

Ought the Church to Pray for Revival?

by Herman Hanko

If one were to ask the question, "Ought the church to pray for revival?" the answer almost surely would be a resounding, "Yes." Anyone who has a love in his heart for the church and who is concerned about the cause of Zion is aware of the fact that the church is by no means in a healthy condition. It is simply a fact that, from a doctrinal point of view, today's church has, at best, become doctrinally indifferent and, at worst, allowed all kinds of heresies to creep into her confession. From a doctrinal point of view, the church is not strong. The same is true if one measures the strength of the church from the viewpoint of her spiritual walk. The church is spiritually very weak. It is characterized by worldliness and carnality. The commandments of the Lord are openly broken by its members. The Lord's day is desecrated. The name of God is taken in vain. Fornication, adultery, and immorality flourish in the church as if they were plants in a heavily fertilized soil.



It is no different if we consider the church from the viewpoint of her zeal. Anyone who is at all concerned about the church cannot help but see that the church has lost her zeal for Christ and for the cause of the truth; lost her spiritual energies; and become spiritually lethargic, spiritually cold, and sunken in formalism so that the vibrancy that ought to characterize her seems to be gone. And the church has, without any doubt whatsoever, come under the condemnation of the Lord in His letter to the church of Ephesus, "You have lost your first love."

From all of these points of view it would seem immediately evident to anyone who concerns himself with the welfare of the church that the church is in need of revival. And so it has happened, too, that the cry for revival has become increasingly loud, widespread, and urgent.

Let me give you just a few instances of this. Ian Paisley, who is perhaps the best known and most powerful man in Northern Ireland, has publicly gone on record as stating that he is "convinced that before he dies the Lord will send revival to the church." And the Lord has told him, so he claims, that he will be an instrument in such revival. A great deal of the work which he carries on is geared to bringing about revival in the church of his land and in the church throughout the world.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose influence has been so great and who has cast his long shadow not only over the British Isles where he labored all his life, but also over America, has said publicly, and has written in his books that "the last hope of the church in our day is revival" (*The Welsh Revival of 1904*, Introduction).

The Banner of Truth, which has been instrumental in the excellent work of re-publishing innumerable Puritan classics and which sponsors the Banner of Truth Conferences, plays a large role, if not a crucial role, in the growing clamor for revival and in the growing interest in revival which characterizes the church of our day. At their conferences they speak of the need for revival, they lecture concerning revival, and they pray for revival.

David Bellington has said: "Revivalism is a strand within the evangelical tradition." The same thing is true in the Reformed churches. The following prayer appeared this past year in a magazine of a Reformed church: "Lord, for our souls, families, churches, missions, schools, and nations we desperately need revival. The times are dark. Thy judgments are imminent" (*The Banner*, January 1990, 7). And so revival has become an important and an urgent cry that arises from a church concerned about the spiritual welfare of God's heritage.

The question that faces us is this: "Is it proper, is it biblical, is it Reformed to pray for and seek revival in the church?" To that question the Reformed faith must give a resounding "No!" Revival is wrong. Revival is contrary to the Scriptures. Revival is at odds with the Reformed faith. To pray for revival is to go against the will of God and is to grieve the Holy Spirit.

What Is Revival?

Before we enter into any kind of an analysis of revivals we must be careful that we understand what we mean by this term. Many have used the term "revival" in a very broad sense. They have used "revival," for example, to describe those incidents in the history of the nation of Judah when, under the leadership of a good king (such as Asa or Jehoshaphat or Hezekiah or Josiah), the nation of Judah returned to the true worship of Jehovah after a period of idolatry and grievous sin. Although Scripture uses the word "revival" in the Old Testament, this term must be understood in the context of Israel's theocracy and before the time of the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. It had therefore an entirely different connotation.

This broad meaning of revival has also sometimes been applied to various reformations in the church, such as the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the rise of Puritanism in the British Isles, and the Separation in the Netherlands from the State Church under the leadership of Brummelkamp, Van Raalte, Scholte, and others. But none of these events, either in the Old or New Testament, is rightly called a revival. They were church reformations, but to confuse church reformation with revival is a serious historical and theological mistake.

