How Is Your Revival Going?

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A while back I spent some time in Madagascar, teaching a course with my husband at the Lutheran seminary in Fianarantsoa. There were three questions that the students asked us repeatedly.

The first was, "Is it true that Martin Luther drank beer?" This scandalous rumor seemed to be a point of dispute between the Malagasy evangelized by pietistic, teetotaling Norwegians in the center of the country and the Malagasy evangelized by not-quite-as-pietistic, beer-tolerant Norwegian-Americans in the southern part of the country. We told them yes, it was true, though beer in Luther's day was a lot weaker than ours and with its live yeasts was safer to drink than water. They did not ask about our beer drinking habits and we did not volunteer the information.

The second question was, "Is it true that Americans celebrate Halloween?" In a culture where witchcraft and traffic with the dead are still normal and widespread, Christians have to make a clean break with such affairs. It is therefore shocking to the Malagasy that Christians elsewhere might set aside a day to dress up children as ghosts and ghouls and shower them with candy. We said that there are some American Christians who object to Halloween, but for most of us demons and witches are so far from our experience of reality that they're not a cause for concern. This was obviously harder for them to believe than that Luther drank beer. They did not ask us about our Halloween habits and once again we did not volunteer the information.

The third question was, "How is your revival going?"

Caught off-guard by the question the first time it was asked, I stumbled and stuttered and finally managed to say, "Well, actually, we don't have a revival."

"None? Not at all?" the student pressed.

"No. None."

"How can you have a church without a revival?" the student wondered aloud in astonishment.

And after just a few days experiencing the vibrancy of the Malagasy church, its rapid growth, its powerful spiritual and healing ministries, I began to think: you can't.

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"Revival" is not a word to warm the cockles of a northern Lutheran's heart. Revivals aren't totally foreign to the Lutheran experience, but nowadays they have a bad rap. It's rare to hear a good word said about revivalist Hans Nielsen Hauge (one of those pietistic Norwegians) despite his almost singlehanded transformation of Norway's society.[1] Finland has seen two major revivals, led respectively by Paavo Ruotsalainen and Lars Levi Laestadius,[2] but their heirs today are seen to be reactionary and sectarian, hanging on to membership in the folk church by a thread.

American Lutherans have our own particular burden about the word. Revivals are what *Protestants* do, warming up the anxious bench to extract emotional but short-lived conversions via carefully engineered tactics. Revivals are carnivals of hypocritical religion where "more souls are conceived than saved," as a pundit once put it. Revivals are the domain of manipulative superapostles preaching hellfire, damnation, and bigger contributions to the coffers rather than the grace of God. Inherently anti-institutional, anti-intellectual, and anti-liturgical, they perfectly embody everything that Lutherans oppose.

Sometimes you even get that judgment from revivalists

themselves. The book *On Revival: A Critical Examination* collects conference papers by pastors and theologians in Great Britain reflecting on the fates of revivals and attempted revivals, mainly in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. The various authors agree in condemning "revivalism," a human-induced or -engineered social phenomenon. They observe that revivalism not only depends on the liberal Enlightenment Christianity it decries but actually tends to reinforce it: both Wales and Norway saw powerful, extensive, and wildly successful revivals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet they count among the most secularized parts of Europe today.[3] The authors are positively scurrilous toward the habit of making spiritual phenomena ends in themselves and looking for victory instead of the cross: "It is only a specifically bourgeois church that perceives the Spirit's action as being achieved outside the common matrix of struggle, pain and self-denial."[4]

Yet for all this insider frustration, there is a common agreement that revival, as opposed to revival*ism*, is a God-given reality. "[T]rue revival has God as its subject."[5] And what *God* does in true revival is generate "internal transformation that bears the hallmark of Jesus Christ" as well as "consideration for those most predisposed to the Kingdom of God, namely, those for whom divine grace works—the disempowered, disenfranchised, marginalised and overlooked. Such are the characteristics, the virtues, of those who enter into the Spirit's domain of resonance."[6]

Still, the initial excitement even of truly God-given revival won't guarantee long-term results. The authors collectively argue for a more serious approach to catechesis and character formation for endurance, growth, and maturity. If not, revival will degenerate into revivalism, and instead of seeking Jesus, people will seek "experiences of the Spirit [as] add-ons to their affluent lifestyle. Contemporary revivalism is a cultural expression of advanced capitalism… Charismatic revivalism provides emotional release for those who have made it up the greasy pole of techno-capitalist society at the expense of their psychic dislocation."[7]

Such criticism may convince American Lutherans that revival is more trouble than it's worth. Better a slow and dignified death than a noisy and compromised anarchy. Yet one factor makes a tremendous difference to the outcome of both church and revival: and that's whether the revival stays *in* the church.

