**10 Ways to Revive a Dying Church**

by [Theresa Cho](http://sojo.net/biography/theresa-cho) 07-12-2011 | 7:00pm

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*"And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God."* ([Ephesians 3: 17-19](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=177504951))

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You don't need a ton of proof to know that more and more churches are struggling to survive. It seems churches that are in this predicament have one of two options: revive or die. There are a lot of books, seminars, and workshops given on how to go about reviving a church. However, there is not one cookie cutter, full-proof, and effective strategy in reviving a church. Having said that, it doesn't mean that it is impossible. There are many examples of struggling churches that have successfully revived the congregation, increased the health of the church, and expanded their ministry.

Now, before you go and buy another book, or attend another conference, or start selling off your pews for coffee tables and chairs, let me make a few suggestions. These suggestions are for the people in the church because you are the church. Pastors come and go, but it is the congregants, parishioners, and members that make up the identity, flavor, and, ultimately, affect the future direction of a congregation.

**1. Who are you?** Figure out who you are as a congregation. As Rick Warren once said, "You will attract who you are, not who you want." There is some truth to this and that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Visitors can tell if a church is not being authentic to who they really are. When I first started at my church, my job description focused heavily on attracting the growing population of young Chinese-American families in the neighborhood. The problem was that the make-up of the church was the exact opposite. Furthermore, the suggestions being made to attract such folk were evidence that this wasn't being authentic to who we were. One thought was that by hiring me, an Asian-American woman, these families would feel more comfortable and accepted at church. It wasn't until someone pointed out that I was Korean and not Chinese that there was willingness to abandon this direction and start all over.

**2. Pick the right leader**: Knowing who you are as a church and what the current needs of the [congregation](http://blog.sojo.net/tag/congregations/page/2/) are is vital to searching and choosing the right leader and pastor. If your church is in conflict, it is wise to choose someone who has skills in conflict management. If you are at a loss for future direction, it is important to choose someone who can guide you in that process. If you are a church that is grieving, it is wise to choose a pastor who can provide stability. I have witnessed many churches who choose a leader based on what they want and not on what they need -- maybe the new pastor reminded the parishioners of the previous, most-beloved pastor in physique and looks, but lacked the same temperament and leadership style, or a small church of 50 relishing in their heyday of 500 choosing a pastor who is rooted in all the high church rituals.

**3. Follow the leader:** A good leader needs a good follower. In fact, it doesn't matter how good the leader is if there are no followers. There may be times when parishioners are uncomfortable with some of the new changes in worship, ministry, or vision, but at some point there needs to be a step of faith, trust, and willingness to allow the pastor and the leadership of the church to actually *lead* the church in a future direction. If I think back on my eight years at my church and all the changes that have happened, we wouldn't be where we are today without some faithful, trusting, and committed followers who trusted my suggestions and decisions even when they didn't fully comprehend what was going on. However, without them, we wouldn't have 85 children in a church size of 120.

**4. Everything is outreach**: Five years ago, my church developed a strategy on how we would engage in outreach and evangelism in our neighborhood and community. What we concluded was that everything we do is about reaching out to our community in the hopes to make a connection with them. This meant being intentional about providing a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere for members and visitors to feel at home within the church and out in the [community](http://blog.sojo.net/tag/community/). This perspective changed the way we worshiped, how we gathered, and planned programs and activities. It even changed the way we made coffee. No one wants to drink bad, watered-down coffee. The simplest changes can have the greatest impact on how those in the community feel welcomed in your church. If you recite prayers or creeds in your service, consider printing the words in the bulletin and reading it rather than reciting them from memory so that those who don't know them won't feel excluded. If your coffee and fellowship hour is located in a room far off, consider relocating to a more accessible and inviting area. We used to hold our coffee and fellowship hour in a room located in the back of the sanctuary. We realized that for newcomers the location could be intimidating and therefore not many stayed after worship to mingle. We moved it near the entrance of the church so that as people walked out, they could easily grab something to eat and meet someone new.

**5. Keeping a pulse on the congregation**: Every member should be engaged in participation of some kind when it comes to carrying out the mission of the church. There should be a variety of entry points for people to participate in, ranging from easier ones like signing up to pass out the worship bulletin on a Sunday morning to more committed involvement like running the weekly food pantry program. This means that leaders of the church need to keep their pulse on the congregation. What are the interests, needs, desires, and challenges? Sometimes, it takes creative thinking on how to get people involved. In a casual conversation after worship, a member told me that she wished there was a Sunday School for preschoolers. The next month, we ran a pilot program with the assurance that the parents would volunteer to teach. It was a big hit.

