

Editorial: Our Constant Need for Reformation and Revival

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As one reads the New Testament (NT), one is struck by two complementary truths regarding the proclamation, defense, and the passing on of the gospel to the next generation. First, there is the sad fact at how quickly we who confess our loyalty to Scripture as God's word and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ drift away from the truth and substitute it for another gospel. It seems that we as fallen creatures—even those who profess that God has done a work of regeneration in us and brought us to saving faith in Christ—tend to embrace error faster than we do the truth. Second, considering this sad reality, Scripture also constantly warns and exhorts us to be vigilant, to guard our hearts, and to stand for the truth of the gospel, by looking to our Lord and depending on the sanctifying, renewing, and reviving power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the church.

The first truth is evident throughout the entire NT. For example, think of the church at Galatia. Paul is astonished at how quickly this church has turned

to another gospel, which he vociferously argues is “no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6). Unfortunately, Galatia is not an isolated occurrence. Think of Paul’s warnings to his young pastor-apprentice Timothy where he describes the “last days” as one which is characterized by those in the church who are “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). In Scripture, it is crucial to remember that these “last days” are not future days to Paul, Timothy, or us. Instead, the last days refer to the entire time between the first and second coming of Christ, which we now presently live, and as such, they describe our day. In addition, Paul characterizes these days as in which “people will not put up with sound doctrine” (2 Tim 4:3) but instead people will seek to find teachers who will say and teach them what their “itching ears want to hear” (2 Tim 4:3). Or think of the church that the author of Hebrews addresses. After much encouragement to think of the glory and supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ, the author also must repeatedly warn them not to drift away from the truth of the gospel but instead preserve to the end (Heb 2:1-4; 12:1-13). Or think of the seven churches of Asia Minor that our Lord addresses in Revelation 2-3. How many times does our risen and exalted Lord warn his church to stand for the truth, both in word and deed, in the face of those within the church who are introducing false doctrine and unholy living and thus departing from the gospel? The sad answer is far too many times.

But the second truth is also unmistakably taught in the NT. Given the tendency for so many in the church to drift away from the truth of the gospel and the glory of Christ, Scripture constantly warns and exhorts us to “guard the deposit” (2 Tim 1:14), for leaders to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock” (Acts 20:28), for the entire church “to test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). The NT is clear: To withstand the danger of theological and spiritual drift, we must not only love the Lord and the truth of the gospel, but we must do so by being vigilant in proclaiming it, standing against those who attempt to replace it by “another gospel,” and faithfully passing it on to the next generation. And the NT is also clear: we will only be able to do so by crying out to the Lord of the church and to ask him constantly to reform and to renew us by the sanctifying and reviving power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the church. In fact, apart from the constant reform, renewal, and revival of us as individuals, and the entire church, we will be unable to stand for the truth as we ought, and

inevitably we will experience theological and spiritual drift, as witnessed in the NT and throughout church history.

For this reason, a study of God's work of reformation, renewal, and revival in church history is important. First, it not only reminds us of our great need to depend on our triune God for our spiritual life and health the life and health, as well as the life and health of the church. But second, it also teaches us how to think about true revival and what to expect when it occurs. As with our drift away from the truth, so true works of God in reformation and revival can be counterfeited, hence the crucial distinction between true and godly "revival" and "revivalism."

The former, namely, "revival," is a sovereign work of God whereby he visits us in power and grace. The results of such a work is that God's people are convicted of their sin and stirred with holy desire and affection to know him according to the truth of Scripture. When the Spirit of God is truly at work in us and the church, he stirs within his people a commitment to Scripture, a love for it in exposition and teaching, and a desire to obey all that it teaches. No longer do we desire to have teachers who tell us what we want to hear; instead, we surround ourselves with those who faithfully teach and proclaim the whole counsel of God in power and deep conviction. Also, true revival is always theo- and Christocentric: it renews us to trust, love, and obey our triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus as we look to him alone by the power of the Spirit. True revival leads us to yearn for holiness of thought and life, and the aim to be pleasing to our Savior in all that we say and do. True revival not only affects the church but also has a salt and light effect on those outside the church. It leads the church to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, and it even impacts entire societies as God not only revives his people but often extends common grace to those outside the church. However, the latter, namely, "revivalism," is too often a human-centered attempt to manipulate and manufacture revivals by our own strength and power. The result of such "revivalistic" attempts, as history teaches us, is a poor substitute for a true work of the Spirit, and thus it may witness some short-term results, but it rarely has results that stick over the long haul.

A fair assessment of the state of the evangelical church in the West is that we need once again the reviving work of God among us. Given drift in biblical-theological conviction, a tolerance for that which God does not tolerate in terms of our lives, a disregard for God's holiness, and a basic absence of the

fear of God in our lives, we need God's reforming, renewing, and reviving power once again to visit us. This is one of the reasons we decided to focus this issue of *SBJT* on the topic of revival. By looking at God's reviving work in the past, we want to learn lessons for us today. Our focus is primarily on God's work of revival in Europe and America in the past 300 years in such places as the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Ireland, the United Kingdom, and our own nation. Our aim is to remind ourselves of what God has gracious and sovereignly done in the past to encourage us in our present day to ask God once again to revive his church. If the present state of the evangelical church is disconcerting, then as we look at what God has done in the past, may we cry out to our great and glorious triune God once again: "O Lord, will you not revive your church once again?" This is my prayer for this issue of *SBJT* and may also be our collective prayer as his people.