

CHAPTER 1

Hope for a Revival?

Is there hope for a revival?

These are hard times for Christians hungering for radical social justice and renewed spirituality. The past couple decades have been very regressive. All sectors of society seem to be regressing. Government is retrenching on commitments to racial justice and affirmative action. There is a backlash against the women's movement and gay rights. Most of society seems to be taking a more punitive attitude towards poor people, homeless people, and immigrants. Food stamps and other aid programs for poor people are being restricted. Society is becoming more militarized and authoritarian. The U.S. more and more is becoming a police state. Police forces are growing. Police powers are increasing as individual rights are receding. Surveillance and security measures are increasing. Prison and jail construction has boomed. The inmate population has grown to one-and-a-half million Americans - with millions more on probation and parole. Society is more determined to punish individuals, especially poor people and people of color, than it is willing to seriously address root problems. Much of society is showing signs of distress. Despite a long period of high corporate profits, economic stability for many Americans is declining. Corporations, civic leaders, and lawmakers have no solution for a more economically stratified society, the transfer of factories to foreign countries, downward pressure on union wages, the increase in homelessness - especially among women and children, the breakdown of communities and marriages, the persistent violence against women and among youth, and persistent racial segregation in society.

Ecologically, these are hard times for the whole earth. The world's ecosystems are seriously threatened by numerous wars, mounting pollution and toxic wastes, and economic exploitation of lands, oceans, and forests. Deforestation, loss of wetlands, high rates

of soil erosion, groundwater contamination, acid rain, ozone depletion, and global warming bode ill for the future. In some countries important agricultural land is covered with land mines. Tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste continue to accumulate and leak radiation, contaminating the environment. Biological diversity is declining - with an alarming rate of extinction of species. The earth and most of life on it are in trouble.

The Christian churches are not providing a light in the present darkness. The churches don't even attempt to encourage or practice holistic discipleship to Jesus. Neither are they neutral. Rather, the churches obstruct and run counter to real discipleship to Jesus. In large part, although with minor differences, the lifestyles of Christians mesh with the mores of society. As a result, the social forces sweeping the nation are also sweeping the churches.

Alternative, intentional Christian communities, while doing many wonderful things, have been struggling. The past several decades are marked by the disintegration of many alternative Christian communities. Even long-enduring communities have lost some of their prophetic edge or are struggling to maintain members - and could use a new infusion of life and Spirit.

These regressive times seem to defy hope. The tide has changed. The old hopes and visions have dissipated. Conservatism, with some reactionary edges, has settled in. No revival movement seems to be close at hand. How can one maintain hope in these times?

Regressive times do not snuff out the possibilities for a revival. Regressive times offer the possibility of providing a starker contrast between the ways of the nations and the Way of God. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, possibilities for a revival are at our doorstep. Only we need faith to see them and the heart to seek them.

The bad news of the world is only one side of the coin. On the other side is the gospel of Jesus, the good news. Amid the distress and crisis in the world God has been active. God has been actively working to change us and lead us on the path of peace and justice. Even now God is preparing a Way in the wilderness. A secure and

fruitful Way is prepared for us. There is indeed hope for a revival. In fact, the Way is ready now. That is, God is ready and all is prepared. But something seems to be missing. What could it be?

If regressive times do not prevent a revival and if God is fully ready then on what does a revival depend? Not to be evasive, but the answer to the above question depends, in part, upon *which revival* we are hoping for.

A revival of altar girls, Beanie babies, and espresso shops??

Which revival? Puff and fluff? Fire and brimstone? Smoke and mirrors? Or the real thing? Many Christians have hopes and desires for some sort of Christian revival. These hopes can take different forms. In mainstream churches Christians may be inspired and "revived" for months by token changes - by minute but well-rehearsed and well-publicized gestures. Many Christians feel uplifted whenever patriarchal religion shuffles its feet - as if movement of any kind is significant. Glory! - a new church conference resolution on peace! Hallelujah! - an ecumenical meeting of top church leaders! Praise the Lord! - small groups forming to have potluck dinners! Praise the Holy Father! - less than twenty centuries after Jesus, the Vatican now officially approves altar girls! (I never thought I'd live to see the day!) And Hail Mary! Spread the good news: for the new millennium the Pope expands indulgences!¹ What will happen next?? Dare we leave our seats? The benefits of remaining in church have never been greater!