**6. Prepare for the future**: Every structure should creatively facilitate and reiterate outreach. Effective outreach and evangelism doesn't happen unless the structure of the church supports outreach efforts. We changed not only the way our elders and deacons functioned, but even how they met. Less time is spent on doing business and more time is spent on actual dreaming, planning, and implementing outreach efforts. Outreach efforts should prepare the way for the direction of the church. For example, if you want to attract more families, consider providing a nursery and paying for childcare providers. Don't wait to see if there is a need. Instead, anticipate what might make visiting families feel more welcomed.

**7. Partner up:** Everything you do should be interconnected and communicated. Effective ministry doesn't happen in isolation, but in collaboration. Our elders and deacons are divided into four different teams that focus on stewardship, mission, fellowship, and worship. All these teams collaborate with each other and share ideas with each other. For example, the missions team is planning an event to bring awareness to our weekly food pantry. One of the ideas is to encourage families to live on a food stamped budget for one week. The stewardship team is looking at ways to encourage folks to donate what they would have spent on groceries that week towards the program. The fellowship team is planning on hosting a potluck that features budget friendly recipes for families to use during that week. And the worship team is looking at incorporating [interactive prayer stations](http://en.wordpress.com/tag/interactive-prayer-stations/) around the theme of hunger.

Collaboration also needs to happen outside your church. Recently, a planning team I was on gathered [22 Presbyterian churches in San Francisco](http://theresaecho.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/how-to-shape-conversations-in-the-21st-century-part-ii/) to brainstorm ways that we can partner with one another. Many of the churches are struggling and have different challenges. Questions we pondered were 1) What is our collective calling that Christ is calling us to? 2) How do we live into that call? 3) How do we support each other and work together so that we are living out Christ's call?

**8. Be thou my vision**: Everything done should be visibly clear and understood by the entire congregation. When asking a random church member, they should be able to say in a few short sentences what the mission of the church is, and it should be visibly obvious and evident. For a small congregation like mine, it is clear that we focus a lot of our efforts on the kids, the music, and our weekly food pantry program. When people tithe, they know what and why they are contributing.

A vision of the church should be something that the church can live into. It doesn't necessarily have to be all figured out, but it must be flexible enough so that how it is lived out can adapt and change with the changing needs of the community. When my church developed a strategy plan on how we were to live out the vision of the church, the strategy wasn't about *what* we were going to do, but *how* we were going to go about doing things. I can sum up the strategy in three words: welcome, nurture, and commit. Everything we do must first be from the [perspective of hospitality](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9907&article=990741g), then how we nurture spiritual growth, and then our willingness to commit.

**9. Move from revival to relevance**: Having suggested 1 to 8, here is the kicker. As a church, it isn't about [reviving or redeveloping a dying or struggling church](http://blog.sojo.net/2011/06/13/10-problems-of-a-dying-church-and-how-to-fix-them/). It's about being relevant in one's community -- visibly living out Christ's presence in your neighborhood. Moving from the mindset of revival to relevance is vital to determining the future of the church. Revival can put the congregation's focus inward to think about what to do to increase membership, increase tithes, and build the church back up to where it used to be. Relevance is about figuring out the current identity and gifts of the church now and matching that with the needs of the community. Relevance is not about survival, but about recognizing no matter the size of your congregation, Christ is calling you to use your gifts in a particular way for a particular reason. Sometimes, this does lead to a revival of the church in energy, in numbers, and in significance. Sometimes, it means recognizing that the ministry of the church exists beyond the actual existence of your congregation. Maybe it is time to bless other ministries or new church developments with your church building or financial assets. Maybe it is time for the legacy of your church to live on through the ministry of another. Being relevant causes us to not be selfish about what we want, but to also look at what Christ is calling us to do in ways we never could imagine possible.

**10. Pray!** Lastly, be in prayer. It may seem obvious, but in order to discern the direction where Christ is calling, a faith community needs to be in constant prayer for guidance, strength, and faith.

It isn't easy being a part of a church that is struggling for whatever reason, but there are unique gifts that a struggling church can offer. It just takes a willingness to step out into the unknown, a commitment to change, and an acceptance to give up the things that may be holding your congregation back from doing something only God knows

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| **What Is a Revival?** **by C. H. SpurgeonFrom the December 1866 *Sword and Trowel*** | Spurgeon |

