

Something Simmering

by Stephen Chavez

I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard the word "revival," as in "What this church really needs is a revival."

I know what the speaker means. It means that when he or she looks out on the Adventist landscape they see primarily uninspired leadership and boring images of apathy and carelessness. They see churches reacting, either positively or negatively, to the latest societal trends without substantively impacting society as a whole. Revival would stir things up, make things interesting.

The problem with so-called revivals is that they're often cyclical. Every couple years something like a spiritual El Nino blows through Adventist churches and schools. It might contain an emphasis on prayer, or righteousness by faith, or worship, or some new health fad. But it never stays long, and when it's over, you have people looking for the next new thing, like worldlings anticipating the next installment of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

To some, the word "revival" reflects something rather severe or austere, such as smashing secular music CDs, eating only raw fruit and vegetables, taking cold showers, trashing the TV, or all-night prayer vigils.

Both these attitudes about revival miss the point. The Christian experience is a journey, a state of mind. The point is not to compare ourselves with anyone else, or flagellate ourselves because we're not "spiritual" enough, but to enjoy the sustained reality of living day by day in the company of the living Christ.

This is where many saints miss the boat. In a movement blessed with so many counsels, texts, and testimonies, it's easy to get sidetracked and believe that revival happens only when everyone marches in lockstep: when everyone practices health reform, when everyone listens to the same kind of music, or when "worldly" forms of dress and recreation are weeded out of our midst. But no true revival has its foundation outside of a living relationship with Christ.

The apostle Paul is a prime example. Indoctrinated in the strictest sect of Judaism, his zeal was so great that it led him to persecute those who didn't agree with his interpretations of Scripture. Finally God arrested him with a force so powerful it left him lying dazed and blinded on the side of the road to Damascus. It wasn't until he met Jesus that Paul experienced a true revival.

Paul's story is a warning to all, that zeal is no substitute for a daily relationship with Jesus. The number of people who have been taken hostage by false revivals and misguided zeal is inestimable. Only a relationship with Jesus, nourished by prayer and reflection, Bible study, and disinterested service, will protect us from the extremism to which so many religious people are prone.

In the early days of Israel's settlement in Canaan, there was need of a revival. "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions" (1 Sam. 3:1).^{*} The religious establishment was corrupt; people were given to apathy, disobedience, and lawlessness.

God approached a boy so inexperienced that he didn't even recognize the Lord's voice when He spoke to him. After a couple miscommunications, Samuel responded to God's voice with an invitation that is a model for all of us who want to do something useful and lasting for God's kingdom; he said, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (verse 10).

What would happen if, every day in our personal devotions, we lingered a few extra moments in God's presence and prayed, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening"? What if, as we carried out our daily responsibilities, we were conscious of God's Spirit whispering, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isa. 30:21)? What if we acted on those impulses, not in some big, splashy way, but in the sincere, humble manner of true disciples?

Maybe then we'd see beyond the spiritual apathy present in our churches and institutions (yes, there is some) to the untold thousands who are on fire with a passion to love and serve God and others in their homes, churches, and communities.

Do we need revival? Yes. But we need one that simmers at a slow boil, rather than one that blazes white-hot and leaves behind only a trail of ashes. We need a revival that begins and ends with our individual invitations "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

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^{*}Texts in the editorial are from the New International Version.