

KINGDOM-CENTERED PRAYER

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

Throughout the Old and New Testaments and church history, every spiritual awakening was founded on corporate, prevailing, intensive, kingdom-centered prayer. We cannot create spiritual renewal by ourselves, but we can “prepare the altar” and ask God to send his Holy Spirit to change our hearts, our churches, and our communities.

Christians are used to thinking about prayer as a means to get their personal needs met. More mature Christians understand prayer as a means to praise and adore God, to know him, to come into his presence and be changed by him. But the corporate aspect of prayer is not well known. How do we pray, repent, and petition God *as a people*?

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND RENEWAL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God continually fall into periods of spiritual stagnation and then cultural accommodation to the idol worship and practices of surrounding pagan societies. Then there is a turning to God, the raising up of new leaders, and a “covenant renewal”—a restoration of spiritual vision and vitality.

This pattern is especially visible in the book of Judges, but it continues throughout the reign of the kings, the captivity, and the return from exile. Just as Israel was constituted a people with the reading of the law and the taking of the covenant oath at Mount Sinai, so the people must periodically remember who they are, renew the covenant, and return to the Lord. Sinai-like covenant ceremonies occur again before entering Canaan (Joshua 24), before choosing the first king (1 Samuel 12), and after the return from exile (Nehemiah 8–9). Less formal but crucial renewal movements are continually happening (you can find a string of them in Judges 3:7–11; 3:12–15; 4:1–4; 6:7–10; and 10:6–16).

If we look at all of these various revivals, we are first struck by how different they are. Some are formal ceremonies. Some seem to be spontaneous. Some are led by a strong central leader, and some seem to bubble up from the grassroots. But one thing is stated over and over again: the people “cried out to the Lord.” It is the only factor that is always present in every revival. It is corporate, intense, prevailing prayer—not for personal needs, but for the presence and reality of God among his people.

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND RENEWAL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Even in the New Testament under the leadership of the apostles, it is evident that there is still a need for continual renewal. Just as Israel’s election as God’s people was demonstrated at Mt. Sinai, so the church is constituted by the descent and filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. But just as Israel is continually called to Sinai-like covenant renewals, so the church, even when it doesn’t seem to be in major decline, receives fresh fillings of the Holy Spirit. “Mini-Pentecosts” happen in Acts 4:31; 7:55; 8:17; 10:44; and 13:9. What do these have in common?

It is very easy to get distracted by the three unusual phenomena of the day of Pentecost: the mighty sound like “a violent wind” (v. 2); the visible “tongues of fire” over each person (v. 3); and speaking “in other tongues” (v. 4), which each member of the multiethnic audience could understand in his or her native language (v. 6). Speaking in tongues happens in some of the other Spirit-filling occasions, but not all, nor even most. The central, abiding characteristics of Pentecost are that they were together in prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:1), they were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4), and therefore they “began to speak” (2:4) “declaring the wonders of God (2:11).”

Compare this with two other incidents in Acts after Pentecost. In Acts 4:31, like Pentecost, there is a period of prevailing prayer (4:24) and then a powerful shaking as everyone senses the presence of God descending. But unlike Pentecost there are no tongues of fire or speaking in tongues. What results again are boldness (an assurance of God’s love and reality) and the ability to speak the word of God (v. 31).

The incident in Acts 7:55–56 is interesting, because it is an individual experience. As Stephen is about to be executed, he raises his eyes to heaven (v. 55), as the believers in 4:24 raised their voices to God. He gets the same assurance and boldness, the sense of God’s reality and presence called “the fullness of the Holy Spirit.” This allows him to face persecution in a completely Christ-like way, with courage and forgiving love toward his executioners.

In summary, what do all of these incidents have in common? We see that there is a continual need to renew the fullness of the Spirit. We see also that the fullness, in general, is connected to prevailing prayer, especially in the face of a challenge.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL RENEWAL?

