

Happily Surprised by Works of God’s Spirit

Dave Coles

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Abstract

Throughout Church history, God has worked in “normal” ways, in and through the lives of his children, in evangelism, discipleship, and missions. He has also, on numerous occasions, worked in “unusual” ways, among significant numbers of people, to greatly advance his kingdom work via evangelism, discipleship, and missions. The terms *revival* and *movement* have both been used to describe these surprisingly positive advances of kingdom ministry. This article focuses specifically on movements involving rapid and generational church planting and considers similarities and differences between revivals and movements—in principle and in practice.

Key Words: awakening, church planting movements, Jonathan Edwards, revivals

Introduction

In 1736, Jonathan Edwards wrote “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages...” This narrative described the “surprising” dynamics of the first wave of the revival now known as The First Great Awakening. It has become paradigmatic for perspectives on revivals in successive centuries. While some (Waugh 2020, 16) distinguish between revivals as local phenomena and awakenings as more widespread in geography and time, their similar dynamics are such that this article will consider them together.

In recent decades, phenomena known as Church Planting Movements (CPMs) have reported surprising kingdom advance, especially among unreached peoples. J. Nelson Jennings, wondering why various analysts have labeled particular phenomena as either “revivals” or “movements,” recently commented: “One area of further study (not taken up in either this issue of *Global Missiology – English* or, apparently, other relevant literature) is the overlap between how ‘revivals’ and ‘movements’ both are understood and in actuality occur” (Jennings 2022, 2). This article takes a first step toward observing that overlap, with specific reference to movements known as Church Planting Movements and Disciple Making Movements, as defined below.

Scripture portrays a marvelous confluence of human effort and divine working in ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and missions to the unreached. God has ordained that certain responsibilities must be fulfilled by obedient human beings, while all human effort in these realms remains fruitless without God’s Spirit working to accomplish his purposes in people’s lives.

Throughout Church history, God has worked in “normal” ways, in and through the lives of his children, in evangelism, discipleship, and missions. He has also, on numerous occasions, worked in unusual ways, among significant numbers of people, to greatly advance his kingdom work via evangelism, discipleship, and missions. The terms *revival* and *movement* have both been used to describe these surprisingly positive advances of kingdom ministry. This article will focus specifically on movements involving rapid and generational church planting, as well as consider similarities and differences between revivals and movements—in principle and in practice.

First, it is important to clarify terms and delineate the scope of the comparison. Along with Michael McClymond, this article will consider revival as “a period of time in which a Christian community undergoes revitalization.... a period of religious awakening: renewed interest in religion... (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*).” McClymond adds, “‘Revivals’ are thus *corporate, experiential events* (emphasis original; McClymond 2016, 245). Moreover, the First Great Awakening (with prominent figures such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield) involved a clear understanding of God’s sovereign role in salvation of the lost. The Second Great Awakening, by contrast, included greater focus on human effort and introduced “new measures” such as altar calls (Nichols 2019). These features of the Second Great Awakening became embedded in two phenomena *sounding like* revival but in fact very different: *revival meetings* (a tradition of special services scheduled in advance with the goal of reviving piety) and *revivalism* (pre-planned meetings featuring well-known preachers, from Charles Finney in the nineteenth century through Billy Graham in the twentieth century). This article’s focus will *exclude* those two phenomena, looking back more distinctly to revival as a work of God.

The definition employed for CPM comes from *24:14 – A Testimony to All Peoples* (Coles and Parks 2019, 315): “a multiplication of disciples making disciples, and leaders developing leaders, resulting in indigenous churches (usually house churches) planting more churches. These new disciples and churches begin spreading rapidly through a people group or population segment, meeting people’s spiritual and physical needs.... When consistent, multiple-stream 4th generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement.” This broad CPM definition includes phenomena described as Disciple Making Movements (DMMs) (Watson and Watson 2014), Kingdom Movements (Coles and Parks 2019), and Discipleship Movements (Farah 2021). It does *not* include Insider Movements, as described in *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Travis and Talman 2006).

