

Reformation  
& Revival

---

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

---

Volume 1, No. 2 • Spring 1992

---

**F**rom an academic point of view repentance is a familiar concept. It is one of the two parts of conversion. Conversion consists of repentance and faith. It is a turning from sin in heartfelt sorrow for one's transgression against God and His law, and a turning to the Lord Jesus Christ in saving faith. Repentance thus pertains to the very heart of the application of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ to sinners. No one can be a child of God without repentance.

I remember a haunting question put to me by an old man in my first congregation. Whenever I called on him he used to ask me, "What does one do if he feels no remorse, no sorrow at all for anything he has ever done?" This man knew that he should be sorry for his sins, but he found it impossible to humble himself before God and acknowledge his need of the Lord Jesus Christ. So far as I know, he met his Maker in that condition.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks early on in the course of that beautiful series of questions and answers: "How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou . . . mayest live and die happily?"

The answer follows: "Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption." Think of the first part of that answer: It is necessary for me to know how great are my sins and miseries. This means that all evangelical preaching, whether addressed to converted or unconverted persons, must deal with repentance. In times of revival, however, repentance figures prominently. It is not too much to say that repentance is a fundamental aspect of revival. When the church comes alive, through the movement of the Holy Spirit of God, repentance is a prominent feature of its life. A period of revival is a time of intensification of evangelical activities: the manner and content of preaching, praying, the operation of the Holy Spirit and repentance.

---

**Water on Dry Ground**

Revival generally takes place on dry ground. Isaiah 44:3 says, "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground." In times of dryness and barrenness God's people begin to become concerned about their own spiritual condition, and it is on such people, in such states, that the Lord powerfully pours forth His Holy Spirit.

One thinks of what took place in the Reformation period, the greatest time of both revival and reformation in all the history of the church. We know the condition of the church before the ministry of Martin Luther. Alexander VI, the Borgia pope, was in the Vatican. He filled the place with his own illegitimate children and did not hesitate to lift them to positions of esteem and influence. (It was a far more reprehensible thing in those days for a minister of religion to be married than to keep a concubine.) Alexander VI was succeeded by Julius II, the warrior pope so pillared by Erasmus. Then came Leo X, the Medici pope who said, "God has given us the papacy; let us enjoy it." This was the attitude of the leadership of the church of Christ in those days. All across Europe the church was in ruinous condition. People were superstitious and ignorant. They were looking here and there for answers to their spiritual problems. They sought answers in mysticism, the relics of the saints, holy days, and the purchase of indulgences—but to no avail.

There had been the distant rolling of revival thunder and dimly perceptible flashes of lightning in the ministries of men like John Wycliffe of England and John Huss of Bohemia, but it was not until the sixteenth century that God had mercy on His church.

Martin Luther arose, groping through the dry land of the religious teachings of his time with a thirst that would not be satisfied with anything short of the pure water that only the Lord Jesus Christ can give. Luther had been terrified by the righteousness of God. "I could not love a righteous God,"

Luther said. "I hated Him." But Luther persisted in study of what he called "the dear Paul" until he came to understand that "the just shall live by faith." Then he bestrode the Europe of the sixteenth century like a Colossus. With the mighty hammer of the Word of God he shattered the corrupt ecclesiastical establishment and held high the banner of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and His sole sufficiency to deliver His people from their sins. It was on dry ground that the water of God's reviving Holy Spirit fell in the sixteenth century.

Jonathan Edwards has something to say about this as well. Edwards succeeded his grandfather Solomon Stoddard as minister of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts. In Stoddard's long ministry there had been five periods of quickening, but for many years after the fifth of those quickenings there was barrenness and aridity. Edwards speaks of the licentiousness which prevailed among the young people, the breakdown in family structure, the failure of family worship, the contentions, jealousies, and divisions which marked the community. The situation of Northampton was marked by a spiritual need that only the Holy Spirit could remedy. And He did remedy it! There, too, the Holy Spirit of God came down and did His reviving work.

The same was true of England in the eighteenth century. Bishop J.C. Ryle, in his *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, tells of the great lawyer Blackstone, whose name will be familiar to any who have studied law. Early in the reign of King George III Blackstone visited the principal churches of London to see what was being preached. His report was that there was no more Christianity in the discourses he heard than in the writings of Cicero, and that it was impossible to discover from what he heard, whether the preachers were followers of Mohammed, Confucius or Jesus Christ. This was the scene upon which revival burst through the ministries of George Whitefield and John and

Charles Wesley. God came down on a spiritual desert.

Our position today is not without parallel in these past periods. Nevertheless, we can get comfort to ourselves from the knowledge that it is in such situations that the Lord God, who dispenses grace according to His sovereign wisdom and mercy, is pleased to operate.

