



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

How to Revitalize your Church through your pulpit



Michael F. Ross



MENTOR





Michael Frederick Ross was raised as a Roman Catholic and even studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood, during his high school years, at the Divine Word Seminary, in Perrysburg, Ohio. He was converted in August of 1976 while living and working in Memphis, Tennessee.

He holds degrees from The Ohio State University, Miami (Ohio) University and Memphis State University. His Master of Divinity degree is from the Columbia Biblical Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina (1982) and his a Doctorate of Ministry degree is from Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi (1997). For ten years, he served as the organizing pastor of the Surfside Presbyterian Church in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. In 1992, he became the sixth senior pastor of the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi.

Copyright © Michael F. Ross 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 1-84550-123-3

Published in 2006

in the

Mentor Imprint

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd,

Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,

IV20 1TW, Scotland

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Danie Van Straaten

Printed and bound by Bell and Bain, Glasgow

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licenses are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.





Dedicated to

Jane

My wife and partner in ministry
whose love, encouragement, faith and patience
have strengthened me to preach the Word

and to

Joanna, Abigail, Nathan and Aaron
My children who have been my first parish and
whose love and admiration keep me faithful





Acknowledgements

A sermon and a book are truly joint ventures. I want to thank Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III, the Reverend Derek Thomas, and the Reverend Duncan Rankin, for their help and direction in this dissertation that became the book. Ligon has been a good friend, a faithful co-worker, and a kindred spirit in preaching and pastoral ministry. His guidance in each step of this project has been invaluable. Thanks is also due to Don Malin and John McCarty of the RTS library for their helpful service and many efforts to make the research for this project much easier. Always displayed was their patience and gracious manner. May their servant-like spirit not go unrewarded.

I am profoundly grateful to Dina Plunket, Nancy Benson, Sheila Lester, Cathy Novick and Linda Beard. They typed and retyped, edited and corrected, ran errands and did research, and sent innumerable e-mails in order to turn yellow pages with ink scrawl into a manuscript. My thanks to all these dear ladies for their corrections, comments and contributions to this work. Brent Sadler and Andy Halsey, pastoral interns, did final proof and corrections on footnotes and bibliography. Good work and much thanks!

I am also thankful to four men whose lives have influenced me more than they will ever know and whose ministries have resulted in this book. I will ever be grateful for Dr. James M. Latimer under whose preaching I was converted and called to the ministry. Drs. William J. Larkin, Paul W. Ferris, and Harold E. Burchett taught me Greek, Hebrew, exegesis and homiletics at Columbia Biblical Seminary. What wonderful role models for a young man!

I cannot forget to express my gratitude to the two precious congregations I have pastored these past twenty-four years. Under their love and prayers I learned to preach and to shepherd. I thank the Surfside Presbyterian Church in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi for helping me become a preacher.

I also thank my four gifts of grace – Joanna, Abigail, Nathan and Aaron. I thank God that every Sunday their honest and hungry eyes look up to me in the pulpit, encouraging me, for their souls' sake, to "rightly divide the Word of truth." Never was there a more precious congregation within a congregation than these four friends.





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

Finally, I am most indebted to my dear wife, Jane. She has edited this entire project, sometimes staying up all night to do so! She has spent hours in the library, done research, coordinated the editing, typing and dissemination of this manuscript, and made countless incisive and constructive suggestions. She has encouraged me, prayed for me, and inspired me in not only this project but my life's ministry. She has helped me, more than any other person, to preach with integrity, soul, fire and compassion. I must honestly say that without her, I would not be in the pulpit. Second only to Christ Himself, she is the greatest of God's gifts to me (Proverbs 18:22).





Introduction







Chapter 1

Preaching for Revitalization (The Need for Holy Manna All Around)

In the nineteenth century George Atkins penned the words to a famous hymn, *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship.* In the first stanza of that hymn Atkins wrote: *Brethren, we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God. Will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the Word? All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. Brethren, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around.* I am touched by the words to this old hymn, written in 1819, every time I hear it sung. Others are not.

One of my dear friends in the ministry would not sing this hymn. When asked why, he responded that he could not stand the phrase, *While we try to preach the Word,* as if somehow we could not just preach the Word whenever we wanted! Such is the way we moderns think. The idea of asking for 'holy manna' from above seems foreign to a generation of preachers reared in an age of Church growth methodology and pragmatic church programming.