There are others who speak of revival, especially in evangelical and fundamentalistic circles, as referring to that kind of preaching which goes sometimes under the name of "revivalistic" preaching – preaching after the order of Dwight L. Moody, the Sankees, and, in our own time, such men as Billy Graham. It is common for churches who have become spiritually lethargic to call in a revival preacher who attempts to instill new life into a congregation, gain new converts to Christ, and solicit from members of the church new commitments to the Lord Jesus. On a much broader scale, efforts are made by such powerful revival preachers as Billy Graham to bring revival to whole cities or countries. The Reformed faith has a quarrel with that type of preaching, particularly with its decisionism, its whole approach to the preaching of the gospel, and its idea of the church. But we are not particularly interested in this either, although some of

the things which are characteristic of revivals in the narrower sense of the word are characteristic also of revival preaching.

When I speak of "revival" I am using the word in a much more limited sense than that, but in the sense in which it is used time and time again in church circles today. Perhaps it is best for us to take our definition of "revival" from one who himself is an ardent proponent of revival (or was until the Lord took him this life), Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In his book, *Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey* he defines "revival" in these terms: "Revival is an experience in the life of the church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work." The key word in that definition is the word "unusual." At unexpected times and in unexpected ways, the Holy Spirit enters the church to bring about unusual events in the lives of men which bring about drastic change in the lives of men and churches.

There have been many such revivals since the time of the Protestant Reformation. Some of the more important ones were the Welsh Revivals of 1859 and 1904; the Irish Revival of 1859; the revivals of 18th century England, under the leadership of John Wesley and his brother Charles, the great hymn-writer, as well as George Whitefield, who also came to America to promote revivals. In America, perhaps the best-known revival is the Great Awakening in New England in the time of Jonathan Edwards in 1734-1735 and again in 1740. And Jonathan Edwards, himself a minister at that time in the church of Northampton, Massachusetts, was a leading figure in the revival movement. George Whitefield came from England to join Edwards in this work. There were other such revivals in the eastern part of America, as in the early 1800s under the preaching of Charles Finney.

When Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines revivals in the terms that he uses in his book, these are the revivals to which he specifically refers and these are the revivals which he says are the last hope of the church in our day. If the Lord is not pleased to send revivals, the end has come for the church. So the question is: What characterizes all these revivals? What do they have in common? What are the unusual aspects of the work which the Holy Spirit performs which makes these revivals different from the Spirit's ordinary and common work?

The distinctive features of such revivals are, first of all, that they come especially at a time when a church is characterized by the two great evils of worldly-mindedness and dead formalism in her life, confession, and worship. The church has been conformed to the world and, as a result, has died spiritually. It is at such a time, if revival is to come, that it comes as an unusual working of the Spirit.

Such revival is always characterized by and has its beginning in a work of the Spirit which brings about, in the people upon whom the Spirit falls, a deep and profound, an extraordinarily disturbing consciousness of sin. It is an effusion of the Spirit, an outpouring of the Spirit in unusual measure, an outpouring of the Spirit in great abundance, so to speak, which brings about and manifests itself in a profound and even unnerving and frighteningly disturbing conviction of sin.

But this conviction of sin takes on the outward form of very strange and very peculiar happenings. If you read the literature on revival, the books on the Welsh revival or the Great

Awakenings which describe the New England revivals, they are all filled with the dominant theme that the conviction of sin brought about by the Holy Spirit manifests itself in extraordinary and unusual forms. It comes about in such a way that those who are brought under the conviction of sin are so completely under the control of forces beyond their power that they cry out and groan and shout. They fall down in fits of despair. They are, in their awful agonies of soul, seized by fierce tremors of the body, shaking of the limbs, strange contortions, so that they roll about on the floor, sometimes in agony. They fall into what amounts almost to a catatonic state in which they are immobile and rigid, and during which time they see visions of the flames of hell and of demons which come seeking their souls – all of which are intended to portray to them in graphic and unusual ways the horror of sins and the fury of God against the formalism and worldliness which characterized their life. All revivals, without exception, were accompanied by phenomena of this sort. Sometimes within a congregation, as the minister was preaching, the disturbances, the groanings, the shouting, the pleading, the crying became so loud and so boisterous that it became impossible for the minister to go on. He had to quit his preaching and dismiss the services.