Descriptions of Revival

Much has been written about revival. For example, Geoff Waugh quotes Martin Lloyd-Jones, describing revival as:

an experience in the life of the Church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work. He does that work, primarily, amongst the members of the Church; it is a reviving of the believers. You cannot revive something that has never had life, so revival, by definition, is first of all an enlivening and quickening and awakening of lethargic, sleeping, almost moribund Church members (Waugh 2020, 16-17).

Michael McClymond writes:

At least since the mid-1700s, reports of Christian revivals from differing geographic regions and cultural groups have shown common themes. Participants in revivals speak of their vivid sense of spiritual things, great joy and faith, deep sorrow over sin, passionate desire to evangelize others, and heightened feelings of love for God and fellow humanity. In times of revival, people often crowd into available buildings for religious services, “Filling them beyond capacity. Services may last from morning until midnight. News of a revival usually travels rapidly, and sometimes the reports of revival—in person, print, or broadcast media—touch off new revivals in distant localities. During a revival, clergy and other Christian workers may receive many requests for their services. Sometimes people

openly confess their sins in public settings. Another mark of revivals is generosity – individuals willing to give their time, money, or resources to support the work of the revival. Revivals are often controversial, with opponents and proponents who vehemently criticize one another. Anti-revivalism typically arises in the wake of revivals. Often there are unusual bodily manifestations in revivals, such as falling down, rolling on the ground, involuntary muscle movements, laughing, shouting, and spiritual dancing. Another common feature in revivals is the occurrence of so-called signs and wonders, such as the healing of the sick, prophecies, visions or dreams revealing secret knowledge, deliverance, or exorcism from the power of Satan and the demonic, and speaking in tongues (McClymond 2016, 245).

Waugh adds this description:

The early church lived in revival. It saw rapid growth in the power of the Holy Spirit from the initial outburst at Pentecost. Multitudes joined the church, amid turmoil and persecution. As with Pentecost, revivals are often unexpected, sudden, revolutionary, and impact large numbers of people bringing them to repentance and faith in Jesus the Lord.... Revivals continually display the characteristics and phenomena of the Pentecost account, including:

1. Divine sovereignty (Acts 2:1,2): God chose the day, the time, the place, the people, uniting old covenant promise with new covenant fulfilment. His Spirit came suddenly and people were overwhelmed at the Pentecost harvest festival.
2. Prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:1): The believers gathered together to pray and wait on God as instructed by the Jesus at the ascension. All revival literature emphasizes the significance of united, earnest, repentant prayer in preparing the way for revival and sustaining it.
3. Unity (Acts 2:1): The disparate group meeting ‘in one accord’ included male and female, old and young, former zealot and former collaborator, most of the twelve and those who joined them. Their differences blended into the diversity of enriched unity.
4. Obedience to the Spirit (Acts 2:4): Filled with the Spirit they immediately began using gifts of the Spirit as ‘the Spirit gave utterance’.
5. Preaching (Acts 2:14): Peter preached with anointed Spirit-empowered boldness, as did the others whose words were heard in many languages.
6. Repentance (Acts 2:38-39): Large numbers were convicted and repented. They were instructed to be baptized and to expect to be filled with the Spirit and to live in Spirit-led community, and that succeeding generations should expect this also.
7. Evangelism (Acts 2:40-41, 47): The new believers witnessed through changed lives bringing others to faith in the Lord daily.
8. Charismata (Acts 2:43): The era of the Spirit inaugurated supernatural phenomena including glossolalia, signs, wonders and miracles, demonstrated powerfully among the leaders, but not limited to them.
9. Community (Acts 2:42-47): The outpouring of the Spirit brought the church into being as a charismatic, empowered community which met regularly in homes for discipleship instruction, supportive fellowship, daily informal eucharistic meals, and constant prayer.
10. Rapid church growth (Acts 2:47): Typical of revivals, The Lord added to the church those who were being saved. This eventually transformed the community of Judaistic

believers into a constantly expanding community embracing all people” (Waugh 2020, 20-21).

