

Revivals And Church History :: An outpouring of the Holy Spirit in France in the late 17th century

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An outpouring of the Holy Spirit in France in the late 17th century shows how God's power must be handled with care

The late 17th century were dark days for the Protestants of France. The Roman Catholic king had passed over 300 laws restricting their personal and religious freedom. In 1685 he revoked the law by which Protestants were protected, which meant they could now be persecuted and killed at will. Many were. All over France, church buildings were destroyed; house meetings were raided; men, women and even children were put to the sword.

On top of this, all pastors were banished from the realm and fled to places like Holland and England, so the estimated 150,000 Protestants who remained were deprived of experienced spiritual guides and had to teach themselves the word of God. They withdrew to the wild Mediterranean hills and met in caves, seeing themselves as God's prophets of old, ministering to Him in the desert.

Godly souls exhorted the people to corporate and personal repentance. Tears flowed, and penitent hymns were written.

Then, in 1688, the Cevennes area of southern France received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. A girl of sixteen, Isabeau Vincent, knew states of ecstasy, in which she would quote scriptures that she had not learned. She knew shakings and swoonings. She would sing, pray and even preach in her sleep. At times she would prophesy, not of future events, but to exhort the believers to endurance, repentance and a transformation of life by God's word and the Holy Spirit.

The effect was electric! By the end of that year, over 60 people in that village had received a baptism of the Holy Spirit with gifts and ministries, particularly prophecy.

News spread through the area that the power of God had been poured out, and many came to catch the fire. One visitor at that time records:

"On every hand you may find blessed souls who fill the hearts of their hearers with a fear of God, with hope, and with deep repentance. They are both men and women, and of all ages, from the most simple youths of 15 or 16 to a woman of 65 whose zeal for the Lord could break the very rocks. They all have a most pleasing appearance, resembling angels in beauty when the prophetic inspiration moves them. They read I Corinthians 12-14 concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They advocate generosity to the poor, and they rebuke all worldly pleasures."

One who arose as an able leader in those early days, Gabriel Astier, would organise the meetings in such a way as to allow the Holy Spirit the maximum freedom to move. He urged people to prepare themselves by prayer and fasting. Sometimes he would follow an unusual inspiration; once he got the entire congregation to keep praying aloud the single word "Mercy!" until they knew God touching them within. There would then be spontaneous outbursts of joy, handclapping, shouts, and people falling over backwards without ever hurting themselves.

Among the signs recorded by a visiting Calvinist pastor were:

Believers being guided to the location of secret meetings by bright lights in the sky;

Visions of angels, and hearing them singing;

Words of knowledge regarding situations and people; sometimes everything a person was thinking would be revealed and declared;

Discernment of spirits, particularly to unmask informers or traitors;

Powerful gifts of prophecy and preaching, including ministry by children;

People touched by the anointing with sensations of heat around the heart, and heavings of the stomach.

It was not long however, before the revival hit serious difficulties. Much of this could be explained by a state of shell-shock among the Protestants, who were seeing their farms destroyed, their women abused, and their menfolk killed or sent to row on the slave-ships. Added to this was the absence of mature spiritual leaders. The survivors had learned to move in the Holy Spirit's anointings, but had not grown in maturity, wisdom and character to match the miraculous things they were experiencing. The result was an overbalance on signs, with disastrous consequences in some areas.

Certain prophecies became more fanciful and predictive of times and seasons, for example that the world would end in 1699. Outward manifestations were encouraged and copied, as if there was some merit in the outward sign itself rather than the truth and life it conveyed. Worse still, a few persecuted churches began to take up arms against their oppressors. Whilst these 'Camisards' as they called themselves, had some military success, they began to claim the Spirit's guidance for whom to kill and what to burn. Gradually they were rounded up and cut to pieces by the royal army.

Man's lack of wisdom and maturity contributed in great measure to the decline of what was really a genuine and deep move of the Holy Spirit - a warning we do well to heed in our day. In its day, however, the revival among the French Protestants of the Cevennes brought much blessing and fruit, and good things did continue in some areas. One eye-witness woman records:

"We knew many wonderful happenings during this outpouring of the Spirit of God. A zeal for pure godliness; a despising of the world and its vanities; a spirit of reconciliation and love for one another; an inner consolation, hope, and heart-felt joy. We hated evil and loved good, and we tasted the excellent fruits of the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Those who received such gracious touches left behind all their old, corrupt ways, and became upright and godly, leading exemplary lives."