bring, or what the churches are supposed to do **after** the revival has come. I have yet to see a breakdown on what kinds of capital expenses should be taken care of first, and what kind of training ministry should be in place. I see none of this. Why? **Because revivalists are not interested in revival.** They are interested in **revivalism.** They are interested in tents, convention halls, collection plates, one-shot healings, back-up bands, hoopla, and invitations to return next year. They sell entertainment, not revival. The sell excitement, not discipline.

What I am saying is simple enough: God is unlikely to give men something which they are not willing to accept as stewards. **Revivals require long-term stewardship.** They are no more free gifts of God than salvation is—and no less. Our planning does not produce them; our planning simply tells God that we are serious about our future responsibilities concerning them. It is the demonstration before God of our willingness to become stewards of revival which is the basis of its arrival.

### Why God Delays Sending a Revival

How many years have we heard about the imminent revival? For at least a quarter of a century, and probably longer. Yet it never comes. We have had pseudo-revivals, or big programs that promise revival, or grandstands full of hand-clapping, hand-raising youths who walk out and are never heard from again. We have rock groups promising revival, and basketball teams promising revival, but we never seem to get the revival. Why not? Because the basis of a **sustained revival** is not the temporary techniques used for dragging people into the kingdom; it is the **stewardship program for keeping them in the kingdom.** God is not interested in another Great Awakening, followed by either the traditional two generations of sleeping or the traditional humanist crusade. He is not interested in a wild fling of ecstasy, followed by hibernation or self-destruction. He is interested in seeing His visible kingdom built by law-honoring people.

The whole counsel of God should be brought to bear on the process of revival. All the talents of all the church traditions have got to be put at the disposal of the revival. No one tradition or set of skills is capable of feeding and sustaining even a U.S. revival, let alone a worldwide revival, in which billions of people may be recruited for God, and then have to be trained in the whole counsel of God.

Are you going to teach some island population the basis of the faith, as applied to their historical and geographical circumstances? Is your church ready to tell the leaders of, say, 250 million new Chinese converts, how to restructure their ancient heritage to conform to biblical principles? Are you ready to train Kenya tribesmen in constitutional law?

If we are not ready to deal with these sorts of problems, then we are not ready for revival. If we are not ready to tell honest inquirers from around the world the answer to their question, "How then shall we live?" then we are not ready for revival. If we are not ready to show them how to worship, finance schools, write curricula, get people off welfare, start a drug rehabilitation program, use computers in their ministries, publish tracts, and the hundreds of other tasks that are done well case by case only by individual congregations, then we are not ready for revival.

Why have our missionaries not yet produced civilization-transforming revivals? Because we have not been ready. Why have the graduates of Christian mission schools become the Marxist revolutionary leaders of the next generation, in China, Africa, and Indo-China? Why were they so effectively picked off by Satan? Why did our missions pro-

duce the Marxist harvest? Lack of a world view.

Missionaries have slowly been learning the very minimal foundations of revival, and teaching these to natives. All the missionary work of 2,000 years, all the capital, effort, experiments, and accumulated knowledge of two millennia have not been sufficient, so far, to prepare Christians for a **program of world conquest, which is what a serious revival inescapably must become.**

We have not thought long term. On the one hand, we worry about not seeing the great revival in our own day, yet we also talk about it as if it could be God's gift to our generation alone. On the contrary, when it comes, it will be the **accumulated "interest" of 2,000 years of investing in evangelism.** It will be the product of the history of the whole church. It will indeed be a discontinuous event, but one which comes in response to 2,000+ years of patient effort. And if it does not come in our day, we nevertheless will have made our contribution to it, just as our forefathers did.

Jesus said that we are to pray like a woman who seeks justice from an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-5). She comes to him again and again, until he finally settles the dispute. Now, is her incessant pestering of the judge useless? She is told to keep pestering him. For a long time, this produces nothing except sore knuckles from banging on the door. But those knuckles toughen up, and she learns patience. She learns to keep coming back. Eventually, the judge capitulates. He can stand it no longer. She, in turn, has received her gift—the discontinuous transformation of her circumstances—as a result of her continuous efforts.

