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Revival and the Holy Spirit

What does it really mean to be a Christian?" asked a student at Australasian Missionary College in August, 1939.¹ Although always an important question, at this particular moment in history it held special significance for Adventist youth and, indeed, for the world as a whole.

Beyond the college, the world of 1939 was in a state of ugly unrest, for Nazi Germany had just occupied Prague and was greedily eying Poland, as Japan and Italy left the League of Nations. Their breakaway was a deathblow to that unsuccessful federation that Adventist evangelists of the time referred to as the mixture of Daniel 2:43, the feet of iron and clay. In Britain, still called the Mother Country by Australians and New Zealanders, conscription had been introduced, and thousands of Jewish children from Central Europe were being received into foster homes following the persecution of German Jews. On August 2, the physicist Albert Einstein wrote to the American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, telling him that scientists had discovered how to create a nuclear chain reaction that could lead to "extremely powerful bombs of a new type."² This was a year for serious questions, needing serious solutions.

It was at this moment in remote, rural, safe Cooranbong, in the Australian state of New South Wales, that the annual Week of Prayer began at the Australasian Missionary College, the denomination's senior tertiary

institution in the South Pacific (today it is Avondale College). For this event, Pastor Len Minchin, youth leader of the Adventist Church in Australasia, had been chosen as speaker. A couple of days into his series, on that Tuesday evening, Pastor Minchin invited anyone who would like to talk or pray with him to meet at the music building after the meeting. Some of the male students and their friends accepted the invitation. The time sped by in good fellowship and prayer, with questions answered and discussed. At 2:00 A.M. one of the group asked that all-important question: "Let me get it straight tonight before I go to bed. What does it really mean to be a Christian?" It started discussion and prayer all over again.

At dawn, the students were joined by friends who had come searching for them. "Something is happening here," several students said. Minchin later recalled, "I never before felt such a spirit of prayer, praise and surrender."

Later that day, Pastor Minchin told the full assembly of staff and students what had happened the previous evening. Then he introduced a new topic, the Spirit-filled life. But suddenly, a student stood up. "Please excuse me," he said, "but I cannot keep quiet any longer. I feel I must apologize publicly to my theology teacher." He turned to face his teacher. "Sir, we had a problem, and I was unforgivably rude, and I also spread unfair rumors about you. I must apologize! Please, please forgive me."

Silence followed this unusual interruption. Some students looked away, while others watched the faces of the guest speaker and the college president, Pastor A. H. Piper. The stillness was broken when the theology teacher stood up and faced the student who had spoken. "I was largely to blame—I provoked you. Son, I ask *your* forgiveness." He went over to the young man and put his arms around him.

Without any planning or rehearsal, the meeting then changed as a line of students formed, all desiring to stand near the platform, compelled to speak. As their testimonies and confessions continued, well past the chapel hour, Minchin noticed the chapel clock. He said, "Pastor Piper, it is now time for classes to resume. What shall we do?"

The prompt reply came in a resolute voice. "Brother Minchin, we shall extend the chapel time. We cannot program the Holy Spirit."

So the Wednesday morning meeting continued, well into the lunch hour. Occasionally, a student left the chapel to go to find a friend who had stayed away. They would return together, swept into the electric atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit worked upon hearts. The week continued with the same spirit, intensifying as young people gave their hearts to the Lord Jesus, confessed their sins, and resolved to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in their lives so that they would know what it meant to be a real Christian.

That was the beginning of the Avondale revival of 1939 that spread

out into the wider community of the church in the Southern Hemisphere. Walter Scragg, later a distinguished theologian, General Conference (GC) communication director, pioneer of Adventist World Radio, and president of the South Pacific Division, recalled its impact on his own life and others in his home youth group. He wrote: “The great revival that swept through Adventism in 1939 . . . found me as a lad in the Tasmanian camp meeting of that year. In the fall-out of that remarkable Spirit-inspired event, I gave my heart to the Lord and was baptized. A whole generation of young people . . . felt the influence of the revival.”³

Does this story matter? There have, after all, been other revivals in Adventist history—and there will be more in the future. The 1939 Australasian revival had wider significance, because shortly after the Week of Prayer, on September 3, 1939, the Second World War began. Now came the hour of challenge, especially to young men at Avondale. Now they had to decide where they stood personally, as Christians, about war—it took courage and conviction to refuse to bear arms. Pastor Piper and the college staff believed that the Holy Spirit had visited the college in that week in August 1939 to prepare and strengthen the youth for the challenges that lay ahead.

