

09 HISTORY OF REVIVAL

“Revival” comes from roots meaning “life” and “again.” To be revived is to be brought back to life, either after death or near-death, or after a long period of inactivity.

The Bible uses imagery of “death” and “life” to describe what it means when people turn to God, turn away from evil, and receive God’s gift—the Holy Spirit. In church history we use the word “revival” in two main ways:

- Christians experiencing new life in their walk with God
- People meeting God for the first time.

In some ways, these two things are very similar. Either way, revival comes when people encounter God in new and powerful ways, when they turn away from sin, when they give to God the worship that God deserves, and when they go out into the world, following where the Holy Spirit leads.

There have been many different kinds of revivals over the centuries, involving young and old, rich and poor, insiders and outsiders, and from every corner of the world and every walk of life.

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Sometimes, revivals are unexpected. Sometimes not. Sometimes people have prayed for revival—and God has not answered their prayers. Other times, revival has broken out against the wishes of church leaders. That is: sometimes, God interrupts our comfortable Christian lives. It is always powerful but is not always pleasant. Do all these revivals have anything in common? Yes! New life is breathed into God's word when we hear the good news in new ways—or for the first time.

For this reason, revival often looks like a youth rebellion: young people, encountering God, and newly filled with God's Spirit, often meet resistance from those of us who are set in our ways. Sometimes, these enthusiastic young people are able to bring us older folks back to the warmth of our earlier faith. Sometimes, we older people resist too much—and the revived young people end up either walking away and starting something new (and leaving us older believers to wither away in our stubbornness), or the revived community dies, stifled.

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In other words, revival begins as an act of God—an interruption into the world—and it ends if Christians turn away from God. How terrible! Speaking as a historian, I have seen many examples of Christians walking away from God, and it never loses its edge. It is heartbreaking every time.

On the other hand, the real joy of history is seeing God's hand in the lives of people unlike us, whose experiences and life circumstances are different from ours—whose experience of God is unlike our own. At that moment, reading Christian history is like listening to testimonies. We learn more about Jesus and the Holy Spirit as we hear about Jesus and the Holy Spirit through others' words.

-Paul Grant