In the second place, that kind of an unusual and extraordinary working of the Spirit bringing about conviction of sin was soon followed in many people, if not most, by experiences of total rapturous joy. When the conviction of sin was removed and the Spirit worked in the hearts of those under the conviction of sin, the rapture of their salvation was indefinable and indescribable. They were cast into ecstasies of joy and were carried on the wings of rapture into the very presence of God Himself, where they were given the privilege of seeing visions and receiving revelations which they could scarcely describe. They experienced a closeness and fellowship with God which tore at the heart. I have, for example, a description of one such ecstatic experience which, as a matter of fact, characterized the leader of the Welsh revival in 1904.

One Friday night last spring, when praying by my bedside before retiring, I was taken up to a great expanse without time and space. It was communion with God. Before this I had a far off God. I was frightened that night but never since. So great was my shivering that I rocked the bed. And my brother, being awakened, took hold of me thinking I was ill. After that experience, I was awakened every night a little after one o'clock. This was most strange for, through the years, I slept like a rock and no disturbance in my room would awaken me. From that hour, I was taken up into the divine fellowship for about four hours. What it was, I cannot tell you except that it was divine. About five o'clock I was again allowed to sleep on till about nine. At this time I was again taken up into the same experience in the early hours of the morning, until about twelve or one o'clock. This went on for about three months (*The Welsh Revival of 1904*, Evans, Evangelical Press of Wales, 1969).

This is by no means the most unusual of experiences, literally hundreds and hundreds of which are reported in the literature on revival. And this was, indeed, the state to which revivals were intended to lead one. The prayers that ascend today from the hearts and minds of so many have this as the goal: that an experience such as this would become the experience of every believer.

One leader of the Welsh revival received a vision of "unprecedented excitement" which is described as follows: "His spiritual perception had been considerably developed and he could not fail to draw inspiration and motivation from those supernatural, extrabiblical [notice the

terminology, HH] revelations. There was no question in my mind as to their authenticity or authority" (Evans, 191). The result of that kind of an experience is one in which one withdraws, as it were, into direct union and fellowship with God and which gives to one a rapturous joy and an other-worldly peace and tranquility of heart.

This experience brings one into such close union with God and experience of fellowship with Him that it defies human description. It is a wholly emotional and completely ethereal absorption into mystical union with God Himself and it has resulted in a kind of revival in the church which manifested itself in a new zeal for the cause of God and a new zeal for missions and for the conversion of souls, and has brought the church to a state of spiritual strength such as she had not known in all of her existence.

This is what is meant by revival. When you hear prayers for revival, when you hear people speak of the need of revival, this is what is meant. This is the *unusual* work of the Holy Spirit which characterizes revivals.

This is what revivalism is all about. I know that there have been those who have warned of the excesses of revivalism. Jonathan Edwards himself wrote a book in which he specifically condemned the excesses that were present in the New England revivals. And Samuel Miller, the old Presbyterian Calvinist, himself an ardent defender of revival, delivered an extraordinarily lengthy speech warning against its dangers. Nevertheless, this is what characterizes revivals. These are the unusual outpourings of the Spirit. Those who engage in such things have made a return to Roman Catholic mysticism.

That kind of revival is what men seek for today as the cure for the church's ills. That kind of revival is inimical to the Reformed faith and must be condemned by every believer who loves the truth of the Scriptures.

The Mysticism of Revivals

What are the Scriptural and confessional objections to revival? The answer to that question is, in the first place, that revival is characterized by mysticism.

