

Classic Christian Writings:

Edited from a message delivered at the "Heart-Cry for Revival" Conference near Asheville, North Carolina, April 2002

Background Scripture reading: Jeremiah 5:20-31; 6:13. Text: 1 John 4:1

The first time I attempted to write a book on the subject of revival, the title was simply "Revival." I declared that a revival is an extraordinary work of the Spirit of God producing extraordinary results. Certainly a basic concept of revival includes God drawing near. The concern with which I approach the session this morning is, "How many of us will know how to discern the presence of God, and will know how to behave ourselves in the midst of revival?" The blessing of God we call revival is a very fragile blessing. It is easily broken and frequently misused.

What I want to address this morning is not a subject I am comfortable in addressing, but I prepared myself as best I could for this week over a period of many weeks and felt directed to this subject. I felt the necessity of taking this time with Christian leaders to discuss as Jonathan Edwards did in his great book, "The Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God," the difference between counterfeit revival and real revival.

At the present season in the life of the church, how much activity is Satan required to engage in to keep things going in a direction that is to his benefit? He certainly is not working day and night; he doesn't need to. But let a season of genuine revival come, and you can be sure that Satan will be aroused to very considerable activity. While he could lay hold of some pagan person somewhere, and use him to confuse issues, the greater likelihood is he will use someone already in an influential place in the church to advance his cause.

Normal Means Satan Uses

I want to point out normal means Satan has used to confuse the work of God at all times. From the study of our New Testament we are well aware that Satan uses opposition. Christ and the disciples were confronted regularly with those who ridiculed them and those who, without any qualm or hesitation, used violence against them. We see little of that in the present time in the Church (in this country) because there is no reason for Satan to stir himself up and fight against the Church. The Church is committed to calm and ease, and isn't it astonishing that at a time when millions are spiritually asleep, the most common theme in the evangelical church is comfort? Pastors week after week feel they need to lay out more of the balm of Gilead for troubled souls. So why should the devil arouse himself in a situation like that? But let these preachers become serious and let them do some awakening preaching, and Satan will be aroused and opposition will be there. Of course, some don't dare preach for fear of opposition.

Satan also uses duplication and imitation. We have seen a great deal of this in the Scriptures. There were Old Testament magicians who stood against the prophets of God and produced miracle after miracle. We know from our New Testament that miracles are not limited to believers but unbelievers have considerable capacity to the point where the Lord makes it crystal clear that a man is not recognized by our Savior because of his power to work miracles. (See Mt. 7:21-23).

We've seen a good bit of commercialism in Scripture. We find the money changers in the Temple. We find Simon Magnus seeking giftedness from the Spirit. Of course, there is at all times a proliferation of evil, but in seasons of revival, these things that I've mentioned increase dramatically.

Another tool that Satan has regularly used is the tool of exaggeration. This is so prominent in evangelical circles that we had to coin a special phrase to cover this matter. An evangelist comes home from a great series of meetings and reports that they had 5,000 converts. What he means is there were 4,612 that came forward, but you always round it off to the higher figure naturally. But after some examination, if 5% of those who are called converts in evangelistic crusades had an enduring relationship with Christ, it becomes almost a marvel. "Evangelistically speaking" we say to indicate gross exaggeration. This is a tool that Satan uses. We find in the Church right now during ordinary times, gross exaggeration of what God has done.

We've been getting accounts about revival here and there around America and other parts of the world. I'm fearful that many of those reports come with gross exaggeration. Have you learned to tell the truth, to report the activities of God with accuracy? If you are already given to gross exaggeration, is it not highly probable that you will be a very beneficial tool in the hands of Satan at a time of revival? All Satan has to do in a

revival is to turn the eyes away from Christ. It could be wild behavior. Or it could be a nice, well-accepted pastor who draws the attention to himself. As I've said, revival is a fragile blessing. All eyes must be on God.