When William Moore put Atkins' words to music in 1825, and published the hymn in *The Columbian Harmony*, he chose for his tune title *Holy Manna*, the phrase George Atkins used to end each of his original five stanzas:

Brethren, we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God;
Will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the
Word?
All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down;
Brethren, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around.





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION


Brethren, see poor sinners round you slumbering on the brink of
woe;

Death is coming, hell is moving, can you bear to let them go?
See our fathers and our mothers, and our children sinking down;
Brethren, pray and holy manna will be showered all around.


Sisters, will you join and help us? Moses' sister aided him;
Will you help the trembling mourners who are struggling hard
with sin?

Tell them all about the Savior, tell them that He will be found;
Sisters, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around.

Is there a trembling jailer, seeking grace, and filled with tears?
Is there here a weeping Mary, pouring forth a flood of tears?
Brethren, join your cries to help them; sisters, let your prayers
abound;
Pray, Oh pray that holy manna may be scattered all around.



Let us love our God supremely, let us love each other, too;
Let us love and pray for sinners, till our God makes all things
new.



Then He'll call us home to Heaven, at His table we'll sit down;
Christ will gird Himself and serve us with sweet manna all
around.

Little is known about the background of this hymn, its author or the one who set it to music. In fact, we know of no artist rendition or photo of either George Atkins or William Moore. But we can speculate a bit about the nature and intent of this hymn. Because we know it was written in 1819 and put to music in 1825, we know that this hymn may well be categorized as one of America's revival hymns. For it was authored during the middle years of America's Second Great Awakening.

In its words the American evangelical theology is well rehearsed: the idea that God will work through human agency to bring man to salvation in Christ and to renew a slumbering, sin-sick Church. Its five stanzas reflect a straightforward, innocent and even simplistic approach to religion. God works through His ordinary means of





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

grace with extraordinary power when these normal means of grace are baptized with the unction of the Holy Spirit. Worship, preaching, prayer and fellowship can be empowered by God the Spirit so that sinners are converted, the lethargic are enlivened in soul and the Church is revived.

Atkins' prayer reflects a man who sensed that a great work of God was needed in the Church and who sensed that God was on the brink of doing just such a work of spiritual awakening, both in England and in America. George Atkins' hymn-prayer was answered in the longest and most profitable revival in the history of Christianity in the Western world.

In their book *Firefall: How God Has Shaped History through Revivals*, Malcolm McDow and Alvin L. Reid chronicle the results of this Second Great Awakening from 1787 to 1843:



Great revival always leads to significant *evangelism and church growth*. From 1800 to 1830 Presbyterians grew fourfold, from about 40,000 to 173,329. Baptists grew from 872 churches and 64,975 members in 1790 to 7,299 churches and 517,523 members in 1836. The Methodist Church, after rapid gains in the latter eighteenth century, actually lost some 11,000 members from 1793–95. But phenomenal growth in the Second great Awakening resulted in 1,323,361 members by 1850.

The most significant impact of the awakening was the rise of *societies and agencies*, many of which still minister. The New York Missionary Society was founded in 1796 by Presbyterians, Baptists, and Dutch Reformed to reach the Indians. The Congregationalists formed the Missionary Society of Connecticut in 1798 to establish new churches in frontier areas. The Massachusetts Society, founded in 1799, supported 224 missionaries by 1824.

By the turn of the century, such enterprises literally exploded. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions began in 1810. Two of the first missionaries, Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice, became Baptists while enroute to Burma. Rice formed the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions in 1814.

Samuel Mills itinerated three thousand miles through the western frontier on mission work. His work was influential in the beginning of



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

the American Bible Society. In 1817 Mills helped form the American Colonization Society. He died at sea while returning from Africa, where he discovered a location for returning freed American slaves. Magazines began which promoted missions endeavors: *Connecticut Missionary Magazine*, *Missionary Herald*, *Evangelical Intelligence*, and *The Analytical Repository*.

