



REVIVAL TERMINOLOGY IN HISTORY

by Richard Owen Roberts

A number of years ago in a book entitled *Revival* I gave the following definition of that term: “*Revival is an extraordinary work of the Spirit of God producing extraordinary results.*” While that phrase conveys the fundamental concept of revival, over the intervening years I have come to the conviction that one single word describes revival better than any other—that word is “GOD.”

There is a very precious sense in which revival is literally “GOD in the midst of His people.” His manifest presence produces all that is desirable in revival. The absence of His manifest presence accounts for all that is undesirable during the seasons of moral and spiritual decline that precede revivals.

Revival is a time when heaven comes closer to earth than at any other time in the lives of men and women. If one considers the greatest attraction of heaven, is it golden streets? Is it the tree of life? Is it the presence of angels? Is it fellowship with other redeemed? NO! The greatest allure of heaven is the absolutely unbroken presence of God.

So, too, the most fearful aspect of hell is not the fire that is never quenched, the worm that never dies, the agonies that never cease, the evil that reigns unbridled—the most awful aspect of hell is that God is never there. Think of it! After a billion years in hell the sinner still has no hope that God will ever come, even for a moment.

While these are valid definitions and statements

about revival, they are nowhere near comprehensive. Through the years, the descriptive language used to portray revival has been very broad and instructive. Please consider some of the names and nomenclature used by our fathers and brothers to describe this precious work. Let me group the more than sixty titles I am aware of under sixteen headings.

AWAKENING

Historically, this term has been used interchangeably with the term revival. In the eighteenth century, for instance, the work in the United Kingdom was called “The Evangelical Revival,” whereas its counterpart in America was dubbed “The Great Awakening.” But in recent years there has been a wise attempt on the part of many thoughtful believers to use the word “revival” to describe the work among God’s people and the term “awakening” to describe the effect of a “revived people” on the world of sinners, in other words, when many believers are revived many unregenerate are awakened.

Various movements of the Spirit of God have been described as “An Awakening,” “A Religious Awakening,” “The Awakening that Must Come,” and “The Awakening and Conversion of Many.” What precious truth is portrayed in each of these terms, but especially in the last!

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FIRE

Doubtless connected with what occurred at Pentecost, when cloven tongues of fire rested on each believer (Acts 2:3), the word fire has been used in a significant number of ways to describe revival. Notice that each of these expressions conveys something distinct and significant: “The Baptism of Fire,” “Fire From Heaven,” “Fire on the Earth,” and “Flames of Fire.” Persons touched by revival have been spoken of as “Ablaze for God,” and in reporting the coming of Christ among His people it has often been said: “The Fire Fell.” Clearly, the purging that occurs during seasons of revival is most excellently represented by this term “fire.”

FULLNESS

A proverb describes the backslider as one who is filled again with his own ways (Prov. 14:14.) What can be said of individuals must also be said of churches, for surely many of them are filled with themselves. A true revival must certainly empty people of themselves and refill them with Christ. Thus, to describe revival as “A People Saturated With God” is among the most wonderful of all the labels attached to this special work. Likewise, “The Church Filled with All the Fullness of God” is an equally expressive and attractive term.

GLORY

When Moses asked God to show him His glory, God took Him back into the mountain and caused all His goodness to pass before him (Ex. 33:17-23.) The remarkable effect on Moses was seen in his shining countenance for a long time thereafter. The concept of “Glory in the Church” beautifully portrays the manifest presence of Christ among His people in revival. Consider the delightful expressions that have been

used to portray this aspect of revival: “Glory Filled the Land,” “A Gracious Manifestation of God’s Glory,” “They Saw His Glory,” and “The Whole Earth Was Filled with His Glory.” Such expressions most certainly excite the believing heart to desire and expect the repetition of such “Glory Days” once again.

JUDGMENT

While most of the titles I draw to your attention are very up-beat, the expression “Revival is Like Judgment Day,” is of a very different nature. And yet, it too conveys a most significant aspect of the work of God in revival. Because numerous individual believers and many cor-

porate entities have failed to judge themselves and put away their sins, revival, when it comes, will be like the Day of Judgment for them. But even here the grace of God is evident for He Himself provides a season of cleansing in revival which, while often very severe, results in blessed restoration to usefulness.

OUTPOURING

Isaiah pled with God to rend the heavens and to come down (Isa. 64:1.) Our current scene is readily depicted by a vast layer of heavy clouds between heaven and earth. The idea of God taking His mighty hand and parting these clouds and then tipping the heavenly vats of divine mercy and pouring fresh graces upon the land is very attractive. Through the years numerous expressions have captured this aspect of revival including: “The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” “The Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit From On High,” “A Remarkable Outpouring,” and “An Outpouring of the Spirit of Grace.” My favorite phrase in this category is that old Puritan expression, “A Plentiful Effusion of Divine Grace.”

