

When the Holy Spirit moves – Part 5

When the Holy Spirit moves in power across a people over time revival always comes. In a revival the Church is renewed and refocused, the Gospel explodes across communities and nations and the presence and power of God is seen and felt by hundreds of thousands of people. Some of the greatest examples of the Holy Spirit moving like this are the powerful revivals of the eighteenth century which spread through Europe, especially England, and then on to North America. They became known as the *Evangelical Revivals* in England and *The Great Awakening* in America. They grew from the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit on some small communities of refugees which had suffered incredible persecution in Europe.

No one present could tell exactly what happened on this one Wednesday morning when a special Communion service had been scheduled. The glory of the Lord came upon those who were present so powerfully that they hardly knew if they were on earth or in heaven. The Spirit of God moved powerfully among those three hundred refugees in Saxony in 1727. One of them wrote this:

‘Church history abounds in records of special outpourings of the Holy Spirit, and most certainly Wednesday August 13, 1727, was such a day when the Holy Spirit moved in power. We saw the hand of God and His wonders, and we were all under the cloud of God’s presence. The Holy Spirit came upon us and in those days great signs and wonders took place in our midst. From that time scarcely a day passed without us beholding God’s almighty workings amongst us.

A great hunger after the Word of God took possession of us so that we had to have three services every day, at 5.00am, 7.30am and 9.00pm. Every one desired above everything else that the Holy Spirit might have full control. Self-love and self-will, as well as all disobedience, disappeared and an overwhelming flood of God’s grace swept us all out into the great ocean of Divine Love.’

Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the benefactor and 27-year-old leader of that community, gave this account at a meeting in London many years later:

‘We needed to come to the Communion with a sense of the loving nearness of the Saviour. This was the great comfort which has made this day a generation ago to be a festival, because on this day twenty-seven years ago the Congregation of Herrnhut, assembled for communion (at the Berthelsdorf church) were all dissatisfied with themselves. They had quit judging each other because they had become convinced, each one, of his lack of worth in the sight of God and each felt himself at this Communion to be in view of the noble countenance of the Saviour.

In this view of the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, their hearts told them that He would be their patron and their priest who was at once changing their tears into the oil of gladness and their misery into happiness. This firm confidence changed them in a single moment into a happy people which they are to this day, and into their happiness they have since led many thousands of others through the memory and help which the heavenly grace once given to themselves, so many thousand times confirmed to them since then.’

Known as the Moravians this group had grown from the work and martyrdom of the Bohemian Reformer, John Hus. They suffered centuries of persecution. Many had been killed, many others were imprisoned, tortured or banished from their homeland.

This group had fled for refuge to Germany where the young Christian nobleman, Count Zinzendorf, offered them asylum on his estates in Saxony. They named their new home Herrnhut, which means *'the Lord's Watch.'* From there, after their baptism of fire, they became pioneering evangelists and missionaries.

Fifty years before the beginning of modern missions with William Carey, the Moravian Church had already sent out over 100 missionaries. Their English missionary magazine, *Periodical Accounts*, really inspired Carey. Apparently he threw a copy of the magazine on a table at a Baptist meeting and said, *"See what the Moravians have done! Cannot we follow their example and in obedience to our Heavenly Father go out into the world and preach the gospel to all?"*

That missionary zeal all began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as Zinzendorf observed here:

"The Saviour permitted to come upon us a Spirit of whom we had hitherto not had any experience or knowledge. ... until then we had been the leaders and helpers. Now the Holy Spirit Himself took full control of everything and everyone."

Converted in early childhood, at four years of age Zinzendorf composed and signed a covenant: *"Dear Saviour, be mine, and I will be Thine."* His life's motto was, *"Jesus only."* Zinzendorf learned the secret of prevailing prayer. He actively established prayer groups as a teenager, and by the time he finished college at the age of sixteen he had already established seven praying societies.

The disgruntled community at Herrnhut early in 1727 criticized one another. Heated controversies threatened to disrupt the community. The majority belonged to the ancient Moravian Church of the Brethren. Other believers attracted to Herrnhut included Lutherans, Reformed, and Anabaptists. They argued constantly about predestination, holiness and baptism. Zinzendorf, pleaded for unity, love and repentance. At Herrnhut, Zinzendorf visited all the adult members of the deeply divided community. He drew up a covenant calling upon them to seek out and emphasize the points upon which they agreed rather than debating their differences. On 12th May, 1727, they all signed this covenant, dedicating their lives, as Zinzendorf had dedicated his, to the service of Jesus Christ.

The Moravian revival of 1727 was preceded and sustained by extraordinary personal and communal, united prayer. A strong spirit of grace and unity grew among them. On July 16th Zinzendorf poured out his soul in a prayer accompanied by a flood of tears. This prayer produced an extraordinary effect. The whole community began praying as never before. On July 22nd many of the community covenanted together on their own accord to meet often to pour out their hearts in prayers and hymns. On August 5th Zinzendorf spent the whole night in prayer with about fourteen others after a large meeting for prayer at midnight where great emotion prevailed.