Preparing to Handle The Blessings of Revival

Has it ever deeply gripped you that when you pray for revival, you ought to prepare for it? It doesn't make much sense to pray for something without expectation. If revival is going to come, who's going to handle it to the glory of God? Will the typical pastor? Like it or not, the typical pastor hasn't handled the ordinary benefits of Christ and His Kingdom as he ought. Why should we suppose that we automatically, without any difficulty, will handle the sacred blessings of revival to the glory of God?

I think it is very urgent that we do something very careful to prepare ourselves for revival and for the leadership that revival requires. Some have the notion that in revival God doesn't use human leadership; it's all divine. That is a silly notion. God could obviously convert all the world without any of us, but that's not how He's chosen to work. He has chosen to use means.

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Revivals through the ages of the history of the Church have always been accompanied by counterfeits. Normally the real comes and then Satan introduces counterfeit. Some foolish leaders in the Church chase after the counterfeit, and some discerningly try to eliminate the counterfeit, and keep all the focus on Christ Himself.

In this country revival began about 1792 and continued on into the early part of the 1800's. The great movement came in two major segments. In the Northeast the revival was pure and blessed. There the revival came largely as the result of the influence of the president of Yale College, Timothy Dwight, who went to the college as president at the time when a high percentage of the students had given themselves over to infidelity. Timothy Dwight arrived on the scene and he commanded all students to be in attendance at chapel while he preached. For months and months he preached on the doctrine of God. Tremendous revival came, and virtually every student of the college was brought into a vital relationship with Christ. These men went out throughout the region in pastoral positions, and when the revival came, having been trained under a holy man of God and in the solid theology of Scripture, it was a pure movement.

But in the South there were many influences. Wild conduct became quite common. There was not discernment between what was a work of God in the soul of man and what was a counterfeit work of Satan affecting the body.

Discerning a True Work of God

How do we discern what is the true work of God and what is not the work of God? There are certain inconclusive things that we need to consider. In revival movements there are commonly men who gain leadership who are untrained in the ways of God. I'm not speaking about formal education. That has its place. I've used the expression, "Men untrained in the ways of God." You rarely read of a genuine revival that begins under the ministry of a man in excess of 35 years of age. Almost always the initial leaders of revival are young and in their late teens or early twenties. Youth has a vital enthusiasm but little discernment. They have as yet little ability to distinguish what is the work of God and what is merely part of the animal passion of man. If you are an older person and know the Lord, I plead with you that when revival comes, you lay hold, under God, of the reins of leadership. Revivals require godly leadership.

Can we then discern that revival is not of God because there are some unwise men who gain leadership? No, that's a very inclusive proof. Can we conclude that a work is not of God because of wild enthusiasm that accompanies it? I don't suppose that often we use the word "enthusiasm" today as it has been historically used. I'm not using the term "enthusiastic." But I'm speaking of "enthusiasts." An "enthusiast" is someone who is carried away, someone who is overcome, someone who lays aside good sense. Men and women get carried away with excitement and make exaggerated claims. In many movements there are very unwise and irresponsible things done, physical excesses.

There are a lot of things that can be looked at and the question can be asked, "Is that revival?" And you have to say, "I'm not sure." If you see someone barking like a dog, and they say that is revival, can you stand up authoritatively and say, "That is not revival!" No, not wisely. That's an inconclusive evidence. It looks suspicious. It arouses indignation in many of us, but it is not an absolute matter that you can be totally clear on.

All I try to do is to be suggestive. Many things go on that we're not sure of, but what I want to do is give you twelve things by which you can test whether a work is truly of God.

Twelve Means by Which You Can Test Whether a Work Is Truly of God

1. God as He reveals Himself in Scripture is the central figure. In some recent movements which were described by many as revival, they talked about God; they read from the Bible; they claimed wonderful Christian experiences. But the question I asked was, "Was God the central figure?" I have declared that revival is a time when God draws near. Well then, is He the central figure? Are all eyes fixed upon Him? Is the manifest presence of God the great and overwhelming feature of the movement? That's the first test. If it is some manifestation, if it's the religious experience that people are having, then it is suspicious. God must be the central figure.

