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What is a Revival?

By Tal Davis

One term that is often used in evangelical churches is “revival.” We used to hear the word a lot more than we do today. That may be because it seems a bit outmoded for modern times. For some it brings to mind extreme ideas of tent services with loud singing, wild preaching, and people crying in the aisles. That was probably never what most “revivals” were at all. So just what is a real revival?

The dictionary defines “revival” in several different ways.

1. The act or an instance of reviving or the state of being revived.
2. An instance of returning to life or consciousness.
3. A renewed use, acceptance of, or interest in some thing or subject.
4. A reawakening of faith or renewal of commitment to a religion.
5. An evangelistic meeting or service specifically intended to effect such a reawakening in those present.

All those definitions are relevant to the use of revival in the context of a Christian church or community. In the past, many evangelical churches would conduct revival meetings in their congregations or at a local auditorium. Their primary purpose was to have a guest preacher, often a professional evangelist, preach a series of sermons designed to win lost people to Christ as savior and Lord. They would usually incorporate special musical talent who set a climate for the preacher’s messages to be effective. They often lasted a week or even two weeks, and church members were encouraged bring unsaved guests with them to hear the evangelistic messages. That would correspond to the fifth definition above.

Of course, the churches had to be careful that the revival was real and not contrived. Years ago, Ray Stevens made a comedy song called the “Mississippi Squirrel Revival.” In the song, he tells the story of how a squirrel got loose one day in a tiny church service. Because of the uproar of shouting, jumping, and hooting it caused, the people thought a revival had broken out.

In any case, many people think those kinds of revivals are now obsolete and ineffective. And maybe they are in today’s culture. However, I worked in the Evangelism Section of the

Southern Baptist Convention for over 20 years in the 1990s and 2000s. About once every five years or so, from the 1960s through the 2000s, the Evangelism Section promoted special simultaneous revivals among Southern Baptist churches all across North America. In those years of simultaneous revivals, statistically, the overall baptism rates of the SBC always were much higher than other years. Clearly when the churches focused on evangelistic outreach, the effect was obvious, people got saved and baptized. When those convention wide simultaneous revival emphases were eventually discontinued, the numbers of annual baptisms dropped drastically.

So those kinds of revivals were effective. In any case, is that the real way to define “revival?” That may be what our culture and history has led us to think. But an authentic revival in a church does not involve a special week of services and a guest preacher or evangelist, though it may certainly include those elements. As we said, a genuine revival includes all of the definitions listed above. So you ask, if our church wants a real revival what should we do? For a church to have an authentic revival, it is primarily a matter of spiritual resurgence. Paul, in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians laid out several key principles necessary for authentic spiritual revival.

Paul begins this chapter about revival by encouraging the Ephesians to walk humbly in the way of Christ and love one another.

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:1-2 NASB)

I love sports. In my years of being around it, I saw two types of athletes. One type was arrogant and self-centered. I remember once being present at a Little League baseball game where a friend of mine’s son was playing. A very famous ex-football player was there watching his boy play. My friend’s nine-year-old daughter and her gal pal bravely approached the famous athlete and asked for his autograph. He curtly refused them and told them to leave him alone. I guess we should have expected that response given the guy’s reputation.

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What a contrast to other great sports figures who go out of their way to sign autographs and talk to fans and kids. I think of Tim Tebow who always talks to people and gives all the glory to God for his success since he won the Heisman Trophy.

A humble spirit is also an important quality for a church. I have visited churches all over America and in other countries. And, like some athletes, you can tell those that see themselves as somehow a cut above others. You can feel those that take great pride in the size of their buildings, the size of their crowds, or the glory of their music programs. The preaching tends to be boisterous and a bit arrogant, with little or no room for questions.

Those are in contrast to churches that humbly recognize their mission to serve the people God has given them. They may be large or small, but the attitude they exude is welcoming and unpretentious. The preaching takes a more modest and subdued approach focusing on sound interpretation and application of biblical truth.

Another important principle Paul emphasized for a revived church is unity in Christ.

Being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-6 NASB)

Obviously, organizations need to be united. Unity can be accomplished in two ways. One is through enforced uniformity. That's when everyone walks in virtual lock step as the leadership determines. In many cases the people are not even sure what the goals are that the leaders are aiming for. In many cases it is just to stay in power.

The best example of this kind of unity is the country of North Korea. Everyone in that relatively small isolated nation of 18 million is totally unified to do whatever their Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un says. Independent thought is squashed. Anyone who dares to question his authority or even show any bit of disrespect will be imprisoned or executed. Everyone is expected to report anyone who they might hear, say, or do anything contrary to the government's dictates. That is total unity, but is the worst kind.

The best kind is when people are unified freely around a guiding principle or goal.

This is the kind of unity Paul was writing about to the Ephesians. Note, however, he calls it *"the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* (v. 3) It is a kind of unity that cannot be maintained by purely human efforts. It requires the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of each believer.

Paul then demonstrated the full extent of this unity by the illustration of two aspects of Christianity. First, he talked about three aspects of Christians themselves. First is *"one body."* This refers to the church being the body of Christ in the world. Each part works together for the common good. Then he speaks of *"one hope of your calling."* This refers to believers' calling of salvation in Jesus Christ. Finally, he mentions *"one faith, one baptism,"* a reference to the one true faith of those following Jesus Christ.

