

Revivals And Church History :: Revival—seeking to clear the confusion by Shane Idleman

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By Shane Idleman; WCFav.org

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“The true saints of God, who have clear heads, and pure, warm hearts, have in all generations had to walk between the two extremes of cold formality on the one side, and wild, ranting fanaticism on the other. Dead formality and the false fire of fanaticism are both Satan’s counterfeits, and he does not care into which extreme the soul plunges, just so he can prevent it from having that scriptural type of holiness which is ‘full of faith,’ and ‘full of the Holy Spirit,’ and ‘full of wisdom,’ and of a ‘sound mind’” (George D. Watson; 1845-1923).

Watson masterfully describes how God’s Spirit, who is given to inflame the hearts of men, can be suppressed or skewed. The Holy Spirit is not some weird, mystical force; He’s part of the triune nature of God. The Bible says that the Spirit intercedes, leads, guides, teaches, and so on. (Check out Romans 8:26; Acts 8:29; John 16:13.) He enables and empowers us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and to boldly live for Christ. God’s Word becomes living and active in the life of the believer who is continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Charles Spurgeon said it best, “What can a hammer do without the hand that grasps it, and what can we do without the Spirit of God?”

God radically changed, transformed, and redirected my life through the power of the Holy Spirit. By age 28, my life was crumbling around me. I was at a turning point. I could choose to turn to God, or continue to reject Him. By God’s grace, I put my complete trust in Christ.

Within the months that followed, my passion and purpose for life became clearer than ever. I finally understood Acts 3:19, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” I was truly filled with the Spirit as seen throughout the scriptures (e.g., a transformed life resulting in a love for God and His Word—not perfection but direction). From this experience, came books, articles, speaking engagements, and ultimately, a church.

Although far from perfect, God radically transformed and redirected my life. He can do the same for you—“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me...” (Acts 1:8). The power of the Holy Spirit is like dynamite that ignites a hunger for God so intense that every aspect of life is changed—we become bold, not passive; stable, not fanatical; and committed, not wavering.

I’m not a closed minded conservative with an axe to grind (a “holier than you” attitude is not the right approach). From what I’ve read, scripture appears to support the miraculous work of the Spirit today versus cessationism (the belief that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased with the early Church). I would call myself a Reformed Charismatic—one who underscores the desperate need for sound doctrine and the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s possible to be “Bible taught,” but not “Spirit led”—straight as a gun barrel theologically, but just as empty. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Don’t get me wrong, I love systematic theology; it’s essential to Christian living, but how often are students taught to fast and pray? How often are they taught brokenness and repentance instead of how to dissect and translate the Greek language—more concerned about a Master’s Degree than a degree from the Master? The Scriptures, to be understood, must be read with the same Spirit that originally inspired them. If the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, and Jesus and the Apostles began their ministry in the power of the Spirit, we would be wise to ask for His guidance as well. I agree with Leonard Ravenhill here, “We need to close every church in the land for one Sunday and cease listening to a man so we can hear the groan of the Spirit which we in our lush pews have forgotten.” Granted, we have gifted leaders who are led by the Spirit. But here is the point: we, individually, need to spend serious time searching and listening to God.

Sadly, the only thing holding many churches together today is social activity, not the activity of the Spirit. I once knew a pastor who instructed his worship leader to remove all songs mentioning the Holy Spirit. How sad...in his zeal to avoid charismatic excesses, he actually quenched and grieved the Spirit by not acknowledging His vital role. A.W. Tozer put it b

luntly, “If the Lord’s people were only half as eager to be filled with the Spirit as they are to prove that they cannot be filled, the church would be crowded out.”

While several of the past articles often receive united agreement from most denominations, the topic for this current series has been the subject of debate throughout church history. I would actually prefer not to write these articles, but the need to address this topic is necessary.

If being labeled legalistic, judgmental, and arrogant are the cost of speaking the truth, and looking to the scriptures as the source of truth, then so be it. God takes sound doctrine (a correct understanding of Him) very seriously, so should we.

As Mr. Watson rightly noted earlier, Christians can embrace one of two extremes when it comes to the word “revival.” At one extreme are those who embrace pure emotionalism and hysteria—“if it’s odd it’s God”...all weird behavior is excused.

The other extreme seems to lack a living, vibrant spiritual life. The church feels dead, cold, and lifeless. Talk of reviving the things of God (revival) is either dismissed or ridiculed. Both extremes can hinder the work of the Holy Spirit and genuine Christian growth, but I will primarily address the first extreme where I have witnessed people supposedly getting high, toking, and drunk on the Holy Ghost. This is much different than being filled with the Spirit (cf. Ephesians 5:18). Bizarre and grossly unbiblical manifestations are not reflective of one filled with the Spirit. Those truly filled become bold, not passive; stable, not fanatical; and committed, not wavering. I’ve also seen videos of people being led around like dogs on a leash and acting like animals. Yes, I’m serious.

