

Spiritual Awakening: The Only Thing That Will Save Us

We can learn an important lesson from the East African Revival, which transformed a region 80 years ago.

The people of Uganda call it *Balokole*. In the Luganda language it means “the saved ones,” but the word became synonymous with the East African Revival—one of the most significant Christian movements in modern history.

This revival had humble beginnings in September 1929, just before America’s Great Depression. Historians trace it to a prayer meeting on Namirembe Hill in Kampala, Uganda, where a missionary to Rwanda, Joe Church, prayed and read the Bible for two days with his friend Simeoni Nsibambi. They felt God had showed them that the African church was powerless because of a lack of personal holiness.

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It is impossible to explain exactly what happened after this prayer meeting or how the resulting spiritual fervor spread. When God comes, unusual things happen. Within weeks after the Rev. Church returned to Gahini, Rwanda, Christians gathered to

pray and confess their sins openly. A heavy spirit of conviction fell on the people. Whenever they repented for their sins and failures they would weep uncontrollably, ask others to forgive them and pledge to make restitution.

The weeping spread to farmlands and open fields. Unbelievers who visited these gatherings were converted after they witnessed the sincerity of the Christians. Repentance went deep. Husbands publicly apologized for adultery and farmers repented for stealing cows from each other. Eventually, as the revival spread from Rwanda to Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Burundi, even the centuries-old tradition of polygamy (which was still common among professing Christians) was unraveled in some areas.

Balokole changed African Christianity forever. In a 1986 article for *Christian History*, Michael Harper writes of the revival: "It's effects have been more lasting than almost any other revival in history, so that today there is hardly a single Protestant leader in East Africa who has not been touched by it in some way."

I spent the past two weeks ministering in Uganda and Kenya, and everywhere I went I met people who still talk about the East African Revival—80 years after it began. It breathed resurrection power into dead, traditional churches and triggered aggressive church-planting movements that affected a variety of denominations.

Whether sermons were delivered from pulpits or under trees, six important themes were emphasized in those days: 1) the blood of Jesus; 2) the name of Jesus; 3) the cross of Jesus; 4) the Word of God; 5) the testimony of the saints; and 6) the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Leaders also stressed the message of 1 John 6-7: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness,

we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His son cleanses us from all sin (NASB).” As was true in other spiritual awakenings in history (such as the Asbury Revival in Kentucky in 1970), people stood in front of each other and admitted their sins, no matter how embarrassing. The honesty cut deep into human pride and dealt a fatal blow against entrenched sin and religious hypocrisy.

After hearing more details about the East African Revival while I was in Uganda last week, I was convinced that this type of movement is the only thing that will pull the United States out of its current despair. *We must have a spiritual awakening, or we die.* Political engineering, economic policies, government bailouts and stimulus packages will not save us. No politician, Democrat or Republican, will reverse our course toward destruction.

Our only hope is that a backslidden American church—a church that is as smug, blind and lukewarm as the Laodiceans—will “be zealous and repent” (see Rev. 3:19).

What encourages me is that God, not man, initiated all the spiritual awakenings of the past—including the First Great Awakening, which gave our country its historic Christian identity. Yes, we play our feeble part by praying, and we must storm heaven. Yes, awakenings come in response to our weak attempts to repent, and we must passionately seek a fresh baptism of holiness.

But we cannot manufacture revivals. Pentecostal fire comes from heaven alone. It is a sovereign blessing from a God who loves us and desires to rescue us from ourselves. We charismatics have generated a lot of our own sound and fury in the past 30 years, but much of what we have created is a shameful substitute for revival. We must become desperate for

the real thing.

Today our movement is mired in the shallow waters of self-centered, carnal Christianity. May God mercifully send us our own version of *Balokole*. May gut-wrenching repentance and public confession of sin interrupt our trendy worship services. May this holy fire spread until the people of the United States see genuine Christians living the message we preach.

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