

Cautionary Thoughts on the Revival Phenomena

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I would appreciate your sympathy as I try to address a subject that is already dividing many of God's people into defensive and opposing camps. I venture out with some trepidation to raise some questions about a "revival" phenomenon that is already perplexing many. Unlike such previous moves of God as the Welsh Revival, noted from its inception for its unmistakably holy character, the present revival generates mixed reports from unequivocal enthusiasm to those that are dubious, critical and utterly rejecting. Some suggest there is more than one stream with a fleshly counterfeit paralleling the God-given and authentic. Via video tape of the principal and evidently original stream, I have been able to observe things that I find entirely repugnant. Ministers of the word were ostensibly so drunk in the spirit that they were unable to be coherent, railing finally into a collapse from their stupor. I found this entirely unbecoming to the dignity of their professed call, and felt the preached word to be denigrated by joking references to the feeble results obtained by it in comparison to the results procured now by the experiences of the "power" to which they were testifying. In watching some helplessly convulsing in laughter, I sensed that they had been gripped by something beyond their control and was actually causing them a physical pain? Can those manifestations be described as "holy"? On the contrary, they appeared to be irreverent if not indeed demonic and hellish.

From identical meetings others report unmistakable benefit, instant release from depression and other dogged personality disorders and disabilities upon receiving "the blessing." We are not in a position to categorically condemn as deception the ostensible benefits to which many testify. God is always free to bless whom He will bless. But our point is that if the enemy can succeed in bringing the Church to viewing benefit as the determinant by which something is judged to be of God, we may well have been brought to the very ground of deception itself.

For myself, I would choose to keep my distance from such manifestation phenomena, trusting that whatever I might be missing is not greater than what I am protecting and cherishing, and that the Lord is not offended by a carefulness that would rather err in a jealousy for His holiness than to risk subverting what has already been given as pure and true, namely, the residue of the knowledge of God as holy, obtained through obedience and communion, cherished and guarded over the years. What believer who has once been in that Presence could ever countenance the entertainment-carnival atmosphere that prevailed in the video cited above? I have not yet recovered from the eerie experience some twenty years ago of being present on the platform at an international conference in the midst of falling bodies, ostensibly "slain in the Spirit", in the complete absence of the sense of God's presence! The visible demonstration of power without the corresponding sense of God in the midst of squeals of carnal excitement and popping flashbulbs was more than could be borne. Whatever the consequence to propriety, ministerial and offended relationships, I had to leave.

Remarkable that though we are explicitly warned about end-time "lying signs and wonders" in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 and Matthew 24:24, we imagine that it is future. In our greed for experiences, empowerments and releases, we mindlessly trust ourselves to dubious personalities who have caught the public fancy in incredible overnight popularity. I profoundly respect God's use of the weak and the foolish thing, but for that reason I cannot endorse what is garish, cheap and coarse as being that weakness. "Holiness unto the Lord" is still the standard of God's House even when it is unspectacular and unassuming in the eyes of the world, or even our own.

The invitation to welcome the phenomenon seems to be to abandon all restraint with language like, "The bar is open! leap in or get out of the way of others if you cannot!" God is well able, I feel sure, to protect as well as perfect what pertains to Him (Colossians 1:28). I cannot help but wonder if it is man's interests that are being so vehemently defended and that we are at the inception of what could ultimately be finalized by the warning that "they will kill you and claim that they are doing God a service" (John 16:2). Perhaps one of the most ominous features of the hour is the note of warning sounded toward those who have some reserve of about the outpouring of God as being "obstructions, enemies and threats."

How much does it suggest that we may be reaping mindless and careless sowing in the early decades of the Charismatic Movement? The immaturity of many was fostered in easy "decisions," Cross-avoiding laziness, undisciplined living, the giddy adulation of personalities and in the superficiality and lightness of our meetings. I would insert here a caution given by T. Austin Sparks, more appropriate now perhaps than when it was sounded decades ago. In speaking of the Corinthian believers' propensity for "sensational evidences", he writes:

"We are in that kind of age today. It is becoming more and more a psychic age. It is an age of the soul just spilling over, asserting itself, taking control of everything in Christianity as well as outside of it! it is a soulish age! Be careful that you are not hankering for this realm again! My, how I have seen dear Christian people just prostrating themselves, groaning and crying, almost screaming for evidence of "sign" things! Christians and dear men of God, who have been greatly used, are creating an emotional, psychic situation that is involving simple Christians in things which are, sooner or later, going to be a great disillusionment and an offense! and that is just what the devil is after." (Called Unto the Fellowship of His

Son, p. 46, published by Emmanuel Church, 12000 E.14th St., Tulsa, OK 74128 (very slightly paraphrased).

