Revival and Spiritual Warfare

Robert H. Lescellus

Without a recognition of the spiritual warfare between God and Satan, history will be "as confusing as a football game in which half the players are invisible." This conflict is magnified when it comes to the matter of revival. In revival God advances his program by effusions of power. It is only to be expected that Satan will seek to prevent such outpourings. When they do come, the enemy is to be expected to resist them with his power to prevent this advancement, and when he cannot thwart the advancement, he seeks to discredit and distort the movement as much as possible.

The book of Acts records an activity of Satan with each new advance of the Gospel (Acts 5, 13, 16, 19; 1 Thess. 2:18). Satan can also be seen behind the persecution of the apostolic church by political structures of the day (Acts 4, 5, 7, 12, 16, 22-28). His work as an angel of light to resist the truth by counterfeiting it is also clearly revealed in the New Testament (2 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:8-13; 1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-4; 2 Peter 2:1-2).

In subsequent history every movement of spiritual renewal has been met with satanic opposition. Satan has worked in opposition to revival in three ways: by seeking to (1) persecute it, (2) pervert it, (3) prevent it.

Satan’s Direct Attack by Persecution

This is done by outward and inward means. First,

1. By direct attack. The early church faced the direct attack of Satan through the powers of government. In the post-apostolic years the church went through ten great persecutions at the hands of pagan Rome. The period from Constantine to the Reformation, which witnessed the existence of a church-state union, saw this sacral system persecuting any renewal movements that arose, suppressing and subduing them. With the Reformation came the age of revivals, but, sad to say, many times revival movements were persecuted by a sacral system called Protestant. In more recent times revival move-
ments have been persecuted by pagan religious systems, Islamic powers and Communist states.

Satan has also opposed revivals through the ridicule, misrepresentation and indifference of the world. Professing Christians have opposed revival through ignorance, prejudice, pride and party spirit. The Great Awakening saw the division in New England between the "New Lights," who supported the revival, and the "Old Lights," who opposed it. The Middle Colonies had a split among the Presbyterians between the "New Sides" and the "Old Sides." Wesley and Whitefield faced opposition from the religious establishment.

J. Edwin Orr records one incident in revival history of the persecuting measures of Satan and how the cause of the Gospel triumphed through it all. The record is that of the revival in Assam, India, during the Fifth Evangelical Awakening. Orr writes:

Unlike the sweeping success of the Khasi work, one of the immediate results of the revival was an intense persecution of the Christians which broke out in the Autumn. The growing churches in Phullen and surroundings suffered intensely. Christians were evicted at midnight from their villages and driven into the jungle. The chief and his henchmen made life miserable for believers in many villages. It was a sad time for all who professed the faith.

Worse was to come. The 1907 persecution was followed by an "anti-revival," a resurgence of blatant heathenism that mimicked the revival in form, heathen lyrics being sung with great abandon and young people of both sexes dancing in ecstasy, followed by great feasts. It spread like wildfire, with demonstrations in every village.

The Christian church suffered a serious set-back in the anti-revival, the leaders despairing. Paganism ran rampant in the Lushai Hills until, in 1912, the flowering of the bamboo brought a horde of rats. Although stores of rice had been laid up in anticipation, the rats appeared almost overnight and devoured the stores of food and grain in the fields, leaving nothing.

Famine havoc was terrible. People subsisted upon roots in the hills, and the refugees poured onto the plains, while multitudes died of starvation. Missionaries cared for the orphans. In Wales, collections were made, and Christians in Lushai shared their food ungrudgingly with hungry pagan people. The distress and the charity brought an end to the pagan revival among the Mizos.

Revival was rekindled in 1913, breaking out with great power at presbytery meeting in 1913, when the first Mizo was ordained to the pastorate. In 1919, even greater revival broke out simultaneously in three separate places, spreading with speed even to Tipperal and Manipur States. Four thousand were converted, more than the total number of current communicants. Hymn-singing accompanied by the drum swept the land in a wave of rejoicing.

