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WHAT DOES TRUE REVIVAL LOOK LIKE? THOUGHTS ON THE BROWNSVILLE REVIVAL

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The Lord Jesus Christ stopped by Jacob's well one day to engage a Samaritan woman in conversation about eternal things. She was more concerned, however, with a long-standing controversy between Jews and Samaritans. Each group thought they had a franchise on Jehovah.

The Jews insisted that true worship could take place only in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans saw Mount Gerizim as the only legitimate place of worship. The Messiah responded that the time was coming—in fact, it had already come—when location would not be the real issue. He declared to her that “God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).¹

That ancient controversy is still alive. We invest incredible energy and resources to visit highly celebrated “church growth” practitioners, hoping to learn how to grow our churches according to their successful models. God is *there*, we assume, so *there* we go.

Success is our measuring stick. If we cannot be successful, then tradition becomes an acceptable substitute. Neither the Jews nor the Samaritans had really known the intimacy of God's presence for at least four hundred years. They were making it up as they went along.

Sadly enough, our post-Christian American culture has not seen the mighty hand of God since Edwards and Whitefield, so who is really going to know the difference if we package “revival” and sell it to those hungry for it?

Finney has taught us well. The development of revivalism has encouraged some questionable thinking that, in some special sense, God's presence is localized in whatever church happens to be having a "revival meeting" in a community.

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Most visitors agree that God's presence has indeed settled here with great power, and they are hoping that the Brownsville Revival will spread through them back into their own local churches. Many pilgrims come back repeatedly. "Revival fever" has gripped some, compelling them to quit their jobs, sell their homes, and move permanently to this Gulf Coast community in spite of a weak local econo-

my, high cost of living, low wages, and overcrowded schools.

THE EARLY DAYS

On Father's Day, June 18, 1995, the Brownsville Assembly of God conducted its regular Sunday morning worship service. The congregation was middle-of-the-road evangelical. The pastor, John Kilpatrick, had invested fifteen years of ministry there and the church had grown. The congregation listened intently that morning to a special guest evangelist, Steve Hill, who was there at Kilpatrick's invitation.

The beginnings of the "Brownsville Revival" or the "Pensacola Outpouring" are sketchy, depending on the source. Pastor Kilpatrick describes that service in much the same way Luke described Pentecost. Others who were there describe it as a typical worship service. Some long-standing members, who have since left the church, believe that the whole "revival" was planned well in advance and implemented with the precision of a Broadway show; others, including Hill and Kilpatrick, just believe that God showed up.

Within a few weeks, the church ran a paid advertisement in the *Pensacola News Journal*, inviting all local pastors and their churches to join in a "sovereign movement" of God's Spirit. In late July the newspaper published a front-page story titled "Church Experiences Divine 'Refreshing,'" which highlighted this meeting in glowing terms, complete with photographs and testimonials.

Since the summer of 1995, hundreds of people have been forming long lines in the church parking lot as early as 5 a.m. to insure a place in the main sanctuary for the evening services. For many months, the revival was conducted seven days a week. At times, multiple auxiliary buildings and open-air tents accommodated overflow crowds, linking them via fiber optic cable to live video and

sound from the main worship center.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As a pastor, I have often prayed (as many others have surely done) that God would visit us again as He did in the Great Awakening under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and other godly men. I wanted the real thing—the type of spiritual awakening described by the Brownsville church ad—and it did not bother me that God might begin such a work in another denomination. Therefore, with an open mind and prayer for discernment, I attended a Wednesday evening service.

My first visit to Brownsville was quite a shock to my Baptist system. At least an hour was devoted to celebrative, Vineyard-style, contemporary Christian music. If your tastes in Christian music lean toward such artists as Carmen, Steven Curtis Chapman, Audio Adrenaline, 4Him, and Jars of Clay, then Brownsville's worship leader, Lindell Cooley, will provide some of the most exciting praise and worship that you have ever heard in a church service. Cooley, his band, and a team of professional vocalists make Brownsville Revival a four-nights-a-week Christian concert, free to the public and one of the best shows in town.

Their music is fast, loud, and rhythmic. The congregation stands during most of the singing, unable to sit quietly in their pews. Most clap along with the music, and many sing the words to songs they have learned with repetition. The pace starts a bit slow at first, but quickly moves into high gear.

Some would describe the style as rock and roll, but the songwriters have made an obvious effort to fill them with discernible and intelligible truth that speaks quite plainly to thousands who attend the services each night. An apocalyptic element permeates some of the songs. Realizing that musical style can be a controversial issue among believers, I

suggest that the music at Brownsville has far more balance and content than the preaching; in fact, it may be the secret to Brownsville's popularity.

My Southern roots make me feel quite at home in small rural churches that sing only hymns, but I can also praise the Lord with those who prefer more contemporary praise songs. The critical issue for me is not so much style as content: is it biblical truth that has been set to music, and can the words be clearly understood?

There was a lot of "coaching" going on before the invitation. Visitors were told that they needed to have an open mind . . . that they might not receive anything from the Lord on the first night . . . that they needed to wait patiently on the Lord even if it meant staying until three in the morning . . .