Mysticism has an interesting history in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It first made an appearance very early in the history of the church, as early as the third century; and the great church father, Tertullian, made the mistake at the end of his life of joining a mystical movement called Montanism. But mysticism did not really come into its own until the Middle Ages, during the period when the Roman Catholic Church was ruling supreme in Europe. That is striking because the mysticism of the Middle Ages was also a reaction to worldliness and carnality in the church and to the dead, cold formalism of Roman Catholicism. The mysticism that developed in the Middle Ages, however, had a highly developed theology. I cannot go into many of the details, but it is very interesting that mysticism had as its goal what is called "union with God," a phrase which sounds not only perfectly innocuous, but also like something eminently desirable in the life of the child of God. What could be better than union with God? Mysticism spoke of this however, in such a way that union with God was attained through a series of steps which one had to go through in order to reach that high goal. Now, without going into any kind of detail

concerning these steps, the last step that was to be taken before union with God could be achieved was called by the medieval mystics "the dark night of the soul." It was as if the steps to union with God led first of all downward to the dark night of the soul, only then to spring out of the dark night into that rapturous, joyful, other-worldly union with God.

It is very striking that the Roman Catholic idea of mysticism found a certain analogy in the thinking of the Puritans. Now, I know when I say anything bad about the Puritans it is almost as if I am beating a sacred cow. And I do not want to leave the impression that the Puritans are of no value. The works which they produced, especially the early Puritans, can be read even today by any child of God with a great deal of pleasure and spiritual benefit, so much so that I would urge you to read Puritan literature. And, in fact, I can think of little devotional literature that is better to read than Puritan literature. That does not alter the fact, however, that they were wrong, desperately wrong, in their conception of Christian experience. What the medieval mystics called the "dark night of the soul" became, in Puritan thinking, "the conviction of sin" or "being under the conviction of sin."

But the mysticism of Roman Catholicism was carried directly into Protestant thinking through the revivals of John Wesley in the 18th century. It may surprise you to know that prior to his Aldersgate experience, at which time John Wesley considered himself to have been converted, he steeped himself deeply in the writings of Roman Catholic medieval mystics, read them avidly, devoured them, as *he* says, and was even instrumental in publishing a great number of these Roman Catholic works. That mysticism stayed with him all his life. Robert G. Tuttle, in a book entitled *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*, points this out very clearly. Tuttle, by the way, is himself a Methodist, an admirer of John Wesley, and is pleased and thankful for the fact that Roman Catholic mysticism became a part of Protestant thinking through the work of John Wesley.

John Wesley and the Puritans are the fathers of revivalism. In fact, so much is that so that an acknowledged authority on revivalism goes so far as to say: "The Puritans gave to the English-speaking world what may be called the classical school of Protestant belief in revival" (*The Puritan Hope*, Iain Murray, The Banner of Truth, 1971, 4).

All the trappings of mysticism are present in revivalism. The idea of "the dark night of the soul" has become known as "being under the conviction of sin"; the experiences according to which one defines genuine conversion are the experiences of the mystics; the rapturous joys that grip one and that carry one to realms unknown and into union with God are the rapturous joys of the mystics of the Middle Ages. The emphasis on visions and dreams, special, extra-biblical revelations, the guidance of the Spirit through these revelations – all these things belong to the tradition of mysticism.

It is interesting that a crucial and integral part of mysticism was also the performing of miracles – exorcism and miracles of healing. I say this because that immediately ought to bring to our minds the obvious relationship between revivalism and the charismatic movement. These two have much in common – so much in common, in fact, that those who promote revivals even go so far as to say that before a revival can come it is necessary that the church have a second outpouring of the Spirit. This is charismatic language indeed! In fact, those who promote revivals

have, in many instances, been, if not supporters, then encouragers of the charismatic movement, and unwilling to condemn it. Are you aware of the fact, for example, that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was himself a strong supporter of the charismatic movement? You can find that in several of his books. You can understand some of what he says, for example, in his sermons on Ephesians, especially *Ephesians* 4 and 5, if you are aware of his leanings toward the charismatics. There has always been the closest relationship between revivalism and the charismatic movement because both are characterized by mysticism.