THE word "revival" is as familiar in our mouths as a household word. We are constantly speaking about and praying for a "revival;" would it not be as well to know what we mean by it? Of the Samaritans our Lord said, "Ye worship ye know not what," let him not have to say to us, "Ye know not what ye ask." The word "revive" wears its meaning upon its forehead; it is from the Latin, and may be interpreted thus—to live again, to receive again a life which has almost expired; to rekindle into a flame the vital spark which was nearly extinguished.When a person has been dragged out of a pond nearly drowned, the bystanders are afraid that he is dead, and are anxious to ascertain if life still lingers. The proper means are used to restore animation; the body is rubbed, stimulants are administered, and if by God's providence life still tarries in the poor clay, the rescued man opens his eyes, sits up, and speaks, and those around him rejoice that he has *revived.* A young girl is in a fainting fit, but after a while she returns to consciousness, and we say, "she revives." The flickering lamp of life in dying men suddenly flames up with unusual brightness at intervals, and those who are watching around the sick bed say of the patient, "he revives."In these days, when the dead are not miraculously restored, we do not expect to see the revival of a person who is totally dead, and we could not speak of the *re*-vival of a thing which never lived before. It is clear that the, term "revival" can only be applied to a living soul, or to that which once lived. To be revived is a blessing which can only be enjoyed by those who have some degree of life. Those who have no spiritual life are not, and cannot be, in the strictest sense of the term, the subjects of a revival. Many blessings may come to the unconverted in consequence of a revival among Christians, but the revival itself has to do only with those who already possess spiritual life. There must be vitality in some degree before there can be a quickening of vitality, or, in other words, a revival.*A true revival is to be looked for in the church of God.* Only in the river of gracious life can the pearl of revival be found. It has been said that a revival must begin with God's people; this is very true, but it is not all the truth, for the revival itself must end as well as begin there. The results of the revival will extend to the outside world, but the revival, strictly speaking, must be within the circle of life, and must therefore essentially be enjoyed by the possessors of vital godliness, and by them only. Is not this quite a different view of revival from that; which is common in society; but is it not manifestly the correct one?It is a sorrowful fact that many who are spiritually alive greatly need reviving. It is sorrowful because it is a proof of the existence of much spiritual evil. A man in sound health with every part of his body in a vigorous condition does not need reviving. He requires daily sustenance, but reviving would be quite out of place. If he has not yet attained maturity growth will be most desirable, but a hale hearty young man wants no reviving, it would be thrown away upon him. Who thinks of reviving the noonday sun, the ocean at its flood, or the year at its prime? The tree planted by the rivers of water loaded with fruit needs not excite our anxiety for its revival, for its fruitfulness and beauty charm every one. Such should be the constant condition of the sons of God. Feeding and lying down in green pastures and led by the still waters they ought not always to be crying, "my leanness, my leanness, woe unto me." Sustained by gracious promises and enriched out of the fullness which God has treasured up in his dear Son, their souls should prosper and be in health, and their piety ought to need no reviving. They should aspire to a higher blessing, a richer mercy, than a mere revival. They have the nether springs already; they should earnestly cover the upper springs. They should be asking for growth in grace, for increase of strength, for greater success; they should have out-climbed and out-soared the period in which they need to be constantly crying, "Wilt thou not revive us again?" For a church to be constantly needing revival is the indication of much sin, for if it were sound before the Lord it would remain in the condition into which a revival would uplift its members. A church should be a camp of soldiers, not an hospital of invalids. But there is exceedingly much difference between what ought be and what is, and consequently many of God's people are in so sad a state that the very fittest prayer for them is for revival. Some Christians are, spiritually, but barely alive. When a man has been let down into a vat or into a well full of bad air, yea do not wonder when he is drawn up again that he is half-dead, and urgently requires to be revived. Some Christians—to their shame be it spoken!—descend into such worldly company, not upon such unhallowed principles, and become so carnal, that when they are drawn up by God's grace from their backsliding position they want reviving, and even need that their spiritual breath should as it were be breathed into their nostrils afresh by God's Spirit.When a man starves himself, continuing for a long time without food, when he is day after day without a morsel of bread between his lips, we do not marvel that the surgeon, finding him in extremities, says, "This man has weakened his system, he is too low, and wants reviving." Of course he does, for he has brought himself by low diet into a state of weakness. Are there not hundreds of Christians—shame that it should be so!