In summary, a revival impacts a large number of believers with a powerful sense of the reality of spiritual things, a deepened faith, and a passionate desire to evangelize others. Repentance and radical obedience become common manifestations of deep love for God and for others.

Descriptions of CPMs

In his foundational book on the subject, David Garrison describes “Ten Universal Elements” found in every CPM:

1. Extraordinary Prayer (and extraordinary faith) by ordinary believers
2. Abundant Evangelism
3. Intentional Planting of Reproducing Churches
4. The Authority of God’s Word
5. Local Leadership
6. Lay Leadership [ministry is not dependent on ordained people]
7. House Churches
8. Churches Planting Churches
9. Rapid Reproduction
10. Healthy Churches (Garrison 2004, 172).

He then describes ten factors found in *most* CPMs:

1. A climate of uncertainty in society
2. Insulation from outsiders
3. A high cost for following Christ
4. Bold fearless faith
5. Family-based conversion pattern
6. Rapid incorporation of new believers
7. Worship in the heart language
8. Divine signs and wonders
9. On-the-job leadership training
10. Missionaries suffered (Garrison 2004, 221-222).

Samuel Kebreab, in “Observations Over Fifteen Years of Disciple Making Movements,” describes these “Features of Disciple Making Movements”:

- DMMs Depend Heavily on Prayer, which is Often Followed by Miraculous Signs. Every DMM we have the privilege of witnessing traces its origin to intense intercessory prayer and fasting....
- DMMs Equip Ordinary People to Achieve the Impossible. DMMs are simple, scalable, and sustainable, partly because they usually start through committed and obedient ordinary people....
- DMMs are Holistic: Merging Compassion and Healing with the Gospel of Kingdom Transformation....
- DMMs Require Trusting God to Supply the Resources Locally....
- DMMs Depend on Lost People Discovering God in the Bible and Choosing to Obey What they Discover About God’s Will in Every Passage....

- DMMs Involve Ordinary Disciples Making Disciples and Churches Planting Churches....
- DMMs Require Courage and Sacrifice (Kebreab 2021, 27-30).

Three advocates of different CPM approaches have together presented a summary of similarities:

A CPM approach is one in which:

1. There is awareness that *only God can start movements*, but disciples can follow biblical principles to pray, plant, and water the seeds....
2. The focus is to make *every follower of Christ a reproducing disciple* rather than merely a convert.
3. Patterns create *frequent and regular accountability for lovingly obeying what the Lord is speaking to each person and for them to pass it on* to others in a loving environment. This requires a participative small-group approach.
4. *Each disciple is equipped in comprehensive ways* (such as interpreting and applying Scripture, a well-rounded prayer life, functioning as a part of the larger Body of Christ, and responding well to persecution/ suffering) in order that they can function not merely as consumers, but as active agents of kingdom advance.
5. *Each disciple is given a vision both for reaching their relational network and for extending the kingdom to the ends of the earth*

Once a CPM has started – regardless of the approach used – the resulting disciples and churches have very similar DNA with similar outward expressions.

- *Praying*—CPM is always accompanied by a prayer movement. Once a movement starts it is also marked by extraordinary prayer....
- *Scriptural*—In CPMs, the Bible is taken very seriously. Everyone is expected to be a disciple and sharer of the Word, and to interpret and apply Scripture.
- *Obeying*—The churches are devoted to listening to God’s Word and obeying it individually and corporately....
- *Indigenous*—The outsider looks for Persons of Peace and households of peace (Mt. 10, Mk 6, Lk. 9, 10) that God has prepared within a society. When these people and groups come to faith, they are immediately equipped to reach others. Since the insiders are the disciple-makers, the new churches can grow in ways that are both based on Scripture and adapted to the culture.
- *Holistic*—By focusing on obedience to Scripture, believers become eager to show God’s love to people. The disciples in these movements love those around them in practical ways, such as caring for widows and orphans, ministering to the ill, and fighting oppression.
- *Rapidly Reproducing*—Every disciple and church is equipped to reproduce and taught to rely on the Holy Spirit to empower them (Parks, Sergeant, and Smith 2019: 39-40).

