



RE VIVAL

WHEN
GOD
COMES

TO
CHURCH

REVIVAL



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Three birds are depicted in flight, positioned to the left of the word 'REVIVAL'. They are arranged in a descending line from top-left to bottom-right, appearing to fly towards the right.

WHEN

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STEVE GAINES

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to two men—Roy Fish and Don Miller, both of whom are deceased. God used them to plant a hunger in my heart for revival and prayer. I served as Dr. Fish’s grader for seven years at Southwestern Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He taught a PhD seminar on “The History of Spiritual Awakenings” that literally changed my life and ministry. As I studied the great awakenings that God has sent to his people over the years, the Lord birthed a hunger for revival deep in my soul. Likewise, Brother Don taught a prayer seminar that I attended my first year in seminary. I invited him to teach that same prayer seminar in all four churches I have pastored. I learned from him about how to commune intimately with the Lord in prayer. He was and still is the greatest prayer-warrior I’ve ever met. I am forever grateful for both of these godly brothers in Christ. Though they are both in heaven, their legacies of revival and prayer continue to live in the hearts of those they mentored for decades.

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I am grateful for the many people who helped in various ways with the publication of *Revival: When God Comes to Church*. Thank you, Donna, for being my wife since 1980 and for pursuing the Lord so beautifully. You are the most Christlike person I know. You live in revival every day. Thank you, pastors Josh Smith and Steve Smith, for encouraging me to write this book. I know you both have a heart for revival. Thank you, Ben Mandrell, CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources for being willing to publish the book. Thank you, Matthew Hawkins and your team at B&H, for all the encouragement and help. Thank you to my administrative assistant, Candy Phillips, for proofreading the manuscript. Thank you, Noah Sidhom, for all your help and advice. You're one of the brightest and most godly people I know. And thank you to my longtime, best friends, Bill Street, David Jett, and Russ Quinn for seeking the Lord and diligently praying for revival for decades. You guys are my heroes. May we live to see the glory of God fill the house of God again! "O Lord, open the windows of heaven and come down!"

*“Will you not revive us again
so that your people
may rejoice in you?”*

Psalm 85:6

*“LORD, I have heard the report about you;
LORD, I stand in awe of your deeds.
Revive your work in these years;
make it known in these years.
In your wrath remember mercy!”*

Habakkuk 3:2

CONTENTS

Introduction.	1
Chapter 1: Who’s in the House?	7
Chapter 2: Church Is Not a Performance	17
Chapter 3: An Audience of One	25
Chapter 4: Welcoming God’s Glory.	35
Chapter 5: A Church with Little but God	45
Chapter 6: American Revivals in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries	55
Chapter 7: American Revivals from 1900 to the Present	71
Chapter 8: The Leader’s Heart.	89
Chapter 9: Attracting God’s Presence	97
Chapter 10: Flow, Not Show	107
Chapter 11: Music: The Agony and the Ecstasy	115
Chapter 12: Praying Together	123
Chapter 13: Preaching—a Word from Above	131

REVIVAL

Chapter 14: Calling People to Jesus Publicly 139

Chapter 15: Five Enemies of Revival 147

Chapter 16: Discontented but Hopeful 159

About the Author 173

Notes 175

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a relatively small, Southern Baptist church located in a county seat town in West Tennessee. The pastor was a kind, Christlike man. The deacons were servants, the teachers were kind and knowledgeable, the choir sang beautifully, and we had a good youth ministry. My father was a deacon and the head of the ushers. My mother taught children's Sunday school. We were very involved in that church.

But when I was a sophomore in high school, I turned away from the Lord and the church. I was a pretty good football player on a successful team. I started running with some of my teammates who liked to drink and party. As a result, for most of the next three years, until the spring of my freshman year in college, I lived a sinful life. It wasn't my church's fault, my parents' fault, or anyone else's fault. It was all my fault.

But I've often wondered whether or not I would have strayed if I had known more Christians like the ones I read about in the book of Acts.

