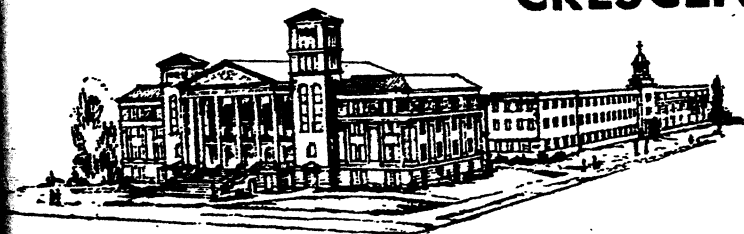


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"WHY HAVE A REVIVAL?"



Sunday Morning, April 8, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Matthew 5:33-37

A little over a year ago I received a letter from a friend who is a dedicated Christian. She lives in another state, but follows our church by receiving The Crescent Beams. She expressed great surprise that we were planning a revival. She wrote: "This is a matter about which I am not even neutral. I think the revival technique is a violation of the Gospel." Then she related her childhood experiences along this line. She had grown up in a small southern town where once each year the church staged "a big meetin'." Everybody got excited, and for one week it was the talk of the community. This person's father happened not to be a Christian, and she said during this period the preacher made his annual call to win him. But after the week was over, everything fell back to normal and the excitement and concern disappeared until the next revival. She concluded: "I have since come to realize that genuine Christianity must be constant; real enthusiasm would have remained in the church and true concern for individuals would have continued. Perhaps I am biased, but I think revivals as such are a denial of our faith."

I was very grateful for these words, for they made me call in question a very familiar procedure. I had been raised a Southern Baptist, and thus had known of revivals from my earliest remembrance. I had heard many people question their effectiveness for our day, but here was one who challenged their validity. It forced me into a very healthy re-examination, something in which I want you to share this morning. What about this time-honored practice of evangelical churches? Is revivalism a "bona fide" endeavor, or is it, as my friend said, a repudiation of the Gospel? We need to face this issue honestly, especially in light of coming events in our church. Therefore, this morning I ask you as I asked myself: "Why have a revival?"

I think we should begin by acknowledging that my friend's protest was based on a sound religious instinct. The revivalism that she had known was a spasm of excitement that was unrelated to the continuing life of the church. And this sort of thing is foreign to the religion of Jesus Christ! If there was one thing he stressed, it was the wholeness of true religious life. What one did was to flow naturally from what one was. All self-conscious acts or hypocritical demonstrations were rejected by our Lord. He would have nothing to do with the kind of "play-acting" that aimed at creating a false impression. This was one of His fundamental clashes with the Judaism of His day - their actions at certain times were inconsistent with their true being.

His scathing rebukes at this point are so familiar that they need little elaboration. He condemned the type of public generosity that gloried "in being seen of men" (Matthew 6:2). He rejected the showy practices of prayer and fasting that were aimed at evoking human admiration (Matthew 6:5; 6:16). But perhaps His passion for wholeness was seen most clearly in His words about the use of oaths (Matthew 5:33-37). He enjoined men not to swear by anything, and to restrict their statements to "a simple 'yes' or 'no'." The reason for this is obvious: if one has to confirm the truth of his words by a special act, it implies that under normal conditions he might indulge in falsehood. Even the hint of such duplicity denies the constancy of the Christian life. Men are to tell the truth at all times, not just on special occasions. Therefore, to make "a big ado" over something that ought to be going on all the time in itself arouses suspicion. It betrays the kind of "double standard" that has no place in a consistent Gospel.

This attitude of Christ toward oaths is very pertinent to the issue we are discussing. My friend saw in traditional revivalism the very lack of wholeness that is here condemned. Instead of an act welling up out of the very substance of being, it was a detached and artificial thing. What was done during that one week had little relation to what was done during the other fifty-one. This was the glaring weakness: the church made a temporary gesture at what should have been a permanent endeavor.

Therefore, I am willing to concede both that her protest is valid and that it is characteristic of much revivalism as we have known it. And I shall agree with her even further; this is not a neutral issue. I fear actual harm has resulted from this distorted procedure. It is not enough to say that the revival technique is ineffective. In some places it has worked, but to the detriment - not to the increase - of the Church.

We must remember that whenever we proclaim a truth but do not carry it through, we have thereby weakened it. It is better to do nothing than to make a claim and then deny it by our action. I know for a fact that my friend's father never became a Christian, and it was partly due to the erratic behavior of the church. She herself once said: "It would have been better for him to think they did not care; when they claimed they did, yet demonstrated they really did not, hypocrisy was added to unconcern creating an even greater barrier." The church must listen to these words very carefully, for we do not operate in a neutral zone. We can hurt as well as help, and we must accept this responsibility. Jesus predicted a dire fate for those who cause others to stumble. Paul gives an acid commentary on the influence of the Jews: "The name of God is maligned among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:24). One of the church's greatest weaknesses has been what Harry E. Fosdick called "the sin of Palm Sunday": cheering Christ on the first day of the week and crucifying Him five days later. Wherever there is duplicity, there is spiritual loss. Therefore, let us confess that a spasmodic, temporary, unrelated, artificial revivalism can be the arch enemy of the church. These are harsh words, to be sure, but I believe they are true.

