

# TENTMAKERS

## REVIVALISM VS. THE CHURCH

by Gary North

David Chilton keeps threatening to write a book called *Revivalism: Its Causes and Cure*. That book is desperately needed. The trouble is, so are his books on eschatology, the Book of Revelation, dispensationalism, and famine. He has no time to write the book on revivalism. Neither do I.

Still, it is appropriate to survey some of the problems, both theologically and historically, that revivalism presents to Christianity. They can be summarized as follows: 1) level of communicated theology; 2) methods used to communicate the message, including methods used to gain a confession of faith from listeners; 3) doctrine of the church; 4) means of church discipline over the revivalists; 5) financing of the revival; 6) after-effects of the revival.

### Communicated Theology

The revivalists have always aimed at a large mass of unconverted people who are to be brought rapidly into the kingdom. The problem is, the message of the gospel must be reduced to very simple propositions at the initial stages of proclamation. Jesus spoke to great crowds, but He always spoke in private to small groups of leaders, who themselves needed additional explanations. At Pentecost, there was a revival, but the apostles spoke through the power of the Holy Spirit to Jews who were theologically sophisticated when compared to today's average church member, let alone the average 20th-century pagan. They understood what Pentecost was. They understood what the prophets had said. They just refused to believe the message. Then, at Pentecost, thousands miraculously believed. But they were not theologically or ecclesiastically undisciplined people. They were not people with no theological heritage.

Jesus' ministry had its broad-based side and its face-to-face training side. The open side led to the gathering of large crowds. One week after His entry into Jerusalem, these same crowds were calling for His death. Even one of the "insiders" was against Him. So we cannot take heart from Jesus' success with mass evangelism techniques. He never used such techniques apart from a parallel ministry of detailed training of dedicated men who had forsaken everything to follow Him.

The Communists have always understood this principle. They train up the cadre even as they appeal to the masses. In fact, they are more concerned with the training of the cadre. Mass appeal programs will flow from the training, they believe. Ex-Communist Douglas Hyde had the right idea when he titled his book *Dedication and Leadership*. So did another ex-Communist, Frank Meyer, in his book, *The Molding of Communists: The Training of the Communist Cadre*. But the best title is ex-Communist Benjamin Gitlow's *The Who/le of Their Lives*. The point is this: until the revivalist has a dedicated band of righteous men willing to offer up the whole of their lives to Jesus, for the sake of His kingdom, no revival should be attempted.

A watered-down Christian message is suitable only for recruiting, never for long-term discipleship. Is the revivalist's organization ready to provide such advanced training? One group which does is Bill Gothard's Basic Youth Conflicts, and his may be the most successful broad-based ministry of our era. But his is not a "first-stage" ministry. He motivates and trains professing Christians.

If the revivalist has no advanced training and no developed theology into which he is trying to lead the new converts, then his ministry is futile. It will die when he does, or be destroyed when he falls into scandal, or is captured by the theological opposition. (The YMCA is a classic example, as were the various student revival movements of the early 1900s.) He will gather in the tares in large numbers. He is forced to compromise his theology and his ministry. If there is nothing deeper in his theology than the content of his mass-appeal sermons, then he is in the army of revivalism, not revival.

### Methods of Communication

How watered-down will his initial message be? How little will he risk a conflict with the humanists and the neo-evangelical compromisers who help make possible the triumph of humanism? How embarrassed is he by the plain teaching and hard truths concerning sin in high places, low places, and all places in between? To put it bluntly, how much of the gospel can Billy Graham preach inside a Soviet Church to KGB agents during his annual pilgrimage to Moscow? And if the message he preaches there in a few days is not fundamentally different from the message he preaches to the American public, how much can we expect from a Billy Graham revival? The Communists use him to help blunt the criticisms of the persecuted home church movement in the Soviet Union. The neo-evangelicals use him to accomplish something similar with conservatives within their denominations. Why should anyone who wants revival imitate his ministry?

Do we need huge choirs to bring the people forward? Do we need pre-arranged "sheep leaders" who start walking forward to get the unconverted to follow? And if we really do, then why introduce the technique of having people go forward? Where in the Bible is such a technique recommended? The only reason Elijah had anyone go forward at Mount Carmel was to join in the community-wide slaughter of the priests of Baal. Can we really imagine Jesus telling the crowds to bow their heads and pray, and then call for a show of hands? Can we really imagine Jesus calling out, "I see that hand, brother. Thank you. God bless you"? No? Then why should we do it?

If the revivalist tells people where to go to church to assemble with the saints the following Sunday, fine. If he tells them to buy a Bible and start reading, fine. If he offers to send them a free Bible study guide, fine. If he calls them for-

ward to get baptized, fine. That is how Philip dealt with the Ethiopian eunuch: teaching and baptizing (Acts 8:26-39). But if they are not being called to place themselves under a formal covenant with God, why call them forward? They are being misled as to the seriousness of their commitment. We need fewer temporary confessors and more long-term converts.

#### The Doctrine of the Church

The great failure of the so-called first Great Awakening (1735-55) was the destruction of Christian social order. Richard Bushman chronicles this in his study of Connecticut, *From Puritan to Yankee*. The Itinerant preachers came into a community and drew away people from the established "cold" churches. They had no doctrine of the church. In this respect, Jonathan Edwards was an exception; he was not an Itinerant preacher, either. The churches never really recovered, especially the doctrinal churches.