What should a church of the Lord Jesus Christ look like in the twenty-first century? Should it resemble the culture around it? Or should it look like the earliest church in the book of Acts?

Can a church faithfully share the gospel of Jesus Christ with non-Christians while simultaneously seeking to appease our secular culture? Is it possible for Christians today to be true to the gospel of Jesus while they remain worldly?

The gospel of Jesus not only differs from our worldly culture; it is an outright affront to it. The gospel states forthrightly that all people are sinners by nature and by choice. Consequently, we are separated from God and in need of salvation. Apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ, there is no hope for forgiveness of sin and peace with God. People need to be regenerated. For that to happen, they must *repent* and turn from their sins, *believe* savingly in Jesus's atoning death and bodily resurrection, and volitionally *receive* Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. After someone becomes a Christian, God commands him to leave his worldly ways and live a holy, Christlike life. He must adhere to biblical doctrine that will go against the beliefs of our culture. Indeed, Christians are to be different from the world.

I enjoy the tune of Louis Armstrong's renowned song "It's a Wonderful World," but I disagree with the lyrics. It's true that the world God originally created was "wonderful" before sin entered it. But after Eve and Adam ate that forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, the world changed drastically. Their sin caused our world to come under the curse of God. Because our world is cursed, it will never function correctly until Christ returns and reigns as King of kings. Thus, Christians should embrace the amazing example of Jesus and the earliest Christians.

Again, whenever I look at Acts, I can't help but think, *Why don't our churches today look like that?* I once heard someone say,

“It’s time for churches to stop focusing on the book of *Numbers* and start focusing on the book of *Acts!*” That clever rhetoric of course is not a dismissal of the actual Old Testament book of Numbers but a call to check our pragmatic quest for church attendance with a pursuit of the Holy Spirit.

J. B. Phillips, the Anglican clergyman who paraphrased the New Testament in the 1950s, wrote a stunning preface when his first edition of Acts came onto the market. He got honest about how his work had impacted him.

It is impossible to spend several months in close study of [this] remarkable short book . . . without being profoundly stirred and, to be honest, disturbed. The reader is stunned because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The newborn Church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money, influence, nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ. The young church, like all young creatures, is appealing in its simplicity and singleheartedness. . . .

Yet we cannot help feeling disturbed as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound

by over-organization. These men did not make “acts of faith,” they believed; they did not “say their prayers,” they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit that they were open on the Godward side in a way that is almost unknown today.¹

Our churches today could look more like *that* church. That’s why I have written this book. The church in the book of Acts was known for following the Lord Himself with every step they took. They had the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus Christ.

When God’s manifest presence comes to a fellowship of believers in Christ, God’s people experience revival. I’ll address what revival is and isn’t in chapter 1, but my favorite way to define revival is, simply, *when God comes to church*. The Lord Himself is the answer for all our problems. We don’t need another program; we need His presence. We don’t need better personalities in the spotlight; we need His presence. We don’t need slick marketing; we need His presence. Lights, cameras, and websites don’t matter as much as the presence and power of God. The Holy Spirit is our primary draw. When He touches people, they’re never the same.

Some might object and say, “Well, Acts was a special case and time. God gave them special power to get the church up and

rolling. He doesn't do that in our day." Frankly, I disagree. Why would God put us on earth at this point in history and withhold from us the same power He gave to the earliest Christians? Our modern culture is just as evil and sinful, if not more so, than the one they faced. God wants to redeem people today just as He did then.

Most people recognize that our nation and world are in serious trouble morally and spiritually. I'm convinced we are long past a political, secular, or social solution. We dare not look primarily to Republicans or Democrats to repair our broken land. If that were possible, our nation would have already been repaired. But we all know that hasn't happened. Secular social improvements are unable to channel the tide of culture in the right direction.