—who live day after day without feeding upon Bible truth? shall it be added without real spiritual communion with God? they do not even attend the week-night services, and they are indifferent hearers on the Lord's day. Is it remarkable that they want reviving? Is not the fact that they do so greatly need it most dishonorable to themselves and distressing to their truly spiritual brethren?There is, a condition of mind which is even more sad than either of the two above mentioned; it is a thorough, gradual, but certain decline of all the spiritual powers. Look at that consumptive man whose lungs are decaying, and in whom the vital energy is ebbing; it is painful to see the faintness which suffuses him after exertion, and the general languor which overspreads his weakened frame. Far more sad to the spiritual eye is the spectacle presented by spiritual consumptives who in some quarters meet us on all hands. The eye of faith is dim and overcast, and seldom flashes with holy joy; the spiritual countenance is hollow and sunken with doubts and fears; the tongue of praise is partially paralyzed, and has little to say for Jesus; the spiritual frame is lethargic, and its movements are far from vigorous; the man is not anxious to be doing anything for Christ; a horrible numbness, a dreadful insensibility has come over him; he is in soul like a sluggard in the dog-days, who finds it hard labor to lie in bed and brush away the flies from his face. If these spiritual consumptives hate sin they do it so weakly that one might fear that they loved it still. If they love Jesus, it is so coldly that it is a point of question whether they love at all. If they sing Jehovah's praises it is very sadly, as if hallelujahs were dirges. If they mourn for sin it is only with half-broken hearts, and their grief is shallow and unpractical. If they hear the Word of God they are never stirred by it; enthusiasm is an unknown luxury. If they come across a precious truth they perceive nothing particular in it, any more than the cock in the fable, in the jewel which he found in the farmyard. They throw themselves back upon the enchanted couch of sloth, and while they are covered with rags they dream of riches and great increase of goods. It is a sad, sad thing when Christians fall into this state; then indeed they need reviving, and they must have it, for "the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint." Every lover of souls should intercede for declining professors that the visitations of God may restore them; that the Sun of righteousness may arise upon them with healing beneath his wings.When revival comes to a people who are in the state thus briefly described, it simply brings them to the condition in which they ought always to have been; it quickens them, gives them new life, stirs the coals of the expiring fire, and puts heavenly breath into the languid lungs. The sickly soul which before was insensible, weak, and sorrowful, grows earnest, vigorous, and happy in the Lord. This is the immediate fruit of revival, and it becomes all of us who are believers to seek this blessing for backsliders, and for ourselves if we are declining in grace.If revival is confined to living men we may further notice that *it must result from the proclamation and the receiving of living truth.* We speak of "vital godliness," and vital godliness must subsist upon vital truth. Vital godliness is not revived in Christians by mere excitement, by crowded meetings, by the stamping of the foot, or the knocking of the pulpit cushion, or the delirious bawlings of ignorant zeal; these are the stock in trade of revivals among dead souls, but to revive living saints other means are needed. Intense excitement may produce a revival of the animal, but how can it operate upon the spiritual, for the spiritual demands other food than that which stews in the fleshpots of mere carnal enthusiasm. The Holy Ghost must come into the living heart through living truth, and so bring nutriment and stimulant to the pining spirit, for so only can it be revived. This, then, leads us to the conclusion that if we are to obtain a revival we must go directly to the Holy Ghost for it, and not resort to the machinery of the professional revival-maker. The true vital spark of heavenly flame comes from the Holy Ghost, and the priests of the Lord must beware of strange fire. There is no spiritual vitality in anything except as the Holy Spirit is all in all in the work; and if our vitality has fallen near to zero, we can only have it renewed by him who first kindled it in us. We must go to the cross and look up to the dying Savior, and expect that the Holy Spirit will renew our faith and quicken all our graces. We must feed anew by faith upon the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus, and so the Holy Ghost will recruit our strength and give us a revival. When men in India sicken in the plains, they climb the hills and breathe the more bracing air of the upper regions; we need to get nearer to God, and to bathe ourselves in heaven, and revived piety will be the sure result.When a minister obtains this revival he preaches very differently from his former manner. It is very hard work to preach when the head aches and when the body is languid, but it is a much harder task when the soul is unfeeling and lifeless. It is sad, sad work—painfully, dolorously, horribly sad, but saddest of all if we do not feel it to be sad, if we can go on preaching and remain careless concerning the truths we preach, indifferent as to whether men are saved or lost! May God deliver every minister from abiding in such a state! Can there be a more wretched object than a man who preaches in God's name truths which he does not feel, and which he is conscious have never impressed his own heart? To be a mere sign-post, pointing out the road but never moving in it, is a lot against which every tame heart may plead night and day.Should this revival be granted to deacons and elders what different men it would make of them! Lifeless, lukewarm church officers are of no more value to a church, than