The American Bible Society and the American Education Society came along in 1816; the American Colonization Society in 1817; the American Tract Society in 1825; and the American Home Missions Society in 1826. In 1791 the first Sunday school union was formed in Philadelphia. The New York Sunday School Union was established in 1816. The American Sunday School Union was organized in 1824 to establish a unified effort for the growing Sunday school movement.

Social effects were felt as well. One cannot underestimate the impact of the great awakenings on the cultural fiber of America, particularly in the nation's formative years.... Some of the new societies were directly aimed at social reform: the American Temperance Society in 1826; the American Peace Society in 1828; and the American Antislavery Society in 1833. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) began as an evangelistic outreach. It also became known for its positive influence on society as a whole....

Education was renewed as well. By the end of the awakening, the colleges in that nation were operated, 'from boards of trustees down to senior tutors, by ministers and devout laymen.' The beginning of the modern seminary movement is traced to Andover Theological Seminary in 1808, although earlier prototypes like the Log College had existed. One reason for the need of such schools was the rise of ministers out of the college revivals.

Princeton Seminary began in 1812; Yale Divinity School in 1822; and Hampden-Sydney established a theological library for ministry students. The first Baptist seminary was Newton Theological Seminary, begun in 1824. Oberlin Seminary, later led by Finney, opened in 1835. In 1780 there were nine schools of higher education in America. By 1861 there were 182. Only 27 of these were founded by states or municipalities. The Presbyterians had 49; Methodists, 34; Baptists, 25; Episcopal, 11; and Congregationalists, 21.¹





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

It does appear that as the saints sang *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship* God indeed scattered all around the *holy manna* Atkins sought in prayer and in song: the fruit of the preached Word.

Could it be that the old hymn of George Atkins should be sung and prayed again by churches in America, the United Kingdom, Europe and the Western world? No student of History or observer of the modern church scene can doubt that we need reformation and revival in the old world of Christendom. Although the words may appear sentimental and overly passionate for those reared on a spiritual diet of Maranatha music and historic hymns, the fact remains: We need holy manna once again. Jesus told us, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God' (Matt. 4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3; NASB). This is still the truth today.

Manna came from God, sent by His providence and grace, gathered in faith and obedience, and able to sustain life with energy and strength indefinitely. It came as a mysterious gift from heaven – arriving each evening, while Israel slept, and disappearing with mid-day sun. If not used as God designed and demanded, it would sour and putrefy. In the age of the Puritans 'holy manna' was a symbol for the life-giving strength of the preached Word, endowed with spiritual power from on high, and received by faith and in obedience.

Anyone who regularly attends church in Europe, England or America can attest to the dismal state of preaching; the poor and paltry diet being fed to the people of God week after week. Little wonder then, that many are calling for, and calling upon God to give, a new great awakening, a revival of the Christian religion in the world. There are those who believe that such a revival is no longer possible in the west. Joel A. Carpenter, in his book *Revive Us Again: the Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, makes the observation that the modern hope for a great awakening is ill-found in our postmodern times.

Had a national revival come? In the busyness and cultural diversity of mid-century America, it was doubtful that anything like a great Awakening could command national or even local interest for very long.... The revivalists, however, often seemed more reluctant than the secular press to call this new interest in religion a full-blown revival. Edwin Orr thought that the nation was on the verge of a



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

third great Awakening, but he insisted that it had not yet 'reached the pitch of effectiveness of either of its predecessors.' Real revival would amount to more than what was going on just then, insisted evangelist Fred B. Hoffman. It would 'regenerate the whole life of America' and would be manifest 'in every church, in every city and town and village and rural community' of the nation. Here was a mythic understanding of revival that could never be fulfilled across a vast and variegated modern nation like the mid-century United States.²

I am afraid that many others see George Atkins' hymn as nothing more than pining after a '*mythic understanding of revival that could never be fulfilled across a vast and variegated modern nation*'. Yet, the fact remains: There is a famine in our land for the Word of God, a dying hunger for 'holy manna' (Amos 8:11). And it is the duty of godly preachers to seek to do something about that lack of holy manna, that preaching of the Word that reforms religion, revives the Church and regenerates dead souls.