These sources convey the most common and salient features of CPMs. Further sources will be cited below to illustrate additional specific features.

Notable Similarities between Revivals and CPMs

The first notable similarity between revivals and CPMs is the foundational role of *extraordinary prayer*. Waugh states: “All revival literature emphasizes the significance of united, earnest,

repentant prayer in preparing the way for revival and sustaining it” (Waugh 2020, 20). McClymond concurs: “Devout authors tell us that fervent prayer is a ‘leading indicator’ of an impending revival” (McClymond 2018, 44); and, “The practice of intercessory prayer, the traditions of biblical preaching, and the very expectation of periodic ‘outpourings’ of the Holy Spirit are all a part of the religious culture presupposed in North American revivals” (McClymond 2018, 45); and,

In *Humble Attempt* (1748) Edwards promoted the transatlantic “concert of prayer” in which congregations in far-flung locations united to pray for revival on the same day of the month. This work had widespread historical influence throughout the 1800s, and again, since the 1980s, reemerged as a seminal work in the international Christian prayer movement (McClymond 2016, 248).

The first of Garrison’s universal elements is “Extraordinary Prayer” by ordinary believers. Parks et al. also list “Praying... extraordinary prayer” as common in all CPM approaches.

A second notable similarity between revivals and CPMs is *the essential role of Scripture* in powerfully touching people’s minds and hearts. In revivals, Scripture has most commonly been presented by preachers from a pulpit to a group gathered within a church building. McClymond mentions “biblical preaching” as “part of the religious culture presupposed in North American revivals” (McClymond 2018, 45). In CPMs, partly due to their occurrence in most cases among an unreached group, Scripture is more often studied inductively in small groups or house churches. As mentioned above, Garrison listed among his universal elements “The Authority of God’s Word,” while Parks et al. list “*Scriptural*.... Everyone is expected to be a disciple and sharer of the Word, and to interpret and apply Scripture.” Movement leader Victor John describes two of the “Principles that Guide the Movement” as “The Word is the Foundation” and “Obedience and Accountability to the Word” (John and Coles 2019, 178,180).

A third notable similarity between revivals and CPMs is *rapid expansion*. Michael McClymond writes: “In almost all cases of rapid expansion, the growth of Christianity was connected with ‘religious revival’ or ‘awakening,’ or, perhaps better, ‘charismatic people movements’” (McClymond 2016, 244). Waugh describes rapid church growth as “typical of revivals” (Waugh 2020, 21).

Sam Storms cites Jonathan Edwards’ comments: “One of the more distinguishing features of the awakening was the acceleration or intensification of God’s activity. Edwards described it this way: “God has also seemed to have gone out of his usual way, in the quickness of his work, and the swift progress his Spirit has made in his operations on the hearts of many. It is wonderful that persons should be so suddenly and yet so greatly changed.... 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, with all endeavours that men can use, and with such a blessing as we commonly have, is done in a year” (Storms 2007, 25).

As noted above, Garrison’s ninth universal element is “Rapid Reproduction.” Parks et al. also list “Rapidly Reproducing” as a characteristic of all CPM approaches. This constitutes one of the most notable happy surprises common to revivals and CPMs.

The fourth notable similarity between revivals and CPMs is *wide activation of all God’s people in ministry*. This has been variously described. McClymond writes: “Revivals refashion social and

ecclesial structure by transferring power from centre to periphery. People not previously given a voice, or a chance to lead, are suddenly thrust into the limelight. Women, people of colour, the young, and the less educated have all played central roles in Christian revivals of the past century” (McClymond 2018, 81).