One effect of these revivals, within a generation, was to make headhunters into a predominantly Christian people, inhabiting India's most Christian and most evangelized area, in zeal far surpassing the early evangelized fields, as well as the places which claimed a thousand years or more of a traditional Christianity.²

The satanic source behind the persecution of the revived church is a fact to be recognized. Yet, we must also realize that in spiritual warfare "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). God is always in sovereign control, and, no matter how powerful the Devil is, he cannot overcome the purpose of redemption. Satan always turns out to be the loser in persecuting the church.

His attacks are not always outward. Sometimes his onslaughts are inward.

2. By demonic accusation. The powers of darkness also attack the minds of participants in revival with accusation and oppression (Rev. 12:10). Jonathan Edwards detected the enemy's work in causing depression and suicidal tendencies
Revival and Spiritual Warfare during the Great Awakening:

In the latter part of May, it began to be very sensible that the Spirit of God was gradually withdrawing from us, and after this time Satan seemed to be more let loose and raged in a dreadful manner. The first instance wherein it appeared, was a person putting an end to his own life by cutting his throat. ... He had, from the beginning of this extraordinary time, been exceedingly concerned about the state of his soul, and there were some things in his experience that appeared very hopeful; but he durst entertain no hope concerning his own good estate. Toward the latter part of this time he grew much discouraged, and melancholy grew again upon him, till he was wholly overpowered by it, and was in a great measure past the capacity of receiving advice, or being reasoned with to any purpose. The devil took the advantage, and drove him into despairing thoughts. ... The news of this extraordinarily affected the minds of people here, and struck them as it were with astonishment. After this, multitudes in this and other towns seemed to have it strongly suggested to them, and pressed upon them to do as this person had done. And many who seemed to be under no melancholy, some pious persons who had no special darkness or doubts about the goodness of their state—nor were under any special trouble or concern of mind about any thing spiritual or temporal—had it urged upon them as if somebody had spoke to them, Cut your throat, now is a good opportunity. Now! Now! So that they were obliged to fight with all their might to resist it, and yet no reason suggested to them why they should do it. ³

Many servants of God are facing the attacks of Satan today, especially those who are seeking spiritual renewal in their lives and ministries. Knowledge of the spiritual warfare is essential (Eph. 6:10-18). Such attacks are intensified in periods of revival. We must be prepared for this inner conflict.

Satan's Discrediting Actions of Perversion

Satan will also endeavor to thwart the effects of revival by perverting it. This he seeks to do

1. By carnal zeal. When God graciously visits with revival, Satan, seeing he cannot stop its advancement, will seek to pervert the work so as to discredit it before the church and the world. He does so by stirring up and reinforcing its defects. Satan will use the momentum of carnal zeal as a wrestler uses the motion of his opponent to secure his defeat. Edwards notes this tactic of the Devil in the Great Awakening:

If we look back into the history of the church of God in past ages, we may observe that it has been a common devise [sic] of the Devil to overset a revival of religion, when he finds he can keep men quiet and secure no longer, then to drive 'em to excesses and extravagances. He holds them back as long as he can, but when he can do it no longer, then he'll push 'em on, and if possible, run 'em upon their heads. ⁴

In the Great Awakening a man named James Davenport went to excesses of fanaticism, denouncing his opponents as unconverted and of the Devil, and brought the revival under criticism. He later saw his error and publically repented, but the damage was already done. The Old Lights, led by Charles Chauncy, opposed the revival. Chauncy opposed the movement in a work titled Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England. Jonathan Edwards defended it and left us a theology of revival in his writing, works that the church since has ignored to its own detriment. Lovelace notes the valuable contribution Edwards made:

With the hindsight afforded by history we know that some of Chauncy's complaint issued out of his own incipient rationalism, which moved increasingly from Puritan Calvinism toward Unitarianism in subsequent decades. But Edwards took Chauncy's complaint seriously. Where he could not contest Chauncy's findings, he incorporated them and restated them more strongly. Perhaps one reason Chauncy's book failed to sell was that Edwards' Thoughts on the Revival in New England and Religious Affections reiterated everything that was valid in Chauncy's critique and focused it to heal the
defects of the awakening. These works are a model of evangelical self-criticism.5