a crew of sailors would be to a vessel if they were all fainting and if in their berths when they were wanted to hoist the sails or lower the boats. Church officers who need reviving must be fearful dead weights upon a Christian community. It is incumbent upon all Christians to be thoroughly awake to the interests of Zion, but upon the leaders most of all. Special supplication should be made for beloved brethren in office that they may be full of the Holy Ghost.Workers in the Sunday-schools, tract distributors, and other laborers for Christ, what different people they become when grace is vigorous from what they are when their life flickers in the socket! Like sickly vegetation in a cellar, all blanched and unhealthy, are workers who have little grace; like willows by the water-courses, like grease with reeds and rushes in well-watered valleys, are the servants of God who live in his presence. It is no wonder that our Lord said, "Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth," for when the earnest Christian's heart is full of fire it is sickening to talk with lukewarm people. Have not warm-hearted lovers of Jesus felt when they have been discouraged by doubtful sluggish people, who could see a lion in the way, as if they could put on express speed and run over them? Every earnest minister has known times when he has felt cold hearts to be as intolerable as the drones in the hive are to the working bees. Careless professors are as much out of place as snow in harvest among truly living Christians. As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes are these sluggards. As well be bound to a dead body as forced into union with lifeless professors; they are a burden, a plague, and an abomination. You turn to one of these cold brethren after a graciously earnest prayer-meeting, and say with holy joy, "What a delightful meeting we have had!" "Yes," he says carelessly and deliberately, as if it were an effort to say so much, "there was a good number of people." How his frostbitten words grate on one's ear! You ask yourself, "Where has the man been? Is he not conscious that the Holy Ghost has been with us?" Does not our Lord speak of these people as being cast out of his mouth, just because he himself is altogether in earnest, and consequently, when he meets with lukewarm people he will not endure them? He says, "I would thou wert cold or hot," either utterly averse to good or in earnest concerning it. It is easy to see his meaning. If you heard an ungodly man blaspheme after an earnest meeting, you would lament it, but you would feel that from such a man it was not a thing to make you vexed, for he has only spoken after his kind, but when you meet with a child of God who is lukewarm, how can you stand that? It is sickening, and makes the inmost spirit feel the horrors of mental nausea.While a true revival in its essence belongs only to God's people, it always brings with it a blessing for the other sheep who are not yet of the fold. If you drop a stone into a lake the ring widens continually, till the farthest corner of the lake feels the influence. Let the Lord revive a believer and very soon his family, his friends, his neighbors, receive a share of the benefit; for when a Christian is revived, he prays more fervently for sinners. Longing, loving prayer for sinners, is one of the marks of a revival in the renewed heart. Since the blessing is asked for sinners, the blessing comes from him who hears the prayers of his people; and thus the world gains by revival. Soon the revived Christian speaks concerning Jesus and the gospel; he sows good seed, and God's good seed is never lost, for he has said, "It shall not return unto me void." The good seed is sown in the furrows, and in some sinners' hearts God prepares the soil, so that the seed springs up in a glorious harvest. Thus by the zealous conversation of believers another door of mercy opens to men.When Christians are revived they live more consistently, they make their homes more holy and more happy, and this leads the ungodly to envy them, and to enquire after their secret. Sinners by God's grace long to be like such cheerful happy saints; their mouths water to feast with them upon their hidden manna, and this is another blessing, for it leads men to seek the Savior. If an ungodly man steps into a congregation where all the saints are revived he does not go to sleep under the sermon. The minister will not let him do that, for the hearer perceives that the preacher feels what he is preaching, and has a right to be heard. This is a clear gain, for now the man listens with deep emotion; and above all, the Holy Spirit's power, which the preacher has received in answer to prayer comes upon the hearer's mind; he is convinced of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come, and Christians who are on the watch around him hasten to tell him of the Savior, and point him to the redeeming blood, so that though the revival, strictly speaking, is with the people of God, yet the result of it no man can limit. Brethren, let us seek a revival during the present month, that the year may close with showers of blessing, and that the new year may open with abundant benediction. Let us pledge ourselves to form a prayer-union, a sacred band of suppliants, and may God do unto us according to our faith. "Father, for thy promised blessing,Still we plead before thy throne;For the time of sweet refreshingWhich can come from thee alone. "Blessed earnests thou hast given,But in these we would not rest,Blessings still with thee are hidden,Pour them forth, and make us blest. "Wake thy siren bering children, wake them,Bid them to thy harvest go;Blessings, O our Father, make them;Round their steps let blessing flow. "Let no hamlet be forgotten,Let thy showers on all descend;That in one loud blessed anthem,Myriads may in triumph blend."