I believe that kind of preaching, by God's grace and the Spirit's enabling, is possible once again. It is just the kind of preaching that brings revival and that revival brings to the Church. Iain Murray speaks of such preaching when he states:

The twentieth century has seen a more widespread and enduring defection from historic Christianity in the English-speaking world than has been witnessed in any period since the Reformation. This defection has occurred through the removal of the foundation to all Christian teaching, namely that the words of Scripture are so given of God that the teaching they contain is entirely trustworthy and authoritative. The Bible stands supreme above all human wisdom and religious tradition. It alone is the Book which God has given for the salvation of men. If, therefore, Scripture loses its true place in the church nothing remains certain.

Protestant churches came to depart from belief in Scripture not so much by outright denial as by acceptance of the claim, made in the name of scholarship, that 'theories' about the divine inspiration of the Bible are unnecessary. Further, it was argued that Christianity would gain wider acceptance if it ceased to require submission to all that Scripture teaches.





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

In confronting the consequences of this rejection of biblical authority, which occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, there have been those who have labored to defend Christianity with apologetics and other forms of scholarship. ...But while accepting a measure of value in such endeavours, it has to be said that neither in the eighteenth century nor in the twentieth could the tide be turned by these means. Unbelief is primarily a moral rather than an intellectual problem, and apostasy comes from a sinful bias against God, not merely from mistaken thinking. Accordingly the only effective means for the restoration of reverence has to be the action of God in changing man's moral nature. ...God himself must authenticate the truth to make it real to us....

This being true, it inevitably follows that every period which has seen a widespread restoration of faith has always been a period when the convicting and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit has been manifest. Apologetics may modify conditions for the better but it is only under the powerful preaching of the gospel that unbelief is scattered as mist before the sun. In this respect, as in others, revivals have brought a repetition of what happened when the gospel confronted the wisdom of men in the apostolic age.³

The question arises: Does such 'Holy Manna preaching' come from man's efforts or from God's reviving grace? The answer is both! In all times of spiritual declension men must *work for and promote* reformation while they *wait and pray* for revival. It is the pastor's duty to seek for the revitalization of a declining congregation and to seek to lead in this revitalizing work through the primacy of the pulpit.

Pastors must themselves awaken to the real challenge of revitalizing the Church through the use of the means of grace, and primarily through the preaching of God's Word accompanied by prayer for holy manna (Acts 6:4). It is to this subject of 'Preaching for Revitalization: The Need for Holy Manna All Around' that we now turn our attention.

In recent years a new buzzword has appeared upon the American church scene: *Revitalization*. Unlike other buzzwords that come and go with trends, this word carries with it substantive meaning and great impact for the church. Though difficult to define in a comprehensive manner, the idea of revitalization of the church





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

(or local congregation) carries with it the hope of renewed vigor; redirected purpose; restoration of healthy growth, qualitatively and quantitatively; reformed beliefs and practices; and the refreshment of the Holy Spirit over the entire life of the church. Revitalization of the church has become a major concern for the evangelical and Reformed movement in America.⁴

There is a developing genre of literature devoted to the subject of revitalization and touching the various aspects of ministry that periodically need purposeful efforts at renewal (e.g. leadership, preaching, evangelism, etc.). For example, in 1986 Roger S. Greenway edited a book entitled *The Pastor-Evangelist: Preacher, Model and Mobilizer for Church Growth*. In that book's fourteen chapters and two hundred pages, only one chapter was written on 'Revitalizing a Dying Church'. In that chapter Harry L. Reeder III addresses the issue of churches in need of revitalization. The book treats that subject almost as an added thought, a digression from the mainstream of church growth. However, since the publication of Greenway's book, the realization of the vast need for revitalized churches has grown. Reeder defines that need succinctly:

'Revitalize a dying church!' In other words, be an instrument in the hands of God to breathe spiritual life back into a body before it becomes a corpse.... The method is twofold. First is an expositional public ministry of the Word that is faithful to the Scriptures, clear, and applicatory. Second is the occupation of discipling leaders who will multiply our ministry as they disciple others, who in turn disciple still others.⁵

What was a new idea, a buzzword a couple of decades ago, has now become a major concern for local churches all across this land. In 1995 the Presbyterian Church in America formed the office of 'Evangelism and Church Revitalization' with Archie Parrish as its director. Other American denominations have taken similar action to ensure that along with evangelism, church planting, and church growth, emphasis is also given to church revitalization.