One can perhaps understand the need people feel for revival. In these times of spiritual darkness and lethargy, when our own spiritual life is so cold, there is something about revivalism that brings with it a promise that is eminently attractive. By a cultivation of the inner life, by a special effusion of the Spirit, by an outpouring from above in which the Spirit enters the heart in unusual and powerful ways, one is transported into the very presence of God Himself, there to be united with God in this totally otherworldly, rapturous, emotional joy which transcends anything that can be found in this world. There is a siren song in that. There is a particularly sensuous appeal of Satan in that sort of thing. And the colder one's spiritual life becomes, the more that sort of a thing seems to be desirable.

Nevertheless, mysticism is contrary to the Scriptures and the Reformed faith. It is contrary to the Reformed faith because mysticism, in all its forms, places all the emphasis on the human emotions. It is a theology of emotions, a theology of feeling. Perhaps that is exactly its great appeal in our day. We live in an age in which feeling is everything. Feeling is the end—all and be—all of life. And when this siren song of rapturous, emotional joy of union with God comes dinning in our ears at times when our lives seem barren and cold, it seems as if the emotional high of mysticism is eminently desirable. But it is a siren song that leads to destruction.

Mysticism has little regard for doctrine. With its emphasis on feelings and emotions, it makes light of the knowledge of the truth. In this respect it also stands at odds with the Reformed faith. The Reformed faith has always emphasized the importance of knowledge as an essential part of faith. It takes seriously the warning in Hosea – "My people perish for lack of *knowledge*." The Reformed faith believes in the importance of doctrinal soundness, of confession of faith in harmony with the Scriptures. Revivalism shows little interest in doctrine; it is much more concerned about emotions.

This manifests itself in two ways. It manifests itself first of all in a carelessness or indifference toward doctrine, even to the point where it considers doctrine a detriment to true spiritual life. Consider, for example, this quote which is taken from the book of Ian R.K. Paisley. He writes about someone involved in a revival who was asked concerning whether or not he was a Calvinist. This is his answer: "I would not wish to be more or less a Calvinist than our Lord and His apostles. But I do not care to talk on mere points of doctrine. I would rather speak of the experience of salvation in the soul" (*The '59 Revival*, Valiant Press, London).

Secondly, this influence of mysticism on revivalism often results in crass and false doctrine. This can be illustrated from *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (Zondervan Publishing, 1989). Charles Finney was a revivalist of the 19th century who worked in the Northeastern part of the United States. In these *Memoirs* he tells us of how he repudiated all the fundamental doctrines of

Calvinism, including the vicarious nature of the atonement of Jesus Christ, in the interests of preaching revival. He writes:

But my studies, so far as he was concerned as my teacher, were little else than controversy. He held to the Presbyterian doctrine of original sin, or that the human *constitution* was morally depraved. He held also, that men were utterly unable to comply with the terms of the Gospel, to repent, to believe, or to do anything that God required them to do. That while they were free to all evil, in the sense of being able to commit any amount of sin, yet they were not free in regard to all that was good. That God had condemned men for their sinful *nature*; and for this, as well as for their transgressions, they deserved eternal death, and were under condemnation. He held also that the influences of the Spirit of God on the minds of men were *physical*. acting directly upon the substance of the soul. That men were passive in regeneration; and in short he held all those doctrines that logically flow from the fact of a nature *sinful in itself*. These doctrines I could not receive. I could not receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will or any of their kindred doctrines (48).

Throughout the book Finney consistently repudiates and even mocks Calvinism and all it stands for. He speaks openly of free will and of universal atonement, and even embraces the Arminian doctrine of perfectionism – that the converted man can free himself from all known sins. Interestingly enough, he even explains that he adopted what is today known as "the altar call" (which he called "summoning sinners to the anxious seat") because he believed that this method would be a solution to the constant backsliding of those who earlier had claimed to be converted. Revivalism substitutes emotions for sound doctrine. Although this cannot be said of all revivalists, notably of such men as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, nevertheless for the most part revivalism at best is disinterested in and careless of doctrine; at worst, it is an enemy of the truth.