Personally, I believe myself to be ready to risk all and to dare all for the Lord, but certainly not for a "blessing" or dubious "experience" that confers some seeming good. My own preference, and I believe that of the Scripture, is to seek out the root of our many depressions according to the Word, which is usually unacknowledged disobediences. This will be accomplished primarily through that part of the Body to whom I am accountable and with whom I am authentically joined (Ephesians 4:15). When "experience" as a "quick-fix" alternative is preferred to these disciplines, we put ourselves in a place of spiritual jeopardy. Is not the Lord near at hand to all who seek Him? What is the enduring benefit when we have merely received some alleviation from the symptoms that were occasioned by serious defects of character?

Clearly, a power is at work. The question is, whose? Who is it that is mediating an alternative and lesser joy to the immature, the carnal, and the undiscerning? We are already discomfited to learn of the loss of interest, even the repudiation of apostolic vision once held by those who have received "the blessing", as if the one were somehow antithetical or opposed to the other! Assuming that our fears are exaggerated and that the present phenomenon is of God, though admittedly marred only by certain excesses, in what ways will future "elying signs and wonders" be different from that with which we are presently being confronted? By what criteria will these differences be identified? Are we presently at the level of maturity and discernment by which these important distinctions can be made? By what means shall we come to that place if we are now prone to describe as "enemies" those who are only raising the questions? The very ridicule and censure brought by the advocates of this revival to those who attempt to do so makes suspect the very claims they espouse.

The fact that something eventuates in blessing, release, or deliverance, is no sure evidence or guarantee that it is of God (Matthew 24:24). The same powers of darkness which have wrought the oppressions and depressions through careless or unclean living can just as easily relieve them in order to bring about a greater deception!

Even the most rapturous "love of God" can be a pseudo-sensation produced by spirits in the indiscriminate and slothful who are unwilling for the sacrifices of seeking God's face in truth. Is the "hunger for God" in fact that, or a hunger for an experience of God that will assure the insecure soul that they are known and accepted of God? Is this not the unrecognized motive that makes many pant after present day prophets in hope of a "prophetic" word of this kind? Does not this encouraged tendency promote the immaturity of such rather than encourage them in the faith of sons? Do we not prefer to be effortlessly "acted upon" miraculously rather than to diligently seek God on the basis of the promise of His Word? "And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Are these not the last days in which we have been warned about deception and exhorted to test all spirits? (I John 4:1; I Thessalonians 5:21). What are our eschatological expectations, the premises of our faith? Surely these views will altogether affect our susceptibilities to every new thing that promises to bless and that establishes us in this present life. At the same time, we are robbed of the alertness that would and should otherwise be ours. Are we to ignore the prevalence of ear-splitting "worship", high-powered offerings, calculated theatrics, carnival bawdiness, the chilling, hellish shrieks and cries that punctuate the proceedings, the conspicuous absence of the preached word (except perhaps in a token way), the relentless spirit-dulling testimonies in a stupor unbecoming the dignity of God given incoherently even by ministers of the Word? Not for a moment would such "phenomena" be tolerated at the historic Welsh Revival where every care was taken to avoid even the use of instrumental music or any intrusion of man, which coincidentally are the very things now being celebrated and employed.

Has God changed from being the God who insisted that His priests mount a ramp to the altar rather than ascend by steps lest any flesh be revealed? (Exodus 20:26). He had them wear the golden head plate continually on their foreheads engraved with the words, "Holiness unto the Lord", the very place now we so readily make available for the touch that brings the "blessing". Our ache is that "Holiness unto the Lord" be ascribed afresh on the foreheads of priestly men and women who will stand for Him in this age of sleaze and vulgarity. It is the cry of Isaiah 52:11, "Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst other; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord." Indeed, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1). Viewing the world staggering in violence, war, the catastrophes of earthquake, famine, flood, and fire, the Church in its present pitiful state of shallowness and un-preparedness, should we not rather "be afflicted, and mourn and weep: let[ting] our laughter be turned to mourning, and [our] joy to heaviness?" Forgive us if we are being too cautious. We would be naïve to think that deception is only a fear for the carnal and the sensual. Final and last days' deceptions will be spiritual for Satan himself "transforms himself into an angel of light" (II Corinthians 11:14). "The end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (I Peter 4:7).

Whatever the future will reveal of the present revival phenomenon, perhaps the greatest will be the profound repentance of broken thousands upon recognizing their susceptibility to deception, their lack of elementary discernment, and their haste to run after demonstrations of power in atmospheres so contrary to God's known holiness and character.