The fact is, the church as an institution with its tremendous weight of history and bureaucracy generally does not like the suggestion that revival is needed. Even genuine revivals have a hard time finding a home in the church. And revivals, caught up in the excitement, aren't usually willing to slow down and quiet down long enough to listen to the historians, much less the bureaucrats. As far as I can tell, this mutual deafness is exactly what happened with the Charismatic renewal in the American Lutheran denominations in the 1970s, to the detriment of both. Likewise the revivals in nineteenth-century Sweden, which produced splinter Free Church and Covenant offshoots and then, some decades later, the most thoroughly secularized Lutheranism on the planet in the form of the Church of Sweden. Different orientations and assumptions about the problems facing Christianity usually mean a breach, or worse a divorce. When that happens—and as a rule it does—the revival gets crazy, the church gets authoritarian, and the society gets secularized.

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But sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the church accepts the need for revival and the revival accepts the need for discipline. The fact that Finland is the least secularized of the Nordic countries is often attributed to the fact that its two big revivals have stayed in the church, even now when tensions are running as high as they ever have.

Even more impressive is the case of Madagascar. There have been four major revivals—starting in 1894, 1900, 1941, and 1946 respectively, three in the Lutheran church and one in the Reformed church—and all four are still going![8] The Malagasy word for the movements as whole, *Fifohazana*, means "to be awake, to be alive, and to be active," alluding to Ephesians 5:14.[9] Hardly a passing fad, revival is considered essential to the health of the church.

Not that it was altogether easy for the revivals to be integrated into the life of the church. In each case, there was a period of testing. The original movement, founded by Rainisoalambo, was only accepted when the church's leaders realized that "the central focus of the movement's mission-evangelizing was not on the signs but was Christological."[10] It took more than a dozen years for the even more famous and more effective evangelist-prophetess Nenilava's revival—centered on preaching, exorcism, and the laying-on of hands—to be recognized by the church.[11] The fourth revival, sparked by Rakotozandry Daniel, focused more on repentance and amendment of life, and even this took some time to accept.[12] All of the revival movements led to the creation of camps or even villages of committed believers; today there are fifty-six such *toby*s in all.[13] And the Fifohazana

is the number-one provider of care for the mentally ill in the entire island.[14]

In 1985 the Fifohazana became an official branch of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, and it remains a rare case of an indigenous African Christian movement remaining within a historic mission-started church. To be sure, as one observer puts it, there are two different ecclesiologies at work in the revival and in the church. But the difference appears to be a wholesome case of mutual correction, a dialectic of the sort that Lutherans otherwise adore. "Is the Fifohazana movement a church? Clearly not, if we believe their printed manual, which names unity with the church and not moving out of it as a guiding principle. Then how are we to understand the movement? Perhaps we need to develop new ecclesiological categories, new ways of understanding the nature of the church."[15] Or, as one Malagasy pastor put it to me, the seminary in Fianarantsoa is the heart of the church, but the revival is its lungs. The church would not live very long without either.

The Malagasy example shows that it's a mistake to equate revival with panicked efforts at reanimating dead liberal Protestantism in the West or upping membership numbers. Revival in Madagascar was and always has been essentially biblical, missionary, and diaconal in spirit. The same can be said of the revivals in Ethiopia and Tanzania's Lutheran churches.[16] And as long as there has been church, there has been need for revival—as lukewarm Laodicea of Revelation 3, at the tail end of the canon, already demonstrates. Missiologist Andrew F. Walls even finds revival at the headwaters of that most respectably staid of institutions, monasticism: "How shall we sum up Antony's witness to Christ? Antony represents perhaps the first revival movement that we know of in the early church. His conversion is not from paganism, but from ordinary Christianity."[17]

How is your revival going?

The words haunt me, and not because I have any personal predilection for emotional excitement in worship or anxiety about numbers. I feel much more at home amidst ambiguity, nuance, and endless qualifications than the enthusiasms of ecstatic prayer. But the irony is that the study of church history and ecclesiology has convinced me that revival is needed. We Lutherans may excel in theology and all the complexities of the theology of the cross, but we continually—and I believe mistakenly—address this wisdom to those not yet ready to hear it. We expect people to be Christians before they are Christian, Lutherans before they are Lutheran. True, a revival will spoil without good theology to catechize the revived. But we have little notion of how to create in people a *longing* for catechesis, a desire to know the Lord they've actually encountered in a meaningful way. What is the real presence of Christ in the Supper to someone who's never noticed his absence? What's the joy in forgiveness to someone who's never seen the need to repent?

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It's not just our failings toward those who have not yet heard and believed in the gospel that troubles me. Madagascar's revivals certainly draw in new believers, but they are primarily for the long-term Christians. Even people who show up in church every Sunday may be committed to showing up in church every Sunday rather than being committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even the infant-baptized raised in the faith need to grow up, deepen, mature, feel, experience, serve, and grow *passionate* about the gospel.

I'm not seeing much passion toward the gospel among us. The passions that run high in our midst are the angry ones, directed toward all the failures, real and perceived, of church as institution. All the decades of my life have been marked by continual power struggles for the direction and shape of our denominations, with little outcome but massive loss of membership and pyrrhic victories. We have intense anxiety about our institutions and something approaching apathy toward the gospel. It's as if we have been engaged in an anti-revival.