In more lively Christian churches a revival may rest upon stirring people into a yet greater fervor. Speculation about "the end times" and naming "signs" foretelling Christ's imminent second coming adds fuel to the fire. Amen, brother - can you see Him coming yet? No - but I can feel Him - coming closer! Soon and very soon! Alleluia! In some circles a revival may be generated by putting the right ingredients together and simply grinding it out. Bible-pounding speakers, gospel music, and a large sanctuary or tent provide the basics for prolonged meetings on consecutive days or nights. Look! The Holy Spirit is moving! They're swaying and shaking and falling

from their seats! Slain by the Spirit! - Or - did Alice fall when she dozed off? And did Frank go too long without a drink before he started shaking? Hmmm. (I can see the fingers pointing at me now - "Scoffer!" - for "Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing..." 2 Pet. 3:3) Still another revival may focus more on the bottom line - headcount - with the two most important statistics being attendance and number responding to the altar call. 20,000. 25%. Hosanna in the highest! Joy in heaven! 5,000 souls saved for Christ and added to heaven's coffers! And a few more notches on our ego-straps! Hallelujah!

Well - not to be in any way disrespectful - but the revival advocated for in this book is a little different from the revivals described above. The revival advocated here is a radical, i.e., deep-rooted, revival of holistic discipleship to Jesus. This is a call for a new discipleship movement in our times. Or, to put it another way, this is a call for a revival of the revolutionary movement that Jesus began nearly 2000 years ago.

A radical revival involves more than simple conversion to Jesus, more than a brief encounter with the Holy Spirit, more than a commitment to some form of personal piety, and more than a deepened social concern. A radical revival involves a call for a *lifelong commitment to follow Jesus and his revolutionary Way of changing the world*. To live out this commitment involves forming new discipleship communities.

How can Jesus and the discipleship movement be described as revolutionary? Well, it's true that Jesus is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill revolutionary. Jesus' revolutionary movement is committed to nonviolence. It is based on the power of love - and is in conflict with the power of violence. Yet Jesus' unique Way of changing the world is not weak or wimpy. On the contrary, the discipleship movement is the grandest experiment in courage and risk-taking. It challenges the powers and authorities of the nations and lifts up the banner of God's commonwealth on earth. It is all about a new way of living infused with the Spirit of life.

The radical revival this book calls for is possible *at any time* because it does not depend upon *external* factors. A radical revival

does not depend upon what politicians are promising or what government leaders are or are not doing. Nor does it depend upon whether the nation is on its normal "peace-time war-footing" or actually engaged in military actions. It does not depend upon national economic growth, a recession, or a depression. A radical revival does not depend upon reforming traditional churches or upon church leaders achieving a higher consciousness. It does not depend upon praying for several years for a revival. It does not even depend upon special autonomous actions by God - such as apocalyptic divine intervention into human affairs, another Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, an imminent rapture, or Jesus' second coming. Then on what does it depend?

A radical revival depends upon us. That is, a revival depends upon some people willingly choosing to follow Jesus and his revolutionary Way. So it depends upon our will, our choices. It depends upon how badly we want to know Jesus and to see God's power working in our lives. It depends upon how badly we want healing for ourselves, for our children, and for the planet. Literally, whether a radical revival occurs in our lifetimes depends upon the choices we make. Or at least upon the choices *some* of us make, since it only takes a relatively small number of deeply-committed people to begin a revival.

The fact that God has prepared a life-transforming Way for us and is fully ready now to lead a radical revival needs to be followed with the question: But are we ready? For we are the ones for whom the stage is set, for whom God has been laboring. We - all who are alive today - are on center stage on planet Earth. It is our time. We are the only ones who can act now. Whether we like it or not, the responsibility for responding to the world's problems is ours. The spotlight is on us. The opportunity is here for us to shine like stars. People of faith who have gone before us, like a "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), surround us. They are praying for us to act for the sake of the whole world. Who from our generation will follow Jesus? Are you willing to follow Jesus the whole way?