Faith, as our Heidelberg Catechism says, is, though also confidence in Christ, a certain knowledge whereby I hold for true all that God has revealed in His Word. That is the amazing wonder of the Scriptures. When I appropriate the Scriptures and lay hold on their truth and receive as true all that they teach, I lay hold on Christ. Not by some emotional high, not by reducing religion to some kind of a spiritual shot of adrenaline, but by laying hold on the truth of the Scriptures. And in that way I lay hold on Christ and on God and live in fellowship with Him. Faith, the faith that brings assurance, true assurance, an assurance not built on the shifting sands of emotional experiences which are here today and gone tomorrow, but a faith which is solid as a rock, a faith which withstands the onslaughts of Satan, a faith which says with Job, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," a faith which is the calm, quiet confidence of victory over all our enemies, over the devil and his hosts and even our own flesh, the faith which is the victory that overcomes the world – *that* faith is knowledge.

A Wrong View of Conversion

All of that brings us to another objection which a Reformed man brings against revivals: the theory of conversion which is inherent in revivalism and which is specifically taught by those who still promote revivals today.

Once again I have to go back to the Puritans, specifically the later Puritans, the Puritans at the time of the Marrow controversy in the early part of the 18th century, including the so-called Marrow men: Thomas Boston, the Erskine brothers, and others. They emphasized that when the law was preached in the church then the Holy Spirit could make the law and the preaching of the law instrumental in bringing people under the conviction of sin. Read, for example, the diary of Robert M'Cheyne, an old Puritan divine of this school, and you will find a diary that is filled with this sort of thing. Under the preaching of the law, men came under the conviction of sin. That conviction of sin manifested itself in all of these strange phenomena which we described. Sometimes this happened to a greater degree than others, but all agree that law-preaching manifested itself especially in such terrible fears of hell and of damnation which so gripped the soul of a man that he was overcome by them. He saw that his condition was hopeless; he understood that the only way of escape was by a power greater than himself. This was how the Spirit worked, first of all, through the preaching of the law.

The wrong of this was that this conviction of sin was apart from the work of regeneration. It was what the Puritans called "preparatory grace." It was what sometimes was called the "work of the Spirit in His prompting," a phrase that carried with it the idea that the sinner was prompted to seek Christ. Or, it created a man who was sometimes called "a seeker" – not regenerated, not converted, not saved, not a child of God, but one who possessed that work of the Holy Spirit which, as a preparatory grace, enabled him to "seek" for salvation. To that man had to be directed the preaching of the gospel which brought the urgency of taking Christ, taking hold of Christ, or, as the Puritans were wont to express it, "closing with Christ." But whether one under the conviction of sin would actually "close with Christ" was not certain. He could feel deep sorrow for sin. He could experience the torments of a guilty conscience. He could long for deliverance and salvation. But the outcome remained uncertain and the possibility existed that he could still go to hell.

It was in this context that the Puritans developed their ideas concerning the free offer of the gospel. One must preach the gospel and preach Christ's love for all, urging men to "close with Christ." This could only be done on the basis of the fact that in some sense Christ, as Thomas Boston put it, was dead for all. Boston did not want to say that Christ died for all. He insisted only that Christ was dead for all. But in this way Christ's death could serve as a "warrant" to all who heard the gospel to close with Christ. None could say: I will not close with Christ because He did not die for me. Salvation was offered freely.

The preaching of the gospel, therefore, which urged one to take Christ into his life, was preaching that made salvation dependent upon the individual, who was put in this state of preparatory grace, whether or not at that crucial point in his life he would indeed take Christ into his heart. What he did would result in his salvation or in his damnation. Such a one, in other words, who had these prompting of the Spirit, who was prepared – the Puritans, as you know, developed a theory of "preparationism" – by the Spirit, and put in a spiritual frame of mind either to accept Christ or reject Him, is now left with a decision resting in his hands.

That is their view of conversion. But that view is fundamentally Arminian. It places the salvation of the sinner in the hands of the sinner himself. It places the salvation of the sinner in the choice

or the free will of man, although it is a will prepared by the Spirit. It makes salvation less than sovereign and is, therefore, opposed to the Reformed faith.

