

The Church Needs Revival

By Tom Hill

Bible Text: Matthew 17:14-21

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The Bible provides many examples that reveal the need for revival. The exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt and their migration through the wilderness reveals numerous illustrations that called for revival.

Further, the times after the occupation of the land as recorded in Judges disclose the sins of mankind that establish the need for revival.

The sinful rule of the kings of Israel furnishes abundant examples of the need for revival and God's movement in revival.

The New Testament gives numerous examples, too. One in particular comes from Matthew 17:14-21. It recounts the time following the transfiguration of Christ.

A distraught father had brought his demon possessed son to the disciples for help. They failed in their attempt to cast out the demon. As Jesus came down the mountain, He saw the crowd, questioned the father, and then healed the boy.

This striking account pictures the current condition of the Church of Jesus Christ.¹ The demon possessed child represents the world. The disciples depict the Church.

As the disciples had no affect upon the boy, so the Church has no affect upon the world today. This ineffective influence gives an unpleasantly conspicuous signal of the desperate need of revival in the Church.

From this passage, I want to examine some particular absolute truths about this evidence of the need for revival. I pray that these truths will overcome your doubts and questions about your need for revival and lead to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in your life.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify for you the truth, convict you of its need in your life, and correct you to bring about repentance and revival in you that will revolutionize and transform your life.

The child's condition

The passage clearly reveals the pitiful condition of the boy. It says in Matthew 17:15:

“Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is a lunatic, and sore vexed: for oft-times he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.”

The other references to this incident from Mark and Luke describe his state even more graphically. Those writers describe the uncontrollable fits and convulsions into which the demon threw him.

Truly, the child was helpless and hopeless. As Dr. G. Campbell Morgan points out, that although he lived in a cultured society, he found no solution to their problem from it.²

The refined, learned, and religious leaders could not effect a cure. In desperation, the father took him to Jesus’ disciples.

Indeed, the world today mimics this suffering boy. It, too, suffers at the vile hand of satan and his evil demons. It, too, finds no answers from the cultured society at hand.

Its refined, learned, and religious leaders watch, helplessly and hopelessly, as mankind, sick with sin, reels under the dominion of the evil one.

Again, like the afflicted boy, mankind can find help only at the feet of Jesus Christ.

The disciples’ failure

As the father responds to Jesus, he describes the failure of the disciples. First, he had brought his son to them. The Scriptures plainly describe the father’s story in Matthew 17:16:

“And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.”

In other words, they tried to cast out the demon that controlled the boy. But, they could not effect a cure. The child continued to suffer.

In addition, the disciples sensed their own failure. After Jesus had healed the man’s son, they met privately with Christ to discuss the miracle and their failure. Note their question to Jesus in Matthew 17:19:

“Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?”

They knew that they lacked something. Not only had they failed to help the boy, but they experienced an inner failure, as well.

Perhaps, you, like most Christians today, know what these disciples felt. God’s people often endure failure instead of victory. Despair takes the place of hope. Spiritual hunger supersedes inner satisfaction. Disquiet and discontent control where peace should rule.

Yes, the disciples display a clear picture of the Church of Jesus Christ today. In like manner, as they failed, the Church has failed. It does not impact the world.

Worse yet, the present day records the continual decline of what little influence it had from the past. In addition, many believers today live with an inner failure that eats away at their spiritual vigor.

Like the disciples, the Church has made its attempts to change the world and the inner dissatisfaction of believers, but without success. The conditions remain not just unchanged, but worse.

The Church's condition

Sadly, the Church of Jesus Christ has become an ineffective influence in the world today. The world no longer dreads the Church as it has in times past.

With regularity, it derides the Body of Christ. It disrespects the presence and power of the Church and disregards the Church's position on matters of life.

Outside the Church, this lack of interest reveals the Church's unimportance and ineffectiveness. Inside the Church, the inner discontent within believers causes spiritual misgivings. Extensive evidence within the Church confirms these conclusions.

One evidence comes from the defection from the Church. This defection expresses itself in at least four ways:

- a decrease in Church attendance;
- a desertion from the Lord's Day observance;
- a decline in ministerial candidates; and
- a disinterest in personal holiness.

In regards to these serious signs, the noted Christian scholar Dr. J. Gresham Machen stated that

“...these things are simply surface indications of a decline in the power of Christianity. Christianity is exerting a far less powerful direct influence in the civilized world today...”³

In addition, signs appear in the Church's disavowal of cardinal Biblical doctrines. Indeed, the Church loudly proclaims that it stands on the authority of the Bible in all matters of life and godliness. Yet at the same time it in practice rejects its authority in many critical areas.