Edwards saw the working of Satan behind the excesses of the revival:

I don't know but we shall be in danger by and by, after our eyes are fully opened to see our errors, to go to contrary extremes. The Devil has driven the pendulum far beyond its proper point of rest; and when he has carried it to the utmost length that he can, and it begins by its own weight to swing back, he probably will set in, and drive it with the utmost fury the other way; and so give us no rest; and if possible prevent our settling in a proper medium.6

He explains the purpose of the Devil in this tactic:

The devil in driving things to these extremes ... has I believe, had in view a twofold mischief hereafter, in the issue of things; one with respect to those that are more cold in religion ... to tempt them entirely to reject the whole work as being nothing but delusion and distraction. And another is with respect to those that have been very warm and zealous ... to sink them down in unbelief and darkness.7

The result of this driving of Satan to extremes is usually a spiritual burnout. This has been repeated over and over in history.

Satan perverts also

2. By counterfeit revival. Everything supernatural is not necessarily of God. Ignorance of this fact has been a tool of the Adversary in times of God's supernatural working. Satan will counterfeit what God is doing so as to work confusion. With every revival has come a counterfeit revival. The revival under Moses saw the counterfeit miracles of the magicians of Egypt, a lesson for us to heed (2 Tim. 3:8). The New Testament days saw a false gospel, a false Jesus, a false spirit, false apostles, false Christians, a false assembly and false experiences (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15; Gal. 1:7-10; 2:4; Rev. 2:9, 24). In revival seasons there is a danger of accepting everything extraordinary as evidence of the Spirit's mighty working.

The working of the Holy Spirit in revival does not guarantee against false doctrine, false emphasis and even false manifestations of the supernatural being present. Revival does not exempt the church from the commands of Scripture to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1) and to "examine everything carefully; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). Satan's presence will certainly be manifest in times of revival. It is not inconsistent to have a mixture of the true and the false during such times. Edwards observed this:

Nor are many errors in judgment, and some delusions of Satan intermixed with the work, any argument that the work in general is not of the Spirit of God. However great a spiritual influence may be, it is not to be expected that the Spirit of God should be given now in the same manner as to the apostles, infallibly to guide them in points of Christian doctrine, so that what they taught might be relied on as a rule to the Christian church. And if many delusions of Satan appear, at the same time that a great religious concern prevails, it is not an argument that the work in general is not the work of God, any more than it was an argument in Egypt, that there were no true miracles wrought there, by the hand of God, because Jannes and Jambres wrought false miracles at the same time by the hand of the devil. Yea, the same persons may be the subjects of much of the influences of the Spirit of God, and yet in some things be led away by the delusions of Satan, and this be no paradox than many other things that are true of real saints, in the present state, where grace dwells with so much corruption, and the new man and the old man subsist together in the same person; and the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil remain for a while together in the same heart. Many godly persons have undoubtedly in this and other ages, exposed themselves to woeful delusions, by an aptness to lay too much weight on impulses and impressions, as if they were immediate revelations from God, to signify something future, or to direct from where to go, and what to do.8
So often the Word of God is neglected and an unhealthy emphasis placed on the miraculous, especially being caught up in direct spiritual guidance and revelations. These are manifested in an increasing measure where there is ignorance of the Scripture on the nature of sin and the work of the Spirit. One witness to the Welsh Revival commented: "Towards the end there was too much talk about the Holy Spirit, and not enough about the Lord Jesus." One criticism of that revival was the de-emphasis on Bible preaching and overemphasis on the Spirit's guidance. Orr writes that "the Welsh revival took scripture knowledge for granted, and preaching thus deemed superfluous was at a minimum."9 Spiritual excesses resulted, causing Evan Roberts and Jessie Penn Lewis to write the book, *War on the Saints*, to give instruction on how to discern the difference between the Holy Spirit's working and that of the demonic activity. Edwards also instructed as a check to excesses looking to the Word of God, illuminated by the Spirit:

Why cannot we be content with the divine oracles, that holy, pure word of God, which we have in such abundance and clearness, not since the canon of Scripture is completed? . . . Why should any desire a higher kind of intercourse with heaven, than by having the Holy Spirit given in his sanctifying influences, infusing and exciting grace and holiness, love and joy, which is the highest kind of intercourse that the saints and angels in heaven have with God, and the chief excellency of the glorified man Christ Jesus?10

Besides the area of guidance, miracles are another realm where Satan can operate under the cover of the supernatural. Certainly there is the fact of the supernatural in revival, for God comes on the scene in evident manifestation. Revivals have been marked by supernatural phenomena since the model revival of Pentecost (Acts 2). There have been sounds of a rushing mighty wind, prostrations, tremblings, trances, healings, mysterious drawings of men to meetings, etc. There is no denying that God has been in much of these, working in His own sovereign way to accomplish His purpose. Yet time has also proven much miraculous activity to have had no lasting effect spiritually, but, in contrast, to have had a reverse effect.

There is a great danger in overemphasizing the miraculous in times of revival. It is possible to develop a "miracle-mania." This is an observation that comes from the modern Indonesian Revival. Peters observes this in his evaluation of that revival:

Basic to the motivation of the movement in many instances are dreams, visions, ecstatic experiences, healings, and related circumstances. Such experiences usually result in compulsive motivation in people of para-psychological or occult backrounds. Against this I am not able, nor am I willing to argue. The weakness, however, is that these experiences become the main content of the message. This happened with many teams and individuals. Reciting experiences under aroused emotions may grip people's minds and move them to respond, but this is not the means the Holy Spirit uses to regenerate the hearts of people. Saving faith rests upon factual knowledge of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for our sins and raised again for our justification. No experiences, no matter how valid, exciting, meaningful and compelling to the individual, can substitute for the Word of God.

The much hailed evangelism by illiterates produced a backlash in the form of present-day barrenness, spiritual deadness and Gospel indifference in much of Timor and surrounding islands. They are trying to remedy this today in the lay institute of Soe. This is commendable. The damage, however, is done, and will be difficult to repair.11

Illustration after illustration from revival history can be given of the effects of Satan's counterfeit revivals in hindering true revival. Lovelace brings us up-to-date:
[The] strategy of darkness in opposing revival, the intrusion of counterfeit movements to capture those seeking salvation and further discredit genuine renewal, is also especially apparent today. The Jesus movement, which was at times a patchwork of carnal religiosity, has been followed by a circus of occult and Eastern sects promising spiritual fulness and reality. Campuses which were recently penetrated by a new Evangelical witness are now drowning in mystical propaganda. In some cases this has had the expected effect, and current Evangelical renewal is dismissed as part of the wave of Aquarian religiosity and superstitious nostalgia. This is a familiar pattern from past history. The early fathers who discerned Satan behind the waves of persecution they suffered saw his hand also in the gnostic counterfeits multiplying around the church, and even in the mystery religions which caricatured its theme of regeneration through the dying and rising of God. This explanation may itself seem facile and superstitious. But the fact remains that the apostolic writers regarded false religion as an antichristian weapon forged by the powers of darkness and expected its growth to parallel that of the expanding church. 12

May the church garrison itself with a deeper knowledge of the Word, illuminated by the Spirit, that it may be able to face these strategems of the Devil!

Satan's Deadening Activity of Prevention

"Revival is a sovereign work of God, but it never comes to passive waiting." So said the late Dr. Peter Connolly. Whenever revival has come there has been a people prepared for it by cleansing, unity and prayer (Acts 2:1). Thus an unclean believer-priest, unfit to minister in the Heavenly Sanctuary in intercessory prayer, is a hindrance to revival. Sin in the life and disunity in the church are definitely hindrances to revival. Satan is certainly active in keeping believers defeated in their spiritual lives and in promoting division of the body. The flesh is a ready instrument of the Devil in the prevention of revival. Granting these elements have a definite measure of satanic activity in them, we concentrate on two basic areas we believe Satan works in to prevent revival. These areas are similar in that they keep the church from seeing its real need of revival. Satan will blind the church to its need of revival by giving a substitute or by satisfying it with something else. We see evidence of both of these today. The Laodicean condition is chronic in our day: "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Satan is blinding the church today with a substitute for revival in some circles and in others a satisfaction without it. Satan is preventing revival:

1. By seducing the church. The word is out today that we are seeing a great revival sweeping the world. There is no doubt that there is evidence of revival in various places on earth, such as on some mission fields and lands that were once behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, but what is generally called revival does not fit the biblical or historical pattern. We are speaking of such phenomena as the charismatic and Signs and Wonders movements. Are these evidence of true Holy Spirit revival? J.I. Packer's evaluation of the charismatic movement can apply to its counterpart, the Third Wave:

Does this ideal of renewal at any point go beyond the historical evangelical notion of revival? Yes: A vein of what I have called super-supernaturalism runs through it, becoming visible in the stress on tongues, prophecies, healing, and the expectation of miracles. In evangelical thinking about revival it has constantly been diagnosed as a mark of disturbing immaturity rather than of high spirituality.

Does the charismatic ideal of renewal at any point fall short of what Evangelicals mean by revival? Yes: The notes of humility and awe in the presence of a holy God and of the need to realize the sinfulness of sin, the evil of egoism and the radical nature of repentance are rarely struck. As a result, the
child-Daddy, buddy-to-Jesus informality that charismatics often embrace and cultivate as a corrective of the cold and distant formality of prerewindel religion easily becomes more childish than childlike and actually stunts growth.  

There is no doubt that the charismatic and Signs and Wonders movements have within them many sincere believers, and we echo their call for renewal, a Spirit-filled life, openness and praise to God in our assemblies and zealous evangelism of all men. But the movements are marked by theological immaturity and overemphasis on experience and de-emphasis on doctrine. This opens them to delusion and seduction by the forces of darkness.

The same tactics of Satan in perverting revival also are used in preventing it. More and more we are seeing the inroads of occultism into the secular world, including science, business, psychology and psychiatry. Tragically, this has infiltrated into the professing church, especially through the so-called neutral science of psychology. Practices of shamanism (witchcraft, sorcery) have come into the church in such terms as positive imaging, positive confession, holistic healing. Some groups champion these tactics in the name of “faith,” preaching a “health-and-wealth gospel.” Noncharismatic evangelicals experiment in these practices in the name of positive thinking, possibility thinking, and self-esteem. Hunt and McMahon get at the heart of the delusion:

The entire smorgasbord of therapies being encouraged by some Christian leaders is being sampled by Christians in one form or another, either out in the secular world or inside the church. Much of this influence has come into the church through Christian psychology and the pseudoscientific practices of inner healing and healing of the memories. The common denominator is self. Not everyone would identify with the desire to become a god, but that is the lie that hooked not only Eve but her descendants. And to whatever extent we seek our own will, seek to use God to bring about our will, pander to our self-centered desires, or in any way are afraid or unwilling to surrender wholly to God’s will—to that extent we are exalting ourselves to the position of gods, whether we call it that or not. The teaching is spreading that we don’t ask God, but command Him to give us all that is our divine right to possess and enjoy.

Whatever the label on the package, the product inside is the same old satanic ploy: “The answer is within ourselves,” we can “do it” if we only learn the “law” and “principles” that apply and put them into operation by “faith.” The goal is always to reward self in some way. Though called by many names, it is still the lie that the Bible prophesies will become the new “truth” upon which Antichrist’s kingdom will be built and which will eventually prove to be a foundation of sand. From this root of delusion the entire tree of sorcery has sprung forth and blossomed, and is now being devoured by this generation.

