

Transforming Revival

Are We Realizing the Full Power of God's Presence?

I honestly can't remember when I first heard the word *revival*, much less what I thought about it. It was just one of those things, like Sunday School and Billy Graham, that made up the religious landscape of my childhood. I didn't know whether it was something that you did, or something that happened to you. There was only a vague association with spiritual intensity — of God drawing closer to his people.

As I moved into my preteen years, the Charismatic Renewal was in its heyday. Though I was still too young to appreciate the theological nuances of the movement, it was clear that something was afoot. A new hunger for God's fullness gripped believers of every denominational stripe and flavor, and my own Presbyterian family was no exception. Every other week, it seemed, men like Dennis Bennett and Harald Bredesen were holding meetings in our home that lasted late into the night. The atmosphere was electric... but was this revival?

As the years passed, two developments brought my understanding on this matter into sharper focus.

The first of these took place in my early twenties when I encountered written accounts of prior awakenings in New England, Wales, Upstate New York and the Scottish Hebrides. As I studied these testimonies, a simple pattern began to emerge. Prayer was always the starting point. Whether the participants were many or few, their united, desperate cries were a game-changer. They didn't just pray, they prayed until they were *heard* — and heaven took over. As the awakenings progressed, supernatural phenomena were widely reported, and an overwhelming sense of God's awesome and holy presence resulted in pervasive conviction of sin. Profound societal transformation soon followed.

A second encounter with revival, this one in the mid 1990s, led to a more comprehensive scrutiny of religious awakenings. In a span of twelve months, I was approached by four individuals, all of them new acquaintances, who provided me with detailed reports of contemporary revivals — and then asked for an analysis of the underlying principles. More specifically, they wanted to know if these blessed events were reproducible.

Many of these reports stirred my blood — drug cartels being overthrown as Colombian believers gathered in stadiums to pray; Inuit natives burning fetishes on frozen sea ice as they hear the roaring voice of God; coral reefs springing instantly to life as Fijian villagers rededicated their lives and land to God. These were not the aging stories of revivals long past — they were happening now! Here was an opportunity to get up and see what God was doing for myself.

Discoveries on the Road to Revival

Over the past sixteen years, my quest to understand and document true revival has taken me into thirty-one nations on six continents. At times, the scope and intensity of this pursuit has reminded me of the Discovery Channel's hit television series *Storm Chasers*. Lots of false alarms accompanied by moments of sheer exhilaration.

But following the moving cloud of God's Presence has also yielded its share of surprises — with none more impressive than the comprehensive nature of God's reviving work. I was fully prepared to encounter widespread conversions, social changes, and perhaps the occasional miracle, but that was where my expectations ended. The notion that spiritual awakenings were the *primary* impetus for social reforms and economic renewal (a case argued by Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel), or that the healing presence of God could extend to the land itself, was new territory for me. (See Sidebar)

A second surprise related to the sheer volume of these Spirit-swept communities — and more disturbingly, to the regions where this type of revival was *not* happening. Since my colleagues and I began studying transformed communities in the mid 1990s, we have encountered nearly 800 examples. Astonishingly, as of late 2011, only *two* of these could be found within the borders of the United States — with only one other possible case in all of sub-Arctic North America. I know of *no recent instances* of transforming revival in Europe, Japan, Singapore, Korea, Australia or New Zealand.¹

As a researcher, you've got to at least wonder about this ratio. How can it be that within the entire range of Western society and culture we can identify only two definitive cases of transforming revival?

¹ This is not to say there *are* no other cases, only that I am not yet aware of them. One can argue that Korea as a whole is still in the afterglow of earlier awakenings. Certainly that country's Biblical Worldview Movement and Holy City Movement are greatly encouraging, and the hope remains that their influence combined with the country's strong prayer initiatives will soon result in localized evidence of transforming revival.