What our world needs is a heaven-sent revival among the followers of Jesus Christ. In *Revival: When God Comes to Church*, I invite you to join me as we analyze and imagine how our churches today can look like the church of the first century. Infused with the Holy Spirit, early believers evangelized most of the known world within only three centuries. When Christians are reignited with the flame of the Holy Spirit and begin to take the gospel of Jesus to our secular, lost, and hurting culture, real change will come. Our communities are spiritually sick and dying. The Lord's presence among His people in His churches is the answer to our problems. I encourage you to read the following pages with an open heart and a prayerful attitude. Time is of the essence. It's time for revival.

Chapter 1

WHO'S IN THE HOUSE?

Since 1978, I have served on the staff of several Baptist churches. In one of those churches, on a Wednesday night, our congregation gathered for prayer. We prayed for our upcoming revival meeting. We prayed for lost people to show up and be saved and for Christians to show up and be revived. Someone asked, “Is there anything else we should pray about?” I raised my hand and said, “Let’s pray that God will show up.” You could have heard a pin drop.

I wasn’t trying to be a smart aleck. I know that God is omnipresent—He is everywhere, simultaneously. But I’d been in a few Christian meetings where God’s presence was undeniably manifest. I’d experienced that in student gatherings at the University of Tennessee at Martin, where I attended my first two years of college on a football scholarship. I attended the Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings. In February 1976, I went with some teammates to a revival meeting at a small, rural Baptist church, and the pastor, Bill Coleman, led me to faith in Christ.

When that happened, I began to avidly read my Bible, pray, attend church, fellowship with other believers, and witness to lost people. In our campus Bible studies, we were often eclipsed by God's presence. That's what I desired for our revival meeting, but it was not to be.

When our revival services came, people attended, sang, prayed, and gave offerings. Sermons were preached, a few were saved (mostly children), and some others rededicated their lives to Christ. But it wasn't what I'd describe as corporate revival. After it was over, someone asked, "Why didn't more happen at our revival meeting?" In frustration, I wanted to say, "Because God didn't show up!" Then I thought, *As a pastor, I want to lead God's people to hunger for His presence more than anything else!*

For more than forty years, I've been a senior pastor, and I've served in leadership in my denomination. I've developed and (hopefully) matured. But one thing hasn't changed: I still want God to show up! I still believe the main thing isn't how many people show up but how much of God's presence shows up.

Revival is more than a feeling. I'm talking about something *real*, like what we read about in the Old Testament when the new temple was dedicated. "The temple, the LORD's temple, was filled with a cloud. And because of the cloud, the priests were not able to continue ministering, for the glory of the LORD filled God's temple" (2 Chron. 5:13–14). That's a great way to define revival: when *the glory of God fills the house of God*.

What do we mean by *revival* or *spiritual awakening*? I once heard evangelist and revivalist Richard Owen Roberts say, "Revival [is] an extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit

producing extraordinary results.” He stressed that revival is extraordinary (i.e., not the norm), revival comes from God (not man), and revival produces amazing results.

In a class I took at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the late Dr. Roy Fish defined *revival* as “an infusion of divine life into the body of Christ which enables the body to love unconditionally, rejoice exceedingly, serve productively, live victoriously, praise appropriately, minister freely, and witness effectively.” Dr. Fish was saying that when revival comes, God’s people will be aware of His presence, be characterized by life and enthusiasm, love one another and also non-Christians, rejoice and give thanks, serve others, be set free from sinful strongholds as they walk in victory, worship God according to Scripture, be led by the Spirit as they minister, and share the gospel with the lost.

“Revival is when the glory of God (i.e., His manifest presence) fills the house of God and the people of God!” In other words, revival is *when God comes to church* (hence, the title of this book!).

In Acts, some Christians held a prayer meeting and poured out their hearts to God. Then, “the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). They had no buildings, but they had God’s presence. Some of our churches today could use some spiritual shaking. We need the Holy Spirit to shake out our sin, pride, and satisfaction with church as usual.

Through the years I’ve seen glimpses of revival. One Sunday at West Jackson Baptist Church in Jackson, Tennessee, when

the choir began their special music, I can only say, “God walked into the room.” You could sense His presence. People stood and worshipped the Lord. Others knelt at the altar and prayed. Lost people were saved. Christians were blessed. It was a touch of heaven on earth, and we all left wanting more!