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# Revival in the Church\*

## Do We Need It?/Is It Biblical?

Far from being experts on revival, it nevertheless seems rather strange to us that modern-day revivalists proclaim that "God is going to be bringing a great revival in these last days, characterized by a new and powerful working of the Holy Spirit." Yet the Bible says that God's plan for the last days is the Great Apostasy, characterized by all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders (2 Thes. 2:3, 6-10). Is God really bringing revival, or is what we see happening now that which will culminate in the greatest delusion of all time (vs. 11)? We believe the latter, and what is commonly called "revival" today, is not at all different from the revivals of yesteryear -- a religious carnival show steeped in mysticism and rampant emotionalism.

The question that must ultimately be answered with respect to revival is this: "Is it proper (i.e., is it Biblical), to pray for and seek revival in the Church?" Is revival wrong? Is revival contrary to the Scriptures?

Although Scripture uses the word "revive" in the Old Testament, this term must be understood in the context of Israel's theocracy and before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. "Revival," therefore, had an entirely different connotation then. Revival has also been confused with various so-called "reformation movements" in the Church, but this is also a serious historical and theological mistake.

In the revival movement of today, the common practice has been for "spiritually lethargic" churches to call in a revival preacher to instill new life into the congregation, and solicit from members of the church new commitments to Jesus. Besides the fact that this "decisional" type of preaching is unbiblical, our greatest quarrel is with the experiential/emotional/mystical/fanatical approach that most modern-day revivals take.

Believers struggle to be free from the presence of sin. Some suffer defeat after defeat in their growth in sanctification. Yet the born-again Apostle Paul said, "Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). Still looking for a quick fix, however, many naively opt for such things as "revival" meetings. Throughout history, "revivals" have mixed Scriptural words and concepts with mystical experiences. These mystical experiences pretend to be direct encounters with God. In light of Jesus' discourse with Thomas Didymus (Jn. 20:24-29), any relationship between such revival meetings and true Christianity is purely conjectural.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an ardent proponent of revival himself, defined revival as "an experience in the life of the church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work." (Emphasis added.) This "unusual" work of the Spirit, claim the revivalists, manifests itself in a profound and even unnerving and frighteningly disturbing conviction of sin, so that those brought under this conviction are so completely under the control of forces beyond their power that they cry out and groan and shout. They may even be given the privilege of seeing visions and receiving revelations from angels or even from Jesus Christ Himself!

Those who encourage such things are, in effect, advocating a return to [Roman Catholic](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Cults/Catholicism/) mysticism. Revival is characterized by mysticism, and it was carried directly into Protestant thinking through the revivals of John Wesley in 18th century England. Wesley was steeped deeply in the writings of Roman Catholic medieval mystics, claimed to have read them avidly, and was instrumental in publishing a great number of these Roman Catholic works. This false mysticism stayed with Wesley all his life, and is present today in revivalism.

The emphasis on visions and dreams, special extra-Biblical revelations, and the guidance of the Spirit through these revelations all belong to the tradition of mysticism. No wonder there is such a striking resemblance between revivalism and the [modern charismatic movement](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/)! Yet, mysticism is contrary to the Scriptures -- it is a theology of emotions, a theology of feeling, with little regard for doctrine. Although this cannot be said of all revivalists (e.g., Jonathan Edwards), in general, revivalism is at best disinterested in and careless of doctrine, and at worst, is an enemy of the truth.

For example, consider the life of Charles Grandison Finney, the early-19th century revivalist in the Northeastern part of the United States, and a kindred spirit of John Wesley. (Finney doctrinalized Wesley's "second experience" teaching.) Finney's introduction of new methods for getting converts and the orchestrating of emotion and excitement in huge revival gatherings was clearly based on his heretical understanding of being born-again (12/25/95, Christian News, p. 7). Finney writes that he repudiated all the fundamental doctrines of the faith, including the vicarious nature of the atonement of Jesus Christ, in the interests of preaching revival:

"These doctrines I could not receive. I could not receive his [my teacher's] views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will, or any of their kindred doctrines" (The Memoirs of Charles Finney, p. 48).

Revivalism, then, is clearly the friend of pragmatism; i.e., using whatever method works in getting men to "make decisions for Christ," or in getting them to "weep and wail before God as evidence of a renewed commitment to godly living," regardless of the Bible's condemnation of any such method. Finney again, writing in 1834, declared that revival is "a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means. " In other words, Finney's purpose was solely to convince the human will and produce decisions and commitments (12/25/95, Christian News, p. 7). ([See note at end of this report](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/revival.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22Note).)

This pragmatic approach appears to be grounded in the revivalist's faulty view of conversion; i.e., the revivalists were, for the most part, like Finney, Arminians, preaching that salvation was dependent upon the individual, and that the preacher must prepare the individual's heart by preaching the law so as to put him in a spiritual frame of mind either to "accept" Christ or "reject" Him. The "decision" was solely up to the individual.

Revivalists typically hold to the false doctrine that salvation rests in man's hands, and that a "decision" can be encouraged if only some kind of "unusual" and/or "extraordinary" experience can be generated. In the end, the intensity of the "experience" becomes the revivalist's test, not only for the genuineness of the conversion, but for the personal assurance of salvation as well.