If we are not ready to make a deep commitment to Jesus, and I believe that very few of us are, then we are still left with some choices. One choice is to work for reforms within existing churches.

Another choice is to prepare and get ready for a wild and adventurous ride with Jesus. The first choice - to work for reforms within existing churches - douses real hope. It means business as usual. It means a prolongation of the status quo, of this murderous patriarchal age. It means, in large part, resisting deep-rooted change. The choice to stay within existing churches means postponing, delaying, or rejecting new practices and sticking with deeply-flawed traditions. It means continuing to worship the churches' domesticated Jesus and domesticated Christ. It means continuing to turn away from the raw and untamed Jesus of the gospels. Those who make the first choice need not read any further.² The rest of this book pertains to those who dare to make the second choice.

The second choice means preparing for a much deeper commitment to Jesus - and it offers real hope. Hope for a radical revival. Hope for a new discipleship movement. Hope for the world.

There is hope for a radical revival only if we can leave church institutions behind and take some big steps forward. Every radical reformation or revival in the past has meant breaking away from established religious institutions and old traditions. Christianity began as a Jewish sect and then made a radical break away from Jewish traditions and from the Jewish establishment. The Reformation began when Martin Luther made a radical break from Roman Catholic traditions and eventually from the Catholic hierarchy. The Anabaptist movement made yet a greater break from the Roman Catholic church and church-state traditions. Every new denomination began as a new beginning, as a breaking away from existing churches and traditions. This pattern of breaking away is necessary because as we see Jesus more clearly we can no longer be satisfied with stagnating church paths.

Looking forward

How does one prepare to join Jesus' revolutionary discipleship movement? How does one prepare to make a deep commitment to Jesus? It is good to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus, his mission, and how to live by his liberating teachings and practices.

Beginning a radical revival involves three parts: 1. developing a new vision of Jesus and God's commonwealth on earth; 2. preparing to make a revolutionary commitment to Jesus; and 3. organizing discipleship communities and actually living out the vision and the commitment. The book Christian Idolatry / Christian Revival (C.I./C.R.) focused on part #1 - on exposing Christian idolatry and developing a new and holistic vision of God's commonwealth. This book continues to expand upon part #1 while emphasizing part #2.

Central to the discipleship movement is the leadership of Jesus, the Messiah. This book seeks to encourage people to fully establish and maintain that leadership in their lives. Three chapters cover different ways of reading the Bible and how they can either enhance or undermine Jesus' leadership. Two chapters focus on preparatory steps before making a revolutionary commitment to Jesus. Preparation helps to shorten the gap between our current lifestyles and what Jesus wants us to be and to do. A chapter on baptism explores this subversive commitment-ritual. A revolutionary baptismal commitment can demarcate between followers of "old-time religion" and those on the path of revolutionary discipleship.

Let us begin by expanding our understanding of Jesus' big mission and why Jesus offers so much hope for the world.

Footnotes

1. Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II decreed a jubilee year from December 25, 1999 to January 6, 2001, during which the faithful had more ways of earning and receiving church-sanctioned plenary indulgences. *If* the Vatican was accurately tapping into the mind of God, then these were valuable indulgences that will reduce time spent in "purgatory." It's a rather big "if."

2. The point here is not to denigrate the good work and positive contributions of individual Christians within churches. Rather, the point is that churches, as organizations, lead Christians *astray*. They lead Christians *away from* full-time discipleship to Jesus. For a

radical critique of the churches and degenerative Christianity, see C.I/C.R., 1993.

Waiting for the dawn

Alone in the darkness
waiting for the dawn.
Why keep watch?
Before, there were songs,
there were visions -
admittedly some illusions -
but now -
there is only brokenness -
the long loneliness -
the uneventful monotony
of time slowly passing
waiting for the breath
of new life.

A strange existence
of attentiveness
and dormancy
impatiently enduring
the dark cycle.
In the cold of the night -
sweat dripping down -
the external evidence
of a passion
yet too deep
to be subdued.
A kindling fire -
awaiting new possibilities -
to burst forth.

Yet, for now -
a steadfast determination
to stay awake
waiting to catch
the first rays
of a new dawn.