The parable of the unjust judge and the persistent seeker of justice should be in front of the planners of every evangelism program. Planning may produce very little in any given generation, but Christians are learning, and the church as a whole is learning. When the church begins to understand the comprehensive nature of the gospel, and also the comprehensive nature of the church's responsibilities, and when all the assets of the church as a body can be tapped and applied by the various branches, then and only then we can and should expect comprehensive, **sustained revival.**

### Beyond Discontinuity

We think of revival as a discontinuous event. Clearly, it was immediately following Pentecost. But the Reformation took well over a generation to launch, and certainly the Puritan movement, a century later, was the tail end of the Reformation itself. This was a "discontinuity" which lasted over a century. Pretty long discontinuity!

Unless we see revival in terms of at least a century, we will be planning for a false revival. We will be planning for short-lived ecstatic outbreaks that are followed by cynicism and generations of skepticism. A revival should be a discontinuous **breaking into history** which subsequently blends into an extended period of **institutional transformation.** The revival should launch the process of transformation, but the subsequent social transformation is to be a **lineal heir of the revival itself.** The discontinuity of revival must be followed by the continuity of social transformation, or else the revival is undermined.

What I am saying, then, is that the discontinuity of revival follows a long period of preparation, and is followed by an even longer period of application. Just as Wycliffe preceded Hus, and Hus preceded Luther (by a century), so are we to understand the revival as God's rapid transformation of historical circumstances which itself had a pathway cleared by less revolutionary and less transforming changes.

Could Luther have been as successful without the printing press? Unlikely. He was a master of pamphleteering—probably the first and greatest master—and he transformed the German language as a side effect of his publishing efforts. A technological innovation was fundamental to the historical and institutional transformation. The same was true in the case of Roman roads and a Roman-policed, pirate-free Mediterranean Sea in Jesus' time. Revivals take place within history.

We see the technological tools in front of us, both for bringing the revival into homes where evangelical visitors seldom enter (ghettos, isolated villages), and for extending the initial transforming work of the revival for decades thereafter.

We need to see the work of revival lasting for a minimum of two generations, and probably more, just to transform the West. The transition from revival to reconstruction will be a continuous process, and reconstruction will take generations. The goal should be to have revival produce reconstruction in one region, and then have that reconstruction process help finance the next phase of the revival elsewhere.

The Communists saw this in 1917 Russia. Their "revivals" in the Third World are well thought out discontinuities, as are the "reconstruction" (re-education) programs that follow. Each revolutionary beachhead becomes a launching pad for the next wave of Communist revival, extending outward from the Soviet Union. **Continuity-discontinuity-continuity:** here is the pattern of Communist revolution and biblical revival.

### Conclusion

What we have labeled "revivals" in the past have not been true revivals. The Reformation was a revival, but it is seldom called a revival; the Great Awakenings were anti-ecclesiastical outbursts that dissipated into burned-over districts; and what Behemoth Baptist Church had last June wasn't a revival, no matter what the roving evangelist called it then and will call it next June when he returns.

To revive means to bring life back. It means **to come back from the dead.** It is God's pre-resurrection resurrection. A church which requires an annual revival is in desperate shape. First, revival will not come in response to a hired parachurch ministry which specializes in whooping up the troops for five evenings in a row once every three years. The troops need **boot camp** more than they need a pep rally. They need an armory more than they need a nursery. They need meat more than they need milk. The church needs vision, motivation, and discipline.

Second, revival is what the lost need, not what the church needs. While the lost may be in the churches, and while many denominations are lost, the church, as church, is not in need of revival, for God's people have **already** been resurrected. Their revival **was.** Now they have to apply it. For that, they do not need revival. They need reformation.

Modern revivalists have not understood the extent to which they are dependent on past continuities (the gifts of the whole church in history). They have only begun to recognize the potential for recent technology. They also have ignored the post-discontinuity period, when the gains made by the revival's rapid transformation of large numbers of people are institutionalized, becoming the foundation of regional social transformation and also the next wave of exported revival. In short, we have been **cursed with revivalism,** with the ecclesiastical equivalent of one-night stands instead of marriage. We need permanent covenants, not one-night stands.

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