

CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

Part 5

REVIVAL—GOD’S WORK OR MAN’S?

By
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It does not take great discernment to comprehend that America in general, and the church specifically, has fallen to its lowest spiritual condition in history. Not just that, the church seems powerless to stop America from forsaking her Judeo-Christian roots and plunging deeper into an abyss of wickedness that will bring divine judgment. What makes this situation so catastrophic is that the church doesn’t realize that she is in a major crisis. Those who do recognize the crisis are often looking in the wrong places for the answer.

Though there are many reasons why the American church is suffering under these spiritual maladies there is an extremely important one this article will address—how the kingdom of God advances; through God or through man. Individuals, churches and denominations have a philosophy of ministry that determines their approach to this subject. The eternal destiny of multitudes hang upon our theological and applicative response to this issue.

One challenge we have in answering how the work of God advances is in how we reconcile verses that appear contradictory. Take for instance the seemingly incompatible differences between Zechariah 4:6b and 2 Chronicles 7:14. Zechariah 4:6b reads, “*‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.*” Second Chronicles 7:14 says, “*if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*” The verse in Zechariah establishes that the work of God is done by the Holy Spirit alone, while 2 Chronicles teaches that before God will revive, man must do specific things.

BUILT BY GOD OR BY MAN

Leaders and lay people alike are naturally prone to trust in themselves, even when it comes to ministry. This is a result of our fallen nature. Churches and denominations can be built

without God. Intelligent people can apply the latest marketing techniques or church growth principles to create large churches while Jesus stands outside their doors knocking to get in.

The compromise of the church stinks in the Lord's nostrils. The smell from ten dead people can be mighty bad, but the stench of a thousand corpses is far worse. Large dead churches are no better than small dead ones.

If our church growth methods grieve the Holy Spirit then we are left to build the church through the strength and wisdom of man. Far too often, we want Jesus' stamp of approval upon our religious undertakings while never being overly concerned if His will is being done. The majority of churches are not growing. Of those that are growing a vast number do so only by robbing from other churches. Some may call it "marketing the church," but if a church has grown through thievery it will never be considered successful by God.

A pragmatic approach to church growth (the end justifies the means) can be anathematized by God. Men that grab hold of the proverbial bull by the horns to build Christ's kingdom may find the only horns He wanted them to grab were the horns of the altar in passionate prayer and repentance. Self-trust is always repulsive to God and is akin to rebellion and compromise. Arthur Wallis defined compromise as, "A partial surrender of one's position, for the sake of coming to terms' (Oxford Dictionary). For the Christian it means that he concedes something that God has given, or sets aside something God has revealed, for the sake of coming to terms with the situation he faces. . . . When we are dealing with truth, *to concede is to compromise*. . . . We never compromise out of ignorance, only out of knowledge."¹ So what works in filling pews is not always what is right in God's sight.

Moreover, what right do we have to compromise Christ's message? His love for humanity compelled Him to teach the truth so as to pierce sinner's hearts and bring them to repentance. Successful preaching from God's point of view is diametrically opposed to much of the preaching in the 21st century, especially with what is found on "Christian" TV and through big name preachers. In contrast stands the Biblical preaching of men like James Glendinning (Oldstone, Ireland, 1626):

Behold the success! For the hearers finding themselves condemned by the mouth of God speaking in His Word, fell into such anxiety and terror of conscience that

¹Arthur Wallis, The Radical Christian (Columbia, MO, Cityhill Publishing, 1987), 11.

they looked on themselves as altogether lost and damned. . . I have seen them myself stricken into a swoon with the Word; yea, a dozen in one day carried out of the doors as dead, so marvelous was the power of God smiting their hearts of sin.²

Though such preaching may appear to the compromised church as ignorant, archaic, harsh and irrelevant, God sees it otherwise and anoints it. Results like this will never come out of a watered-down, pop-gospel that is palatable to the sinful nature.

The world will never be converted through compromise. Buildings may be filled through such methods, but heaven will never be populated by conceding the truth. “Christianity is divine life within individuals. When the proportions of the Christian drive and fervor become less than revolutionary, it ceases to capture the imagination and attention of the world.”³ When the Biblical faith is preached, and the Spirit is poured out, the explosive nature of Christianity will shake a dying world.

In one sense it is understandable why churches turn to pop church growth methods. The old, dead, traditionalism is not working, so why beat a dead horse; get a new one. But don't replace a dead horse with a sterile mule that is powerless to reproduce. There is an endless stream of programs and seminars that claim they can help pastors out of their numeric plateaus. This may be little more than dead horse meat or a fresh mule. Neither can reproduce. In the end, leaders and churches grow cynical and are immobilized. When pastors grow weary of seeing little fruit from their labors they look to manmade plans, leave the ministry or go back to the upper room to get authentic Holy Ghost power.

Because something appears new and imaginative does not mean it has come from the Spirit. Singing and shouting are not proofs of spiritual life; social action is not evidence that a church is alive; busyness will never be an honest gauge of spiritual vitality. Life in the church can only be equated with the saint's ability to reproduce new life. Dead people cannot produce living babies. Empty altars reveal that the people are spiritually barren. Many innovative or emerging churches may find that all they have been doing is feeding a sterile mule.