There are essentially three ways of responding to a question as serious as this one:

1. We can deny the charges are true
2. We can blame God for the situation
3. We can take a hard look at our own shortcomings

Imagination and Memories

Let's start with the charges themselves. I am fully aware that there are those who will take issue with my contention that there are only a handful of genuinely awakened communities in the West. And I make no claims of infallibility. But even if my assessment is off by tenfold, that still leaves less than two dozen cases in a region encompassing hundreds of thousands of churches and 18 percent of the world's population.

What I see today is a widespread tendency among Christians to characterize almost any spiritually positive event or activity as evidence of God's favor and reviving work. Some believers (I'll call them "experience pilgrims") maintain an almost constant state of spiritual ecstasy by riding a circuit of healing camp-meetings, outpourings, and prophetic prayer gatherings. For these folks, the river of God is flowing deep and wide.

Other Christians (I'll call them "community fixers") point to a host of fruitful city transformation initiatives as evidence that spiritual revival is alive and well in Western society. In their minds, the church is finally making a difference, and anyone who thinks otherwise simply hasn't been traveling in the right circles.

Without denying or denigrating these experiences, I think it is both fair and necessary for us to examine whether they approach the standards of a genuine spiritual awakening. We often talk about revival as though it were an old friend, but how many of us have actually set foot in a community where its fearful splendor was on full display?

Several years ago I journeyed to the Outer Hebrides, an Island archipelago off the West Coast of Scotland that has experienced numerous powerful revivals. The purpose of my visit was to interview a group of elderly individuals that had experienced the great move of God that swept through the area in the early 1950s.

Most of these interviews were group sessions conducted in farmhouses, churches, and weaving barns. Inside, the subjects would gather around on chairs and pews, always

close enough to hear clearly. Unfailingly polite and sober-minded, their eyes never left me, even when my questions unfolded over the course of hours.

There was one notable exception to this pattern. Whenever these saints began to describe occasions when God's presence had drawn near, words seemed to fail them. They would stammer, turn their gaze toward their neighbors, and weep. This happened four or five times before I finally understood that the memories were so intense, they could only be fully appreciated by someone who had been there. The exchanged glances were based on *shared memories* of something that was exceedingly difficult to describe.

If we have no personal memories of transforming revival, our only recourse is to fire up our imagination. But since the reality of God's presence is so much greater than human imaginations (which are based on our limited experience), this all but guarantees that we will conjure faulty and diminished images.

Mysterious Moon Pizzas

Blame shifting is another way many of us deal with the absence of true awakening. We reason that if the matter were up to us, transforming revival would already have gripped our community. Unfortunately, it is not our call.

As my good friend, Peter Horrobin, once put it, "Revivals might as well be pizza pies cooked up on the surface of the moon." Every once and a while, God, for reasons known only to him, flings one to earth where it intersects with some unsuspecting community. There people are, walking down the street and minding their own business, when all of a sudden this revival pizza lands on their left shoulder — without any warning whatsoever! Where it came from, and why it landed on *their* shoulder, remains a complete mystery.

But if revival really were the product of arbitrary dictate rather than a response to obedient action (see 2 Chr. 7:14, Isa. 62:7, Ho. 6:3), faith would not even enter the equation! We could only *hope* that God might, one day, include our community on his revival itinerary. There would be no principles to apply, no guidelines to follow, no promises to expect, and no certainty of success. Not very good news really.

Why the Son No Longer Sets in the West

By acknowledging that revival is indeed scarce in Western society, and that God has not willed or engineered this deficit, we are left to consider our own shortcomings. There is pain here, but also potential for change.

Not long ago I was asked to contribute story material for a Christian magazine whose cover title asked: “Can Prayer Save America?” It’s an intriguing question, to be sure, but I’m not sure it’s the *right* question. A more appropriate inquiry might be: Do Americans, and American Christians in particular, think they *need* to be saved?

I know there are polls suggesting that people are worried about the economy and other social uncertainties. I’m aware that politicians are facing a lot of voter anger, and that some cities are even experiencing loud street protests. But I’ve also been to enough sporting events, shopping malls, and Evangelical churches to know that our concern isn’t *that* pronounced. Most of us are bothered just enough to gripe to our neighbors and hairdressers — and maybe cast an anti-incumbent vote.