I also experienced multiple heavenly invasions during a fourteen-year pastorate at First Baptist Church, Gardendale, Alabama. In the mid-1990s, many people in our church began to pray, fast, and seek the Lord’s presence. God blessed our worship services with His manifest presence for several years. Many people were saved and baptized. God moved miraculously.

Since 2005, I’ve served as the pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis. In every worship service, we praise the Lord with worshipful singing, I preach through a biblical text, and then we extend an altar call. People get saved, schedule their baptism, and begin the process of joining our church. We counsel and pray with people about various needs. We also anoint people with oil and pray for them to be healed (cf. James 5:14–16). Not all are healed physically, but we keep praying because God can heal through medicine, miracle, or both. It’s our job to pray, and it’s God’s job to answer however He pleases. In it all, God reminds us that He is in His house!

The Real Quest

Today, many churches seem explainable. Some “grow” simply because they are “well-oiled machines.” Many modern worship services seem more like a manufactured performance than a

preparation of soil anticipating the Lord's presence. The size and professional polish of a church won't change a person's life. Only the Lord's presence can cause people to stop stealing, stop viewing pornography, and stop abusing others. Yet, in many churches, the motto seems to be: *Come as you are; leave as you came*. People walk out as they came in, except for a bag of church stuff under their arms. Where's the manifest presence of Christ?

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, "But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, *the Father wants such people to worship him*" (John 4:23, emphasis added). I like to envision God hovering over Memphis asking, "What church wants to worship Me? I'm seeking My people who possess humble, hungry, holy hearts, who want to jettison their busyness and reach out to Me!"

It doesn't have to be a Baptist church. It just needs to be a church that loves Jesus, the Bible and people, and is willing to pursue God. A church shouldn't be built on personalities or programs. A church should be built on God's presence. In that kind of church, at least *some* things happen that can only be explained by God's presence. If the Holy Spirit moved out, it would all implode!

When a lost man walks into a church that is saturated in prayer, and he sits among people who pursue God, and God's presence is so real he can't deny it, that man is going to say, like the visitors to the Corinthian church, "God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:25).

Time for Another Awakening

In the book of Acts, thousands of people were saved and whole cities were transformed by God's power. That's what I want to see happen in our day. I want others to experience what I studied in seminary:

- the revivals of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John and Charles Wesley in the 1700s,
- the Prayer Meeting Revival of the 1800s,
- the awakenings in Wales and elsewhere in the early 1900s, and
- the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

I'm weary of reading about such things because I so desire revival in *our* time so that "seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:20). Yes, we should love God with our *mind* and *strength*, but let's not forget our *heart* and *soul* (cf. Mark 12:30)! My mentor, Roy Fish, used to say, "Your theology can be as straight as a gun barrel but just as empty!"

In the 1500s, the church experienced reformations of our view of the Word, thanks to Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and the others who brought us out of the bondage of the Dark Ages. What we need today is a *reformation of worship*—a renewed scriptural understanding of what it means to draw close to God. When we worship, we give the Lord our heart, and He shares His heart with us. What a glorious exchange!

I long to be part of a spiritual awakening in America. I don't believe God is ready to give up on our nation. If God sent a nationwide revival to our country, the evangelistic harvest of souls would be mind-boggling, and the worldwide evangelistic and social effects would last for a hundred years or more. That's why I pray that the Christians in our country will repent and seek God's presence.

Some talk about getting God back into our government and public schools. I want to get God back *into our churches*. When Jesus knocked at a door in Revelation 3:20, He was trying to enter the door of the church of Laodicea, not the door of a human heart. The imagery expresses the Laodicean believers had locked Jesus out of His own church. When Jesus is welcomed back into His churches, everyone—Christians and the world alike—will see an amazing difference.

A Football Revival

In my tenth-grade year, I was on the high school football team in my hometown of Dyersburg, Tennessee. Our school hadn't had a winning team in years. A tough, no-nonsense coach was brought in to make us winners. We practiced hard, but when the season opened, we lost two of our first three games.