Even Jonathan Edwards, whose revivals seemed to bring forth an unprecedented number of genuinely new converts and/or recommitted believers, recognized (albeit after the fact) that any infiltration of the mysticism/emotionalism/fanaticism common to revivals, would be detrimental to the working of the Spirit, not a prerequisite for, nor evidence of, His working. In early-1744, shortly after the most "successful" revivals ever held, Edwards commented that the state of religion "in New England is, on many accounts, very melancholy. There is a vast alteration within two years. ... There had been from the beginning a great mixture ... of false experiences and false religion with true ... and many were led away into sad delusions. ... [When an] affection arises from the imagination, and is built upon it, as its foundation, instead of a spiritual illumination or discovery, then is the affection, however elevated, worthless and vain." (Emphasis added.)

So even under the watchful eye and guidance of a man like Jonathan Edwards, a man totally dedicated to the sound preaching of [the sovereignty of God in salvation](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Introduction/election.htm), there were many spurious conversions and much false religion, which at the time were regarded as genuine. Only later did Edwards fully recognize that the culprit was the emotionalism and false experiences, at the time thought to be the genuine fruit of sound doctrinal preaching, and thereby, not to be discouraged. If it was difficult then, it must be more so now, to detect the causes of the spurious excitement -- the loud outcries, faintings, and bodily agitations -- which then so extensively prevailed.

Do we need revival? No! We need transformation. And this transformation cannot be achieved by "weeping and wailing" before God (as the revivalists would have us do), brought on by some "unusual" outpouring of the Spirit. The transformation that the Bible talks about is the continual sanctification through the Word and the power of the Spirit (Rom. 12:1,2; Phil. 1:6; 2:12,13; 3:20,21). Transformation is the product of our prayers for the courage and the grace of the Holy Spirit; standing fast with the Word in battle; not wavering, not compromising, not being overcome with fear, but steadfast in the cause of the truth -- **TRUTH**! -- a word foreign to most of the revival movement, both past and present.

The warning given about the "great" revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries equally applies today:

All this is a formidable array of evils. ... There was too little discrimination between true and false religious feeling. There was too much encouragement given to outcries, faintings, and bodily agitations as probable evidence of the presence and power of God. There was, in many, too much reliance on impulses, visions, and the pretended power of discerning spirits. There was a great deal of censoriousness, and of sinful disregard of ecclesiastical order. The disastrous effects of these evils, the rapid spread of false religion, the dishonour and decline of true piety, the prevalence of erroneous doctrines, the division of congregations, the alienation of Christians, and the long period of subsequent deadness in the church, stand up as a solemn warning to Christians, and especially to Christian ministers in all times to come (The Trinity Review, July/August 1991).

**Note on Finney's Theology:** Charles Finney's "new measures" in revivalism left an indelible stamp upon Evangelicalism. Evangelism crusades, revival meetings, the altar call, the anxious seat or mourner's bench, the invitation, the "decision" to "accept" Christ, the "prayer of faith," the use of excitement and emotion to facilitate "decisions" for Christ, and the attempt to promote the moral reformation of the culture, can all be attributed to the "new measures" introduced by Finney in the 1830s. Some of his methods, such as the altar call or invitation, are now practically a Protestant "sacrament." Many of the modern movements such as [Church Growth](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/cgrowth/), [Promise Keepers](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/pk/), and the so-called Religious Right find their roots in Finney. Evangelicals cannot escape his influence.

The problem with Finney's influence on modern-day evangelicalism is that Finney's methods produce "results." He initiated what was called the "Second Great Awakening." Great revivals were reported in towns and cities throughout the country. Lives were reportedly changed. Moral reformations reportedly occurred. But since Finney did not preach the total corruption of the human nature and rejected the truth of justification by grace through faith alone, the basis for his "results" could **not** have been the Holy Spirit. Finney's results were exactly as Finney defined them -- a human dynamic. ("Assessing the Promise Keepers," 12/25/95, Christian News, pp. 1, 7-8.)

While those involved in the Great Awakening were slow to use the word "revival" until after the fact, it was in Finney's time that preachers were taught that they could lead, hold, or conduct a revival. This view of revival comes from Finney's belief that "*a* *revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the use of the constituted means as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means*" (*Revivals of Religion*, p. 5).This stands in stark contrast to the Biblical definition of revival as a gracious act of God. His mistaken view of revival was just one example of the faulty theology of Charles Finney that affected his practice and the practice of those who follow his example today.

Charles Finney was converted at a time when Calvinism was the predominant theological view of the day and heretical "hyper-Calvinism," the belief that the gospel invitation was for the elect only, was espoused as well. Finney found these ideas offensive and rejected them as illogical. His reaction was to develop a theology that went beyond Arminianism and approached the heresy first spread in the 5th Century by Pelagius. Finney's theology can be found in his *Autobiography* (also entitled *Memoirs*), *Systematic Theology*, and *Revivals of Religion.* Along with these books by Finney, B.B. Warfield's *Perfectionism* contains an excellent critique of Finney's theology.