The writer, on becoming pastor of Trinity Church in Jackson, Mississippi, devoted himself to the study and pursuit of church revitalization, particularly as it is related to the pulpit and its preaching





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

ministry. Therefore, the point of this study shall be 'Preaching for Revitalization and the Implementation of Principles for Such in the Pulpit Ministry'.⁶ In pursuit of that end, certain definitions, delimitations and distinctions must be explained, and the purpose of the study with certain hypotheses must be set forth.

True church revitalization can never take place and be maintained unless it is the product of a biblical pulpit. Churches in need of revitalization more than likely need revitalized pulpits. The purpose of this study will be to examine historic and contemporary preaching to assess what changes in approaches to preaching are necessary to help produce church revitalization.

Therefore, this study will incorporate four related aspects of the subject of preaching. Each of these aspects will be discussed in the following chapters:

1. An analysis of preaching from the perspective of the Scripture, the Reformers and Puritans, and contemporary models of preaching.
2. An examination of the weaknesses in the pulpit that have caused a need for revitalization.
3. An analysis of four major areas of Reformed and Puritan preaching: its priority, its content, its ethos and its style (the four hypotheses of this study).
4. Some practical approaches to assist preachers in preparing to preach for revitalization.

This study pursues this avenue of investigation due to the great need existing for revitalized churches and ministries and the part preaching will play in that process. Particular emphasis will be given to Reformation and Puritan preaching because of their revitalizing effect upon the church.

Statement of the Problem

Luder Whitlock, former president of Reformed Theological Seminary, stated in a doctor of ministry course on evangelism and church growth in 1987, that 'more than likely every growing and effective church will have an above-average pulpit ministry'. A great



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

many churches, however, are not experiencing either growth or effectiveness in ministry. In fact, recent statistics show that numerical growth among evangelical churches, liberal churches and Catholic churches is in decline. Over the last twenty years, and in general since the mid-1930s, church membership has dropped.⁷ Likewise, church attendance has leveled to 40–42% of the population since 1939.⁸ The writer proposes that part of the problem in the loss of members and the stagnation of church attendance is the result of poor preaching. For effective church growth and revitalization, the pulpit must again rise to pre-eminence. A pastor's leadership in revitalizing the church begins with his role as a preacher.⁹

The problem addressed in this study is the lack of revitalizing influence in pulpits. The writer proposes that practical steps can be taken to revitalize the local church through the ministry of revitalized preaching. How this can be accomplished is set forth in the following hypotheses:

1. Certain *priorities* of revitalizing preaching that will positively affect the interest shown by others toward a minister's preaching can be deduced from Reformation and Puritan preaching.
2. A certain *content* to revitalizing preaching that will positively affect the growth experienced from one's preaching can be deduced from Reformation and Puritan preaching.
3. Certain *characteristics* of revitalizing preaching that will positively affect the ethos of one's preaching can be deduced from the study of Reformation and Puritan preaching.
4. A certain style of *revitalizing* preaching that will positively affect the impact of one's preaching can be deduced from Reformation and Puritan preaching.

Each hypothesis will be set forth in the following chapters. The priority of preaching will be examined in chapters two through four. The content of preaching that revitalizes will be studied in chapters five through ten. The characteristics of Puritan preaching used by the Lord to revitalize churches will be explored in chapters eleven through fifteen. Finally, an expository style of preaching will be proposed and explained in chapters sixteen through nineteen.



Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, certain words distinctive to the topic of preaching for revitalization will be used. These are hereby explained in the writer's own terminology. The precise usage and understanding of these terms are critical to this study and its application due to the general manner in which this study may be used.