#### The Reality of God

When revival comes it confronts people with the reality of a just and holy God. There is an intensified awareness of God as the Judge of all the earth, the One of whom the Scripture speaks when it says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

There is a phenomenon that used to be called "practical atheism." Most people in our country today would insist that they are not atheists. Almost everyone in the country believes in some kind of God. The membership rolls of our churches are swollen with people who profess faith not only in the living God but also in His Son, Jesus Christ. However, when it comes to the practice of living, one wonders how much this means even for many who are regular in their church attendance. So far as their lives are concerned—their marriage relationships, relationships with their children, responsibilities and duties at work—one wonders, I say, just how much all this profession of belief in God means. When revival comes, not only is theoretical atheism driven away; practical atheism also disappears into the mists where it belongs. People are no longer able to deny the awful reality of God. They understand what a fearful thing it is to stand destitute of righteousness before the Judge of all the earth.

Jonathan Edwards, in his *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, speaks of this. He says that conversion experiences differ. They are as diverse as humanity. Nevertheless, common to the experience of all is an awareness of God's

majesty and holiness.

It seems to me that in evangelical churches at the present time there is too much that is man-centered. Too much is directed to people, not to God. Even worship services seem to be calculated to entertain, titillate, and please people, and there is a loss of conviction that what we do when we come together in the Lord's house is to lift up our hearts before God and listen as He speaks. The church is not a place where people come to be affirmed, though they may be affirmed. (That sort of language is used commonly enough these days. We need to affirm each other, to assure each other of our value as individual human beings.) More important by far is our understanding that we appear before the living God, whose creatures we are, to whom we are accountable and on whom we depend for redemption.

#### The Sinfulness of Sin

When revival comes it also gives people a breathtaking apprehension of the seriousness of sin.

Recently I saw a report of a conference featuring a speaker whose name would be known to you. He is one of the most prominent representatives of the electronic clergy of the present time. This very prominent minister said at this conference that the decline of the church in America and Europe is to be attributed to its failure to communicate the gospel in a way that satisfies the deepest human need. So far, so good. But what do you suppose is the deepest human need? He tells us: It is "the need for self-esteem. The last thing we should do," he goes on to say, "is to call someone a sinner if we want him to be saved." Fancy that! The deepest human need is the need for self-esteem! Well, I suppose that is true in one sense. Yet it seems ludicrous to make the extraordinary, not to say bizarre, comment that the last thing we should do if we want somebody to be saved is to tell him he is a sinner! What in the world are we to tell

him if we are not to assure him with all seriousness that he is a sinner and that unless he turns to the Lord Jesus Christ and commits himself in repentance and faith to the only, all-sufficient Savior of sinners, he is undone and forever will have no self-esteem at all?

When revival comes, there is no such nonsense as this. When revival comes, people are induced to cry out as the Philippian jailer did to Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas had been cast into prison, their feet fixed in stocks. They sat through the night, their backs raw and bleeding, covered with open sores from the beatings they had received. But they sang psalms of praise to God, glorifying Christ that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His sake. Then an earthquake struck. The doors of the prison were opened. The jailer, who must have known something of what Paul and Silas had been preaching in the streets of that city, was filled with terror. He thought that his prisoners had escaped and that he would be held accountable. His life would be forfeit. He was about to plunge his sword into his breast when Paul cried out from the dungeon, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here" (Acts 16:28).

The thoughts that had filled the jailer's mind then suddenly overpowered him, and he sprang into the inner dungeon asking, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" (v.30).

John Elias was one of the mightiest of the Welsh preachers. He was fearful of nothing. He lived in the latter part of the eighteenth century and went from place to place in Wales without any thought for the danger to which he was subjecting himself and preached Christ boldly. In the village of Rhuddlan in North Wales there was a fair held for several Sundays prior to the harvest season. It was a time when farmers would buy harvest and other agricultural implements and then would drink and make merry in a way that was utterly dishonoring to God. This was too much for Elias. He took his place on the steps of an inn amid the great

throng that had gathered. He gave out Psalm 24 for singing. He read a chapter from the Scriptures. Then he lifted his voice in prayer. By this time people were beginning to be spiritually impressed. As he prayed, we are told, Elias's heart was in "a very melting frame" and the tears ran profusely down his countenance. People were seized then by a spirit of awe and sobriety. He took his text from Exodus 34:21, "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest." Then came the sermon. What a sermon it was! His biographer has preserved fragments. As he preached, Elias exclaimed time and again to the people, "Oh, robbers! Oh, robbers! Oh, thieves! Alas! Stealing the day of the Lord! What! Robbing my Lord of His day! Oh, robbers! The most vile and abominable." The effect of this address was overwhelming. People became greatly alarmed, and there was an utter transformation from just that one sermon. The work of the gospel went on, and nothing of that sort of buying, selling, and merrymaking ever took place in Flintshire again.