Sadly, when questioned about extremes in odd behavior, people often do not have answers that find support in scripture. They say, “I know it seems bizarre, but...” Or, “I know it’s weird, but...” Or, my personal favorite, “You’re quenching and grieving the Spirit by not being open.” The Holy Spirit is not quenched and grieved when we honor God’s Word and “test the spirits, whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1); quite the contrary, He is quenched and grieved when we do not test and discern—when we allow the Holy Spirit to be misrepresented. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:15, said that those who are spiritual should judge, or discern, all things.

Not surprisingly, Acts 2:15 and John 18:6 are often used to support very odd behavior. Acts says, “For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day,” and John says, “Now when He said to them, ‘I am He,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” This is not only wrong exegetically (uncovering the literal meaning of a text), it’s very misleading.

Granted, we cannot dismiss the truly miraculous works of God that happen daily. Clearly, I’m not minimizing this, or the incredible power of God to radically change lives through the power of the Holy Spirit; however, in our zeal and excitement we often minimize the need for discernment. A discerning person considers the situation in light of God’s Word, nature, and character. They ask, “Is there genuine fruit?” Does it align with God’s Word? “Am I growing in maturity?” “Do I exhibit the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22, ‘love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ as a result of these experiences?”

A true, genuine experience with the Holy Spirit produces godly fruit. A word of caution here: even those in the New Age movement experience powerful feelings of love and euphoria, but it doesn’t draw them closer to Christ. It doesn’t lead to repentance, full surrender to the true God, and genuine brokenness over sin.

Although sincere, we can be sincerely wrong, and seriously misled. Having an “experience” does not necessarily mean that it is right. Our experiences must align with the scriptures and the character of God. Never interpret Scripture in the light of our experiences, but rather, interpret our experiences in the penetrating light of Scripture (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones). Although feelings can be good and God-ordained, we cannot forget Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Again, thank God for emotions, but don’t seek, or rely upon them.

Sadly, the disturbing behavior mentioned earlier is often excused and encouraged, and the leaders of these movements are rarely challenged. They can divorce their wife, abandon their kids, and be back in leadership within a year using 1 Chronicles 16:22 as a proof text, “Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm.” This is an abuse of grace at the highest level, and a twisting of the Scriptures. We should forgive, but reinstatement is another story. In our zeal to defend the Holy Spirit, we run the risk of defending wrong behavior.

When many of these leaders are questioned, they often respond, “But thousands are coming to Christ on the mission fi

eld under my ministry.” No one can really validate this. Many of the people who are supposedly “now saved” on the mission field, are still clinging to idols, charms, and pagan practices. Jesus is not the only way, but one of many ways.

To avoid criticism, they say that those who oppose these movements will suffer the judgment of God. When, in reality, those who oppose the will of God will suffer the judgment of God—“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

People flock to these events to hear what the prophets are saying rather than what Jesus Christ is saying to them daily through His Word. They go seeking signs and wonders rather than the Lord of glory: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign...” (Matthew 12:39). When we seek gifts rather than the Gift Giver, we become unstable and confused. Instead, spend time in God’s Word and in prayer. Then you’ll understand His nature and His ways. Words of encouragement should never supersede the Bible...they are the caboose of the train, not the engine. They confirm more than direct.

When we don’t have the counsel of God deep within us, we can easily be deceived and become easy prey. The problem is that many are not in the Word so the Word is not in them. Spiritual hunger is good, yet we can be so hungry spiritually that we’ll consume anything. That’s why many are drawn to “experience” oriented movements—we were created to experience God—this desire is healthy. Searching for spiritual fulfillment isn’t wrong, but where we search can be wrong.

Some of these events where these oddities occur feed sinful desires rather than challenge them—“having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Timothy 3:5). Granted, some attending these events truly want to know God...I’m not minimizing that. I applaud those who are seeking God, but the “prosperity gospel” is not the real gospel; the “signs and wonders gospel” is not the real gospel. God may prosper you, and miracles do happen, but these are secondary—Christ is primary. We cannot build a theology around what I consider “the American gospel”; we must preach the true gospel. (For more, visit www.WCFAV.org, or click <http://westsidechristianfellows.org/?s=the+american>.)

Granted, Christians do look odd to the culture, and revivals are not predictable, but this is not what I’m referring to. Again, I’m referring to bizarre occurrences such as people appearing drunk at the pulpit, toying the Holy Ghost, acting like animals, and screaming as if they are on fire.

Do we honestly believe that Jesus, Peter, and Paul would endorse, or worse yet, partake in this weird behavior? Would Paul be led around like a dog on a leash? Would Peter run around jerking and acting as if he were on fire? Would Jesus slur as if drunk while preaching? I think that we all know better. If Paul witnessed these weird manifestations I’m convinced he’d say, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). We should honor God’s Word, not challenge it.

