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Are Independent Baptist Churches in a Post-Revival Era?

by Elmer L. Towns

An old Baptist farmer said, "A revival is something that nobody can explain, but everybody recognizes."

Revival does not come by organization, planning, and programs. It does not come only to the educated, the literate, or the sinful. It is not exclusive to Sunday mornings, Wednesday evenings, high-steepled churches, or brush arbor meetings. Revival is God Himself working among His people. A revival is spontaneous, like wildfire burning out of control, like the hurricane that rushes toward the shore.

There is controversy concerning the source and method of revivals. Some agree with Jonathan Edwards, the American churchman instrumental in the First Great Awakening, that revivals are "the sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit." Edwards believed that man cannot bring about revival. On the other side of the issue was Charles Finney, the evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, who taught that "revival is the right use of the appropriate means."

In the early seventies many independent Baptist churches were the hottest items in church growth. During this time a list of the 100 largest Sunday schools included more independent Baptist churches than any other denomination.

According to my understanding of revivals, certain of these independent Baptist churches had a touch of revival and that caused this unusual growth.

Some independent Baptist pastors took unbelievable steps of faith. They sold bonds to buy buildings or buses. They believed God would bless them, so they purchased large acreage for church campuses. Their vision, compassion, and outreach were great. God rewarded these churches with revival. Altars were filled as the unsaved came seeking Christ. Buses brought hundreds to church. Spectacularly, alcoholics were saved and called to preach, broken families were put back together.

When God pours out His Spirit in revival, Christians commit themselves to more work in Sunday school, fasting, soulwinning, and raising money. The church grows and prospers.

If the independent Baptists are right about revival, then the more they repent, fast, pray, and exercise faith, the greater will be the revival, whether in a local church or in a wider circle.

If there was revival among independent Baptists in the early seventies, why did it cease? History teaches that most revivals seem to run their course in three or four years, but there are also natural reasons. In 1974 the Arab oil embargo and the economic crisis hit America. Churches cut back busing and building; they emphasized stewardship rather than aggressive growth. They began to turn from revival-oriented church growth to institutional church growth. Financial seminars became

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popular. Emphasis was given to discipleship, Sunday school curriculum, organizational charts, and educational seminars. These things are not wrong, but independent Baptists did not realize they were moving from a revival model to an institutional model.

Additionally, many pastors had their churches as large as they wanted them. They had no desire for further growth. Many churches listed among the 100 largest in America lost their motivation for growth. They lost the touch of revival they had.

What church growth they had achieved through revival, they tried to

keep by intensifying their labors—more visiting, more advertising, or more revival meetings. Perpetuating revival by hard work is like keeping a storm going by fanning the breeze. It cannot be done.

Others who feel revival is waning go into legalism—under the guise of "parity leads to power." Since they got revival by repenting from known sin, they think they can keep revival by intensifying the cleansing process. But these efforts are man-centered rather than God-centered.

Still others resort to new programs and techniques to try to keep what they gained by revival.

Today some independent Baptist churches seem schizophrenic. They are not sure whether they are an institutional church or whether they are a revival center built on biblical spontaneity, excitement, and emotional response—like their role models of a decade ago.

Of the thousands who were won to Christ in independent churches, and the thousands who were brought in on buses, many were lost to the church because there was no structure to involve them, or educate them properly concerning their lifetime commitment to Jesus Christ.

Can we have another outpouring of revival in America? The answer is obviously yes. It is never too late to have revival. The church can never sink so low, nor can society go to such ruin that God cannot visit His people with revival. Revival can visit an individual church, or be poured out on a group of churches, or on a geographical area—a city, a county, or an entire nation. God can do anything in response to His people when they seek His face. The lingering question is, Will God pour revival on America? The answer lies with the church.

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