I'm increasingly persuaded that this has been the wrong battle to fight. That conviction doesn't arise from the evident failure of any of our denominations to be much more than mirror images, with a thin Christian veneer, of whatever segment of American society they happen to occupy. It comes instead from surveying the congregational detritus. I have heard so many stories by now of pastors destroyed by congregations. I have heard so many stories by now of congregations destroyed by pastors. I wouldn't dare to guess which party has caused more destruction, but there is abundant guilt on both sides.

I sometimes get the feeling that our operating assumption is to treat the "Jesus is Lord" business as read, so now we can get on with what we *really* care about—preserving the building (because my great-grandmother did the needlepoint on the altar cushions), worshiping in a distinct style (because it's superior to all the other flawed styles out there), stewardship (because we all are committed to a certain church lifestyle that is non-negotiable), serving the poor (never noticing the unsaid assumption that the poor are apparently not here with us or might not necessarily want to

receive our magnanimous benefactions), making a public witness (subtly though inevitably in contrast to another church that makes a bad witness), steering American society in the right direction (as evidently God can't do it without our help). And even these examples assume that the congregation's energy is directed toward a matter of substance rather than being the outplay of personality politics of the most toxic kind—though I suspect now that this probably takes up an undue proportion of any given parish's energy. There isn't much room for primary, sustained, passionate attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ when these things are the real center of our life together.

There is so little *church* going on in our churches. Could our denominations have become so unchurchlike if it hadn't been for the fact that the congregations composing them had become so unchurchlike, too? I don't hope for revival as means to an end, in order to fix our denominations. If that should happen, I'd certainly be delighted. But I don't think it's where the locus of our passions should lie anymore. What we desperately need is renewal at the congregational level, which entails renewal at the individual level. Which by any other name is called revival.

Of course, the one thing I can't do is offer a strategy to achieve revival. That could only lead to the devilish facsimile called revivalism. The sole recommendation I can make is prayer. Pray for the heavenly Father to send the Spirit of His Son upon the church (Luke 11:13). And then wait.

Here's how we'll know we are experiencing God-given revival.

True revival creates a love of holy *Scripture*, which ceases to be a weapon to wield or an impediment to overcome. Instead it is the source of abundant life and a wellspring of living water.

True revival creates a love of *prayer*, which ceases to be a rote action or a public demonstration of religiosity. Instead it is ongoing conversation with the Lord of life.

True revival creates a love of *holiness*, which is no longer an attempt to secure one's salvation by good works or a smug show of superiority. Instead it is freely conforming one's words and actions to the law of love embodied in Jesus Christ.

True revival creates a love of *serving others*, which is no longer a scheme for solving the problem of the human race or a covert tactic for proselytism. Instead it is a genuine encounter with irreducibly unique persons created in God's image.

True revival is marked by the *cross*, which neither proclaims false promises of victory in this lifetime nor makes a fetish of its own failures. Instead it accepts suffering as the price of faith's integrity without losing hope in the resurrection.

True revival is not an add-on to an already established life. Revival makes the faith of Jesus Christ to *be* life. Everything else is blessed by extension.

Pray for it. Wait for it. And may God grant it. LF

Notes

1. But he did drink beer. For a positive evaluation of his legacy, see Thomas Jacobsen, "St. Hans Nielsen Hauge," LF 48/3 (2014): 33–36.

2. See Hannu Juntunen, "Lars Levi Laestadius and the Nordic Revival," LF 49/4 (2015): 34–38.

3. In all fairness, Catholic and Orthodox Europe are extraordinarily secularized as well, so the issue is not only Protestantism or revivalism.

4. Graham McFarlane, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Revival," in *On Revival: A Critical Examination*, eds. Andrew Walker and Kristin Aune (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 49.

5. Mark Stibbe, "'Seized by the Power of a Great Affection': A Narrative Theology of Revival," in *On Revival*, 25.

6. McFarlane, 54.

7. Steve Latham, "'God Came from Teman': Revival and Contemporary Revivalism," in *On Revival*, 180.

8. Randrianasolo Dimbiniaina Havanjanahary, "The Contribution of Fifohazana to Mission-Evangelizing in the Malagasy Lutheran Church," *Missio Apostolica* 21/2 (2013): 249.

9. Havanjanahary, 247.

10. Havanjanahary, 250–1.

11. Lotera Fabien, "Healing Ministry of Ankaramalaza," *Africa Theological Journal* 35/1 (2015): 35.

12. Havanjanahary, 251.

13. Fabien, 38.

14. Cynthia Holder Rich, "Mental Illness in Madagascar: A Model of Community-Based Care," *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 20/2 (2010).

15. Cynthia Holder Rich, "Spirit and Culture: Navigating Ecclesiological Minefields in Madagascar," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 131 (2008): 71.

16. The same is the case with the acceptance of Charismatic practice by the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia. See their excellent 1976 statement, "The Work of the Holy Spirit," in *Presence, Power, Praise: Documents on the Charismatic Renewal*, ed. Kilian McDonnell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980), 1:153–182. See also Moritz Fischer, "'The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness': Charismatization of Worldwide Christianity and the Quest for an Appropriate Pneumatology with Focus on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 95–121.

17. Andrew F. Walls, "The Cost of Discipleship: The Witness of the African Church," *Word & World* 25/4 (2005): 438.