The need is imperative for the church to search the Scriptures lest it accept a substitute revival for the true and be seduced along a path of spiritual destruction. There is no separating reformation from lasting revival. Lovelace agrees:

Even where the flesh, the world and the devil are relatively inactive in distorting or resisting an awakening, the adoption of false principles is likely to upset its course. And bad theology can make a work extremely vulnerable to the flesh and the devil. Thus a shallow understanding of sin and the leaven of asceticism have deeply deformed American evangelicalism since the early nineteenth century. ... For the purity of a revival is intimately related to its theological substance. A deep work cannot be done without the sharp instrument of truth. Unless revival involves and issues in theological reformation, its energy will be contained and its fruits will not last.

Satan also is preventing revival:

2. By satisfying the church. A false revival will satisfy and
keep many from seeking the true riches, but we are thinking of many others who are satisfied in a different way. Fundamentals will reject the position of the charismatics on grounds of doctrine, yet will continue in their programs, content without any real demonstration of Holy Spirit power. Our evangelistic techniques and programs of church growth have been “getting the job done.” This “show of success” has our churches in a state of satisfaction. True, we hunger for more results, but we do not hunger for God! In what are called Grace Churches we see so often a glorying in the “riches” of Reformed doctrine and an attitude manifested that “we have need of nothing” (since we have the truth). Dead orthodoxy is equally a tool of the Devil as excessive enthusiasm. Our churches meet week after week content with the status quo of spiritual experience. There is no experience of biblical worship. The results can be explained entirely on natural grounds. It has been said that the American church is 3000 miles wide and one inch deep. “Revival conditions are not with us at present; this is a day of small things, and we remain pygmy saints.”

The book of Judges is a book of revival. Time after time the record unfolds the circle of apostasy, servitude, heart cry for deliverance, and a delivering judge (revival). This is repeated over and over until the end, but the final circle comes short with no heart cry. The deliverance comes in God’s mercy, but only partially (Samson). The real tragedy of our day is that there is no “heart cry” in our churches. We are satisfied with our substandard experience. In our evangelism we are content to export “more of the same” across the street and across the sea. We are satisfied and “have need of nothing.” As long as we are passionless and prayerless revival tarries. Ravenhill pinpoints the condition of a sterile church and its need of soul travail:

The Church of our day should be pregnant with passionate

propagation, whereas she is often pleading with pale propaganda. To be sure, methods of child delivery have altered with the advance of science; but again we say that science, that darling of the doctors, cannot shrink the nine months of child-formation. Brethren, we are not beaten by the time element. The preacher and church, too busy to pray, are busier than the Lord would have them be. If we will give God time, He will give us timeless souls. If we will hide in our soul-impotence and call upon His name, He will bring forth our light as the noonday. The Church has advisors by the carload. But where are her agonizers? Churches admit an alltime low in spiritual births. We can increase our churches without increasing the Kingdom. (I know a family where all the children are adopted. Many of us preachers have more adoptions than births.) The enemy of multiplication is stagnation. When believers lacking births become burdened, and soul-sterility sickens us, then we will pulsate with holy fear, and pray with holy fervor, and produce holy fertility. At God’s counter there are no “sale days,” for the price of revival is ever the same—travail.

Satan opposes revival. When it comes he will counter it with persecution and seek to divert and discredit its effects. In the meantime, his efforts are aimed at hindering the coming of revival. May we not be ignorant of his devices (2 Cor. 2:11). May we get into the Word of God and learn to use the Sword of the Spirit (Ps. 149:6)! May we put on the whole armor of God and engage Satan in the heavenly warfare in Spirit-wrought prayer (Eph. 6:10-18)! Thanks be to our exalted Lord, Satan is a defeated foe (John 12:31-32)! The victory is ours, “because greater is He who is in [us] than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Author

Dr. Robert H. Lescelius is academic dean of Georgia Baptist College and Theological Seminary, College Park, Georgia. He has contributed previously to Reformation & Revival Journal, Volume 3, Number 2, 1994.
Endnotes

1 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 256. This book has been a helpful source of insight and information, especially Chapter 8, "How Revivals Go Wrong."


5 Lovelace, 243.

6 Edwards, quoted by Lovelace, 260.

7 Ibid., 260-61.


12 Lovelace, 261.


15 Lovelace, 261-62.

16 Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit*, 248.