

Are here Twelve Steps to Revival?

Is a spiritual awakening still possible in our post-Christian culture, overdosed as it is on political correctness, feminism, and relativism? Can we still hope for a time when Christians will once again integrate values and spirituality in politics, education, economics? Or has the victory of secularism become so complete that there is no possibility of a return to Biblical foundations?

The legality and the frequency of abortion, the advocacy of homosexual rights, and the attack on the traditional family, have encouraged a broad tolerance of sexual expression and deviations among the general public. The concept of personhood has also undergone a drastic change.

In the past, the idea of the self was viewed as existing for God first, others next, and self last. Today the self comes first, and there is no room for God on the secular agenda. The journey inward is seen as the only path toward one's identity. Self has become the standard of truth, and the only purpose in life is self-fulfillment. Feelings have become the arbiters of right and wrong. Christians have also become infected by the exaltation of the self. For many, personal experiences have taken precedence over Scripture. Churches in North America are trying to come to grips with the tremendous cultural shifting of the last decades. They have lost their position of privilege. The church and the Bible are excluded from the public square. Pluralism and tolerance have filled the void. But tolerance does not extend to Christians who assert the authenticity of Christian truth.

Because of this anti-Christian climate, it is no wonder that many question the possibility of a new spiritual awakening that can offer genuinely constructive and critical positions directed by a world view shaped by the Bible. Despite the spectacular manifestations - holy laughter, shaking, dancing, jerking, weeping, falling down occurring at Toronto Airport Vineyard church and elsewhere, many remain pessimistic.

But what seems impossible to man is possible with God. When Ezekiel was in the valley of the dry bones, the culture of death, the Lord asked him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel replied, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know." A revival cannot be realized by following a formula. Books about revival methods have been published and churches have tried to follow the steps, but no man can produce revival. It is God's sovereign and mighty act, His intervention in the life of the church.

The key to revival is the local church. Are our churches alive unto God? Are church members committed to His cause and mission in the world? Do they live such transparent Christian lives that they create a longing in others for spiritual things?

When we speak of revival, it is not the unconverted sinners, but the saints who need reviving. Dr. A.W. Tozer wrote that when church members begin to pray more, lead holier lives, love each other more fervently, serve God and their fellow men with greater zeal and seek to be Christ-like, there is revival on the church level.

God's covenant people prayed, "Will you revive us again that your people may rejoice?" (Ps. 85:6). The individual believer cannot be separated from the Church. This is an essential Biblical concept in our age of individualism and concentration on the self. Christ cannot be separated from His body. Christians don't need to travel to Toronto for a blessing. They should seek and pray for it in their local church. The spiritual blessing is not just for those who can afford transportation. I remember seeing God's power at work in the dirt poor churches on Negros Occidental, the Philippines, where we served as missionaries.

The Church is the community of believers where the Holy Spirit is at work. Here He bestows His gifts and treasures. Each church member is called to use his gifts for the service and enrichment of others. The Bible reveals the covenant of grace. It speaks of the church as the body of Christ, the great gathering of saints who will one day rejoice before the Throne. This is the corporate nature of the church. But the Bible also teaches us the importance of the individual. Each one is responsible to God. The Bible speaks of personal conversion and renewal. Not the masses, but the individual, comes to God and learns to fear Him. And all those individuals form that great mass of the faithful whose robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

What are the characteristics of revival?

A revived church does not bask in the exotic or stress intense emotional experiences at the expense of careful thinking and cross bearing in a suffering world. It also leaves room for apparent failure and weakness.

A revived church will go back to the Scriptures to discover God's message for our times. Church members will exercise spiritual discipline. Many Christians are spiritually starving today because they don't regularly partake of the spiritual food so readily available.

There will be a hunger for God, the fountain of all good. A revived church echoes the longing of the psalmist: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25). A revival is not an inward journey into the depth of one's soul. It is a return to the psalms with their great love for God. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). There is a return to the prophets who could cry out to God: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you" (Isaiah 64:1). A revival leads to a deep-seated awareness of sin in a world where sin against God is seldom mentioned. A revived church is an ambassador for Christ, imploring sinners to be reconciled to God. Our salvation does not depend on people, our feelings, our emotions. There is no drama. The greatest drama is the Gospel itself. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Revived Christians do not withdraw from the world. They are in it but not of it. They are travelling on the road to the New Jerusalem. Along the way they used their talents, education, work, sciences, politics, their diaconal work in the service of God.

Dr. F.B. Meyer once observed that, "there has never been a great religious revival without social and political reforms." Revivals have always had an impact on the mores of a nation. Wilberforce was instrumental in abolishing the slave trade. Elizabeth Fry founded a society for the rehabilitation of discharged criminals. Green Van Prinsterer, a son of a revival, was a spokesman for the rights of the beggars and the poor.

A revived church will also seek unity among those of like faith. The vast number of small and large denominations is a poor witness to the world. Our divisions often hinder the work of the Holy Spirit. I am thinking of Reformed brothers and sisters who are in agreement on nearly all the fine doctrinal points of the confessions and yet are not able to meet at the table of the Lord or join hands in mission work. In our secular world, where it is so difficult to be a Christian, a revived church will seek to overcome barriers caused by historic circumstances.

A spiritual awakening is possible. If God could use a small band of spirit-filled believers to change the Roman Empire, he can also use today's Christians. Only the Spirit of God can bring the revival the church so desperately needs.

Johan D. Tangelder
May, 1995