Whether we live in America or somewhere else, our *need* for transforming revival will always be determined by our true condition. However, the question of whether we will actually *experience* transformation depends on how we *perceive* our condition. In the words of Norman Grubb, “Until there is a conviction of need, there can never be a desire for change.”

Although desperation is one of the most prominent features that I have observed in transformed communities, it is a concept that many Westerners find unappealing. Having been schooled in the virtues of confidence and self-sufficiency, we find it difficult to accept any suggestion that our condition is beyond human remedy. If there is a problem, we will fix it. But the idea of gaining ground by giving up (even to God) reeks of laziness and irresponsibility.

What some of us do not yet seem to understand is that we *are* lazy — at least spiritually. The reason we don’t see it, to quote American novelist Vladimir Nabokov, is because “*Complacency is a state of mind that exists only in retrospect: it has to be shattered before being ascertained.*”

We think it is *society* that needs to change. But in reality, it is *we ourselves* — the body of Christ — that stand in need of God’s touch. For many of us, religious routines have become placeholders for the presence of God. We are doing good things (for God), but not necessarily what He has asked of us.

Our love, as the prophet Hosea points out, “is like the morning mist...that quickly disappears.” Rather than seeking God while he may be found, we sacrifice the moment to more immediate priorities — like visiting our email, attending choir practice, or campaigning for the latest Christian candidate.

In the Song of Songs we encounter the devastating account of a maiden who is awakened by the sound of her lover rapping on the door. She can hear his voice pleading with her to let him in from the “dampness of the night” — but she is unsure of her next move. Should she put on her robe and soil her feet to let him in? There is no question of her love for him, it’s just that he has come at an unexpected hour. This is a time for sleeping, not intimacy.

The inner debate is brief, but when the maiden reaches the door latch, her lover is gone. His presence has been repelled not by overt rejection, but by *hesitation*; by momentary distraction with lesser things. And the tragedy is not yet over. For when the maiden goes out into the streets to look for her lover, she is beaten by the city watchman who does not recognize her as the king’s consort. Because she has missed her moment, his glow, his scent, is not on her. Claims of a royal connection ring hollow.

Fighting the Right Battles

There is much talk in Christian circles these days about redeeming the various “spheres” or “mountains” of society. Advocates float terms like “kingdom reformation” and “cultural mandate” while a steady stream of books and conferences promote strategies for transforming everything from Hollywood to Washington, DC.

I am sympathetic to calls for social healing and godly change agents, but I’m afraid these sympathies are not accompanied by much optimism that we can win the so-called “culture war” — assuming this is even our mission in the first place.

My initial concern is the fact that social activism does not require God to come down in power (interventionist revival). What if our problems are so deeply entrenched that we *can’t* make a difference? Faithful witnessing, for example, will not bring an end to years of war or

drought. Nor will well-run Christian businesses bring about pervasive conviction of sin. Apart from divine hydraulics, some loads are simply too heavy to lift.

Another reason for our futility in the culture wars is that, like the beloved maiden, we are making claims without evidence. Society doesn't care about our arguments — in fact, it resents them. In the absence of God's presence people are not asking *Who is he?* They are asking *Where is he?* The one thing that sets us apart is missing — all because of a fatal calculus that our projects (or comforts) are so important that we can't let things that are more important interfere with them! In the end, our hesitation leads to missed intimacy; and missed intimacy leads to societal irrelevancy.

Transforming revival is not the morning newspaper or a pre-recorded sports event. It is not a product that can be ordered from a catalog, or an experience for which one schedules an appointment. It is not something we can just "fit in." If we want to see it, we'll need to cultivate an appetite for it.

Satisfaction has been called "the sleep of prisoners." At the height of the Hebrides revival, meetings lasted into the wee hours, and crowds often spilled outside the church buildings. On one such occasion, a neighbor lady approached a church elder to complain about the noise. Full of the Holy Spirit, the elder replied: "Woman, you've slept long enough!"

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