Spiritual revival, or renewal, is a work of God in which the church is beautified and empowered because the normal operations of the Holy Spirit are intensified. The normal operations of the Spirit include conviction of sin (John 16:8), enjoyment and assurance of grace and of the Father’s love (Rom. 8:15–16), access to the presence of God (John 14:21–23; 2 Cor. 3:17–18), and creation of deep community and loving relationships (Eph. 4:3–13).

This view differs or opposes three other common views:

- 1) The popular charismatic notion of revival, which sees revival as essentially the addition of extraordinary operations of the Holy Spirit (miracles, healings, prophecy, revelations).
- 2) The popular fundamentalist view that revivals are simply especially vigorous seasons of evangelistic activity. A “revival” is taken to mean an evangelistic crusade or a city-wide mission, etc.
- 3) The popular secular view that revivals are primitive, emotionally cathartic events, occurring among uneducated people subject to psychological manipulation by evangelists.

Instead, the marks of revival are the following.

First, there is an outpouring of the Spirit on and within the congregation, so that the presence of God among his people becomes evident and palpable.

When this happens, “sleepy” or stagnant Christians “wake up.” That is, there is a new and deeper conviction of sin and repentance—not just for major “behavioral sins” but for attitudes of the heart. They experience a far more powerful assurance of the nearness and love of God, with the end result that Christians become both humbler and bolder at the same time. The more deeply one feels his or her debt of sin, the more intensely he or she feels the wonder of the payment on their behalf.

Nominal Christians, or Christians in name only, begin to realize they don't actually have a living relationship with Christ by grace, and they get converted. When this begins to happen, it electrifies people. Long-time members are getting up and talking about being converted or speaking of Christ in radiant terms or expressing repentance in new ways. The early stages of renewal shake up other nominals and "sleepers" into renewal. Corporately, there is a sense of more passion and freedom and the presence of God in the worship services.

Second, as a result of this outpouring of the Spirit, new people are brought into the church, and it begins to grow.

On the one hand, the renewed believers create a far more attractive community of sharing and caring and, often, great worship. There is the beautified community of the King. This can attract people from the outside.

On the other hand, Christians who begin to experience God's beauty, power, and love put their relationship with Christ and the church first in their lives, and they become radiant and attractive witnesses—more willing and confident to talk to others about their faith, more winsome (less judgmental) when they do so, and more confident in their own church and thus more willing to invite people to visit it. As a result, there are numerous conversions—sound, lasting, and sometimes dramatic. Significant, even astounding, church growth occurs.

Many churches in America grow rapidly, but almost completely through transfer growth. When that is the case, renewal dynamics are not strong in the church. But in revival, conversions are not a trickle. In the U.S. from 1857–1859, a revival brought over a half a million new people into the church. In New York City, it is a well-attested fact that nearly all the churches grew 50 percent in membership in that two- to three-year period.¹ In Northern Ireland during this same period, 100,000 new converts (nearly a third of the population) joined the church. It is estimated that 10 percent of the entire population of Wales and Scotland were converted during the same time.

Third, there is a full impact on the community surrounding the church and even the broader culture.

Revivals produce waves of people who become involved in works of social concern and social justice. Major social justice movements, such as abolitionism, had strong roots in the revivals. The reason for this is that real holiness changes the private *and* public lives of Christians. True religion is not merely a private matter, providing internal peace and fulfillment. Rather, it transforms our behavior and our relationships.

The 1904–05 revival in Wales created many social changes. Life in the coal pits was transformed; workers and management engaged in prayer meetings on company time. Poor Law Guardians (who administered relief) commented that many working people came to take aged parents home from the workhouses where they had been sent so "inconsiderately." Longstanding debts were paid, stolen goods returned, and crime rates plummeted.

In summary, these three marks of revival may be small or large, long or short, dramatic or quiet, widespread or localized. They are subject to different degrees, but when these renewal dynamics are in place, the effects above will be seen. Without these dynamics in place, a church can grow in numbers but not in vitality, and thus the growth will not have lasting results.