On Sunday, August 10th, Pastor Johann Rothe, a friend of Zinzendorf and minister of the Berthelsdorf Parish Church, was overwhelmed by the Spirit about noon. He sank down into the dust before God. So did the whole congregation. They continued till midnight in prayer and singing, weeping and praying. On Wednesday, August 13th, the Holy Spirit was poured out on them all at the specially arranged communion service in the Berthelsdorf Church. Their prayers were answered in ways far beyond anyone's expectations. Many of them decided to set aside certain times for continued earnest prayer.

On Tuesday August 26th, twenty-four men and twenty-four women covenanted together to continue praying in intervals of one hour each, day and night, each hour allocated by lots to different people. On Wednesday, August 27th, this new schedule began. Others joined the intercessors and the number involved increased to seventy-seven.

They all carefully observed the hour which had been appointed for them. The intercessors had a weekly meeting where prayer needs were given to them. The children began a similar plan among themselves. Those who heard their infant supplications were deeply moved. The children's prayers had a powerful effect on the whole community.

That astonishing 24 hour rolling prayer meeting began in 1727 and it was still running a hundred years later. Known as *The Hourly Intercession*, it involved relays of men and women and children in prayer without ceasing. That prayer also led to action, especially evangelism. More than 100 missionaries left that village community alone in the next twenty-five years, all constantly supported in prayer. One result of this mighty move of the Holy Spirit was a joyful assurance of their pardon and salvation. This had a strong impact on people in many countries, including John and Charles Wesley. Their prayers, preaching and witness profoundly affected the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the preacher and scholar who later became President of Princeton University, was a prominent leader in a revival movement which came to be called *The Great Awakening* as it spread through the communities of New England and the pioneering settlements in America. Converts to Christianity reached 50,000 out of a total of only 250,000 colonists. Early in 1735, an unusually powerful move of God's Spirit brought revival to Northampton, which then spread through New England in the north-east of America. Edwards noted the following:

"A great and earnest concern about the great things of faith and the eternal world, became universal in all parts of the town and among persons of all degrees and all ages; the noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things, was soon discarded. The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world; it was treated among us as a thing of very little consequence. They seemed to follow their worldly business, more as a part of their duty, than from any disposition they had to it... And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day, for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvellous light ... with a new song of praise to God in their mouths..."

Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbours ... Those amongst us who had been formerly converted, were greatly enlivened, and renewed with fresh and extraordinary incomes of the Spirit of God; though some much more than others, according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Many who before had laboured under difficulties about their own state, had now their doubts removed by more satisfying experience, and more clear discoveries of God's love."

Describing the characteristics of the revival, Edwards said,

"It gave people an extraordinary sense of the awful majesty, greatness and holiness of God, so as sometimes to overwhelm soul and body; a sense of the piercing, all seeing eye of God, so as sometimes to take away the bodily strength; and an extraordinary view of the infinite majesty of God, longings after more love for Christ, and greater conformity to him; especially longing to be more perfect in humility and adoration. The flesh and the heart seem often to cry out, lying low before God and adoring Him with greater love and humility. ..."

These people felt a great delight in singing praises to God and Jesus Christ, and longing that this present life may be as it were one continued song of praise to God. ... Together with living by faith to a great degree, there was a constant and extraordinary distrust of our own strength and wisdom; a great dependence on God for His help and His empowering presence."

In 1735, when the American revival was strongest, George Whitefield (1714-1770) back in England and Howell Harris (1714-1773) in Wales were both converted at the age of 21. Both ignited revival fires, seeing thousands converted and whole communities changed. By 1736 Harris began forming his converts into societies and by 1739 there were nearly thirty such societies. Whitefield travelled extensively, visiting Georgia in 1738 (the first of seven journeys to America), then ministering powerfully with Howell Harris in Wales in 1739 and with Jonathan Edwards in New England in 1740, all in his early twenties. At the end of 1735, John Wesley (1703-1791) sailed to Georgia, an American colony. A company of Moravian immigrants travelled on that vessel. During a storm they faced the danger of shipwreck. John Wesley wrote in his journal for Sunday 25th January 1736:

"At seven o'clock I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behaviour. Of their humility they had given a continual proof by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, "It was good for their proud hearts," and "their loving Saviour had done more for them." And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness, which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. Here was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge.

In the midst of the Psalm where their service began, the sea broke over, split the main sail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them later: "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked: "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly: "No, they are not afraid to die."