Another hour was filled with testimonies from eight or ten revival attendees. Some of them described out-of-body experiences in previous revival services and vision-like trips to heaven while lying on the floor. It seemed as if three thousand people were "pulling at the leash," ready to see if God would do something equally fantastic in their lives that night.

One young lady told of her trip to heaven just a few

nights earlier. She saw a little girl playing on the streets of heaven, so she stopped to join her. After some time with the child, the woman realized that it was time to go. As she prepared to bid farewell to her young friend, the woman asked the little girl for her name. Somehow, the child revealed that she was her daughter, terminated years earlier in a teenage abortion. They hugged one another, crying for the years they had missed together, and the woman was granted forgiveness by the little girl. At that moment, the woman returned to the Brownsville worship center and reentered her body.

The leadership team that night seemed to be setting a straight course toward “the good stuff,” a reference to the phenomenon of being “slain in the spirit.” Several times the evangelist mentioned, “I know you’re here for the good stuff. We’ll get there eventually.” Applause thundered through the crowd. Everything in the service seemed preparatory to and subservient to this unusual ritual. During Brownsville’s “ministry time” (after the message and altar call) there would be two-person prayer teams zigzagged through the massive crowd, laying hands on people and praying for them. One member of the team touched the forehead of the person being prayed for while a “catcher” stood behind the person to catch him if he fell. The catchers had been trained to lightly touch the person’s shoulder, so that he would know that someone was in position to break the fall backwards to the floor.

There was a lot of “coaching” going on before the invitation. Visitors were told that they needed to have an open mind . . . that they might not receive anything from the Lord on the first night . . . that they needed to wait patiently on the Lord even if it meant staying until three in the morning . . . that they should react without thinking about it (the evangelist called this “immediate obedience to the Holy Spirit” and gave an object lesson to demonstrate what

he meant), and that not everyone would necessarily fall down as a sign of God’s work in his life.

Before Steve Hill could get to “the good stuff,” however, he felt obligated to bring a brief message for the benefit of his critics. He sneered, “I know my critics are sitting out there, saying ‘Where’s the Bible? I want to hear the Bible!’” Biting sarcasm dripped from his words, “So . . . open your Bibles!” He announced his text, saying that he would spend just a few minutes looking at some “Rules for Christian Living,” so that no one could accuse him of not preaching the Bible. After his ten-minute sermonette, given with the enthusiasm of a fifth-grade boy giving an oral book report, he brightened up and replied, “Now, for the good stuff!!”

Hill thought his sarcasm was funny. I was saddened at such a de-emphasis of God’s truth. I believe that the gospel minister has a solemn responsibility to preach the Scriptures, regardless of his style of dress or manner of delivery. It does not matter to me if the truth comes in a still, small voice, or is spoken in conversational tones, or is shouted with all the fervency of Pentecost. Many voices tell us what man is *saying*. I love to hear what God has *said*. My heart rejoices to hear, “Thus says the Lord!”

The altar call was long and loud. If the response seemed to dwindle, Lindell Cooley immediately heated up the atmosphere with a faster, hard-driving rock tempo with repetitious words. The physical and mental exhaustion which sets in after three or four hours (and night after night) and the pent-up expectation of witnessing or participation in the “miraculous” is a recipe for deception and misrepresentation.

Steve Hill’s altar calls are very confrontational—especially to those whose lives are filled with various addictions (homosexuality, drugs, alcohol, and pornography) and religious hypocrisy—and he demands immediate action.

The “altar” is usually filled within two or three minutes with hundreds of people weeping, wailing, and moaning. Hill constantly reminds the congregation of his background as a former drug addict and street punk, giving him instant credibility with those who are living the same lifestyle with the same unsatisfied longings for something better in life. He calls them to repent, naming off a list of sins of the flesh that would hit ninety-nine percent of the people sitting in the pews.

Guilt can be a powerful lever when manipulatively employed by an evangelist among those who have been on an emotional roller coaster for several hours. Watching Hill’s masterful invitations, I have often thought of the question that has become popularized by the bracelets worn by young people today, “What Would Jesus Do?” Except for the cleansing of the temple—aimed primarily at religious hypocrites—it would be difficult to imagine the humble Savior screaming at sinners with the red-faced, rapid-fire, angry-sounding demands of Brownsville’s revival leader. Instead, we learn of Jesus, “A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish” (Isa. 42:3).

The official Brownsville web site includes a testimony of Dr. Carl Sightler, who talks about the differences between the altar calls he experienced as a young boy in a local Baptist church compared to those given by Steve Hill:

I never would have survived one of Steve Hill’s altar calls because they are certainly not short and Steve will resort to most any tactic to get the lost to respond. . . . Steve is like a pack hound on the scent of a big buck deer. As long as Steve senses conviction in the air, he stays with the altar call until God releases him. NO! I would never have made it through one of Steve’s altar calls.²

Upon reflection on Hill’s frequent, public confession

of being an avid follower of Charles Grandison Finney, however, the way he conducts an altar call is not only understandable, but also necessary. Finney believed that the Holy Spirit was an unnecessary component in a successful revival: all you really needed was the right atmosphere and a commitment to pragmatism.