Finney began his journey away from orthodoxy by rejecting the doctrine of the depravity of man's nature. He declared, "the sinner has all the faculties and natural abilities requisite to render perfect obedience toGod." All he needs "is tobe induced touse these powers and attributes as he ought"(*Systematic Theology*, pp. 282-300). He continued his backward trek by dismissing as "theological fiction" the doctrine of imputation. Specifically, he rejected the doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin to mankind, the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness tobelievers (*An Autobiography*, pp. 56-59). This is in contradiction to the Biblical teaching of the doctrine of imputation found in Romans chapters 3 through 5. From his denial of the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity, Finney logically concluded that man does not have a sinful nature and a natural disposition to sin, but is born morally "neutral." -- "If man's nature is not ruined by Adam's fall," Finney reasoned, "then man is able to fulfill the will of God by himself because 'there is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature.'"(*Revivals of Religion*, p. 4). Finney stressed human ability to repent, create new hearts, and to perfect one's own nature and society as well.

With the major premise of man's neutrality in spiritual matters and innateability todo the will of God, Finney's revival and evangelistic efforts were marked by efforts to "persuade" people to accept God's offer of salvation. Finney would say, "If men will not yield topersuasion, they must be lost"(Warfield, *Perfectionism*, p. 176). The effect of such beliefs on Finney's methods was obvious. His book, *Revivals**of Religion,* is pure evangelical pragmatism; that is, "if it works, it must be good." He believed that "the success of any measure designed to promote a revival of religion, demonstrates its wisdom. ... When the blessing evidently follows the introduction of the measure itself, the proof is unanswerable, that the measure is wise"(*Revivals of Religion*, p. 211).

Finney's error in the matter of anthropology, denying the sinful nature of man, led to other deviations from fundamental doctrine, including an erroneous view of justification by faith alone. His doctrine was that justification is not permanent, it is not a Divine declaration, but merely a pardon, and is achieved by man working together with God (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 383-391). This view of justification led tohis view of sanctification. 'Finney claimed that complete obedience to God's law was possible on the grounds (means) of man’s natural ability (*Systematic Theology*, p. 407). All of this logically led to a post-millennial eschatology, which advocated that Christians should invest their time and energy in establishing the millennial kingdom of God on earth by winning converts and being involved in social reform.

The evangelistic efforts of Charles Finney caused his home area of western New York to become known as "the burned-over district" because of the hardness the people developed to spiritual things. Warfield cites close friends of Finney who lamented over the rapid retreat of converts back into their sinful ways. One close friend and co-worker of Finney's, Asa Mahan, said thateveryone concerned with the revivals were "left like dead coals that could not be reignited" (Warfield, *Perfectionism*, pp. 26-27). Even Finney would say, "The great body of them [the converts] are a disgrace to religion" (Warfield, *Perfectionism*, pp. 26-27). Critics would say that his measures promoted superficial professors of religion. A famous contemporary, Charles Spurgeon, would say, "Possibly much of the flimsy piety of our present day arises from the ease with which men attain to peace and joy in these evangelistic days" (Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 1, p. 54).Finney believed that the cause of this lack of permanent results was his failure to teach them perfectionism and to instill in them the "how" of Christian living and the fear of falling away. He would leave his evangelistic efforts to start Oberlin College, where he could concentrate on this aspect of his doctrine. (Source: Spring 1998, *The Projector*.) [[Return to Text](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/revival.htm#Text Return)]

### Quotes from the Past:

"A very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father's house, and never making him say, 'Father, I have sinned.' How can he be healed who is not sick, or he be satisfied with the bread of life who is not hungry? The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised. ... Every thing in this age is shallow. ... The consequence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again. Unhumbled they came to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it" (C.H. Spurgeon, 1882).

"American Protestantism is characterized by a peculiar evil which I may describe by the term 'spurious revivalism.' The common mischief resulting from all its forms is the over-hasty reception into the communion of the churches of multitudes of persons whom time proves to have experienced no spiritual change. In most cases, these mischievous accessions are brought about by sensational human expedients. It is an unpopular thing for a minister of the gospel to bear this witness. But it is true. And my regard for that account which I must soon render at a more awful bar than that of arrogant public opinion demands its utterance" (R.L. Dabney, 1892).

\*Unless otherwise indicated, the content of this report has been paraphrased or excerpted directly from three 1991 issues of The Trinity Review -- May/June, July/August, and September/October -- "[Ought the Church to Pray for Revival?](http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=73)" and ["The Great Revival of Religion, 1740-1745" (Pts. 1 & 2)](http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=72). Those interested in further study should pursue Iain Murray's Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994).

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