Many churches in America do grow rapidly, but there are tell-tale symptoms of lifelessness. Most or all of the growth may be by transfer, not conversion. There is no deep conviction of sin or repentance, and thus few people can attest to dramatically changed lives. Also, the growth of many churches makes no impact on the local social order, because people do not carry their Christian faith out into their use of wealth, their

1. In New York City, the Fulton Street Revival began in 1857, when a layman at the North Dutch Reformed Church on Fulton Street began a noontime prayer meeting for businessmen. These statistics are drawn from collections of sermons preached by New York City pastors during the revival years.

work, or their public lives. Without deep renewal of the gospel in our hearts, our external lives will be sealed off from what we believe, and our beliefs will never result in concretely changed living.

HOW DOES SPIRITUAL RENEWAL COME?

There is much to say about this, but we will concentrate on what is, biblically and historically, the one non-negotiable, universal ingredient in times of spiritual renewal: corporate, prevailing, intensive, kingdom-centered prayer. What is that?

1. It is focused on God's presence and kingdom.

Jack Miller talks about the difference between “maintenance” and “frontline” prayer meetings.² Maintenance prayer meetings are short, mechanical, and totally focused on physical, personal needs inside the church.³ But frontline prayer has three basic traits: A request for grace to confess sins and humble ourselves; a compassion and zeal for the flourishing of the church; and a yearning to know God, to see his face, to see his glory.

It is quite clear when listening to a prayer meeting whether these traits are present. Most interesting is to study biblical prayer for revival, such as in Acts 4 or Exodus 33 or Nehemiah 1, where these three elements are evident. Notice in Acts 4, for example, that the disciples, who had been threatened, did not ask for protection for themselves and their families, but only for boldness to keep preaching!

2. It is bold and specific.

The history of revivals shows one or a few or many who take the lead in praying fervently for renewal. Their pattern is Moses (Exodus 33), who pitched a tabernacle outside Israel's camp, where he and others prayed for God's presence and to see his glory.

Such prayer need not (indeed, usually does not) begin as an organized church program, but rather it is a private field of strong exertion and even agony for the leaders. The characteristics of this kind of prayer include pacesetters in prayer, who spend time in self-examination. Without a strong understanding of grace, this can be morbid and depressing. But in the context of the gospel, it is purifying and strengthening. They “take off their ornaments” (Ex. 33:1–6). They examine themselves for idols and set them aside.

They then begin to make the big request—a sight of the glory of God. That includes asking for a personal experience of the glory and presence of God (“that I may know you,” Ex. 33:13); for the people's experience of the glory of God (v. 15); and that the world might see the glory of God through his people (v. 16). Moses asks that God's presence would be obvious to all: “What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” This is a prayer that the world would be awed and amazed by a show of God's power and radiance in the church, that it would truly become the new humanity that is a sign of the future kingdom.

3. It is prevailing and corporate.

By this we simply mean that prayer should be constant, not sporadic and brief. Why? Are we to think that God wants to see us grovel? Why do we not simply put our request in and wait? But sporadic, brief prayer shows a lack of dependence, a self-sufficiency, and thus we have not built an altar that God can honor with his fire (see 1 Kings 18). We must pray without ceasing, pray long, pray hard, and we will find that the very process is bringing about that which we are asking for—to have our hard hearts melted, to tear down barriers, and to have the glory of God break through. We need sustained, repeated prayer.

2. See C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 98–106..

3. You do have to pray for personal needs, daily bread, people who are suffering, and so on, because God commands it. This is not second-class prayer. For renewal, however, prevailing corporate prayer is necessary.

BUILDING AN ALTAR

Let's return to Stephen's "mini-Pentecost" in Acts 7. When Stephen was dragged before a human court, he was condemned unjustly and was about to be executed. But he was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 55). How so? We are told, "full of the Holy Spirit, he looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him . . . While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed... 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'" (vv. 55–57, 59–60).

What happened? First, he prayed. He looked up.

