

What have been the main features of revivals?

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Acts describes major “outpourings” of the Holy Spirit at 13 locations. These had many similarities which can be grouped as four “phases”: before, start, during and after. For example, at Jerusalem these were:

“Before” The Apostles and other disciples under Peter’s leadership met constantly for prayer and to deal with current problems (Acts 1:12-26)

“Start” The “outpouring of the Holy Spirit” on the Day of Pentecost, triggering miraculous events followed by powerful preaching and resulting in about 3000 conversions (Acts 2:1-41)

“During” The ongoing ministry of the Apostles, with further miracles and rapid increases in the number of believers. This infant church gathered frequently and experienced rich fellowship and caring. But there were also persecution and some internal problems. This phase ended when violent external attacks caused most of the believers to flee (Acts 2:42 – 8:3)

“After” The Jerusalem church’s ongoing leadership, preaching, fellowship and caring, with further persecution and internal problems. Some more miracles but few conversions (various references from Acts 8:4 – 28:31, as well as a few from the Epistles)

Later historical “revivals” generally followed a similar pattern. Obviously the most inspiring features were in their “start” and “during” phases. The powerful influences of the Holy Spirit resulted in multiple conversions. This is why we all desire and seek revivals, and for good reason! Rev Jonathan Edwards led a revival in his church, town and region in 1735. He wrote in his famous *A Faithful Narrative of Surprising Conversions*: “When God in so remarkable a manner took the work into His own hands, there was as much done in a day or two, as at ordinary times is done in a year”.

Yet we can also learn from some features of the “before” and “after” phases. The outpourings of the Spirit in *Acts 2-20* (start and during phases) were followed by Paul’s imprisonments and preaching (*Acts 21-28*). At the same time and later, Paul and others wrote the *Epistles* to address pastoral problems in various churches, with teaching and instructions (after phases).

So *Acts* mostly reported the spiritual birth of multitudes, whereas the *Epistles* dealt with their “growing pains” towards maturity. Mostly this took place in the midst of *troubles*, external and internal, theological and practical.

Historically, many denominations and individual churches were born through some kind of revival events. Large numbers of people were either converted to Christ or renewed in faith. But typically the “after phase” pattern soon developed. External opposition and internal problems increased, with few further conversions. This tends to be the mixture in many churches today.

However, the “before” phase pattern can bring hope and a strategy. Often revivals have come as a surprise, in the midst of corrupt and apparently unfavorable circumstances. But there have been those in the churches who “all joined together constantly in prayer”, just like the first 120 believers in the upper room (Acts 1:12-15). Sooner or later, the momentum of the Holy Spirit’s work accelerated into an “outpouring”!

The Mt Kembla mine disaster occurred exactly 107 years ago today, killing 96 miners. But four months earlier there had been an “explosion” of the Holy Spirit there, with 131 conversions. Dr Stuart Piggin is both a historian of the disaster and a leading Australian revival scholar. He wrote: “revivalism has been a recurring phenomenon in Australian Christianity, but its finest flowering, the culmination of much prayerful hope and expectation, was in Illawarra in 1902.” That revival at Mt Kembla and other local mining villages will be my next subject.