1. *Revitalization*: The process whereby a church is refocused on its mission of both evangelism and nurturing, and renewed in its efforts to minister to others so that numerical, spiritual and organizational growth occur and are sustained.
2. *Revival*: The visitation of the Holy Spirit that causes a church to experience the power, purity and presence of Christ in such a way that the church is renewed, empowered and purified for more effective use in ministry and mission.
3. *Awakening*: The movement of the Holy Spirit over a wide area, a country or an entire culture, causing great numbers of conversions and the restoration of biblical faith and values to all institutions.
4. *Qualitative Growth*: The spiritual growth of Christians or a church in discipleship and holiness.
5. *Quantitative Growth*: The numerical growth of a church by conversions, transfer of members from other churches and the enfolding of the unchurched.
6. *Organic Growth*: The organizational and administrative development and refinement of a church.
7. *Reformation*: A word used in two ways in this study: 'Reformation' or 'the Reformation' (capitalized), referring to the sixteenth century Protestant movement to return to Pauline theology, restructure the polity of the church for New Testament purity, and break with the Roman Catholic Church (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others are thus 'Reformers'); 'reformation' (not capitalized), referring to the process of returning the church to its historical, theological and biblical foundations rooted in the Reformation.
8. *The Reformed Faith*: That theological system of the Protestant Reformation and Puritan experience of faith, best summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*.



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

9. *The Doctrines of Grace*: The kingpin doctrines of salvation known and defined as 'the doctrines of grace' as expressed in Calvinism. (The acrostic T.U.L.I.P.)
10. *T.U.L.L.P.*: The doctrines of the total depravity of man, unconditional election of God, limited atonement of Christ, irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit, and perseverance of the saints as expressed in the acrostic T.U.L.I.P.
11. *Expository*: That method of preaching systematically through texts of Scripture.
12. *The Puritans*: The grandchildren of the Reformation known as 'the Puritans', men who sought both the total reform of ecclesiology and worship, and the application of the Reformed Faith to all aspects of life. Generally speaking, the Puritans dominated the evangelical church in England and America during the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.
13. *Church Growth Movement*: That approach to the numerical growth of the organized church by biblical, managerial and sociological efforts.
14. *Revivalism*: That approach to revival that grew out of the Second Great Awakening and the ministry of Charles G. Finney which believed revival could be secured through the use of proper 'methods'. Revivalism has characterized crusade evangelism and personal witnessing in America since the mid nineteenth century. Revivalism and Revival are not the same phenomenon.

Revival and Revitalization

A clear and definite distinction must be drawn between the content of 'Revival' and that of 'Revitalization'. Although the two may often experience an overlap, they are not necessarily synonymous; nor are they always coincidental. Revival and revitalization are different both in origin and in effect.

Revival is a supernatural work of God, and God alone. It is, as Richard Owen Roberts defines it, 'an extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results.'¹⁰ These extraordinary movements of God have been seen repeatedly in church history, from Old Testament times to modern times. Yet it remains a fact of history that only God can send revival. Andrew W. Blackwood Sr.





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

writes about God's preeminence and power in controlling when and how revivals come upon the church:

Both in the hearts of believers and in the life of a congregation there come times that correspond somewhat with the ebb and the flow of the tides. Also in the growth of an oak tree there comes a season of waiting for growth again to begin. But all such analogies fall short of the truth about revivals. A man who knows the ways of the waves, or of an orchard, can judge fairly well what will follow after the present stage. On the contrary, nobody but God can begin to tell when a long-awaited revival will begin, what form it will assume, or how long it will continue at the crest. ... As a rule the movement bursts out all at once, sweeps across its field like a prairie fire, and everywhere leads to a deepened sense of sin. Then comes an outburst of joy through assurance of pardon and cleansing, with peace of heart and eagerness to serve. As a consequence of such a revival believers begin again to 'possess their possessions' in the form of doctrines dear to the heart of God. There also comes a transformation in the morals of persons and congregations whose hearts have been touched with cleansing fire from above.¹¹

Preparation for revival can be made, and in fact, should be made by those who sense the church's need for renewal and by those who love the name of Christ and want to see it promoted and professed.¹² But the trap of falling into 'revivalism' while seeking and praying for revival must certainly be avoided. In his book devoted to the history of that subject, Iain H. Murray defines for us the difference:

American history was shaped by the Spirit of God in revivals of the same kind as launched the early church into a pagan world. Until 1858, innumerable authors understood events which they had themselves seen in this way... What they had in common was the conviction that God is always faithful to his Word, that Christ is risen and that the Holy Spirit has been given to ensure the advancement of his kingdom. But it may come as a surprise to find that these men were equally opposed to what was merely emotional, contrived or manipulated. They believed that strict adherence to Scripture is the only guard against what may be wrongly claimed as the work of