Second, by the power of the Holy Spirit, something Stephen knew with his mind became real to his heart. He saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. This refers to his work as our Advocate (1 John 2:1 says we have an advocate with the Father, one who speaks in our defense—Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins). At the very moment that an earthly court was condemning him, he realized that the heavenly court was commending him.

In other words, the "fullness" he experienced was an experience of the gospel. At that moment, he got an extremely vivid, powerful sight of what he already knew intellectually—that in Christ we are beautiful in God's sight and free from condemnation (Rom. 8:1; Col. 1:22). The Spirit took that intellectual concept and electrified his entire soul and mind and heart and imagination with it.

Third, Stephen, although only for a moment, was able to exhibit the new humanity that God is creating. He had courage. He forgave his oppressors. He faced his accusers not just with boldness, but with a calmness and joy. That is spiritual renewal. It is not simply an emotional experience—it is a heart-changing and therefore life and practice-shaping work of the Holy Spirit.

A good image for seeking the fullness of the Spirit is the concept of "building a life altar." In the Old Testament, an altar was built and a sacrifice placed on it, and then God sent his fire to burn up the sacrifice (e.g., 1 Kings 18). This is a great illustration of the dynamics of personal revival and spiritual renewal. Paul uses it when he tells us to make ourselves a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1–2). We cannot create spiritual renewal—we can only prepare the altar and the sacrifice. Only God can send the fire.

If we look at Acts 1, we see Jesus helping the disciples build an altar. There are at least four parts to this process.

A renewed church is vision-driven.

In Acts 1:6–8, Jesus repairs their faulty vision of what he is going to do in the world. They were looking for a political campaign, and he tells them about the nature of the kingdom, which will spread through his disciples as they become his witnesses and ambassadors. The vision is that through our words we will bring people under the kingship of Christ, which will heal and repair all things.

A renewed church is gospel-driven.

In Acts 1:9–11, Jesus ascends to heaven, and the angels tell the disciples that now the knowledge of his ascension should empower them. As in the incident with Stephen, it is only as we "preach the gospel to ourselves" about our standing in Christ that the Holy Spirit takes that truth and catches it on fire in our hearts, creating times of amazing assurance that equip us for service.

A renewed church is prayer-driven.

In Acts 1:14, we see the disciples uniting in corporate, prevailing prayer. It is only in prayer and through prayer that the Holy Spirit takes up the vision and the gospel and makes them fiery realities in the centers of our being.

A renewed church is leader-driven.

In Acts 1:15–26, we see the disciples asking for God to raise up leaders. Personal and corporate revivals occur through leaders which God identifies and equips.

How, then, can we as leaders “build an altar,” seeking our renewal as a church and a people by the power of the Holy Spirit? Let’s begin now.

- + First, pray that your church grasps its own vision in a new way. Take time to thank God for your church, for what it has done in your life, and for what you see it doing in the lives of others and in your community. Ask God to help you better understand and grasp what he is calling you to do to reach your city. Pray that your small group and outreach ministries will give people a deeper appreciation of your church’s vision and an experience of real community.
- + Second, pray that your worship services this season will be particularly anointed, that the truth of the gospel will be unusually vivid and spiritually real to all hearers—believers and non-believers—and that God’s presence would be evident.
- + Third, pray that your seasons and services of prayer would not be just a passing program but would signal a greater emphasis on and practice of corporate prayer within your church.
- + Fourth, accept your leadership role in the church. Even if you are not an officer—even if you think of yourself as a “volunteer”—you, as an active worker and servant, are a model to those less committed.

Take time to pray for yourselves, that you could enter a season of self-examination. Ask that you may be, with full gospel assurance, nonetheless hard on yourself. Ask that God would show you ways in which you don’t represent Christ as you should, in your relationships, in your work life, in your family life, in your habits and attitudes, and in your relationships within the church. Take time to pray for yourselves, that God will make things you know about the gospel in your head real to your heart, and changing the way you live where you need to change.

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