

What is a revival?

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Why am I interested in revivals? On holidays at the end of 1992 I happened on an old book by J.Edwin Orr: *Evangelical Awakenings in the South Seas*. This startled me with its historical accounts of many Christian "awakening" movements in Australia that I had never heard about. Looking further, I found numerous other records of Australian revivals. They were so inspiring to read! Some of these I have already written about. Later I did an academic research project on the main historical features of revivals. Here are some of the things I discovered.

I started out with this quotation: "The problem with revival now is that it means whatever we want it to mean!" Often true. I soon found that even the use of the word "revival" did not come from the Bible but was first used by Christian writers from about 1700. So the definition of "revival" is an important issue and is dealt with by most books on the subject.

My approach was to start from historical examples, so I studied some famous revivals from the 1700's. Their main features were multiple conversions to Christ over a relatively short period of time, with whole towns and even regions experiencing a powerful sense of God's influence.

Then I looked in the Bible for historical records of similar events. There are many occasions in the Old Testament where even complete nations were impacted by encounters with God's powerful "presence". Similar situations also occurred during Jesus' ministry. But actual Christian conversions in large numbers did not happen until after Jesus' ascension.

The accounts of these are of course contained in the *Book of Acts*. It records an international movement in which whole cities and towns were impacted. As well as describing individual conversions at some places, there are narratives of relatively large numbers turning to faith in Christ in at least 13 locations. These were at Jerusalem, Joppa, Caesarea, Syrian Antioch, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, Thessalonica, Berea and Corinth, with even whole towns responding at "a city of Samaria", and Lydda and Sharon. Look them up! It seems that these events became so commonplace that *Acts* records them in less and less detail. Finally the revival at Derbe occupies only half a verse!

Acts clearly states that these dramatic multiple responses were due to the Holy Spirit being “poured out” or “coming upon” large numbers of people at one time. So I now generally prefer to speak of and pray for “outpourings of the Holy Spirit” rather than “revivals”. This is the biblical description and highlights the core feature of what happens. My hope is that this will make for less confusion about defining what is meant.

My analysis also showed that the *Acts* outpourings of the Holy Spirit and later similar historical events involved four phases for the churches. I classified these as the “before”, “start”, “during” and “after” phases. I will write more on this next time.