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

God's Spirit. They foresaw the danger of revivalism long before it became a respected part of evangelicalism, and they would have had no problem in agreeing with the criticism which has since discredited it. What is needed now is to get back to the authors of the eras *before* the whole meaning of revival was confused.¹³

Thus, 'Revivalism' is the Charles Finney approach to using the 'right means' to effect the 'right changes' upon one's audience – the church – in order to produce desired results of 'decisions for Christ' and so-called conversions. A distinction is made here because much of the church growth movement and many efforts for revitalization border on revivalistic methodology. The reader must see that a genuine revival is a sovereign act of God, while genuine revivalism is a planned and programmed effort by man.¹⁴ Andrew S. Blackwood Sr. says, 'As for the present-day term, "revivalism," let it serve as a stigma, non-biblical and reprehensible.'¹⁵

Revitalization is the effort to bring purpose, passion, purity and proper priorities back to the life and ministry of the local congregation, but it is not an attempt to produce a revival by means of revivalistic techniques. Revitalization originates with men who cooperate with God in applying biblical principles to church life, ministry and growth, but these efforts cannot guarantee revival. Today it is common to hear of 'revival happening somewhere' when in effect revitalization ministry is merely yielding its fruits.

It can thus rightly be said that genuine revival from God will always lead to true revitalization in the form of biblical purposes, proper priorities, fruitful ministry, missiological focus, and well-rounded growth in every aspect of church life, i.e. qualitative, quantitative and organic growth. But revitalization will not yield genuine revival without the sovereign grace of God. Simply put, one can never have revival without revitalization, but one can often have revitalization without revival.

This distinction must be clearly made so that the reader does not misinterpret revitalization efforts for revivalism or genuine revival. Hopefully, the reader now understands these crucial distinctions about like-sounding and related concepts.

Donald McGavran gives a reminder that, 'Under certain conditions revival may be said to cause growth. Under others, its relationship to





PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

church growth is so distant that apparently revival occurs without growth and growth without revival. Careful consideration of the subject is necessary if we are to understand the function of each in God's purpose of redemption.¹⁶ The reader has been forewarned.

ENDNOTES

1. McDow and Reid, 1997, 247-49.
2. Carpenter, 1997, 231-32.
3. Murray, 1998, 170-75.
4. Greenway, 1986, v-vi.
5. Reeder, 1986, 162. Reeder then identifies three types of pastoral ministry in the church today: organizing pastoral ministry, continuing pastoral ministry and revitalizing pastoral ministry (p. 163).
6. Such a vast subject as preaching relating to the vast problem of the need for revitalization will need to be limited in scope. The study of preaching for revitalization was limited to the context of a local congregation within the confines of the Presbyterian Church in America. Although there will more than likely emerge transferable concepts for preaching in general, the study was limited to that of preaching by pastors of local churches within a Reformed and Presbyterian denomination. This study was done in the context of the culture of the Deep South of the United States, a fact that may have some bearing upon the approach to preaching taken in this study. Finally, study and experiences are in the context of a genuinely evangelical congregation and not one of Neo-orthodoxy, Pentecostalism or opposition to the Reformed Faith or Presbyterian Polity.

The church the writer now pastors did not need to be revitalized by laying a foundation of biblical truth. For the most part, the preceding pastors (and particularly those two who immediately preceded the writer for a combined total of sixteen years) were men faithful to the Scriptures and the basics of the Reformed Faith. Trinity Presbyterian Church, although a church in need of revitalization, was by no means antagonistic to or unfamiliar with biblical truth or spiritually dead.

Therefore, this study was done in the context of a conservative, biblical and reformed congregation; in a conservative, biblical and reformed denomination; in a conservative southern culture; in a city influenced greatly by the Presbyterian Church in America and the Reformed Theological Seminary. These factors surely make the process of revitalization unique in this specific context.

7. Gallup, 1989, 30.
8. Bezilla, 1993, 42.
9. McNair, 1980, 45.



PREACHING FOR REVITALIZATION

10. Roberts, 1982, 16-17.
11. Burns, 1909, 10,12.
12. Stephens, 1961, 30-42.
13. Murray, 1994, xx.
14. Lloyd-Jones, 1987, 98-100.
15. Burns, 1909, 8.
16. McGavran, 1970, 163.