However, having said that, let me go on to say that this is not the whole story about revivals. What we are witnessing today is actually a perversion of a very valid procedure. If you trace back into the history of the movement, I think you will find that it is rooted in a sound understanding of spiritual reality. Therefore, before we write off the whole process, let us look at how it all started.

At its very foundation is the realization that life is a dynamic process. From the very dawn of consciousness, man has recognized this fact. The ancient philosopher thought motion and flux were the essence of existence. Plato called this world "the Realm of Becoming" - that which becomes but never is. Human experience as we know it is never static nor stationary; we are always moving, always changing, always becoming something different. This means that spiritual experiences are never absolutely permanent - we move in this realm just as we do in the physical realm. And constant attention must be given to our spiritual development. This can no more be taken for granted than forgetting to eat. Strength soon fades and vitality wanes unless renewal is continued. A good illustration of this is Moses' experience as he came down from his encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35). His skin glowed so brilliantly that he had to veil his face. But life being what it is, this did not remain. Even "the glory of the mountain top" gradually paled away. And this is characteristic of all spiritual experience as we know it - no matter how vivid or intense, it will not last forever. All through the Bible the call of God is to a continuing pilgrimage, not an isolated act. The basic invitation of Jesus was: "Come, follow me" (Mark 1:16). To move with Him along the road of life was the essence of His way.

It is this understanding that was basic to the idea of revivals. Life is ever-changing, and therefore ever stands in need of renewal. To let things "rock along" in the same old way is to lose vitality. There is a kind of "spiritual gravity" that pulls down that which has ceased to have an upward thrust. Periodically, there must be attempts to revitalize, and this can best be done by changing the usual procedure. Just as we work all day and then lie down to re-create our physical strength, so spiritual life needs an occasional change of pace. This is how revivals began. For a certain period a new leader would be brought in and a different schedule would be followed in order that the fellowship might be literally "revived"; that is, to enable it "to live again." This corresponded to a very real human need, and let it be said that it was effective. Greater interest did result, and the church recovered again her true nature as a seeking fellowship. Thus new people were reached and gathered in as the natural outgrowth of this process. Renewal within led quite logically to expansion without. However, as the years passed and the procedure developed, there was an imperceptible change of emphasis. Gradually, revivals became identified with the effects, the evangelistic outreach. The concern for revitalizing the church herself was lost, and all the emphasis was placed on bringing in new people. Thus the crucial link in the whole process was dropped out, and we can see the result. This accounts for the artificiality of so many revival efforts. They do not start at the right place; they want the end results without perfecting the means; they want the harvest without planting and cultivating the crop; they want to short-cut the process and get the rewards immediately. But it does not work here nor anywhere else in our kind of world! Because they are not rooted in the solid foundation of genuine renewal, many revivals present a hypocritical caricature of what Christianity ought to be.

All of this is to say that the revival method is perfectly valid if we "put first things first." If our primary aim is to bring life back to our church that we might then have true enthusiasm and concern, we are on sure ground. The procedure only becomes bad if we try to short-circuit it and by-pass the only means to our end.

Sunday Morning, April 8, 1962

This brings me to a point where I seem to dwell quite often: our responsibility in this matter. If we really want a quickening of spiritual power in our midst, where else can it begin but right here within the church? It certainly will not happen automatically or without some conscious effort. Unless we "break stride" and make a special attempt, very little can actually happen. Such a change of pace is exactly what we are planning for next week. Throughout Christendom, this will be recognized as "the Holy Week." And we are setting it apart for a definite purpose. A new voice will be heard, a different pattern of activities will be followed - all aimed at reviving, renewing, revitalizing ourselves. This can happen, and then we can better fulfill our destiny as "seeking servants." But we have to make the special effort. Our spiritual lives have to be cultivated or they die.

Quite honestly, at this particular moment, I feel our church really needs just this. We have no alarming problems and much good work is being done, but we can so easily become complacent. Without periodic attempts at renewal, our rut is cut deeper and we can settle down to stable mediocrity.

I have always been haunted by the familiar words in the third chapter of Revelation. It is a description of the church in Laodicea, a fellowship that was obviously rich and prominent and self-satisfied. But what did the Spirit say? "You are neither hot nor cold!" (15). Would that ye were one or the other, rather than just lukewarm! The reaction is rather violent: "I will spew you out of my mouth" (16). As someone graphically said: "This is the kind of church that makes God sick."

Yet life being what it is, this is bound to happen to us without periodic renewal. No matter what the past glory, it will fade; no matter how great the achievements, they are past. Just as we must stop and feed our bodies, so we must stop and nourish our spirits.

We do not need a revival here if you mean by that a spasm of concern that appears for a moment and then vanishes away. But if you mean a renewal of the church herself, there is nothing we need any more! Before we can win others, something needs to happen to us. When we stop looking around and pray: "Lord, first of all revive us again," then, and only then, is the revival technique valid.