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PENTECOST

Of all the records of revival contained in the sacred pages of the Book of God, none reaches such heights and endures to such lengths as the precious outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47.) Is it any wonder faithful believers through the ages have longed for “A Modern Pentecost,” and have time after time pled, “Do it again, Lord, do it again?”

POWER

A wayward church is a powerless church. Paul informed Timothy of the eighteen thieves of power that left some in his day with “the form of godliness but denying the power thereof.” (II Tim. 3:1-5) A season of re-

vival is a time when power is gloriously renewed. We need not be surprised then that such seasons have been described as “Power From On High,” and “Miraculous Power in the Church.”

PROGRESS OR SUCCESS

During the present time of moral and spiritual declension, the church is daily losing ground to the world. Each false convert that is added to an already adulterated work adds to the decline and hastens its pace. We have already reached that point where the negative impact of those who profess to be Christians and either are not or are badly backslidden is greater than the positive impact of those who profess to be Christians and truly are. Thus, the church is going backward instead of forward. Oh for the day when God once again works so mightily that His labors are described as “The Present Progress of the Gospel”, or “The Remarkable Success of the Work of God”, a blessed time when salvation runs across the land as a rushing mighty river.

RAIN

The days preceding revival are often pictured as dry and parched. God Himself speaks of withholding the rain (Amos 4:7) and sending the drought to a stiff-necked people who have turned away from Him (Hag. 1:11.) Thus, expressions suggesting rain are very popular during seasons of revival. Think of the lovely prospect of “Heavenly Showers.” Or contrast the concepts of “Mercy Drops” with “Showers of Blessing.” What could be more delightful than the outlook of “Rain From Heaven?” Especially meaningful is Joel’s term, “The Latter Rain.” (Joel 2:23) Having passed through the most wretched plague of locusts accompanied by a terrible drought, the prospect of God Himself advancing the rainy season so that the crops are plentiful enough to make up for the years the locusts have eaten is lovely indeed.

REFORMATION

This splendid term adds a feature of major consequence to our understanding of revival. Just as we have learned to distinguish between “Experience Centered Revivals” and “Word Centered Revivals,” so too we need to see the added dimension that reformation brings to the entire concept. A revival that merely revives the existing structures will fall far short of that which is needed. A return to biblical center, the recovery of lost biblical truths, the restoration of genuine Christian principles, these are musts. Reformation without revival cannot accomplish these things. Revival without reformation will not do so. Oh, for “A Twentieth Century Reformation!”

REFRESHING

Our fathers spoke of “Times of Refreshing from the Presence of the Lord.” (Acts 3:19.) Many a weary worker longs for such a blessing. Many a tired church needs just such a season. The “nearness of God is our good” (Ps. 73:28) and the prospect of His drawing close again carries with it the most wonderful prospect of refreshing.

RENEWAL

How many dreary days of winter does it require before people begin to yearn for the renewal that comes in the spring time? How deep does the snow have to lie on the ground and how often does it need to be replenished before the prospects of green grass and leafy trees become an anxious longing? As surely as spring marks the end of winter, “Spiritual Renewal” marks the end of the winter season of the soul. It is to be more passionately longed for than any person suffering from “cabin fever” ever yearned for spring.

VISITATION

Those that erroneously suppose that God is never nearer or farther away from His Church might have lit-

tle appreciation for this special term, but consider the numerous ways the concept of God visiting His people has been used in connection with revival in the past: “Days of the Right Hand of the Most High,” “A Divine Visitation,” “Then God Came,” “God Drawing Near,” “God in the Midst of His People,” “Heaven Came Down,” “The Manifest Presence of God,” “Rent Heavens,” and “A Visitation from On High.”

WIND

Numerous accounts of revival have included mention of “The Wind of the Spirit.” Some have reported “The Stirrings of God in the Mulberry Branches,” others “The Gentle Breeze of God’s Spirit,” and still others “The Rustling of the Grass as God Breathes New Life Into His Church.”

WORK

While many unwise men have confused their work with God’s—some even supposing successful evangelism to be revival—others have learned to describe evangelism as that which we do for God and revival as that which God does for us. Thus, through the ages men have depicted revival as “God’s Work,” “A Glorious Work of God,” “A Gracious Work,” “A Remarkable Work,” “A Surprising Work of God,” “That Wonderful Work of God,” and “The Late Happy Work of the Spirit of God.” It was these descriptions that led me to define revival as “An Extraordinary Work of the Spirit of God Producing Extraordinary Results.”

Thank God, no matter what terms are used to describe it, revival is always God’s gift to His returning people. It only comes when He sends it. He only sends it when His people need it. Surely we His people need it now. We can and we must join the Psalmist in pleading, “*Turn us again, O God, and cause Thy face to shine; and we will be saved.*” (Ps. 80:3) □

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