Parks et al. mention “every follower of Christ a reproducing disciple,” “Each disciple is equipped in comprehensive ways,” and “Each disciple is given a vision both for reaching their relational network and for extending the kingdom to the ends of the earth.” Movement leader Shodankeh Johnson describes “ordinary people” as one of Jesus’ movement principles: “Jesus empowered people, empowered every believer. That is how ministry becomes scalable and reproducible: through ordinary people” (Johnson 2022, 15).

A fifth similarity is *more-than-normal occurrence of signs and wonders*. Not every revival or every CPM has brought an increase in such phenomena, but the presence of such has been noteworthy in a vast majority of revivals and CPMs. So much so that reports of such events have often occasioned skepticism and criticism of the accounts. McClymond reports: “Another common feature in revivals is the occurrence of so-called signs and wonders” (McClymond 2018, 74). Waugh (above) describes these as “Charismata.”

One of Garrison’s factors found in most CPMs is: “Divine signs and wonders.” Victor John writes: “In our context, signs and wonders always follow wherever the gospel is preached. Miracles happen quite commonly in the movement, but we don’t focus on those. We focus on obeying God and doing what he commands, to show his glory on earth” (John and Coles 2019, 198).

A sixth similarity is *a confluence of human and divine factors*. Both revivals and movements are powerful works of the Spirit of God; not capable of being produced simply through application of the right methods by God’s people. (Though human actions can either open the door for or tend to discourage both revivals and movements.) McClymond states: “Regarding the causes of revival, my argument is that natural and supernatural explanations do not exclude one another.... Some devout authors, including even Jonathan Edwards—have invoked natural causes alongside supernatural or divine factors as causes or reasons for revivals” (McClymond 2018, 46, 82). Parks et al. observe: “There is awareness that only God can start movements, but disciples can follow biblical principles to pray, plant, and water the seeds.”

Revivals and CPMs show a seventh similarity in that both blaze with a *passion for God’s glory*. In revival, this passion manifests itself primarily through God’s people becoming more what Scripture says we should be—the bride of Christ more beautifully dressed. At the same time, many unbelievers also come to passionate saving faith in times of revival. In CPM, this passion manifests itself primarily in a focus on reaching the lost, including other unreached groups besides one’s own. The passionate obedience that comes from faith then characterizes the life of these disciples. Through CPMs, the big picture vision of God’s kingdom reaching every tribe, language, people and nation results in the bride of Christ becoming more complete.

An eighth similarity is a *passionate desire to evangelize others*,” as quoted from McClymond above and designated by Garrison as “Abundant Evangelism.” This could also be described as a general “bold fearless faith” (Garrison) in speaking of spiritual things, notable in both revivals and CPMs.

A ninth similarity consists of a lowering of racial, gender, and class barriers. McClymond records: “Religious revivals, at least in their initial phases, have often been accompanied by a lowering of racial, gender, and class barriers.... Among Holiness and Pentecostal groups in their earliest years, gender and race relations were revolutionized. Women preached to men, Black men and women exercised spiritual leadership over whites. Children preached to adults” (McClymond 2018, 25, 26).

The Bhojpuri movement in North India, a context rife with divisions of caste and gender, reports: “We view women and treat women as equal partners in the good news and in the ministry. This is counter cultural and intentional on our part” (John and Coles 2019, 196). Similarly, “I consider it important to teach believers from all castes to meet and worship together, even while being sensitive to local customs” (John and Coles 2019, 28).

A tenth similarity: “In the social contexts of ‘revival’ there is often a *spiritual contagion* – and infectious influence transmitted by proximity—causing one person’s spiritual experiences to spill over to others” (McClymond 2016, 245). Kebreab (above) has described this dynamic in CPMs as “Ordinary Disciples Making Disciples.” Believers so appreciate their experience with the Lord that sharing him with others takes place naturally in everyday life.

