

SOME THOUGHTS ON REVIVAL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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THE PERSON who is bounding with energy and bursting at the seams with good health is unlikely to be interested in a book promising to show (in twelve easy lessons) the way to a healthy and happy life. When a person feels as fit as a fiddle, he is not interested in his health, either in analysing it or in having it analysed for him. However, the moment his health breaks down or he feels 'one degree under' he becomes interested in his state of health and begins to peer into medical textbooks for possible causes (which are many) and cures.

This may help us to see why it is that the New Testament apparently has so little to say about revival. The church described for us in Acts and the early Epistles is in the main healthy and therefore not interested in the subject of its health. What we must look for, first of all, in the New Testament is a picture of a healthy church rather than a mass of information on how the church is to become healthy.

One of the great needs of our day is that the church as we now know her should be introduced to the church as the apostles knew her. Our work as ministers of the gospel is to confront our people with the healthy church of the New Testament and to press the question, How far have we come short of this standard of health? Passages such as Acts 2: 42-47, 4: 23-35 and 6: 1-4 deserve consideration. A person may be in a state of low health and not really be aware of it until he comes in contact with someone who is absolutely fit. A person may tolerate poor health because he thinks it impossible to be any healthier, but once a healthy person arrives on the scene his hopes are raised. In many places the church tolerates sickness and is without hope because it has not yet pondered the virile healthy church of the New Testament. It would be a good thing if ministers of evangelical churches could gather their people together and discuss the state of the local church in the light of the New Testament church. Questions such as the following would be discussed and prayed over: Are we as joyful as the early church? Are we as concerned about our fellow-believers? Are we as generous, or as missionary-minded? Do we exercise discipline and maintain holy standards? Are we as fearless, as militant, as evangelistic? Is our preaching as powerful? Is our praying as effective?

In this way we shall discover how sick we are, and what the precise sicknesses are. The first step to a good recovery is a good diagnosis.

When the Holy Spirit searched the seven churches of Asia He sent out a call for repentance. Ephesus heard the words: 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent' (Rev. 2: 4f.). Pergamos heard the call to repent of false doctrine (2: 16), Thyatira of fornication (2: 22). Both Sardis and Laodicea heard the trumpet call to repentance. We must never forget that it is just as much the work of churches and saints to repent as of sinners. The church must continually be repenting of its lack of love towards God and man, of its idolatry, its unholiness, its false doctrine, its coming short of God's required standard for it. It may well be that many churches will have to repent of not having repented. We tolerate much in our churches which would never have been allowed within the doors of the early, healthy church of Jesus Christ. It is instructive to read the 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others' (Wesley's Works, Vol. viii). Question 56 reads, 'What can be done in order to revive the work of God when it is decayed?' and the answers given are:

- i. Let every preacher read carefully over the 'Life of David Brainerd'. Let us be followers of him, as he was of Christ, in absolute self-devotion, in total deadness to the world, and in fervent love to God and man. Let us but secure this point and the world and the devils must fall under our feet.
- ii. Let both Assistants and Preachers be conscientiously exact in the whole Methodist discipline.

- iii. See that no circuit be at any time without Preachers. . .
- iv. Wherever you can, appoint prayer meetings and particularly on Friday.
- v. Let a fast be observed in all our societies the last Friday in August, November, February and May.
- vi. Be more active in dispensing the books, particularly the sermon on 'The Good Steward', on 'Indwelling Sin', 'The Repentance of Believers' and 'The Scripture Way of Salvation'. . .
- vii. Strongly and explicitly exhort all believers to 'go on to perfection' . . .

Here the call is not simply to *pray* for revival but to seek more holiness, discipline, preaching, love to God and man, fasting and devotion to Christ. Prayer of course is necessary, but it is not the only thing necessary; there is room for wholesale repentance.

When all this has been said, there is still one great question to be answered. Does the New Testament encourage us to believe in *special* outpourings of the Holy Spirit, similar to that on the Day of Pentecost? Are we entitled to pray to God to pour out His Spirit upon the Church?

Joel in his prophecy declares, 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh.' This promise is for the last days, and as we are still living in the last days, we ought to expect the promise to be fulfilled again and again. (For 'the last days' see Heb. 1: 1, 2; 1 Pet. 1: 20; 1 Jn. 2: 18.) Smeaton in his book on the Holy Spirit writes, 'The first disciples waited in the youthfulness of simple hope, not for a spirit which they had not, but for more of the Spirit which they had; and Christianity has not outlived itself. The attitude of the church in the first days after the ascension when the disciples waited for the Spirit should be the church's attitude still' (pp. 254f.).

In the fourth chapter of Acts we read of another special outpouring of the Spirit. Peter and John, having been threatened by the authorities, reported the matter to the church, and together they lifted up their voices in prayer. Then, we are told, 'the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness' (Acts 4: 31). This came, we note, *after* the outpouring on the Day of Pentecost, Peter and John (probably, all the disciples) being present on both occasions.

Both these outpourings had an effect on the preaching. The Word of God was preached with boldness and great effectiveness, and many thousands came to believe. What we need to see in our own day is that the bare Word of God is ineffective, even though it be orthodox, without the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6: 17). Paul makes it abundantly clear that the gospel which he preached came not to the hearers in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit (1 Thes. 1: 5). In his famous autobiographical passage in 1 Corinthians 2 he writes, 'And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (cf. 1 Pet. 1: 12). The Spirit enabled the apostles to preach the word irresistibly (Acts 6: 9f.), and they in turn looked to the Spirit to authenticate and bring the message home to the hearers' hearts.

Once we move into the realm of history we see plainly that special outpourings of the Spirit have been a feature of the church's life. The 17th, 18th and 19th centuries bear testimony to this as a fact. Dr. Lloyd-Jones has pointed out in his lecture on Revival (Puritan Conference Papers, 1959) that 'between 1760 and 1860 there were at least fifteen major revivals in Wales alone'. The effect of these revivals was seen clearly in the powerful preaching of men like Whitefield, Wesley, Rowland and scores of others.

It would seem, then, that God is prepared to pour out His Spirit in this special way, and that it is our duty to pray that He will do so in our day. Alongside this, we must put God's house in order and seek as far as we can to repent and conform to the New Testament pattern of the church.

Come, O Thou all-victorious Lord,
Thy power to us make known;
Strike with the hammer of Thy Word,
And break these hearts of stone.