The following list discloses those key areas. At this time, space does not permit a detailed examination of these failures, but future issues of Restoration will explore them in more detail. Here's the list with a few comments about some of the listed items:

1. God: The Church today often questions, for example, the sovereignty of God and His sovereign intervention in the lives of mankind.
2. The wrath of God: Little is said about the judgment of God against sin, either in the lives of unbelievers or believers. It now seems that Christians and non-Christians can sin with license.
3. Jesus Christ: While the world questions the deity of Christ, the Church questions the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. He only made the forgiveness of sins possible, they say.
4. The Holy Spirit: At last count, I have noted 27 verbs that describe the action of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives. How many do you know? How many of them are active in your life?
5. Regeneration: Most believers do not even know the term nor what it means. Yet it describes the initial work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an unbeliever.
6. Justification by faith alone: This is another term that has fallen by the wayside and gets clouded with works.
7. The doctrines of salvation: Sadly, few believers can name them. They include but are not limited to such crucial truths as unconditional election, the total depravity of mankind, and mankind's inherent helplessness to change his condition before God.
8. The authority of the Scriptures: As stated earlier, this doctrine is loudly proclaimed but silently disregarded in practice. The Church today habitually ignores faith in its doctrines and obedience to its commands.
9. Sanctification: Sadly, few believers understand it, and fewer still pursue it.
10. Repentance: It seems that this truth no longer has a place in Church doctrine or practice. Salvation and spiritual growth are presented without any mention of it, as if it didn't matter. It does.
11. Faith: Too often the Church does not encourage the practice and growth of faith beyond salvation. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus asked if He would find faith when He returned (Luke 18.8).
12. Obedience: Somehow, this factor of Christianity has become an option. It seems that we can "ask Jesus into our hearts..." and then ignore Him the rest of our lives as if it didn't make any difference.
13. The doctrine of the Church: The new doctrine of the Church ignores the Biblical mandates and operation of the Church. Like the world, the Church has become entirely pragmatic. If it works, it must be right. The ends justify the means. These myths have captured the imagination of leaders and laity alike and led the Church into its present slothful condition.

With these few thoughts in mind, is it any wonder that Dr. J. I. Packer describes the Church as a mile wide and an inch deep? With great sorrow, I conclude that he is right.

The difference between the historical Church and the Church of today reveals a third evidence. For example, the experience of the modern Church vastly varies from Biblical times.

A serious examination of the book of Acts exposes numerous contrasts between the New Testament Church and the modern Church.

Further, this historical disparity continues to show itself in the modern Church's deviation from the post-Biblical Church, especially during revival times.

It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought to them. Parents rejoicing over their children as newborn, husbands over their wives and wives over their husbands.

The doings of God were then seen in His sanctuary. God's day was a delight and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful. The congregation was alive in God's service.

Everyone (was) earnestly intent on the public worship. Every hearer (was) eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth. The assembly in general (was) from time to time in tears while the Word was preached. Some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”⁴

Of course, this brief excerpt does not completely describe the conditions of the Church in revival. But it does describe what has occurred in every recorded revival in Biblical or post-Biblical history. It is a repeat of Pentecost and the book of Acts.

To my great sorrow, I know of no Church that fits this description. Surely, a few exceptions exist here and there, particularly in South America and perhaps China.

Even if these exceptions prove true, which I pray they do, it still speaks volumes about the desperate need for spiritual revival in the Church of Jesus Christ today.

Clearly, the modern Church is at discord with the Scriptural commands of Christ found in the Sermon on the Mount. In that notable message, Jesus called the Church to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5.13-14). I believe that the modern-day Church fulfills neither command.

Yes, sadly, the Church of Jesus Christ has become an ineffective influence in the world today. It desperately needs a spiritual revival. We need to repent of our sin and cry out to God for mercy. We need to pray earnestly the prayer of Habakkuk 3:2:

“O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.”

What effect should these truths have upon your life? What can the Holy Spirit accomplish in your life today because of these truths?

First, He can comfort you with them. Perhaps, the Spirit will reaffirm these truths in your life and renew your faith to believe Him for the spiritual revival the Church so desperately needs.

Second, He can convict you of sin. Where has He identified in your life your failure to apply these truths in your life? Has He found you guilty or innocent?

Third, He can correct you from sin. Cry out to God in confession and repentance of the sin that the Holy Spirit has identified in your life. In grace and mercy, He will abundantly pardon.

Finally, the Holy Spirit can conform you to the truth. He can work in you to modify your thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and actions to God's word.

I pray that you will experience the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life today. I pray that He will open your eyes to see your true condition before God. I pray that He will bring you to repent of your sin.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will apply these Biblical truths in your life and find relief through the blood of Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.

References

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4. Jonathan Edwards. The Works Of Jonathan Edwards. London. 1840. Vol. I, p. 348