One can see an eleventh similarity in the *social impact* of the phenomena. Jonathan Edwards wrote: “This work of God, as... the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town” (Edwards 1984, 348). McClymond observes: “Christian revivals include... the call for social reform and social justice” (2016, 245-246). Kebreab describes it thus: “DMMs are Holistic: Merging Compassion and Healing with the Gospel of Kingdom Transformation.” Parks et al. agree: “Holistic... The disciples in these movements love those around them in practical ways, such as caring for widows and orphans, ministering to the ill, and fighting oppression.” While in revivals, social impact generally comes as a *result* of revival, in CPMs, community impact often happens both as a precursor to and a fruit of CPM. Victor John observes: “When God’s children live in ways that bless the community around them, that lifestyle opens doors for the good news, proclaims the good news and manifests the good news. God receives the glory as holistic service touches people and transforms whole communities” (John and Coles 2019, 67).

A twelfth similarity can be seen in *attacks against the phenomena* by defenders of the status quo. McClymond summarizes: “Revivals are typically controversial, drawing fierce opposition as well as loyal support” (McClymond 2018, 73-74). Again, “Revivals often bring deep disagreements between the participants and the non-participants” (McClymond 2010, 312). And “Christian revivals have often provoked theological debates” (McClymond 2016, 245). Waugh elaborates: “Many historians wrote from the perspective of the established church, which often opposed and suppressed revival movements.... Strong impacts of the Spirit constantly initiated new movements which criticised and threatened the established order, so these movements were opposed” (Waugh 2020, 22).

In reaction against reports of significant gospel fruit within CPMs, numerous books, articles and videos have come forth critiquing various CPM practices and patterns. See, for example, Rhodes 2021, Vegas and Kocman 2022, and Buser 2019.

Ironically, “Calvinistic or Reformed Christians have been historically prominent in arguing both pro-revival and anti-revival positions” (McClymond 2010, 310). The First Great Awakening clearly reflected this, with both its strongest proponents and strongest opponents holding to a

Reformed perspective. One can hope that further interaction will diminish misunderstanding and increase discerning affirmation of “surprising” works of God’s Spirit in our day.

Having identified 12 points of commonality between revivals and CPMs, the discussion next briefly considers a few salient differences between the two phenomena.

Notable Differences between Revivals and CPMs

1. Revivals mainly occur among Christianized peoples (though frequently including conversion of the unconverted—often nominal Christians). CPMs, in contrast, are happening very significantly (though not exclusively) among unreached (non-Christian) peoples. Usage in some other languages also reflects a measure of overlap or confusion between the equivalent terms for “movement” and “revival.” For example, “Many Koreans use ‘revival’ when they actually mean growth from some kind of ‘movement’”; and, “While Korean and Japanese prayers for Japan’s ‘revival’ include revitalizing churches, the focus is on evangelization or the non-Christian 99% coming to Christ” (Private Correspondence 2022). In light of the above-mentioned caveats and observers’ assumptions (regarding among whom revivals and movements occur), this difference requires nuance and ongoing, detailed, and comparative studies of actual “revivals” and “movements.”
2. CPMs feature planting of new churches, which is not generally a focus in revival. (While precise definitions of church vary from one movement to another, see for example Waterman 2011.)
3. CPMs often involve suffering (Garrison) and sacrifice (Kebreab), which are not generally notable factors in revivals.

Conclusion

Revivals and CPMs are distinct phenomena with some notable differences, yet a great number of similarities. Both are marvelous works of God’s Spirit, worth our appreciation and desire for their frequent occurrence. McClymond notes: “In his foundational text *Faithful Narrative* (1737), Jonathan Edwards referred to revivals as a ‘surprising work of God’. Surprising things have indeed occurred—and during the twentieth century no less than the eighteenth and nineteenth. History suggests that twenty-first-century observers should expect the unexpected” (McClymond 2016, 260).

A similar statement could be made about CPMs: surprising things have happened in recent decades, giving good reason to hope God will continue bringing many to salvation out of contexts previously thought almost unreachable. As Jennings concludes: “Learning more about recent ‘movements’ and ‘revivals’ should spur all of Jesus’s followers to pray and otherwise participate in how God is at work around the world. Humility comes from realizing the surprising initiatives God takes” (Jennings 2022, 3).

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