This error which arose 150 years after Dordt is already condemned in the Canons of Dordt: "We condemn the errors of those who teach that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God" (*Canons* III, IV, B, Art. 3). That, says our Canons, is the error of Arminianism which puts salvation in the hands of man.

Revivalism adopts this same view of conversion and thus holds to the false doctrine that salvation rests in man's hands. I know that the Puritans would dispute this because they want to appear as proponents of sovereign grace. Nevertheless, they teach that there is a common grace worked by the Spirit in the hearts of all, which grace puts all in a spiritual position to accept or reject Christ. Christ is presented through preaching as eminently desirable, as the one who can deliver sinners. And sinners, on their part, though thirsting for deliverance, though seeing the riches of Christ, though understanding that in Him alone is escape from sin, though even praying to be regenerated, may nevertheless still be lost.

This brings us to the theory of conversion promoted by revivalism in a more specific way. Conversion is, in revivalism, something that is accompanied by some kind of unusual and extraordinary experience. This element has always characterized mysticism, either in medieval Roman Catholic thought, in John Wesley's work, in Puritan theology, or in revivalistic thinking today. It so happened, when revivals took place, that those who supposedly came to this pinnacle of rapturous joy when the soul was united to God had to undergo a very rigorous examination on the part of the ministers and the elders of the church to determine whether such a conversion was indeed genuine. And the criterion which was used to determine the genuineness of such a conversion was the genuineness of the experience through which one passed. All of this presupposed not only that a man could give a rational and intelligible account of his conversion, but also that it was within the power of the minister and the elders of the church to evaluate that conversion, to pass judgment upon it, and to determine whether or not it was indeed genuine. They believed that the devil was lurking about, especially at times of revival, attempting to imitate the work of the Holy Spirit and giving people wrong experiences, experiences that arose out of delusion. The devil would bring people to a false and carnal security in which they had no faith in Christ at all, but an imitation, a counterfeit faith that would only lead them more rapidly to hell. The ministers and elders, especially in the Great Awakening during the time of Jonathan Edwards, would, surprisingly enough, claim to be able to tell with almost one-hundred percent accuracy, whether the conversion of a particular individual was indeed genuine or whether it was devil-inspired. So many were the conversions and so busy were the ministers and elders that sometimes these examinations went on, during periods of revival, day and night. There was no time for preaching. There was no time for pastoral work. There was no time for sermon preparation, because of the vast amounts of time which were consumed examining the character of conversions.

Further, such conversions, sudden and profound, not only became the test of whether one was a genuine Christian, but also served as the ground of personal assurance of salvation. Indeed, without such extraordinary experiences, assurance was impossible.

All of this is inimical to the Reformed faith. No man who is genuinely Reformed can teach that kind of doctrine of conversion. The Reformed doctrine of conversion is something quite different.

Conversion in Reformed thought, and this is explicitly stated in our *Heidelberg Catechism* in Lord's Day 33, is not an unusual, once-for-all extraordinary, inexplicable experience through which one passes from the "dark night of the soul" to rapturous union with God. But conversion is a daily characteristic of a believing, regenerated child of God. Conversion ought to take place and does take place every day of his life. As long as the believing child of God lives here in this world, he is a believer who does battle with sin, not only in the world about him, but in his own flesh. He is not yet perfect. He is not yet brought into the everlasting joy that shall be the inheritance of the people of God in glory. Here he is in the church militant. Here he must do battle. Here he carries with him the body of his death.

Conversion is, as Lord's Day 33 expresses it, "a daily killing of the old man." That is, conversion is a deep, daily sorrow for sin. Yet it is also a quickening of the new man. It is a daily joy that one finds at the foot of the cross when one brings the burden of his sins to Calvary. A daily conversion, a daily battle, a daily fleeing from sin, a daily hastening to the cross with an increasingly urgent longing to leave this life (which is nothing but a continual death) in order to be at last in the everlasting perfection of Heaven – that is conversion.

