

REVIVED BY THE SPIRIT
(Acts 2:1-21)

You hear “revival” or “prayer meeting” and you probably think Billy Graham. But Billy is just one in a long line of evangelists going back to colonial times to evangelists like Billy Sunday, Dwight L. Moody, Barton Stone, Timothy Dwight, Charles G. Finney, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards. But revivals and prayer meetings aren’t uniquely American and in fact go a lot further back than that. Charles G. Finney, one of the great names in 19th century revivalism said that the model for prayer meetings was Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit blew into Jerusalem to stir things up.

Pentecost for us is almost a non-event. It’s on the calendar and we count Sundays after Pentecost up until Advent. But most years it comes and goes and we hardly notice unless we remind everyone to wear something red that Sunday. We sure don’t come to church expecting anything like what happened way back then in Jerusalem.

But maybe we need to change our thinking. If we come not expecting anything to happen, guess what? That’s exactly what will happen: Nothing.

Charles Finney addressed low expectations in the 1850s. He said he once attended a meeting held to pray for a revival and he expected someone “to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit.” “One man prayed and prayed for a quarter of an hour, but he ever once asked for the outpouring of the Spirit; and while he prayed for almost everything else, he failed to ask the very thing which we had come together for. People sometimes meet together for prayer,” said Finney, “and ask for everything in the world except the very thing which they have come to present to God.”

To be honest, I wouldn’t know what to do if people suddenly started speaking in tongues or fainting – “slain in the Spirit” as they say – doing any of those peculiar things sometimes associated with revivals and prayer meetings. Revivals typically aim to convert individuals. Billy Graham revivals, for instance, made a point of how many “commitments to Christ” they got in this city or that city – a sort of numbers game.

We’re not so much into numbers. But that’s not to say we couldn’t use a little outpouring of the Spirit or that a revival wouldn’t be welcome. In fact, that might be exactly what we need – a revival.

Take away all the negative associations the word “revival” might have in a religious context and just look at the dictionary definitions. Here are a couple. A revival is

- *A renewal of interest in something that results in its becoming popular once more*
- *The recovering of life, consciousness, or full strength*

Who wouldn’t want that for our church? Renewed interest, recovered life, full strength. We talk about church “renewal” and “revitalization,” but those are

just different, less emotionally packed words for that old religious standby “revival.”

One of the problems Finney saw with revivals in the mid-19th century was half-heartedness. A meeting was scheduled and only a handful showed up. As he said, “So when meetings are appointed to invite the Lord Jesus, and almost none attend, will he come? Nay, verily; why should he come?”

Contrast that to Pentecost, when “they were all together” and “a tongue [of fire] rested on each of them” and “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” No one held back. They were united in their purpose. They expected something to happen, they expected some kind of blessing. They may not have known exactly what it would be or what form it would take. But they had faith and expectation – and they weren’t disappointed. How could they be? They got the power of the Holy Spirit; they got the divine help they needed.

Whether we call it revival or renewal or revitalization, it ultimately depends on the working of the Holy Spirit. But that doesn’t mean we can just sit back and hope and wait for a miracle.

A laid-back, lackadaisical attitude like that was something Charles Finney argued against. It fostered what he called a “spirit of neglect – a spirit of carelessness” and put all the responsibility on God. Which isn’t to say God can’t pull it off alone without us. But in this case there’s some truth to that saying that so many people think comes from the Bible but that in fact comes from Ben Franklin: “God helps those who help themselves.”

If we want to see our church revived, renewed, revitalized, we have to take responsibility for ourselves, we have to get ready for the Holy Spirit to come and fill us with power. One church renewal guru puts it this way: “What your congregation will be in the future is up to you and the other members and how you work together to create something new from the possibilities you face” (*Pathway to Renewal*, p. 25). We can’t summon up the Holy Spirit like some genie in a bottle, but we can definitely block its effectiveness and thwart its mission. The Spirit’s efficacy in large part depends on our openness.

The disciples on Pentecost didn’t put up any barriers to block the Spirit. When the Spirit was unleashed, they were ready. And they made themselves ready by being together, by being united in purpose, by constantly devoting themselves to prayer. In other words, they did everything they could to be ready for the Holy Spirit when it came. And they were ready. And we’re here as a result of their readiness.

Of course, you might be thinking, well, Pentecost happened a long time ago. Our expectations aren’t quite so high. We don’t *really* anticipate an outpouring of the Spirit. We don’t have *quite* the same level of anticipation. But when Jesus gave his apostles the great commission to go and make disciples, he wasn’t speaking only to them. He was speaking to us, too, and he didn’t put any time limits on their mission. On the contrary, he promised to be with them “always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20) – in other words, forever.

That is his promise to us. If we want to see our church renewed, if we want to see it revitalized, if we want to see it revived, we can count on the Holy

Spirit just as the disciples did on the day the church was born. But like them, we have some work to do so we're ready when God brings something new to life.