Reflections on Revival

By

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As I write this, meetings are still underway at Asbury University. The result, it seems, is that the Christian community is in turmoil. Is this of God? Is it man-made? Should we support or condemn it? Not surprisingly, this response is common whenever something unusual happens.

I have not been to Asbury since this phenomenon began. I have preached in the school’s chapel in the past, though my message didn’t spark revival on that occasion! But I have been watching the events closely and have received first-hand reports from several people I trust.

In light of these events, I would like to offer some general thoughts on movements of God.

*1.****They are God-initiated.***People can schedule meetings, but only God brings revival.

The danger with any event such as what is unfolding at Asbury is that people will try to replicate it without allowing the Spirit to lead them. Revivals can certainly spread like wildfire, but you cannot merely gather a group of college students together and assume revival will occur (though it might!).

*2.****Revival always involves repentance****.*Revivals differ widely in many respects. Some lean heavily on the preached word, others on testimonies. Some incorporate music, whereas others don’t. Speaking in tongues or healing are not essential aspects of revival. At its core, revival is when God’s people become deeply convicted of their sin and return to him (2 Chron. 7:14). Without repentance, there is no revival.

*3.****Revival is a refreshing and deepening of our walk with Christ.***James 4:8 declares that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us. This process involves cleansing our hands of our sin. The net result is a closer walk with God. To be “revived” means something was dead or dying. Sin causes death. People experiencing revival tend to feel as if their walk with God has been made alive once more.

*4.****Revival has its counterfeits.***Most revivals include some people who are inauthentic. They may have been swept up in the emotion. False prophets and deceivers are drawn to such events and seek to lead people astray. Pharisees tend to gather at the sidelines to instruct others on how to conduct themselves. Where there are people, abuse and extremes are to be expected. Extended revivals are those that are carefully guarded from abuse.

*5.****Word-based revivals tend to be longer-lasting and more stable than experience-driven revivals.***Historically, there have been two primary types of revival, both of which are legitimate. Experience-driven revivals are dominated by testimonies from those involved. Many revivals, such as the ones at Asbury or Brownwood University, began when a student shared a testimony. These can be powerful movements of God, but they are more vulnerable to emotionalism in which people share things that are unbiblical. Word-based revivals are led by ministers and feature preaching and teaching. Jonathan Edwards’ revivals would be an example. They tend to be better protected from abuse, but they can be affected by preachers who are tempted to touch God’s glory.

*6.****Revivals have critics.***Historically, there are always some who criticize any movement of God. Sometimes people whose own relationship with God is dry and cold recoil at the emotionalism of those experiencing a fresh touch of the Spirit. Others are keen to find any shortcoming or inaccuracy in the proceedings. The problem is that every revival involves imperfect, impressionable, and frail people. It is inevitable that certain aspects will have a shaky biblical basis. Many critics will hurl attacks from afar without experiencing the events firsthand. Others have preconceived ideas of what revival entails and assume anything that doesn’t match up to those ideals is false. These critics assume that if flaws are evident, then the revival is not from God.

*7.****Every revival comes to an end.***One thing is certain: every revival eventually draws to a close. In the height of the meetings, one might wonder if it will ever end. But it will. That doesn’t mean it was inauthentic. Revivals are largely corrective. They draw people back to Christ. When that goal has been accomplished, people return to their normal lives. It’s unrealistic to think God’s people can attend revival services perpetually. There is also no set time period before a move of God qualifies as a revival. You cannot say, “Well, that only lasted a week, so it must not have been genuine.” Generally, it is the fruit that reveals the depth and extent of a revival, not its duration.

Revivals end for various reasons. Perhaps God has gained his people’s attention and drawn them back to himself. At times, revivals descend into excess and lose focus. People covet the publicity and manipulate the meetings for selfish purposes, a certain way to squelch a revival. At other times, well-intentioned people steer a revival in the direction they think it should go rather than allowing God to guide the event. Revivals end when people hijack the work that belongs solely to the Spirit.

## **Responding to Revival**

How should we respond to an apparent revival? Here are some suggestions:

1. ***Listen to the testimony of the Spirit within you.***One way to test the validity of a

revival is to seek affirmation from the Spirit within you. If what you are experiencing is not from God, the Holy Spirit will alert you. Likewise, if it is of the Spirit, he will confirm it, even if the revival doesn’t look like you expected.

2. ***Test the revival with Scripture.*** Scripture has clear guidelines as to what is of God and what is from people. God’s work will exalt Christ, not people. It will never compromise truth. It will never violate something God has already made clear in Scripture. A genuine revival will bring conviction of sin and draw people to Christ.

3.***Don’t be put off by emotions.*** Emotions can be deceptive and easily manipulated. Nevertheless, encountering the living God is an awesome thing! When the apostle John did, he fell to the ground as a dead man (Rev. 1:17). Most people are unfamiliar with such divine encounters and may behave in unusual ways. Don’t necessarily discount what is happening. It merely indicates that people are feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the experience.

4. ***Come with a heart prepared to encounter God.***If you become distracted by what others are doing, you can easily miss your own divine encounter. Though it’s unlikely that 100% of the people in the auditorium are genuine in their response to what is happening, many, if not most, may be. If you are open to the Spirit’s work, you may experience a fresh moving of the Spirit in your life as well.

5.***Focus on the positive.*** In every move of God, negative occurrences have eventually detracted from the overall work God accomplished. If you choose to focus on the bad, you may miss your own encounter with God. People today are so desperate for a fresh work of God that we should rejoice when the Spirit moves powerfully in any place under any circumstance.

Many, many people have been praying for revival in America. Many are deeply concerned about today’s youth. It would be tragic to miss his answer because he moved in a way we were not expecting. The results are not in yet on Asbury. But there have already been enough indications of Spirit-led activity that we must watch closely and be open to what God may be doing. If we love God’s kingdom, we should celebrate every time it wins another victory.

For more information, see Henry and Richard Blackaby, Claude King, Fresh Encounter: God’s Pattern for Spiritual Awakening (Nashville: B and H Publishing Group, 2009).