²Iain H. Murray, The Puritan Hope (Carlisle, Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 30.

³C. E. Autrey, Revivals of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 16.

Scores of churches tenaciously hold to their traditions. There is nothing inherently wrong with traditions unless they are void of the Holy Spirit. The problem arises from our dependence upon rituals and programs and not upon the Spirit. Traditions are birthed and die with each generation. If each generation does not strive to have new life, rather than tradition, their practices bring death. This was the state of the church in Wales before the 1859 revival:

By and large the churches were orthodox in their beliefs, but ineffective in their witness.⁴ . . . For in spite of past revivals, powerful preachers and present orthodoxy, a general apathy and indifference prevailed. This was coupled with a spiritual bankruptcy and stagnation, a lukewarmness and aridity, which were symptomatic of an almost apostate Church.⁵ . . . By and large, however, the watchmen on the walls of Zion had fallen asleep, and they were few in number who saw her peril and desperate need.⁶

Spiritual stagnation and trust in rituals have become the death of many a denomination, church and individual

So why do we keep beating our dead horses of tradition or continue seeking for the newest sterile mule? Because we erroneously believe that all we need is the latest teaching, the right formula, or a breakthrough. If we trust in self rather than abandoning ourselves to Christ, then there is little difference between churches that call themselves renewal, emergent, seeker-sensitive, plain, Pentecostal or traditional. Dead churches are dead no matter their size or denomination.

100% GOD

So what percentage of God is needed in an authentic move of God? 100%! Only God can save, convict, deliver, heal and revive. He does not need our talent or ability; He has more than enough to accomplish the work. Such power does not come from man, for it is not inherent in him. As long as we think we can do the work that only God can do we will never be Biblically successful. When Christians finally abandon themselves to Christ, they will also come to an end

⁴Eifion Evans, When He Is Come (London, Evangelical Press, 1967), 23.

⁵Eifion Evans, When He Is Come (London, Evangelical Press, 1967), 26.

⁶Eifion Evans, When He Is Come (London, Evangelical Press, 1967), 95.

of self-trust. When believer's long for the true prize—Jesus Christ—they will freely lay down self at any cost.

People who have died to self don't want to play church any more; they want to see the face of Jesus. They don't want a counterfeit move of God, but the real thing that will always be true to the Scriptures and glorify the crucified and resurrected Savior. Programs become almost meaningless because people finally learn that only God can save sinners and fill hearts with joy unspeakable. A passion for the presence of God begins to burn that nothing on earth can quench but Christ Himself. This is the depths of man calling out to the deep of God saying, "I cannot live without your nearness. Show me your face or I perish with longing." David Brainerd expressed this well when he wrote, "When I really enjoy God I feel my desires of Him the more insatiable and my thirstings after holiness the more unquenchable. O' this pleasing pain. It makes my soul press after God."⁷ It is at this point where God uses people in phenomenal ways.

100% MAN

Authentic revival is when the manifest presence of God flows through His people transforming secular society. This is the greatest church growth movement the world has ever known. This means that man also has a part to play in revival. His part is also 100%. Nothing less will ever be acceptable to God. Man's part revolves around repentance, prayer, seeking God's face and total dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This is wholehearted devotion that can turn the world upside down (Jeremiah 29:13; Psalms 119:2; Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 22:37; Acts 2:42).

In closing, let me bare my heart. I ache to see authentic revival. But I am weary of manmade versions that do little more than parade the works of the flesh. After seeing genuine revival, the counterfeit appears even uglier than before. I long to see revivals such as the Hebrides Awakening or the 1857 Prayer Meeting Revival. Both of these revivals, among a host of others, were free from the arrogance of man and superstar preachers. Duncan Campbell, the evangelist of the Hebrides Awakening testified, "A force was let loose in Barvas that shook the whole of Lewis. God stepped out; the Holy Spirit began to move among the people. God seemed to be everywhere. What was that? Revival? No evangelist; not a special effort; not anything at all

⁷Michael L. Brown, Its Time To Rock The Boat, (Shippensburg, Destiny Image Publishers, 1993), 74.

organized on the basis of human endeavor. But an awareness of God that gripped the whole community.”⁸

God is glorified whenever His people get out of the way and let Him take center stage. The world has not seen the beauty of Christ because we have clouded His majesty with dead traditions, spiritually sterile church growth methods and our repugnant fallen nature. The Holy Spirit could do great things through us if only we would fully surrender to Him and passionately seek Christ’s face. God is looking for believers who desire a move of God more than their own comforts and ambitions. In the words of A. W. Tozer, “We have only to prepare Him a habitation in love and faith and humility. We have but to want Him badly enough, and He will come and manifest Himself to us.”⁹

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⁸Duncan Campbell, from an audio tape entitled, “Revival Fire,” (No editor, publisher, or date).

⁹A. W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1961), 49.