I realized six or seven hours later that the name of Jesus was not mentioned the entire evening.

EVALUATION

The Brownsville Revival has been a bittersweet experience for me. Since that first meeting, I have been back at least a dozen times to get a broader perspective than from a single encounter. There are some positive attributes, to be sure, and it would indicate an uncharitable spirit for me to paint the entire Brownsville Revival with sweeping criticisms and blanket censure.

I do not believe, however, that Pensacola is experiencing or has experienced a true revival or spiritual awakening. There are several reasons for my conclusion.



Revival attendees are obviously sincere in their search for God’s presence, and I believe that most of them thirst for an encounter with the Lord God Almighty. They come from all kinds of backgrounds: the parking lots are filled with church vans and buses from every mainline denomination. Media and news reports have served to heighten

their anticipation, even before they arrive in Pensacola. A sense of God's presence may be missing in their local congregations, and there is no doubt that the revival services at Brownsville are exciting, compared to the average church service in America.

I do not believe, however, that Pensacola is experiencing or has experienced a true revival or spiritual awakening. There are several reasons for my conclusion: (1) a lack of biblical preaching, (2) an over-emphasis on the Holy Spirit and a corresponding neglect of the person and work of Christ, (3) a defective gospel of salvation, and (4) a dependence on psychological manipulation for results.

The awakenings of the past have always been based upon the plain preaching of the Word of God, which produced great conviction of sin. Leaders of the Brownsville Revival really believe that all the marks of Pentecost and other revivals are present in their services, but my visits have not convinced me that Steve Hill is faithfully preaching the Bible. He is a very gifted communicator and has a unique ability to motivate people through his passionate pleas. His messages seem bold, but empty, like the old preacher-proverb that encourages, "What you lack in content, make it up in volume!" He is confrontational, but not with the sweet gospel reasoning that Isaiah called for. In every instance that I observed, Hill seems committed to a man-centered repentance that is divorced from a clear presentation of the finished work of Christ in behalf of sinners.

Many revival critics are immediately upset by the physical manifestations seen in the Brownsville meetings, such as twitching, jerking, spasms, moaning, falling, and others. These things, according to Jonathan Edwards, neither proved nor disproved that an awakening was genuine. Emotional excesses (loud crying, laughter, moaning, etc.) were not infrequent during revivals of the past, but they

were usually induced as sinners became fearful of God's wrath.

The focus should not be upon one's experience or even upon the Holy Spirit, whom someone has referred to as the "shy member of the Trinity." His purpose is not to draw attention to Himself, but to Christ and the work accomplished on the cross in behalf of sinners. As I have already stated, the name of Jesus Christ was never mentioned the first service I attended. This is very curious since "there is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved," and yet hundreds were crowding the church aisles following Hill's invitation. My first question was, "Lord, why are these people going forward? They have heard nothing of your work in behalf of sinners. No one has even mentioned You tonight. Repentance has been emphasized, but there has been no mention of faith in your Son."

Steve Hill's gospel places heavy emphasis on repentance. The sinner is commanded to forsake drugs, alcoholism, adultery, homosexuality, R-rated movies, fornication and other sins of the flesh. The biblical gospel does require repentance, but only as the handmaid of faith in Christ. According to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Unfortunately, the matter of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone has received little or no attention in the services I have attended at Brownsville. The Brownsville leadership team has been challenged on this issue, but it is not clear whether any lasting modifications have been made to the defective message being preached by Hill.

As already mentioned earlier, the evangelist leans strongly toward a Finneyite methodology of revival, which explains most of the reasons why this is not a true revival. If revival is man's work, then the powerful Word of God is

unnecessary to bring people to a decision. Manipulation is the essential factor, so use guilt trips accompanied by the right atmosphere of highly charged music and emotional stress.

CONCLUSION

The revival services are now being held Wednesday through Saturday evenings with several thousand in attendance. The church marquee currently reads, "140,000 Decisions for Christ," but their web site states that "The figures on this page are intentionally estimated very low. We do this in an effort to avoid being accused of 'hyping' the revival."³

Some significant changes are underway in the revival schedule that may signal a decline in the fever pitch of the past four years. A recent notice on Brownsville's web site indicates that Evangelist Steve Hill, who has preached nearly all of the revival services until now, will soon be preaching only in the Friday and Saturday evening services. The Brownsville Revival School of Ministry, a two-year training academy under the direction of Dr. Michael L. Brown, will assume responsibility for leading the revival services on Wednesday evenings. John Kilpatrick, pastor of Brownsville Assembly for fifteen years, has been leading the Sunday services since the revival began, but on March 4, 1999, began preaching in the Thursday evening services.

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Journal.

Notes

1. *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984).
2. Carl Sightler, "Revival Results," Brownsville Revival web site. See for complete text of his testimony.
3. As of February 20, 1999. The Brownsville Revival web site reports slightly more. See for updated figures.