A revival which does not bring people under church discipline and the sacraments is a rival of Christianity, not an ally. If the revival fails to confront confessors with the long-term responsibilities of the covenant, it is a destroyer of the faith. If it does not point to the institutional implications of saving faith, it is not an agency of saving faith. It is an agency leading to delusion and despair.

#### Disciplining the Revival

What institution is sovereign over the revival? A church? A board? A mailing list? Does the revivalist support himself and his organization through the tithe? Does he collect the tithes, rather than the offerings beyond the tithe, of his listeners? If so, then he is operating an autonomous ministry. Now, is it an autonomous support ministry or an autonomous recruiting agency? Is it an operating substitute for the institutional church?

A revivalist who is not under the official discipline of a local church or presbytery is a threat to the integrity of every church, no matter how many people are pulled in. If people's loyalty institutionally is to a ministry which is outside local church discipline, then they will be tempted to follow an undisciplined man in a crisis. This is not who we should be following in a crisis. Loyalty upward must always be based on discipline downward. We do not follow military officers who are not themselves under discipline. Neither should we follow revivalists who are not under ecclesiastical authority. Before following any leader, check his credentials and his rank. Rank has its privileges; it also has its duties. No duties, no privileges.

#### Financing the Revival

Here is where the rubber meets the road, or better put, where the pen meets the checkbook. Who benefits from the revival? That is who should finance it. Find out who is financing the revival, and you will have an answer to the question, "Who is behind this revival?"

When large, theologically suspect churches bring in a revivalist in order to juice up the laity, you have revivalism, not revival. When the revivalist exists in order to strengthen that which should be allowed to fall, you have a reverse Samson: a man holding up the collapsing pillars, a judge on the side of the Philistines.

In short, check out the theology of the churches that invite in the evangelist, and you will have a good idea of what the evangelist stands for.

Is the money collected by the evangelist shared equally among the churches, with the evangelist being paid an agreed-upon sum? If not, then you have an autonomous ministry. Back in the late 1940s, Rev. Gerald Lalal was minister of a United Presbyterian Church in Ohio (which he later left to join the Orthodox Presbyterians). A female revivalist who was just starting her weird and wonder-filled career

wanted to rent his church, since it was the biggest Protestant church in town. He met with her, and was not impressed. When he asked, "Will the meeting be co-sponsored?" she replied: "ALLLLL RIGHT! But I'll take up the collection." Ah, yes. He said no thanks, and she rented some service clubs hall instead.

There are legitimate reasons for the existence of support ministries in the Christian world. It aids the division of labor. But the question is: Who pays? Any ministry which is financed independently of the churches should not resemble a church. It will mislead people concerning the long-term covenantal nature of their commitment to Jesus Christ.

#### The After-Effects

A revival which has been created by an Itinerant minister or ministry faces the problem of commitment after the excitement is gone. When people come down from their mountain-top experience, will they enter the valley of despair? Or the valley of boredom? Or the valley of the Lord? A ministry which relies on one-time-only techniques of motivation can only expect to motivate people once.

Nine months after the appearance of some revivalists in the 1740's, New England towns experienced an increase in illegitimate births. I have seen the unpublished results of detailed statistical analysis of several New England towns which demonstrates this connection between the revival and sexual license. The emotions of the moment spilled over into other areas of life.

The antinomianism of the revivalists of both Great Awakenings also led to what Charles Finney, critical of the Methodist circuit riders, referred to as the burned-over districts. Once the revivalists had gone through an area, the initial increase in church attendance dropped, and the former professors turned away from Christianity permanently. It was characterized by schism, utopianism, and apocalypticism. It was in upstate and western New York state that cults and heresies flourished during the second Great Awakening, which took place during the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in the west, 1825-37. The story is chronicled in Whitney Cross's classic study, *The Burned-over District* (Cornell University Press, [1950] 1982).

The problem can be summarized in one word: enthusiasm. Enthusiasts of all kinds roamed through the Western regions, preaching fiery sermons, calling people to repentance, and then leaving them to their own institutional devices. Wave after wave of revivalists went through these communities, until repetition and skepticism finally reduced the appeal of the revivalists. New enthusiasms replaced the old: abolitionism, Mormonism, Seventh-day adventism, etc.

#### Conclusion

Shepherds need to defend the interests of the sheep. These needs include stability, discipline, preaching, the sacraments, and hope based on the Bible and real local possibilities. The next decade is sure to bring with it many forms of apocalypticism, as we approach the year 2000. Christians in Edwards' day looked forward to this unique year, and so did French Revolutionaries and humanists. They still do.

Churches must see to it that their congregations are prepared for serious revival. They may need to get revolved in the financing and directing of revival efforts. But revivalism—antinomian, independent, anti-intellectual, emotional, and self-financed—must be recognized early and discouraged from the beginning. We need no more burned-over districts. We also need no more luke-warm revivals that take no stands, take no root, and leave no trace on the civilization two years after they have "revived the nation." We need neither an 1825 revival nor a 1950s revival. Such revivals fail to revive; instead, they sidetrack Christianity. They leave religion impotent, either from overenthusiasm or undercommitment.