The apostle Paul often warns against confusing people. He didn’t want people thinking that Christians were crazy. He was very concerned with actions and reputations. We cannot dismiss this fact. Many of his epistles were written to correct error, never to encourage it. In 1 Corinthians 14:40 he concludes, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” By today’s standards, Paul would be quenching and grieving the Spirit.

We do see people in the Bible, such as the man from the country of the Gadarenes, being possessed, but after He met Jesus he was “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind” (Luke 8:35). We also have an account of a man bringing his possessed son to Jesus: “And as he was still coming, the demon threw him down and convulsed him. Then Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father” (Luke 9:42). It seems that mass hysteria and very odd behavior is the result of people needing Christ, not the result of them finding Him.

As a student of revivals, I understand that being “controversial” isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Revivals are not predictable, and odd things do happen. As I read the Journals of George Whitefield, the life of David Brainerd, the Welsh Revivals, and the first hand accounts of the First Great Awakening in America, I’m often reminded of the words of Pastor Jonathan Edwards. He believed that a true work of the Holy Spirit would be evident: 1) it would elevate the truth, 2) exalt Christ, 3) oppose Satan, 4) point people to the Scriptures, and 5) result in love for God and others.

At many of these events, it appears that the truth is not elevated, the fear of the Lord is not proclaimed, Christ is not truly sought, Satan is not opposed, the challenging Scriptures are rarely mentioned, and people often do not leave with a greater love for God and others.

In comparison to the current “revivals” previously mentioned, genuine revivals of the past would focus on preaching the totality of God’s Word, calling out sin, and correcting error—holiness was sought, not hysteria—the result was genuine fruit, not fanaticism.

Many who support some of these questionable moves of God say that today’s battle is not against liberals in the church, but against those who are “not open” to new prophecies and visions—those who “religiously hold to the written Word alone.” This statement concerns me. I believe Acts 2:17, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams.” But I also embrace 1 John 4:1, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Scripture supports a spirit of peace and order and discernment.

Jesus warns, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15). We cannot ignore these scriptures or avoid them. We hold religiously to the written Word because it’s our guide: “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Corinthians 14:32).

A “prophet,” as mentioned in the Bible, can be anyone in a position of spiritual authority, or claiming to be. Wolves don’t often attack wolves, but they do go after sheep. False teachers aren’t ostentatiously dressed in red, armed with a pitchfork. They often look credible, and talk convincingly; however, they bring destructive teachings and lies into the church. They often avoid the difficult truths (sin, judgment, holiness, etc.) and tell people what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. (Take time and read all of Jeremiah 23 for example.)

False teachers provide layers of truth mixed with error, but even a broken clock is right twice a day. Today, when the truth of God’s Word is spoken, people are often offended because they’ve been conditioned to hear “feel good” messages that do little in calling out sin. As a result, our churches are filled with unrepentant people whose lifestyles reflect little change. William Still said it well: “Many, who for the first time, come under the sound of Holy Ghost preaching are mortally offended...because they have never been exposed to the white light of the Spirit.”

The white light shines upon repentance, holiness, purity, righteousness, surrender, humility, sin, judgment, the blood of Christ, the cross, and so on. Ironically, these topics are rarely discussed in churches across our landscape and Europe: 2 Timothy 4:3 echoes throughout the ages with resounding clarity, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

How do we “test every spirit” and avoid false teachers? Determine if what they are teaching agrees with the Scriptures. For example, if a person says that they are drunk in the Spirit, 1 Corinthians 14:40 tells us otherwise, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” If they say that they cannot control themselves, remind them that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. If they claim that a “messenger of light” appeared to them with a new revelation, or a deeper truth, point them to 2 Corinthians 11:14 where “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.” If they say that we who look to the Word are quenching and grieving the Spirit, remind them that Jesus often used the Word of God to defeat the enemy.

What is true revival? Much can be said, but simply stated: a genuine revival is God reviving His people—“Wilt thou not revive us again that thy people may rejoice in thee?” (Psalm 85:6). Tears of repentance were, and are, often marks of true revival.

In the classic book, *The Calvinistic Methodist Fathers of Wales*, the author says this about the famous preacher, Griffith Jones, who preached during the Welsh revivals of the 18th century: “The tears began to flow in streams down their cheeks. Soon, they wept openly, and cried out, ‘What shall we do to be saved?’”

It was also not uncommon for people to tremble and weep, or shout for joy under the anointed preaching of George Whitefield. Whitefield was the primary evangelist during the Great Awakening that occurred in the mid 1700s. Expression of genuine revival followed: old grudges and debts were forgiven, morality improved, many were added to the church, and there was a greater sense of the fear of the Lord.

