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Reformation & Revival



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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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Correspondence concerning articles, editorial policy, books for review, suggested manuscripts, and subscriptions should be addressed to the editor. Comments are welcome.

The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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Editor's Introduction

John H. Armstrong

American religious history has been shaped by great spiritual awakenings, or movements, of God's Spirit, called revivals. This is a point generally undebated by historians.

What is debatable is the lasting impact and ultimate value of these periods of awakening. Were they an evidence of normative Christianity? Even a return to conditions like those during the era of the apostles? Or were these revivals interruptions of effective day-to-day ministry that brought problems generally not worth the confusion which resulted? Are these awakenings really *An Endless Line of Splendor*, as Dr. Earle E. Cairns calls them in the title of his book on revivals? Or were they the unleashing of forces inimical to holy and healthy religion that destroyed doctrinal foundations and elevated emotions to a place far beyond what is warranted by the Scriptures? The answer you give to these questions depends entirely on your view of several matters.

First, what warrant do we have from the New Testament itself for such awakenings? Are we to expect God to move in this manner? What is our responsibility toward this subject? Should we pray for further outpourings of the Holy Spirit, if that is in fact what these historical awakenings really were? Or should we conclude, as many have in this century, that revivals are a thing unknown in the New Testament and thus an old covenant phenomenon? Is there a difference between the recorded revivals of Israel and those known in the new covenant community since Pentecost? If so, what are these differences? These questions touch upon the meaning of several New Testament texts. How are we, for example, to understand Acts 3:19 and Luke 11:13 in the light of revival theology?

Second, were the American awakenings of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century really helpful to the church in the long run? Doesn't your answer depend, ultimately, on your presuppositions regarding these mat-

ters? Further, what effect did these historical revivals have upon the theological consensus and well-being of the church? If we believe the confessions of the Protestant Reformation were generally sound and helpful expositions of the Gospel, did these awakenings solidify the church's faith and life, or help, in reality, to break it down?

I confess a great deal of skepticism about the benefits of many awakenings, especially those that are touted in our own time. I have seen little, except for a few flickers of light here and there (e.g., the "Jesus Movement" of the 1970s and *some* of the recent student movements), which offers even the remotest evidence that we have seen akin to a real work of revival in America during my lifetime. I further confess that there are serious problems which come as a result of all revivals, both real revivals and spurious ones.

The Great Awakening, in the eighteenth century, was the best of America's general revivals. Even here some deep problems result which alter the church in ways that were not all for the good. (Even Jonathan Edwards later lamented that many of the converts of the years following 1734 may well have been unsaved!) When we come to the era we know as the Second Great Awakening (which was really a *series* of various revival movements from about 1800 until the 1830s, or even the 1840s) I confess that I have even more skepticism. Here the solid theological foundation of earlier American evangelicalism was broken up. This was so much true that by the time of the Civil War (1861-65) American evangelicalism was permanently changed.

One can still hope that this change, which came during the Second Great Awakening, might be altered, but it seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, given the present state of American Christianity and culture. A mighty and profound reformation, like that of the sixteenth century, is now necessary for there to be any significant recovery of the pattern of

the Gospel once known. This surely can happen, for with God all things are possible. Indeed, this must happen, in my opinion, if the church is to be spared from a divine judgment that renders her almost inconsequential for the times that lie ahead.

I am increasingly impressed that God's judgment is already powerfully upon us. When I see reports of the beliefs and lifestyle of "born again" people in America I shudder. If 51 percent of the "born again" do not believe in absolute truth we are in deep trouble. If over 80 percent of conservative believers affirm that in the matter of salvation "God helps those who help themselves" we have already capitulated to the heresy of Pelagius and are in need of a great reformation. We are more than likely much further gone than any of us realizes. If, in addition to these numbers (which reflect doctrinal beliefs and confession of faith), we factor in research regarding evangelical views of life and the day-to-day practice of the faithful we see the actual number of those who may truly be Christians plummet to lows that are frankly astounding to contemplate. I have listened to respected friends discuss the possibility that there might be four or five million actual believers in this nation (i.e., about 2-3 percent of the population). If this is even remotely accurate then a church attendance which remains fairly high (37 percent at last count) is grossly misleading, to say the least. To continue to gain new believers and build churches the way we are doing it presently will only make matters much worse. The answer is not more evangelism, at least as we have been doing it. The answer is to recover what has been lost and to do true evangelism that lives and preaches the real Gospel!

But what has all of this to do with the theme of this issue? I answer, "Much in every way." It was during the Second Great Awakening that we began this journey off the rails of truth. By the 1820s we had already refashioned evangelical-

ism into a religion of democratic populism that would never again look quite like the faith of the Protestant Reformers. Most, even today, celebrate this change. I lament them. It has taken us decades to get into this present mess and it might well take decades to get out, unless God rends the heavens and raises up a wonderful new generation. This is precisely what *real* awakening does, if it is *combined* with God-centered biblical reformation.

In this issue we consider the general flow and pattern of the Second Great Awakening. We look at some of the important figures of the era, especially Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney, the best representatives of the old and the new respectively. We also take up several related matters that have bearing upon how this theme relates to the church in the 1990s.

My prayer is that you will soberly consider this subject and pray that God will grant us a recovery of the Gospel in these dark times. If this prayer is answered we can expect the outpouring of His Spirit upon our labors. If we do not have the Gospel then all the noise of excited stadiums full of men will only produce more moralistic Christianity. Further, if this prayer is not answered, all the concerts of prayer and solemn assemblies will not help us in the least. Our problem is that we are without God's Word and we are, thereby, powerless. Our only hope is found in Christ's Gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). We must get back on the rails or we will continue to run off in every direction. The future is bleak for the modern evangelicalism shaped by revivalism, but it is as bright as the promises of the Gospel for all who flee to Christ and hide under the shadow of the cross. Let us understand the Gospel, love it, and give ourselves to it.

All who love the church should pray, "Lord, hasten the day when we shall again hear the Gospel preached with power across this land."

Editor