Revivalism scorns this. It mocks the humble sinner, the humble child of God who fights daily against the sins of his flesh. It has no time or patience for the daily battle which the believer fights. It looks for the spectacular. Like Elijah of old it has never learned that God is not in the Earthquake, in the fire, or in the strong wind; but only in the still, small voice. Revivalism has not learned what Zechariah had to learn: "Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, saith Jehovah of Hosts. Who hath despised the day of little things?" Looking for the spectacular, for the exciting, for the unusual, looking for that which can serve as some kind of ground for assurance, they find nothing but sinking sand, shaky ground on which to build one's faith and hope and joy. Nevertheless, conversion is in the daily, bitter, and fierce battle against sin; it is carried on in the hearts and lives of the elect children of the covenant; it is characteristic of the faithful child of God all his life long. This is the work of conversion and this is the true work of the Spirit.

We must not mock this. We must not turn away from this as if it is a kind of carnal security, a self-deception, an easy religion. It is not. It is the hard way. It is the way of daily struggle. It is the way of groanings and tears. It is the way of fleeing to the cross. It is the way of casting one's self down in shame at the foot of Calvary. But it is the way of the joy of salvation in the blood of Christ. And that Christ is the Christ that is appropriated by faith.

A Wrong View of the Covenant

Another error which is made by those who press for revivalism is, I am increasingly convinced, an error that has to do with the doctrine of God's everlasting covenant of grace. I cannot go into this in detail. I only want to point out, very briefly, in the first place, that the Reformed doctrine of God's covenant teaches that the essence of the covenant is that God establishes a bond of friendship and fellowship with His people through Christ.

In the second place, however, God establishes His covenant in the line of believers and their seed. Those who teach revivals and plead for revivals have quite a different view. They believe, as you well know, that the church is composed for the most part of unconverted people. This is the explanation for the spiritual lethargy, the carnal-mindedness, the formalism in the church. The church is composed, for the most part, of unconverted people who have to have the law preached to them if perchance the Spirit would bring them under the conviction of sin. And the gospel, when those hearers of it come under the conviction of sin, presents Christ Who pleads with them to "close with Him." The Reformed faith teaches that the church is not composed predominantly of unconverted people. The Reformed faith teaches, as Calvin did, that on this Earth the church always has hypocrites in her midst, tares among the wheat; nevertheless the church is composed of believers and their spiritual seed. It is not composed of unbelievers and unconverted people for the most part. The church is made up of those who believe in Christ whose children are also children of the covenant. In the line of generations the elect children of the covenant are also, as a general rule, regenerated and brought to conversion in earliest infancy. The children of the church are covenant children, themselves already regenerated. In their lives also conversion is a daily turning from sin and turning to God in humble repentance.

That has always been the Reformed view since the time of Calvin, and it is the Reformed view today. But it stands opposed to the views of conversion which are promoted by revivalism.

Conclusion

Do we pray for revival? No. May we pray for revival? No. Does this mean that we are not troubled about the condition of the church? We ought to be and we are. And this precisely means that the Reformed church is and always ought to be a reforming church.

But we must not confuse church reformation with revivalism. The two are completely different. Church reformation is the calling of all the people of God always. But church reformation begins with the child of God on his knees confessing his sins. There is not anything more important in church reformation than this. If it does not start with the Christian daily confessing his sins, there will not be church reformation.

In confessing his sin and hastening to the cross one has the beginnings of true church reformation. On our knees we seek the welfare of Zion. On our knees we seek the peace of Jerusalem. We do not pray for revival, unusual outpourings of the Spirit, but we pray for the courage and the grace of the Holy Spirit to be steadfast in the battle; not to waver, not to compromise, not to be overcome with fear, but to stand fast in the cause of the truth.

And if it comes to that, as it has in the church of Christ many times, one must reform the church by leaving a church that will have nothing any longer of the truth of the gospel. That is

reformation. That is what we seek. That is our calling. May God grant that to us, may God grant that mighty work of the Spirit which brings the sinner to his knees but which makes him strong and courageous in the assurance of the cross in the battle in the church here below.

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