

We Need a Revival of New Testament Love

We who call ourselves Spirit-filled Christians are notorious for overusing the term “revival.” If we get a standing-room-only crowd in a church for more than three nights in a row, and those people end up swooning on the floor after the altar call, we start hyping things up and comparing the meetings to the First Great Awakening.

But what exactly are the signs of a genuine move of God? Lately I’ve been buried in Paul’s epistle to the Thessalonians to find the answer to that question. After all, one of the most explosive spiritual awakenings in history took place in the Greek city of Thessalonica. It was a headquarters of ancient paganism (and just three hours from Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek gods), yet when the gospel was preached there it triggered a chain reaction of miracles and mass conversions.

Paul said of the spiritual explosion in Thessalonica: “Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5a). A riot erupted, Paul was run out of town, and the new Christians were persecuted. Yet the attacks couldn’t stop them: The impact of this move of God was so forceful that within a short time the newly converted Thessalonians spread their faith throughout most of Greece (see v. 8).

So we could say that biblical revivals always include: (1) powerful preaching that brings heavy conviction of sin; (2) supernatural miracles that display God’s power and confirm the message; (3) notable numbers of true converts who share their faith aggressively; and (4) persecution from those who resist the gospel. But after reading 1 Thessalonians a few more times I noticed one additional hallmark of genuine revival that we

often ignore: (5) remarkable, sincere love that nurtures the growing Christian church.

We all want the miracles. We long to see mass conversions. But we forget that New Testament revival doesn't happen without New Testament love. I see this love manifested in some specific ways:

1. Servant-hearted leadership. The apostle Paul and the leaders on his team did not think of themselves as "all that." They weren't pulpit stars. They didn't ride in limousines or demand five-star hotel rooms. Paul was even willing to work a job so he wouldn't be a burden to the Thessalonians. He told them: "Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our very own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

In today's "Spirit-filled" churches, some pastors have morphed into hipster CEOs who appear only in the pulpit and on the video screen. They may bring a powerful message, but the idea of personal impartation has become a relic of a bygone era. In the era of the iChurch, we really can't get on the people's level. That's too bad, because sermons alone don't make disciples. People need a personal touch from leaders who feel deep affection for those they are discipling.

2. Selfless investment. When Paul was in prison, he didn't throw a pity party or feel bad for himself. He was thinking 24/7 about the people he had led to Christ in Thessalonica. He desperately wanted to see them again. They were in his heart. He prayed for them constantly "that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). That kind of selfless love, modeled by humble leaders, sets the bar high for the entire church.

3. Slobbering affection. The word "brethren" appears in 1 Thessalonians 17 times. Paul understood that when we join the

community of the redeemed, we are bonded together by the Holy Spirit who lives in all of us. That precious spiritual bond should be treasured. That's why Paul wrote: "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another" (1 Thess. 3:12). He knew the true measure of Christian maturity is fervent love.

Paul also told the Thessalonians: "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss" (5:26). Today we explain this verse away by suggesting that kissing was a cultural tradition that doesn't apply to us. Really? I've been in churches where people keep their polite distance, and their lack of affection is an indicator of their icy spiritual condition. Some people criticize what they call "sloppy *agapé*," but I've learned that when Christians hug and kiss each other, they are also more prone to be passionate followers of Jesus.

Paul cared deeply about his followers and he told them: "We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children" (2:7). There is a direct connection between extravagant love for each other and the spirit of New Testament revival. Let's rediscover it.

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