

REVIVALS.

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We see quite frequent announcements in the secular journals that the Rev. Mr. A—or the well known evangelist Mr. B—is about to “commence a revival” in a certain place. They mean that special religious services are to be held, and the word revival is thus most inaccurately applied to mere human agencies which are intended to produce certain spiritual results. They may produce such results or they may not; the wheels may be set in motion, but the “living Spirit” from heaven is not always “within the wheels.” A very eminent evangelist visited one of our chief cities a few months ago, and although very extensive arrangements were carried out for several weeks, and many attractive services held, the result as measured by conversions was very small.

Now a genuine Revival is a quickening of the church of Jesus Christ—or of many churches—by the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the usual fruits is an unwonted number of conversions. But a church that is aroused to a fresh liberality in giving, and a fresh activity in Christian labours, is a revived church also. Luther's Reformation-work was a stupendous revival; so was the birth and growth of Methodism under the brothers Wesley. Since the days of Finney and Nettleton we have been accustomed to apply the word to an awakening of God's people, attended with the conversion of impenitent sinners. Almost innumerable treatises and tracts and discourses have been issued on the theory of revivals; but to this hour they remain a mystery. And for the very sufficient reason that they are not controlled by the same uniform laws that prevail in the natural world. The sequence of cause and effect is invariable in nature. Water at a certain high temperature always boils; at a certain low temperature it always freezes.

But the prime factor in a spiritual awakening is the sovereign Divine Spirit, which is like “the wind that bloweth where it listeth.” No mortal man can command the presence of the Holy Spirit, or assuredly predict His coming. No church can arrange any special services, or set in motion any special measures with a positive certainty that they will be followed by the conversion of souls. Our sovereign God will never permit us to put our puny hands on

the helm. Again and again have churches started certain machineries or sent off for certain men with the confident expectation of producing a revival; the well-meant efforts have ended in utter failure. Similar methods do not always produce similar results. It is just because pastors and churches do not recognize this fact that they so often worry themselves over the failures of well-intended efforts, and are sometimes driven into desperate expedients. No little revival machinery has begun with clatter and ended in smoke. Man was in it; God was not.

On the other hand, the most powerful and blessed revivals have often burst suddenly upon a church. No human causes were discoverable. In my own ministerial experience of forty-one years, every revival, except one, came unexpectedly. The first one—at Burlington, N. J.—began when my little church was quite discouraged, and when not a solitary effort had been set in motion. The appeal of a little Christian girl awakened a young man; the youth's mother reported the fact to me; I immediately started the mother in one direction and I hurried off in another, inviting our people to a prayer-meeting that very evening. The house was thronged, and the very atmosphere seemed to be charged with a heavenly electricity. It was a small “Old School” Presbyterian church, wholly unaccustomed to revival-scenes; nothing was done but plain preaching and fervent praying: we sung the old-fashioned hymns and held no inquiry-meetings; and yet for a month a work went forward which for solemnity and intensity of feeling and pungency of convictions and thoroughness of conversions equalled some of the most powerful which Charles G. Finney describes in his Autobiography. The convictions of sin were in some cases so acute as to destroy appetite for food and drive away sleep. The conversions were as clean-cut as a new coin from the mint. It was a normal revival of the Pentecostal stamp; God was everywhere, man nowhere.

Several years afterward a remarkable work began in the Market Street Church, New York, in quite as unexpected a fashion. Discovering during an afternoon of pastoral visits that three or four individuals were deeply impressed by the Holy Spirit, I immediately summoned my Board of Elders, and we appointed special meetings for every evening, with inquiry