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WHAT IS A REVIVAL?

by Charles Finney

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Charles Finney is one of the greatest revivalists of the pre-Pentecostal era. Finney not only understood what revival is and how to have it; he was personally at the center of several of the most notable revivals of the 350 years which preceded Topeka and Azusa Street. This article is presented to demonstrate that the principles and results of real revival have not changed. For those who want true Biblical revival, only one definition of revival is in harmony with God's Word and Charles Finney clearly and narrowly defines and establishes this Biblical supernatural atmosphere in which the true Church must live or it will die. Not more programs, polish, or pseudo-intellectualism, but true revival is the church's greatest need today! Prayerfully consider Finney's answer to the question, "What is a Revival?")

Revival presupposes that the Church is sunk down in a backslidden state having lost its fervency of love for God and its zeal for souls. Therefore, a revival consists of the return of the Church from her backslidings, and of the conversion of sinners. This is accomplished by:

1. A revival always includes conviction of sin on the part of the Church. Spiritually cold, carnal, and uncommitted Christians cannot wake up and begin right away in the service of God without first experiencing deep searchings of heart which are produced by the Holy Spirit of God. The fountains of the soul need to be broken up. In a true revival, Christians are always brought under such deep conviction that they see their sins in such a bright light that they often find it impossible to maintain a hope of their acceptance with God. While conviction does not always work to that extent, there are always, in a genuine revival, deep convictions of sin and a sense of hopelessness on the part of the believer unless forgiveness can be obtained from God. This is MORE than just confessing sins and being forgiven which is the daily practice in which Christians are encouraged to participate. This is Biblical Repentance. While confession will provide forgiveness [1 John 1:7-9], Spirit-produced repentance will begin personal revival.

2. In a true revival, backslidden Christians will be brought to repentance. A revival is nothing less than a new beginning of obedience to God. Just as in the case of a converted sinner, the first step for the Christian who is seeking a personal revival is a deep repentance, a breaking down of the heart, a getting down into the dust before God, with deep humility, and a forsaking of sin.

True revival is always synonymous with deep conviction of sin, which is usually brought on by prayer and strong, fearless preaching of the Word. Without a willingness to be brought to deep repentance, true revival is impossible. Sinners will not be affected by anything the Church says or does unless they can feel the difference between them and the Christian who is witnessing to them. Sinners will never come under the conviction of sin unless the Church is first convicted of sins and participates in true repentance.

Isaiah 57:15 (King James Version) For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and Holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

*Isaiah 57:15 (The Amplified Version)
15 For thus says the high and lofty One — He Who inhabits eternity, Whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, but with him also who is of a thoroughly penitent and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the thoroughly penitent [bruised with sorrow for sin]. [Matt 5:3.]*

Isaiah 57:15 (New Living Translation)

15 The high and lofty one who lives in eternity, the Holy One, says this: "I live in the high and holy place with those whose spirits are contrite and humble. I restore the crushed spirit of the humble and revive the courage of those with repentant hearts.

“True revival is always synonymous with deep conviction of sin...”

3. A true revival breaks the power that the world and sin has regained over Christians. It brings them to such a position of strength in God that they get a fresh impulse towards going to heaven; they have a new foretaste of heaven, and new desires for a more personal and powerful union with God. Their hearts are refilled to overflowing with the Spirit of God. Thus the charm of the world is broken, and the power of sin overcome.

4. In a true revival, Christians will have their faith in God’s ability to save sinners renewed. Their vision for the salvation of the lost and their zeal for souls are restored. While they are in their backslidden state, Christians are blind to the true state of sinners. Because they are participating in the same sins as the sinner while trying to convince themselves that they are still saved just like they are, they cannot see or feel the lostness of the sinner. Their hearts are hard as rock. The truths of the Bible appear like a dream. They admit it to be all true; their minds assent to it; but their faith does not see it standing out in bold relief, in all the burning realities of eternity.

However, when they are moved upon by the Spirit of revival, they no longer see “men as trees, walking,” but they see things in that strong light which will renew the love of God in their hearts. This will lead them to labor zealously to bring others to Him. They will feel grieved that others do not love God, when they love Him so much. With great passion, they will set themselves to persuade their neighbors to give Him their hearts. So with their love for God renewed, they will also be filled with a tender and burning love for souls. The revived Christian will have an intense desire for the salvation of the whole world. They will be in an agony for individuals whom they want to see saved--their friends, relatives, and even their enemies. They will not only be urging the sinners to give their hearts to God, but they will carry them to God in the arms of faith, and with strong crying and tears beseech God to have mercy on them and to save their souls from endless burnings.

Psalms 51:10-13 (King James Version)

- 10 *Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.*
11 *Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy spirit from me.*
12 *Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.*
13 **Then** *will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.*

5. When Christians and Churches are thus awakened and revived, the reformation and salvation of sinners will **ALWAYS** follow. The hearts of sinners will be broken down and changed. Very often the neglected and depraved are among the ones who are saved as a result of a genuine revival. Harlots, drunkards, infidels, and all sorts of abandoned characters are awakened and converted. The worst of human beings are softened and reclaimed, and made to appear as lovely specimens of the beauty of holiness. Mankind is accustomed to reading the countenances of their neighbours. Sinners often read the state of a Christian's soul in their eyes. If their eyes are full of levity, lust, or worldly anxiety and contrivance, sinners know it. If they are full of the Spirit of God, sinners know that also. The ungodly are often led to conviction simply by seeing the countenance of Christians. The hardest of hearts and the most stubborn of wills cannot resist the power of love and conviction that resides in the life of a revived Christian and in the midst of a revived Church.

(Written in the mid-1800's with some minor editing by cmwright)

[EDITOR'S COMMENTS: Friend, Brother, does any of Finney's comments ring true with your spirit? Are you tired of trying to produce the things of God through your own human effort. Are you dissatisfied, unfulfilled, confused, frustrated, etc.? Try the Biblical approach to revival as defined by Charles Finney and see if you do not find that God has shown you the Way, the Truth, and the Life.]

LET'S ALLOW GOD TO REVIVE US!