When revival comes, as it did to many parts of Wales in those days, people begin to see how serious sin is and are incapable any longer of regarding it with a light and flippant attitude.

I suppose that most of us are like me when I once attended a church camp as a youth. One morning in the course of our Bible study the teacher asked me, "Are you a sinner?"

I said, "Yes, but everybody's a sinner." This was exactly what my counselor wanted me to say. But I note in retrospect that although I had an intellectual apprehension in my mind as to my being a sinner, the very fact that I added to the acknowledgment of my own personal sinfulness the qualifying words, "but everybody's a sinner," indicated that at least at that point in my life I was not taking sin with

sufficient seriousness. I was not crying out to God as people do when they come under true evangelical conviction and as they do in great numbers when revival strikes.

My sins, my sins, my Savior,  
They take such hold on me.  
I am not able to look up  
Save only, Christ, to Thee.

We will know when revival comes by the awareness we discern in ourselves and others of sin's seriousness.

It is not simply the unconverted who experience an awful apprehension of the seriousness of sin. It is believers, too. When the Heidelberg Catechism tells us that the first thing we need to know in order to live and die happily is how great our sins and miseries are, the writers of the Catechism did not understand that to be applicable only to those who are as yet on the threshold of faith, not having come into the household of the people of God. They understood those words as applicable also to those who already were children of God. Believers are to go on learning throughout life, with ever-increasing understanding, discernment, spiritual insight, and perception, how great their sins and miseries are.

**Sorrow for Sin**

Revival produces as well a heightened degree of sorrow for sin. Do you remember that story recorded in Genesis 39 in which Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife? If you remember that incident, you will recall what Joseph said as he resisted the temptation. He did not say merely, "How can I sin against my master who has treated me so well?" He said, "How . . . could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (v. 9).

When true repentance takes place, people are aware of

this solemn fact and say, "How could I have done this great wickedness? How could I have sinned against God? How is it possible that I should have been guilty of this? I have sinned against Him. I have spurned His favor. I have repudiated His grace. I have trampled underfoot His blessed law. I have turned a deaf ear to the invitations of the gospel. I have closed my eyes to the spectacle of a crucified and risen Lord. How can I have sinned against God?"

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is sin?" It answers, "Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God." The history of revivals is replete with stories of those who have been impressed with this. They were awakened, as the old divines used to put it. They were made aware of their sinfulness and discovered that they had transgressed God's law. They were filled with pain and anguish.

You remember Martin Luther in his monk's cell. He sought to cope with his sin, sense of guilt and conviction that he was estranged from God. "How can I appear before God? Where shall I find a gracious God?" he asked. The Holy Spirit was at work in him, teaching him that the answer to his quest was not in mysticism, self-flagellation or self-denial, but in Jesus Christ. You remember his sorrow and pain, pain that thousands of others have shared when revival has come.

What follows is a brief description of a service in a Presbyterian church. In 1839, William Chalmers Burns, at the age of 24, was preaching in a parish church of Kilsyth in Scotland, not far from Glasgow, where his father was minister. He preached from Psalm 110:3, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power" (KJV). At the close of his sermon, as he says,

I was led like John Livingston [on the occasion of the revival at the church of Shotts] to plead with the unconverted

before me instantly to close with God's offers of mercy and continued to do so until the power of the Lord's Spirit became so mighty upon their souls as to carry all before it, like the rushing mighty wind of Pentecost. During the whole of the time that I was speaking, the people listened with the most riveted, solemn attention, and with many silent tears and inward groanings of the spirit; but at last their feelings became too strong for ordinary restraints, and broke through simultaneously in weeping and wailing, tears and groans, intermingled with shouts of joy and praise from some of the people of God. The appearance of a great part of the people from the pulpit gave me an awfully vivid picture of the state of the ungodly in the day of Christ's coming to judgment. Some were screaming out in agony. Others, and among these strong men, fell to the ground as if they had been dead; and such was the general commotion that after repeating for some time the most free and urgent invitations of the Lord to sinners, I was obliged to give out a psalm which was soon joined in by a considerable number, our voices being mingled with the mourning groans of many prisoners sighing for deliverance.

This was not a sensation monger. Burns was anything but that. The general testimony of what took place in Kilsyth and Dundee in 1839 was that this was an authentic movement of the Holy Spirit of God and that the manifestations which occurred were consequent upon a fearful conviction of sin. People were filled with repentance, grief, and pain for the sin they had committed against God, His law, and Christ.