Nevertheless, it could not be said that this revival changed the course of Adventist history. So why single it out? There are two reasons. First, to make the point that just because a revival does not completely change the worldwide Adventist Church, it is not any less important. As Ellen White wrote in 1887, “A revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs.”⁴ That was true then, and true now, and it will always be true, until the outpouring of the latter rain. The remnant church will *always* need revivals, because every Christian needs constantly to be reshaped and revived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And this leads to the second reason for telling this story—to draw attention

to the words spoken by A. H. Piper. The first Australian to serve as a foreign missionary, Piper had buried his wife in the mission field. He had been mentored, as a young man, by Ellen White. He was a man of great spirituality and perception, and his words to Pastor Minchin are profound: “We cannot program the Holy Spirit.”

We all need revival: that is as true today as in 1939. But whence comes revival? In 1902 Ellen White wrote: “A revival and a reformation must take place, under the ministration of the Holy Spirit. Revival and reformation are

The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s official Revival and Reformation initiative is important, but by itself this would be destined to disappoint—if this is just a GC program, it is doomed to fail. Why? Because “the Spirit cannot be programmed.” Church leaders can, should, and must make room for the working of the Spirit and point out to people the continual need to be revitalized and revived.

That is why the church’s “Revival and Reformation” initiative seems laudable, indeed essential. But in the end, every church leader, like every

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two different things. Revival signifies a renewal of spiritual life, a quickening of the powers of mind and heart, a resurrection from the spiritual death. Reformation signifies a reorganization, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices.” However, reformation “will not bring forth the good fruit of righteousness *unless* it is connected with the revival of the Spirit.”⁵

The root of true revival is with the Holy Spirit. He uses men and women of deep, true spirituality—powerful preachers, articulate authors, skillful musicians, and others—to prompt us to reflect on our lives and to want to have our relationship with Jesus rejuvenated. But ultimately, true revival cannot be effected by human efforts.

church member, has to say, “The Holy Spirit does not come as something that I help other Seventh-day Adventists find—I need the Holy Spirit *myself*.” And every church member can say, with the apostle Paul, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15, NKJV). Not that I need to convict others—I must be convicted myself.

To rephrase Ellen White: A revival of true godliness is *not* the greatest and most urgent of the church’s needs—but the greatest and most urgent of *my* needs. When the Spirit works in us, there is a greater chance that others will hear and see something in what church workers and

church members say and do that makes them open to the workings of the Holy Ghost, in turn. True godliness, moreover, is more than prayer and Bible study, though they are its necessary preconditions.

While “revival” in Ellen White’s thinking is inner renovation, “reformation,” which she regularly pairs with revival, must have real-world impact: it should (in the words quoted above) “bring forth . . . good fruit.” A. H. Piper certainly would have agreed, for he taught students what he had learned from his prophetic mentor: revival should lead believers to serve, whether in the church, their local community, or the wider world.⁶ Because revival and reformation are twin fruits of the Spirit, the greatest of “my needs” is twofold: *both* to experience personal spiritual renewal *and*, as a result, to engage in service.

Finally, when we see the Spirit working, inwardly or outwardly, we need to be humble enough to acknowledge the Spirit, be thankful for it, and then cancel classes,⁷ cancel committees, cancel all our regularly scheduled programming, and let the Spirit work all these things as He wills.⁸

Ellen White asks, “Are we hoping to see the whole church revived?” She answers, “That time will never come.”⁹ A revival does not need to change the whole church, all around the world, to be a success in the eyes of Heaven. It needs to change just one life: mine. 

1 This article draws on interviews with students and staff of Australasian Missionary College (today, Avondale College of Higher Education) by Marye Trim, who studied at the college soon after the revival this article describes.

2 Einstein to Roosevelt, August 2, 1939, American Experience, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-ein39/>.

3 Scragg to Marye Trim, 1982, quoted in Marye Trim, *Courage in the Lord: The Story of Albert Henry Piper* (Sydney: Department of Education, South Pacific Division, 2004), 34, fn. 10.

4 Ellen G. White, “The Church’s Great Need,” *Review and Herald*, March 22, 1887, 177.

5 Ellen G. White, “The Need of a Revival and a Reformation,” *Review and Herald*, February 25, 1902, 113 (emphasis added).

6 See Marye Trim, *Courage in the Lord*.

7 “When the Spirit seemed to be striving with the youth, did you say, ‘Let us put aside all study; for it is evident that we have among us a heavenly Guest. Let us give praise and honor to God?’ . . .

“ . . . When the Holy Spirit reveals His presence in your schoolroom, tell your students, ‘The Lord signifies that He has for us today a lesson of heavenly import of more value than our lessons in ordinary lines. Let us listen; let us bow before God and seek Him with the whole heart.’” Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943), 363, 364.

8 Compare 1 Corinthians 12:11.

9 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 122.

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