But in the context of these unifying factors of the church, he uses the theological illustration of God's Divine Triune Nature. First, he mentions God the Holy Spirit. He says to be *diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit* (v. 3) and *one Spirit* (v. 4) (*Pneuma*). Next, He mentions God the Son, *one Lord* (*Kyrios*). Finally he says there is *one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all* (v. 5).

This is Paul's way. A church is to be unified as one body, with one hope, with one faith, and one baptism, in the same kind of unity as the Triune God. That's "the tie that binds." This is essential for a true revival.

This is what makes possible the next principle: A church can experience real revival when the people are prepared and available for service. Paul followed his call for unity with a reminder that all Christians are supernaturally equipped with a spiritual gift to provide a function in the body.

But to each one of us grace (charis) was given according to the measure of Christ's gift (dorea - spiritual gifts of service). (Ephesians 4:7 NASB)

This echoed what Paul expounded upon in depth in I Corinthians 12.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7 NASB)

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12 For just as the body is one and yet has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one part, but many. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14 NASB)

Ever heard of an oxymoron? No, its not some dumb bovine animal. Oxymorons are phrases in which contradictory terms are used in conjunction with each other. Here are a few examples I found online: a fine mess; a calculated error; cheap gas; congressional ethics; Dodge Ram; double solitaire; educational television; genuine imitation; jumbo shrimp; sweet and sour chicken; and adult male. You can probably think of many others. Here's one more oxymoron that should apply for any church: "Inactive member." How can a person claim to be part of the Body of Christ and be inactive?

As members of the body of Christ every part has some function to serve. That does not mean everyone is the same. God has gifted each of us to serve in the church according to our individual gift. We are the "body of Christ" but each part has a unique function. Listen to how Paul (humorously) described it.

14 For the body is not one part, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has arranged the parts, each one of them in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many parts, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again, the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those parts of the body which we consider less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our less presentable parts become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable parts have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that part which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one part of the body suffers, all the parts

suffer with it; if a part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it. (1 Corinthians 12:14-26 NASB)

The point is that no one part of the body is less important than any other, They must all work together in a unified way. If one part fails to function the whole body suffers. The same is true for a church seeking genuine revival.

That being said, there is a need for a church to have and follow godly leaders. Paul spells this out in what are some of the most important (and misinterpreted) verses in the New Testament.

11 And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13 NASB)

In these verses Paul delineated some of the key types of leaders that were present in the New Testament churches. He started with the apostles who we can assume he meant as the chief leaders including Jesus' twelve disciples, Jesus' brother James, and himself. Prophets were specially gifted (and probably rare) individuals who could speak God's words verbally. A problem arises sometimes today when certain people declare themselves to be modern apostles or prophets. They often lead people astray. I always warn people to be wary of those making such audacious claims.

He then listed some of the general leaders that were likely found in all the churches of that day and in every generation. We can apply the titles of evangelists, pastors, and teachers to those doing those functions in our churches today. God specially calls them to those ministries. Paul then, in verse 12, delineated what is the one primary duty of those leaders. It is *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.* (NASB) Notice carefully that the job of the evangelists, pastors, and teachers is to equip the saints (all Christians) for the ministry of the church.

Unfortunately, centuries ago a small translation error crept into this passage that radically altered its meaning. Look at how the King James Version translates those two verses.

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Do you see the difference? Notice in verse 12 that there is a comma inserted between *For the perfecting of the saints* and *for the work of the ministry*. Remember, the original Greek manuscripts had no punctuation marks. That single comma, which is not found in any modern translation, subtly changes the meaning of the verse and its interpretation. Instead of saying that the leaders are to perfect (ie: equip) the saints to do the work of the ministry, it suggests *they* (the leaders) are to perfect the saints and they are to do the work of the ministry to edify the body of Christ.

You might say, "What difference does that make?" Only that it justifies how some denominations make firm distinctions between their ordained clergy and the laity, allowing only the ranked ordained to perform certain "sanctified duties or rituals." Those distinctions are, in many ways, unsubstantiated. The Bible does not really endorse the kind apostolic succession that many denominations require for their clergy ordinations.

So, does your church have good leaders? Do they understand their roles are as equippers to train the people to do the ministry of the church. If not, they are not following Paul's instructions, and, if they are trying to do it all themselves they are going to burn themselves out.

But we may have veered a bit from our point in this article. We are talking about a church's keys to revival. Well, there is one more point that Paul reminded the Ephesians about in chapter 4.

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is, Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesian 4:15-16 NASB)

He told them finally that nothing substitutes for love in the church. People respond to actions more than words, both positive and negative. Negatively especially if our words contradict our love. That is why we must speak truth in love. This is probably the most difficult principle to find in most churches today. It seems hurt feelings and disagreements are all too common. Churches need to find ways for members to express their feelings honestly and know they are loved. This is the greatest, and perhaps most difficult, task of good leaders.

What is a revival? We may think it is what we experienced when we were young and a preacher came and did a week of services at our church. And those were good. But as we have seen, a real "revival" is regenerating the deeper life of a church, its leadership and its people united in the service of Jesus Christ.

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