Those who use past revivals to validate many odd events today, perhaps have not truly researched revivals. In reading charismatic and calvinists, pentecostals and puritans, Acts and Azusa, as well as countless biographies of leaders such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Robert Murray McChesney, Charles Spurgeon, and D.L. Moody, and puritans such as Thomas Goodwin, John Bunyan, John Owen, and Richard Baxter, and nowhere do I find these leaders embracing the hysteria, oddities, or outright weirdness we see today.

Jonathan Edwards reported people holding on to trees thinking they may fall into the abyss of hell during his famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. People did cry out to God, or fall on the ground under the strong conviction of sin under the Revivals of George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Evan Roberts, but that's because sin, righteousness, and holiness were preached—"falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25). This is true revival.

One way to discern a genuine revival is to examine what is being said...what is the focus? At many of these conferences (though not all), there's little talk of repentance, holiness, righteousness, and purity, but rather boasting, blessings, abundance, and prosperity. The very thing we need is the very thing weren't not discussing—repentance: "The Church must first repent; then the world will break! The Church must first weep; then our altars will be filled with weeping penitents" (Leonard Ravenhill). Without holiness you will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

Not all recent moves of God lack authenticity; what many have experienced are valid moves of God. Small and large revivals occurring throughout the world are truly that, while others are the fruit of the promotional moxy of the media. While revivals may have humble beginnings, they can be quenched with bizarre behavior, or when leaders take the glory and begin promoting themselves.

God calls us to be deeply concerned, prayerful, and surrendered to Him. Matthew 7:22-23 reminds us that "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Jesus here refers to those who "think" they know Him—these people prophesy, cast out demons, and do wonders "in the name of Jesus." This scripture should cause all Christians to search their hearts: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

We can't ignore the scriptures, but that's exactly what we do when embrace views outside of God's revealed Word and default to cultural trends. Jeremiah 23:16 sheds even more light on the need to discern, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD.'" "

We must discern truth from error, light from darkness, and right from wrong, but how? Jeremiah 23:17 provides one answer, "They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, You shall have peace.' And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'" "

False prophets don't warn, confront, or convict...they encourage people to continue in sin. Jesus said in Matthew 24:24 that "false Christs and false prophets will appear and deceive many." I'm not saying that all of these leaders are false prophets; I definitely do not believe that. I believe that many are sincere, and are open to the work of the Holy Spirit. It should be every Christians concern that we do not allow visions, dreams, prophecies, and wonders to supercede the Word. God's Word must be the foundation on which everything is built. It's not a sidebar; it is the bar.

I end by quoting Duncan Campbell's book, The Price and Power of Revival: "How is it that while we make such great claims for the power of the Gospel, we see so little of the supernatural in operation? Is there any reason why the Church today cannot everywhere equal the Church at Pentecost? I feel this is a question we ought to face with an open mind and an honest heart. What did the early Church have that we do not possess today? Nothing but the Holy Spirit, nothing but the power of God. Here I would suggest that one of the main secrets of success in the early Church lay in the fact that the early believers believed in unction from on high and not entertainment from men...How did the early Church get the p

people? By publicity projects, by bills, by posters, by parades, by pictures? No! The people were arrested and drawn together and brought into vital relationship with God, not by sounds from men, but by sounds from heaven...The early Church cried for unction and not for entertainment. Unction is the dire and desperate need of the ministry today.”

Duncan Campbell is right. We must preach and proclaim God’s Word with the genuine power of the Holy Spirit if we are to experience true revival. Without authority and power from on high, words are lifeless.

Where are men with uncompromising power and authority in the pulpits today? The one thing that all of the great revivals in church history had is the one thing that we are lacking—the genuine power of the Holy Spirit. The problem is that many of us don’t truly want revival.

As I was completing this book, I prayed, “Lord, bring revival to our nation, and to our church.” But I was not ready for the response that followed. I felt as if God impressed this upon my heart: “You don’t want revival—it will ruin your schedule, your dignity, your image, and your reputation as a person who is ‘well balanced.’ Men will weep throughout the congregation. Women will wail because of the travail of their own souls. Young adults will cry like children at the magnitude of their sin. My presence will be so strong that the worship team will cease playing. Time will seem to stand still.” “You won’t be able to preach because of the flood of emotions entering your own soul. You’ll struggle to find words, but only find tears. Even the most dignified and reserved among you will be broken and humbled as little children. The proud and self righteous will not be able to stand in My presence. The doubter and unbeliever will either run for fear, or fall on their knees and worship Me—there can be no middle ground. The church will never be the same again. YOU DON’T WANT REVIVAL!”

The very thing we need is the very thing we are afraid of. “The Church must first repent; then the world will break! The Church must first weep; then our altars will be filled with weeping penitents” (Leonard Ravenhill).

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