

13 Modern Challenges to Awakening and Revival

This past week I had a private dinner with a prominent African bishop who was involved in a mighty national awakening in Uganda. This dinner, and the fact that last week was the National Day of Prayer in the United States, made me think of the subject of **revival**, awakening and how it could happen again in my nation.

Along these lines I have spoken to many who believe that global economic and political conditions will continue to deteriorate; because of this, many are receiving a great burden to pray for a global awakening.

As I have spent much time reading the accounts of the First, Second and Third Great Awakenings in the United States, the 20th-century Azusa Street Revival, and renewal outbreaks such as the Latter-Rain Movement of the late 1940s, charismatic movement of the 1960s and '70s, and some smaller renewal movements emanating out of local congregations (Toronto Airport; Pensacola, Florida; etc.), I have come to conclusions regarding some of the greatest cultural, societal hindrances to seeing a major outbreak of awakening (as opposed to a localized congregational awakening) akin to what the United States experienced through Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards, Finney and the like.

Furthermore, there have been mighty revivals and awakenings in various parts of the Global South (Africa, China, Indonesia and Latin America) that have trumped any of the aforementioned movements. Because of this, I have asked myself many times: Why hasn't anything like this happened recently in North America or Western Europe?

Truly, culture trumps the anointing and can even nullify the

Word of God (read Mark 7:13). That is to say, there are presently major cultural hindrances and challenges to seeing the same kind of awakening the United States experienced in the 18th and 19th centuries. We either have to find solutions to overcome these cultural challenges or we have to ask God for another way to penetrate the culture in a more subtle fashion. Either way, we cannot just continue on the same path, expecting a national awakening without addressing some of these pressing issues.

The following are some of my thoughts regarding challenges to national awakening:

1. The fragmentation of face-to-face contact due to social media.

People are simply not engaging in much face-to-face contact anymore. They are connecting via text, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of online social networking. This is hindering the ability of the gospel to effectively gain the attention and focus of young people (and older people as well) because our thought processes are inundated with trivial and often destructive social interaction, as well as internet pornography, video gaming and other things that sap spiritual life and energy from a generation of people!

Consequently, kids are not as socially skilled as previous generations and are not as inclined to spend time studying, reading books, hearing sermons and thinking of things deep and enduring. (Of course, there are many exceptions to this among our young people.)

2. The independent rather than communal mindset of American culture.

As I hear stories about the revivals in South Korea, China, Africa, Columbia and the like, I can't help but think these nations have less cultural challenges than we do here in the

USA. These cultures have a more communal mindset, in which they would tend to conform to the norms placed before them by a strong leader and/or a group of people, as opposed to the mindset of rugged individualism in America, which has been accentuated and made worse by the advance of technology.

Thus, it is harder to get the typical American to hold to the structure of attending a small group, getting up to pray at 5 a.m. every day, attending church services five nights a week, following a set of goals for evangelism, etc. This is why church growth and evangelism strategies, like G12, have not worked in America. (Not even the founder of G12 has experienced massive church growth and success launching a local church in Miami as he did in Bogotá, Columbia!)

We in America have to find strategies that work in the context of our own culture, not just imitate strategies that are effective in communal cultures and contexts.

3. The lack of geographic cohesion in modern cities.

The days of Finney, Wesley, Edwards, and Whitefield preceded the Industrial Revolution, when men and women left their rural farm communities to secure jobs in cities. Thus, in those days, the average person never traveled far from home, had the same 15 friends from the cradle to the grave, lived with or in proximity to their family, and had nothing to do at night but get together with the rest of their community for socials like dancing, card playing, etc.

Thus, when an evangelist like Finney held a revival meeting the whole community came out every night for weeks. Both the Holy Spirit and the evangelist had the undivided attention of a whole community, resulting in mass revival which eventually spread to the whole region.

Nowadays people do not associate their lives with their communities or even their block. Thus we are not connected to the lives of our neighbors but have divergent interests. This

means that we could live on the same block as another person for decades in a city like New York yet never know their name!

In this kind of social disconnect a church could have a meeting across the street from their neighbors yet have a very difficult time getting everyone on their block to attend the meeting. The effect of the gospel is diluted.

Also, churches are not often community-centric but often have attendees who travel from different communities in their region. This fragmentation results in a lack of cohesion and is a huge challenge to community-wide revivals and awakenings.

For several years during the beginning of my evangelistic ministry in 1980 we were able to break down these barriers in my community because we would close off whole blocks and show gospel movies like *The Cross and the Switchblade*. The result was a Finney-like revival; we would see many people living on the same city block come to Christ! It was like something out of a history book: We would show the movie, I would preach an evangelistic message for 15 minutes, have an altar call for salvation, and 50-70 people who lived on the same block would make a decision for Christ.