#### Refuge in Christ

Revival leads people to take refuge in the cross of Christ. The end of revival is not groans or cryings out in agony of soul but rather the light that comes with true and living faith in the Lord Jesus.

Some of you have read *Pilgrim's Progress*. You will remember how Christian was in the City of Destruction reading his New Testament and was overcome with the words: "Flee from the wrath to come!" These words got hold of him, and he had no peace. They made him quit the city and push on through the Slough of Despond and various other experiences until at length he came to a hill. What a hill it was! It was the hill called Calvary. On that hill was a cross. What a cross! Bunyan describes how, when Christian came to the cross, the great burden of sin he had been carrying fell from his back and rolled down the hill into an empty tomb. This was John Bunyan's reflection on Romans 4:25 which tells us that Christ was "raised to life for our justification." Bunyan shows how Paul is to be understood. He shows us that the Lord Jesus Christ rose again that the burden and guilt of our sin should fall from our backs and roll down Mount Calvary into the empty tomb from which the Lord arose when He burst the bands of death. When revival comes, awareness of sin leads people to the cross of Christ.

The Bible tells us:

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also along with Him, graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32).

#### Turning from Sin

When revival comes it brings about a marked turning from sin. Repentance speaks of a radical change of heart, of a complete turnabout in the direction of one's life. Beforehand one walked in the pathway of sin. When one has

repented he turns about and now walks in the pathway of the righteousness of God in Christ. We are told by the apostle Paul in that marvelous eighth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans: "What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3,4). When repentance takes place it shows itself by a transformation of life—in the great concerns of the social order, and in the much smaller concerns of the individual.

Do you realize what happened as a result of the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century? The whole of England was affected in such a way and to such a degree that a revolution like the one that took place in France was averted. One thinks of the school system which came about as a result of the evangelical revivals. Some of them were called ragged schools. They were established for the children of those who could not afford to give their children an education. One remembers the great missionary movements that flowed forth from the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. One remembers, too, how William Wilberforce, a soldier of Jesus Christ in the mother of parliaments, held nothing back until the slave trade was stopped and slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire. All this was a fruit of the reviving work of the Holy Spirit in the eighteenth century.

Recently I heard a striking lecture on the revival which took place in Ireland in the early 1920s. It was under a preacher by the name of William Patteson Nicholson. In 1926 Nicholson was called in at the last minute to join a three-man Christian mission and preach at Cambridge University. What he did there was formative for the Inter-

Varsity (Christian Union) movement in England. He had a marvelous impact on the whole university.

Mind you, he was a rough-cut fellow. He had no university education. When he preached at Cambridge he would say things like this. He would talk about the verse which tells us that the very hairs of our head are numbered. Then he would spot a bald-headed man in the audience and say, "Man, God wouldn't take long over you!" One night he was preaching on eternal punishment and described an aunt of his who had lived and died apart from Christ and was now in hell. Two young university types got up to leave. People who did that were always in danger of some remark from William Patteson Nicholson, and on this occasion he said, "If you leave this church unsaved, you too will go to hell." One of them called back, "Any message for your aunt?" Nicholson was not very polished, but with all that roughness he was nevertheless a mighty servant of God.

Under his preaching, in the years 1920-22, a tremendous work took place in Ulster. It was the period immediately following the partition of Ireland. The land was bruised and bleeding, even as it now is again. But through William Patteson Nicholson's evangelistic preaching great things happened, and people's lives were transformed in Belfast. When the revival took place it had to open a new department: a department to deal with the stolen goods that had been taken away by workers but were now restored to the company by those who had come to Christ. Nicholson was not a man to allow people to claim conversion without showing by their changed manner of life that they had in fact come to Christ. I spoke with a man who had actually seen public notice in a Belfast newspaper from the period that the department charged with receiving stolen goods returned by newly converted sinners was overburdened and could receive no more. They had far more than they could cope with already.



This is what happens when people come to Christ. Today in our country a remarkable number of people claim to be born again. The observation has been made that, if that is true, then surely we ought to see some signs of it in our social order. That we see so little of it is surely an indication that this profession is not grounded in fact. When true repentance takes place it shows itself in the transformation of many who come to Christ and wish to live in subjection to His lordship over society and the social order.

May you and I live to see a day when God's promise is fulfilled: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground" (Isa. 44:3).

**Author**

---

Dr. John Richard de Witt presently serves as senior pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN. He is an author, writer, and former professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS. This article originally appeared in *Tenth*, a publication of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA (July 1982), and is based on a sermon preached at the 1982 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.