

Clarifying Our Revival Terms



There seems to be much talk about revival among pastors and leaders of denominational and parachurch ministries. Desperation for another significant move of God's Spirit is on the rise in the Church today.

However, a great deal of confusion exists as to what we mean when we use the term revival. We have additional confusion with another term that many incorrectly use as a synonym for revival: spiritual awakening.

Three other issues associated with revival add to the confusion: Some churches have used the term for years to mean a set of special meetings; other groups that rally prayer for a nation will use the term to mean the spiritual renewal of that nation, and some groups equate revival to mean a display of outward manifestations. All of these uses can cause misunderstandings when we speak of revival.

We Need Clarification

Revival. Revival is something that happens to the church and to believers. You cannot be revived if you are not already alive in Christ. In the truest sense of the word, revival means God is doing a sovereign work of grace among His people. He moves in a powerful way to bring about repentance of sin and complacency, empowering believers in a fresh way with His Spirit to live as they should.

Spiritual awakening. A spiritual awakening occurs when an unusually large number of unbelievers come to faith in Jesus Christ. Confusion over using this as a synonym for revival comes because of two factors: 1) Great numbers of lost people coming to Christ always happen in the midst of a revival because the Church gets right with God and comes together in greater unity. Then people always come to Christ as a result. 2) In almost every church there is likely a significant percentage of people sitting in the pews who have never experienced true conversion. They are often the first people converted in a revival.

Transformation of society. Many past revivals were widespread enough that society changed for the better. In the Welsh Revival of 1904–05, jails closed and policemen had to do other things to pass the time because there was virtually no crime. This transformation is a wonderful thing, but it is not revival. It is the result of revival. History shows there have been significant smaller revivals where there was not a noticeable change in communities or regions. Though many revivals have spawned large enough spiritual awakenings that society has changed, that is not a given.

When praying for a nation, it is more accurate to use the terms spiritual awakening or community/national transformation, rather than revival, to describe what you are praying toward.

If you make the distinction that spiritual awakening will not happen unless God's people are revived—and that is why you are calling for prayer for revival—then you are correct in doing so. Even in ancient Israel, it was God's people who got right with Him first (revival), and then as many did, the nation was changed (transformation).

Revival meetings. Most who have grown up in the church remember revival meetings—when a church holds special meetings (usually once a year) to challenge their people toward a

deeper walk with God. Some churches still hold them. Actually, there is justification to call these revival meetings because they are a chance for people to get away from their routine and focus their hearts on spiritual things. Many people “do business” with God and get right with Him in these meetings, which is individual revival. The confusion comes because people have a mental picture of meetings in a church when they hear the term revival.

Manifestations. Some groups think true revival has not happened unless there are unusual manifestations—people shaking, making strange noises, gold dust in the air. In some significant revivals of the past, there were indeed unusual occurrences. People overcome with the Spirit of God shining light on their sins caused many to groan in unusual ways. Others were known to shake or roll (hence the term holy rollers) under the power of the Spirit.

But none of these things has to be present as the mark of true revival. Churches that hold up these manifestations as an “ought to happen,” often during a genuine move of God, begin to point people away from Christ to seek a specific manifestation. If lives are not changed by believers getting right with God and going deeper in their walks with Him, it is not revival.

The point is that people are often all over the map when they use the term revival. All the things mentioned are related to revival. But if we want to pray in agreement over revival we need to, as much as possible, use the same language and definitions.

To learn more about developing a rhythm of prayer for revival in your church, go to nationalprayeraccord.com.

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