2. The holiness of God in contrast with the wickedness of man is the domineering issue. When there is true revival, one of the inevitable aspects is the awesome sense of God's holiness and a terrible sense of guilt and shame over sin. Normally in revival, that results in quiet weeping, but sometimes it results in loud outbursts of agony. But we don't dismiss the movement because of the loud outbursts of agony.

In Ireland in 1858-59 a certain phenomenon was very commonplace, and it was very puzzling and difficult for godly men to accept. Because of the vast concourses of people that assembled, the churches were too small and many of the meetings had to be held outdoors, anywhere that huge groups of people could gather. But a strange thing happened as these faithful ministers of God were preaching. It was very common for strong, hulking men to suddenly sink. They were examined by the physicians and by the godly pastors. Nobody gave a totally satisfactory explanation of what occurred.

The good pastors didn't like it. But what was discerned in connection with this phenomenon in Ireland was that the holiness of God became so absolutely awesome that these great, strong men standing there were overwhelmed with the sense of their own sin, and whatever bodily mechanisms normally enable us to stand upright simply were suspended. These men sunk in place and some of them were "out" for hours. But invariably when they "came around," it was to express an awesome sense of God's holiness and a profound awfulness of their own sin.

3. Conviction of sin and profound grief prevail among the subjects of revival. I must acknowledge that I've never been part of what I would call a full-orbed revival. I long to see this. But although I've not seen what I would call a full-orbed revival, I am grateful to say I have seen awesome conviction of sin. I've felt it myself and seen it in others. By God's grace, numerous of you have seen these profound seasons of conviction in which the Spirit of God is wrestling in the souls of men and often it is accompanied with tears and even outcries.

4. Deeper levels of repentance, both individual and corporate, are experienced in revival than have ever been experienced at any other time. Sometime back I had an incredible experience of God's nearness for a period of months. I tell you, dear brothers and sisters, that I have never known since, and I certainly never knew before, the depth of repentance that I knew in those days when God was so wonderfully near. We can't discern revival on the basis of tears alone. Tears don't prove anything, but tears often lead to radically transformed lives. We test a revival not on the basis of the weeping over sin, but on the basis of the transformation that occurs as true repentance lays hold of the human heart, and men and women are radically transformed.

5. A true revival will always result in wondrous esteem for the Lord Jesus Christ among a vastly increased number. We've had something of a revival of worship in recent years, but a true revival doesn't just result in more activity in worship services. There is day by day, hour by hour, immense esteem and love for Christ. During that special season in my own life, there was just flowing out of me perpetually, "Lord, I love you! I love you!" I didn't have to drum it up. It just flowed. I couldn't stop it. I think God gave me that little experience to encourage me to press on and hope to see a worldwide movement of the Holy Spirit that results in magnificent esteem for Jesus Christ our Lord. Be suspicious of any movement where Christ is not esteemed as never before in the lives of individuals who claim to be its subjects.

6. There is confidence in and obedience to the Word of God. There isn't much confidence in the Word of God today. I believe the average evangelical preacher does not trust the Holy Spirit to use him through the preaching of the Word. That's why all these methodologies have been developed. We don't count on preaching. I am of the conviction that when the Word of God is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit,

everything that needs to be done in the hearts and lives of men and women is done, and that nothing else is needed beyond the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. You will know it is a revival when there comes this marvelous confidence in God's Word so that indeed the doubts are swept away, and men preach as never before.

We had a series of movements approximately five years ago that affected a number of the Christian schools and some secular institutions. As far as I know it began in Texas. Within a few days a group came from Texas to the college right next to us. They met Sunday evening and again Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday, with growing interest and attendance. Beautiful things happened. But a mistake was made. They had no preaching. You have the theory among many that at a time of revival we don't need preaching because people have already had all kinds of preaching; it is thought we need the Lord and experience.