We saw great revival and recommended people to many different churches because our mother church was far away. Of course, this was before the advent of home videos, computers, the Internet, etc. Thus, it would be much more difficult in today's world to get everyone on a city block to be interested in seeing a movie—especially low-budget Christian films with B actors.

4. The amount of distractions and numerous options.

During the revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries people had few options in regards to transportation, technology, education and financially. Thus, when a church opened in a community it became not only the spiritual center but also the social and cultural center of all the people, even the

unbelievers. (For example, Charles Finney was a member of the church choir in his community even while he was a staunch unbeliever.) Thus, when God moved upon a church it automatically affected the atmosphere of its community and region!

Nowadays, people have televisions, radios, computers, bowling, movies, sports, the gym, martial arts, etc. Too many options results in less social and community cohesion and less attention to give God and church.

5. The affluence of American/Western churches and believers.

In my studies of revival and national revivals, it seems they were always preceded by social and cultural disorientation. Very rarely, if ever, was a people group open to the gospel when they were financially affluent with a stable government.

The present economic, cultural and political warfare and disorientation we are experiencing in the USA may be the greatest gift to those who are looking for a way for God to break through and awaken this nation! It may not only be a sign of God's judgment but of God's love that things seem to be getting worse for the average American and global citizen. God is longing for people to call upon His name for deliverance, but many won't if they remain comfortable with their lives.

6. The lack of expectant faith for miracles and the reduction of Christianity to pragmatism.

Many—if not most—evangelical and Pentecostal churches have only a lukewarm commitment to seeing the power of God operate in their midst. Even in Pentecostal churches rare is the evidence of the gifts of the Spirit and healing power of God in both the church services and in people's lives.

American and Western Christianity is acquiescing more and more

to the naturalistic/pragmatic mindset of its culture, devolving into churches that offer nice programs and therapeutic messages run by corporate style church governments and systems. In most cases the simplicity and power of the gospel has been replaced by this pragmatism and naturalism.

Thus, the average pastor and church attendee is expected to stay home when they are sick instead of going to church to get healed (read James 5:13-15), and is just as likely to depend on natural remedies to cure their physiological, emotional and physical maladies as their unbelieving neighbors. The expectation for God to break forth and heal, deliver and perform miracles is largely absent from Western churches. We need to recapture the awe, majesty and mystery of God again in our churches!

7. The lack of preaching on the law of God and the Ten Commandments.

Many pastors and churches have neglected the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments and the moral law of God in their preaching and teaching. The result is little if any conviction of sin, resulting in many emotional decisions for Christ but few real conversions.

Pastors need to preach the moral law of God again because through the law is the knowledge of sin (Rom. 7:7) as it serves as a schoolmaster that leads us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). When both society and the church have abandoned the Ten Commandments less people will be convicted of sin or even know they need a savior, resulting in a huge hindrance for biblical awakening and revival.

8. The lack of preaching on heaven, hell and eternity.

When was the last time your pastor preached a message on hell? Enough said. (Read Matt. 3:7; Luke 16:19-31.)

9. The lack of the fear of the Lord in our churches.

Nowadays it is very common for evangelical church attendees to live together in sin, engage in pre-marital sex, engage in drunkenness, dance at night clubs, post lewd pictures on Facebook, use foul language, and listen to ungodly music—all in the name of grace and as a response against excessive legalism.

Even worse, there is no accountability in the church. Those who live like this are allowed to serve as ministers and leaders! The Bible teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). Proverbs describes the fear of the Lord as the hatred of sin (Prov. 8:13). With so many Christians and leaders living continually on the edge or diving into a life of sin in the name of exploring their grace in humanity, it is a huge hindrance for a real move of God because such behavior grieves rather than attracts the Holy Spirit (read Eph. 4:29-5:10).

10. The lack of personal, family and congregational prayer and seeking of God

While most Christians are decrying atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair for successfully taking prayer out of public schools in the early 1960s, we must admit that prayer was taken out of Christian homes way before that happened. Few are the believers I know, even conservative activist believers, who have erected a family altar in their homes and are seeking God regularly with their spouses and their children.

Furthermore, I have heard for the past 20 years that surveys have shown the average pastor only prays about 22 minutes per day! How can we expect an earth-shattering revival if the leaders of our congregations are not even seeking God! (For more on this read *Why Revival Tarries* by Leonard Ravenhill.)

11. The lack of concerted, continual, united prayer among

pastors and churches.

One of the things I remember reading regarding the revivals of the First and Second Great Awakenings in America was the importance of united prayer amongst the churches in each community. Jonathan Edwards started the Concert in Prayer movement that spread to America and greatly impacted England. Finney would get pastors and congregations in each community to pray before and while he commenced with revival services in their areas.

Sustained, continual united prayer in one congregation can result in a great revival in that church, impacting their immediate parish. But for a city or region to be affected there needs to be a commitment by pastors to engage in united prayer with their pastoral colleagues serving as co-laborers.