That was when our coach had a heart-to-heart talk with us. Standing by the goalpost, he said: "Men, no one around here thinks we can win. Most of you don't think we can win. But the fact is, we *can* win. But we're going to have to pull together,

become a team, work harder, and start seeing ourselves as *winners!*”

Something wonderful started under that goalpost. We won seven of our next eight games, finishing the season at 8–3. The next season we went 10–1! The crowds at our games grew exponentially. My senior year we had ten more victories and even went to the state playoffs in Nashville! When the dust settled, we were ranked third in the state. We were the talk of West Tennessee.

You might say our team and my hometown had a “football revival.” I had the joy and privilege of playing on three winning teams, and I saw a town come together with pride and joy. And it all started under that goalpost when a few “believers” latched on to a fragile and nearly illusive dream. We wanted to win, and we were willing to do whatever it took to see our dream become a reality. Of course, a winning football season isn’t nearly as important as a movement of the Holy Spirit. So my question, as you read this book, is, How much do we desire a profound movement of the Holy Spirit?

In America, for the past six decades, Christian churches and denominations have experienced significant decline. The culture has kicked God out of our public schools. From 1973 to 2022, millions of babies were slaughtered by abortion. Gratefully in 2022, *Roe vs. Wade* was overturned. At the writing of this book, the abortion policy battle is in the hands of state legislatures, making for a chaotic national situation. Also, the LGBTQ culture came “out of the closet” and legalized same-sex “marriage.” Sexually transmitted diseases, divorce, teenage pregnancies, anxiety, depression, and suicides are pervasive. We can’t build prisons

fast enough or large enough to house all the criminals. And our state governments are propped up by the greedy gambling industries. Our problems as a nation seem to go on and on.

What's the answer? Revival! God's Word still says: "[If] my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). That was not just a promise for ancient Israel. The Old Testament was written to encourage and instruct Christians of all ages (cf. Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). Christians *are* the people of God today. God's people, not unbelievers, are the ones holding back revival.

God desires to return to His people and to His houses of worship. He is graciously knocking on the doors of our churches.

Will we let God back into His house?

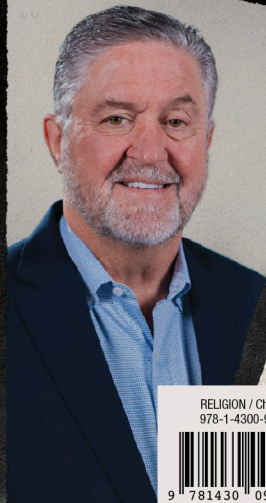
The remainder of this book offers reflections on key components of revival. In chapters 2–3, we'll begin by setting the context for our conversation. I'll follow with a look at some of the accounts of God's presence in the Old Testament and the New Testament in chapters 4–5. Chapters 6–7 provide a historic survey of revivals in America. Then, chapters 8–14 offer practical guidance for pastors and local churches desiring to prepare the hearts of their congregations. Last, chapter 15 addresses some enemies of revival before we close with a vision for the future in chapter 16.

*WHY DON'T
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COULD THEY? When God manifests His presence to a fellowship of believers in Christ, God's people experience revival. That's one way to define what revival is—when God comes to church. In *Revival: When God Comes to Church*, Pastor Steve Gaines analyzes how churches can look like the church of the first century. Infused with the Holy Spirit, they evangelized most of the known world within only three centuries. We don't need programs, personalities, or marketing; we need His presence. The Holy Spirit is our primary draw, and when He touches people, they're never the same.

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DR. STEVE GAINES, senior pastor at Bellevue Baptist Church, is known as a man of prayer and a preacher of God's Word. Steve has pastored churches in Texas, Tennessee, and Alabama. He has served in many denominational leadership roles including president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Steve's wife, Donna, is also a vital part of ministry at Bellevue, teaching in Bellevue Women, serving with mission's projects, and leading younger women in discipleship. Steve and Donna have four children and eighteen grandchildren.



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