But the truth of the matter is that when revival comes, if there is ever a time in the human heart when there is openness to hear from God, it is then. I want to say to brothers who preach to lay hold of the opportunity to preach as you never preached before. Any movement that is not accompanied with tremendous interest in the Word of God and great preaching, falls under heavy suspicion. That's why some of us try carefully to distinguish between experience-centered movements and Word-centered movements. Over and over I've proclaimed throughout the English-speaking world, "We don't need an experience-oriented movement. We need a great preaching revival."

7. Love for God and for fellow man increases substantially during revival so that both the first and second greatest commandments are honored and kept. But dear friends, this will only be true if the revival is kept pure. Revivals have been historically very divisive because there has not been that careful leadership of godly men in revival movements, so you get some racing this way and some racing that way. Divisions result. But in a true revival godly pastors lay hold of the reins of leadership and keep it in the channel of grace, with these things that I am mentioning in focus. Then wonderful new love for God and for others accompanies these movements.

I repeat, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

8. True revival always generates new levels of contentment and joy. Obviously we live in a time of great discontent. Vast numbers of broken marriages among the clergy are but one demonstration of this fact, men who aren't content and who crave something beyond what God Himself has given them. There isn't a man here but what is in danger of bringing dreadful shame upon the name of Christ by allowing the spirit of discontent to arise. But a true revival brings this glorious sense of satisfaction in Christ, and joy. Christ and Christ only becomes the sufficiency of the Church. This chasing after novel ideas, this great investment of strength and energy in inventing new ways of "doing church" is simply laid aside in the glorious contentment that grips men and women.

9. Concern for the eternal well-being of people, especially the lost and dying, dominates the whole of the church. Note, it is eternal well-being. Right now there is a tremendous interest in the well-being of people but not in their eternal well-being. Vast amounts of energy are being poured into trying to resolve tensions and conflicts on every hand. But the Church basically is contenting itself with the pretended salvation of the multitudes. Most in the Church are every bit as satisfied if someone makes a profession of faith as they would be if that person were radically transformed by a work of the Spirit of God. There is something grossly unholy about those who are content to accept claims of faith where there is no evidence whatsoever that any work of grace has occurred.

Some of us are grievously wrong about our understanding of the doctrine of salvation. I doubt seriously if 30% of those in America who claim to be born again ever came anywhere near a work of grace in their lives. Some of us are contributing to this problem continually. A work of revival will cause the Church to be manifestly burdened for the eternal welfare of the lost.

10. When revival occurs there will be a vast increase of resources available for the worldwide work of the Kingdom. It is an astonishing thing when a movement which claims to be a revival has to beg people to give. O my friends, what happened in Moses' day is characteristic of revival. Moses had to say to the people, "Please, don't bring anything else! We've got more than we can possibly use" (See Ex. 36:2-7). A blessedness of revival is that wallets come out and they're emptied. Even Benjamin Franklin was so moved when he heard George Whitefield preach that he emptied the gold out of his pockets. Another man who was known as a stingy person through and through, was seen to empty his pocket, and then he had to ask somebody for enough money to buy himself lunch. Liberation of the purse springs is another genuine test.

11. When revival comes, Satan's kingdom suffers major blows. In revival, iniquity in all forms decreases. When the chief of police does not know there is a revival, there isn't one. The crime rate is dramatically affected. Many of you are acquainted with the wonderful stories that emanated from the principality of Wales in 1904 and 1905—beautiful, beautiful stories. In South Wales where they had deep pit coal mines down in the bowels of the earth, the donkeys and the ponies that drew the coal carts down in the bowels of the earth, had to be retrained to respond to human kindness. They had been driven by kicks and by curses and had no notion of what to do when their masters treated them otherwise. Taverns and dives of iniquity of every kind closed. How beautiful it is to realize that in multitudes of regions day by day, the judges entered their chambers and laid a pair of white gloves on the podium, signifying there was not a single crime to be tried. The devil's kingdom suffers a mighty blow when revival comes. This is the kind of revival that interests me.