Back in England in 1738 the Wesley brothers were greatly challenged by the Moravian missionary Peter Bohler. In March 1738 John Wesley wrote this in his journal:

"On Saturday 4th March I found my brother at Oxford, recovering from his pleurisy; and with him Peter Bohler, by whom (in the hand of the great God) I was, on Sunday 5th, clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved. Immediately it struck into my mind, "Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?" I asked Bohler whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, "By no means." I asked, "But what can I preach?" He said, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith even more!"

Both John and Charles Wesley were powerfully converted in May 1738, Charles first, and John three days later on Wednesday 24 May. John wrote this now famous testimony in his Journal:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Later that year John Wesley visited the Moravian community at Herrnhut. He admired their zeal and love for the Lord, and he prayed that their kind of Christianity, full of the Holy Spirit, would spread through the earth. Back in England he preached evangelically, gathered converts into religious societies (which were nicknamed Methodists because of his methodical procedures), and continued to relate warmly with the Moravians. Evangelical revival fires began to stir in England and burst into flame the following year.

In 1739 an astonishing expansion of revival was seen in England. On the evening of January 1st the Wesleys and Whitefield (recently back from America) and four others from their former Holy Club at Oxford University, along with 60 others, met in London for prayer and a love feast. The Spirit of God moved powerfully upon them all. Many fell down, overwhelmed. The meeting went all night and they realised they had been empowered in a fresh visitation from God.

This Pentecost on New Year's Day launched what was known later as *The Great Awakening*. Revival spread rapidly. In February 1739 Whitefield started preaching to the Kingswood coal miners in the open fields near Bristol because many Churches opposed him, accusing him and other evangelicals of 'enthusiasm'. In February about 200 attended. By March 20,000 attended. Whitefield invited Wesley to take over then and so in April Wesley reluctantly began his famous open-air preaching, which continued for 50 years.

He described that first weekend in his Journal:

"Saturday, 31st March - In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr Whitefield. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.

Sunday, 1st April - In the evening, I begun expounding our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (one pretty remarkable precedent of field preaching) to a little society in Nicholas Street.

Monday, 2 April - At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to almost three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor."

Sometimes strange manifestations accompanied revival preaching. Wesley wrote in his Journal on 26th April 1739 that during his preaching at Newgate, Bristol, "One, then another, and another sunk to the earth; they dropped on every side as thunderstruck."

He returned to London in June reporting on the amazing move of God's Spirit with many conversions and many people falling prostrate, a phenomenon he never encouraged. Features of this revival were enthusiastic singing, powerful preaching and the gathering of converts into small societies called weekly Class Meetings. Initially, leaders such as George Whitefield criticized some manifestations in Wesley's meetings, but this changed. Wesley wrote in his journal on 7 July 1739:

"I had opportunity to talk with Mr Whitefield about those outward signs which had so often accompanied the inward work of God. I found his objections were chiefly grounded on gross misrepresentations of matter of fact. But the next day he had opportunity of informing himself better: for no sooner had he begun (in the application of his sermon) to invite all sinners to believe in Christ, than four persons sank down, close to him, almost at the same moment.

One of them lay without either sense or motion; a second trembled exceedingly; the third had strong convulsions all over his body, but made no noise, unless by groans; the fourth, equally convulsed, called upon God, with strong cries and tears. From this time, I trust, we shall all suffer God to carry on His own work in the way that pleases Him."

Revival also caught fire in Scotland. After returning again from America in 1741, Whitefield visited Glasgow. Two ministers in villages nearby invited him to return in 1742 because revival had already begun in their area. Conversions and prayer groups multiplied rapidly. Whitefield preached there at Cambuslang about four miles from Glasgow. The opening meetings on a Sunday saw great crowds on the hillside gripped with conviction, repentance and weeping more than he had seen elsewhere. The word spread quickly and the following weekend 20,000 people gathered on the Saturday and up to 50,000 on the Sunday for the quarterly communion. The visit was charged with the power and the presence of God to such a degree which even amazed Whitefield.

So why is this journey down memory lane relevant and important to us today? Well first of all, it's relevant because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Therefore, if He could pour out His spirit upon preachers and Church communities and whole nations like He did back in the 18th Century revivals, He can do exactly the same today. These were not cultural phenomena, locked in time and space – these were outpourings from God in response to the prayers and yearning of His people. So if God could move in power like He did back then, He could do it again today – right here in our Church and in our community.

It's also important that we revisit these mighty moves of God's Spirit so our faith might be boosted and our desire for revival and transformation in our lives, our Church and our communities would become our highest priority and our deepest desire.

So let's rejoice and celebrate all the mighty moves of God throughout history but let's also affirm and accept that God's desire for renewal, revival and community-wide transformation never changes with the passing of time or the evolution cultures. The mission of Christ is the same today as it was when Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room, *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."* Then He breathed on them and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit."* Jesus is among us right now saying exactly the same thing today.

Will we heed His call? Will we embrace His mission? Will we pray for and welcome a fresh and powerful impartation of His empowering Spirit among us? All of heaven is awaiting our reply . . .