12. The fragmentation of knowledge that subverts the biblical worldview.

With all the information available today on the Internet—from alternate religions, philosophy, atheism, postmodernism, modernism, New Age movement, etc.—it is harder and harder to have an awakening among a people in a community or city because, in the days of the First and Second Great Awakenings, even unbelievers had a biblical worldview! For example, read the writings of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, both deists in their faith, and you will see men with a strong Judeo/Christian mindset even though they were unbelievers!

Up until the time of the so-called Enlightenment, Christian theologians like Aquinas thought it very possible to unite all knowledge in the world under one unified biblical worldview. But the more they studied philosophy and the different world religions the more they realized what a hard task that was going to be! How much harder (but not impossible) is it today to see whole communities (especially in educated, urban regions) experience an awakening because the average person

with an internet connection has access to millions of books, articles and information on any subject. Thus, everyone thinks they are experts; the days when the clergy were not only the most spiritual, but the most educated and knowledgeable people in a community are long gone!

I still believe the biblical worldview is the most cohesive view, and the only view that makes rational sense of the world. But to get that across even in my own neighborhood amongst all the residents is a huge challenge today because of this fragmentation of knowledge!

13. The gospel is not permeating the elite systems and people of culture.

Present-day global revivals are primarily (but not exclusively) taking place amongst the poorest and uneducated nations of the world. For example, the greatest awakenings during the past 50 years have taken place in developing areas like Africa, China and Latin America in the midst of great economic and political turmoil which made the average person very open to God's saving power! (Although during the past 10 years many young college intellectuals in China are getting saved!)

In the USA, the greatest revivals resulting in societal change and reformation took place when folks like Oxford educated Wesley and Whitefield, Yale graduate Jonathan Edwards, and Finney, a trained lawyer, preached and reached not only masses of uneducated poor people but also the elite in their cities. In the Rochester revival of the 1830's (which was the closest thing to America ever having a whole major city come to God) Finney started revival meetings by first reaching lawyers, doctors, judges and those with the most cultural esteem and influence. This made it easier to reach masses of people!

For us to experience a national revival we either need to have mass disorientation or we need to reach the cultural elites in

the arts, music, science, education, law, and politics—not only masses of poor people who have no influence to bring systemic change to culture. Usually only a Marxist-type movement (for example, Occupy Wall Street) with a groundswell of masses of people who use violence to bring chaos and overthrow governments are successful in bringing real change, even though their change is demonic! Thus, if we want to see not only awakening and revival but a lasting reformation that will change our ungodly laws and culture then we also need to reach the elites, not only masses of people through typical evangelistic campaigns. (For more on this read my article “Why the Church Needs Cultural and Political Access to Bring Transformation.”)

In closing, I did not write this article to discourage anyone from praying for revival but to get all of us to seriously think through the issues and not just simplify everything by using the same methods employed in other nations and/or in other eras of this nation’s history and expect the same results. I still pray much for revival and reformation, but I also know that culture, societal structures and norms have to be understood before we can have the strategies necessary to bring long-term systemic change and experience earth-shattering revivals and awakenings in our nations.

Of course, God was able to use a foreigner like Philip to shake up a whole city (read Acts 8). In the 1950s God used American evangelist Tommy Hicks to shake up the nation of Argentina by moving in extraordinary signs and wonders, which is still having an impact today. (Read *Cry for Me Argentina* by R. Edward Miller for an astonishing account of this awakening.) But this Argentinean revival was preceded by at least 3-5 years of intense, focused, deep, united intercessory prayer led by Dr. Miller and others in his circle. (See point 11 above.)

Even so, let's be humble before God and understand the times in which we live (1 Chr. 12:32) so that when we seek Him, He will give us the wisdom to know how we can have the greatest impact upon our communities, cities, nation and the nations of the world!

As I end this article I think perhaps we should ask ourselves the following questions regarding awakening for the sake of clarity and practicality:

- Do I strongly desire revival, awakening and reformation, or am I content with things in this world as they are?
- Am I personally hindering revival in my church and city?
- Am I seeking the Lord or merely praying perfunctory prayers for awakening?
- Am I open to God for His divine strategies when I pray for revival or do I have preconceived ideas regarding how I think God should bring it about?
- Am I trying to copy old methods for awakening that are no longer relevant?
- Are there new strategies that have never been used before that the church should employ for revival?
- Does our nation have to experience a societal breakdown before people will be open to God?
- Instead of a massive, spontaneous revival like in the past, is it rather God's will in developed countries for churches to employ strategies of gradual, multi-generational, societal penetration in every level of society for reformation and transformation?
- Am I preaching the whole counsel of God that can awaken sinners and convict compromised saints?

Joseph Mattera is overseeing bishop of Resurrection Church, Christ Covenant Coalition, in Brooklyn, N.Y.