12. A revived Church will always aggressively involve itself in doing good. I have been studying the subject of repentance for quite some time, and finally was able to put my study into a book form—"Repentance, the First Word of the Gospel." In that book I point out that repentance is not merely turning from evil, but repentance is turning to good. It is never enough that we cease to do evil. We must always learn to do good, and any revival that is not marked by an amazing outpouring of good deeds is of a very questionable nature.

Some Summary Statements

True revivals are very fragile blessings from God, and they require most careful handling.

Based on that, excesses are inconclusive proof that a work is not of God. But while excesses may not invalidate a work—that is, we cannot look at excesses and say "That is not of God,"—they can and they do shorten its life and lessen its usefulness. Any revival that is tolerant of excesses will quickly end and its potential good is severely limited.

Some leaders dislike excesses and are quick to cut them down. Others are very tolerant.

I had the privilege of knowing well a brother whose books and ministry affected many for years. On one occasion we were able to arrange a meeting at a Bible school where my friend spoke one Friday evening. I thought it was a good sermon, but it didn't seem anything remarkable. He finished very quietly and he said something like this: "There are many of you students who are not right with God, and you need to get right before you leave here tonight." Immediately the front of the auditorium was jam packed with students down on their faces weeping before God. I was astonished but also very grateful.

But then, to my amazement, in a few minutes there was a tap on my shoulder, and it was one of the men who had brought my friend to the city. My friend was staying in our home, and this young fellow said, "He wants to go home."

"What?"

"He wants to go home."

"Why that's impossible!"

"He wants to go right now."

"No, no, that's impossible! We've been praying for years for some touch of the Holy Spirit and now you want us to leave?"

But the young fellow insisted. So I got up and went out to the lobby. My friend was very adamant: "I'm very tired. I must leave."

We had come in my vehicle. What was I to do? I had a friend with me who had worked with me for quite a long time in these special engagements, and he came out and said, "What's happening?" So I explained.

He said, "You go back in. You're the responsible person. I'll drive him to your house and then come back."

By the time I went back into the auditorium, a fellow had gotten up on the platform with a guitar and had taken control of the meeting. I was in a quandary. Is this of God? No, absolutely not. It happened that the fellow

was of another race, and this is the way my mind worked: if I go up on the platform and expel him, someone could say, "Racial prejudice!" The situation had nothing to do with race. He was just an opportunist who saw his chance to be in the limelight.

I said to myself, "If only my friend were here, we could discuss it between us. But I don't know what to do." I didn't do anything. And that glorious move of the Spirit of God was put to death within thirty minutes by this fellow strumming on his guitar.

That's the sort of thing we face—opportunists who see a chance. I'm pleading with you, brothers in ministry, don't give the opportunity to Satan or his cohorts. If God answers your prayers by sending revival, lay hold of your responsibility. I've spent many hours soberly grieving before God that I didn't have the courage to take back that platform and see that the work went on to the glory of God. I plead with you, dear friends, be ever so quick in these matters.

Another summary thought, when phenomena occur, and they regularly occur in revival, it commonly occurs in the early days, and when suppressed by godly leadership, the revival burns on brightly with great power and glorious results. But when there is a retiring leadership that lets the phenomena run wild, the work is quickly brought to a close. Sadly, the fall-away rate among converts who are subjects of the phenomena is vastly greater than the fall-away rate of those who come quietly and submissively to Jesus Christ in repentance. So wherever the phenomena are encouraged or even allowed, it not only affects the length of the revival in its overall fruitfulness, but it also affects as well, the endurance of the supposed converts.

A final encouragement to be discerning is that people who are subjects of phenomena are much more apt to doubt their relationship to Christ when the phenomena cease, because they have gained an unholy alliance with something that had nothing to do with the real issue.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."