

Don't Drop the Ark

The Holy Spirit is easily quenched by pride, greed and religious agendas.

I'll never forget my first trip to Brownsville Assembly of God. It was 1995, the year an uncanny revival erupted at the nondescript Pentecostal church in Pensacola, Florida.

The rumor was that God had visited the quiet Southern town. I came not only as a reporter but also as a hungry seeker.

In the early days of the revival, the faithful came by bus, car and airplane from all over the world. Eager worshipers waited for hours in the sweltering humidity to get a seat for 7 p.m. services that often lasted past midnight. When evangelist Steve Hill finished his nightly sermons—in which he demanded repentance from spiritual compromise—the majority of people in the auditorium would run to the front of the church and bury their faces on the floor.

Wailing was commonly heard during those meetings. Some people shook under the weight of conviction. It did not matter if you were a drug addict needing conversion or a pastor living in secret sin: Everyone found forgiveness and an unusual sense of refreshing in that holy place.

My life was changed there. I wept on the carpet and repented for my journalistic cynicism. One night, in the midst of all the pandemonium near the stage, I ran over to where Hill was praying. He grabbed my head and screamed: "Fire! Fire! More, Lord!"

I was one of the thousands who fell backward on that floor. I

was not pretending. I felt as if God had placed a heavy blanket of His presence on top of me.

I don't question whether the Holy Spirit was in that place. But now that it has been more than 10 years, I am asking other questions. Why has this church that hosted hundreds of thousands of visitors shrunk to a few hundred members? Why do they now owe millions of dollars for a building they can't fill? Why are so many people who were part of the Brownsville church now hurt and disillusioned? Did the leaders of this movement mishandle the anointing of God's presence like Uzzah did when the ark of God almost toppled on the ground (see 2 Sam. 6:6-8)?

History shows us that revival is always risky. The devil opposes it, and carnal flesh gets in its way. The Holy Spirit is easily quenched by pride, greed, strife and selfish religious agendas.

I can't be the judge of what brought Brownsville's demise. But we must face the facts and learn some lessons.

The Brownsville Revival School of Ministry in its heyday had an enrollment of 1,200 students. That number shrunk to 120 this year. The church announced in May that the school will relocate to Louisiana under the direction of revivalist Tommy Tenney.

"One lasting legacy of the Brownsville revival is the school," Tenney recently told me, noting that graduates are doing missionary work in 122 countries. One alumnus, in fact, was instrumental in discovering an unevangelized people group in Indonesia.

That is thrilling news. But my heart is still grieved that the church where this marvelous outpouring occurred is now just a shell of what it once was.

Brownsville's attendance now hovers around 500. One former staff member told me that a large group of Brownsville members now attend a local Southern Baptist church in the city, while many others don't go anywhere.

"People have been leaving for three or four years," the former pastor said. "Some are not in church at all, including some who were on staff. I don't know anyone who has not been hurt."

At one point during the heyday of the movement, Korean pastor David Yonggi Cho announced from Brownsville's pulpit that the revival "would last until Jesus comes." Certainly the fruit of this revival will remain that long. But for those in Pensacola who were swept up in the ecstasy of those early years and then endured splits, resignations, debts and disappointments, the word "revival" now has a hollow ring to it.

Still, my heart cries: "Lord, do it again." The next time He does, I pray we will transport the ark the way God intended—and keep our hands off it.

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