

# The Revival at Asbury

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There is a revival happening on Asbury University's campus.

A chapel service in Hughes Auditorium started on Wednesday, February 8th and has not yet ended. In the days since there has been an organic rotation of public confessions and repentance, worship (of all sorts), proclamation (preaching and testimonies), prayer, and public scripture reading.

The stage is largely empty, with worship teams off to the side. The altar railing is full without hyped-up altar calls and people come to kneel at it as the Holy Spirit prompts them.

Reports of healings and prophetic utterances are present. Children play along the edges of the meeting space as people do earnest business with God. At multiple points in the past week, capacity has been reached in Hughes Auditorium and Estes Chapel across the street at Asbury Theological Seminary has been opened up for overflow.

As someone who has been involved in Christian renewal movements for over 20 years and who has done PhD research on comparable historical events to those recorded in the book of Acts, I've had a number of people solicit my thoughts on the ongoing revival. I've been slow to formally post my thoughts because there is wisdom in not being hasty with one's words and evaluations.

My doctoral work focused on the tangible corporate outpourings of God's Holy Spirit at particular times and places throughout history, with a portion of my work specifically examining the Asbury Revival of 1970. Comparable corporate outpourings of God's Spirit are recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 2, 4, 8, 10, and 19) and similar experiences are testified to globally throughout history.

These comparable experiences have occurred among socially, economically, and geographically diverse groups of Christians throughout time, and all of these events have resulted in onlookers amazed, perplexed, and asking, "What is this? What does it mean?"

A similarly common response is for onlookers to scoff at what is happening and blame secondary causes. Drunkenness was the accusation in the ancient world; overhyped emotionalism is what we hear today. Below are some brief thoughts on the character of revival and responses to common questions I've heard with regard to the unfolding revival.

## **Question 1: "If this is revival, where are all the conversions?"**

This is a complex question for a variety of reasons, but foremost it should be observed that revival has happened, biblically and historically, first among believers and then its effect spills out on local communities and societies, which often results in personal conversion and social transformation.

All of the corporate outpourings of God's Spirit in Acts happened among believers of some kind – none were truly "outsiders" to Judaism. In Acts 2 and 4, the recipients were Jerusalemite and Diaspora Jewish peoples. In Acts 8, they were Samaritans, a Judaism-adjacent people group who worshiped YHWH in their own ways and places.

In Acts 10, God's Spirit fell upon God-fearing Gentiles who had opted to not fully convert to Judaism previously – a decision likely at least in part because it would have required the adult

males to undergo circumcision. Finally, in Acts 19 those whom the Spirit fell upon were “kind-of” (τινα) disciples of John.

These kinds of dramatic encounters with God’s Holy Spirit ultimately prompts different responses in different people. To those who do not know God or are not allegiant to him, the reality of God’s presence forces a response. For those who are wayward or deadened believers, the encounter produces confession, repentance, and revivification. For those passionately devoted to God, they are spurred on towards further obedience.

For all who have such an encounter, it is life-changing – so much so that they may even question the reality of their salvation prior to their encounter with the Holy Spirit.

The dramatic encounter with the manifest presence of God commonly compels believers to share their experience and witness to God’s activity in their own lives. This is seen in the dramatic confessions and testimony present in all the revivals I studied, but especially so in the East African Revival and in the Asbury Revival of 1970. In every context, among every people, the product of such an experience is empowered witness, often alongside greater consciousness to sin and a commitment to personal holiness.

This testimony of God’s work in a believer’s life often becomes the invitation for others to repent of prior allegiances and turn their allegiance towards Jesus. In this way, believers join in God’s mission to the world by witnessing to Jesus and his work in the world.

The results of such experiences are likewise consistent across all data sets I studied. Such experiences (at least in the near-term) bring reconciliation, corporate unity, and a new social identity that “affirms yet chastens and transcends ethnic identity.”<sup>[1]</sup> These new communal identities often inhabit indigenous patterns, such as through the church (and campus) networks in the Welsh and Asbury Revivals, the clan system among the Balokole in the East African Revival, and the village networks of the Dayak in Borneo.

This is not to say that division and strife do not work their way into such communities – the data also testifies that such divisions can creep into communities if not actively guarded against. The Welsh revival sputtered out in the midst of such division. The Balokole actively had to choose unity in the midst of institutional tensions in the East African Revival. Discernment was of utmost importance in the Dayak Revival because of the perceived threat by their spiritual enemy who sought to cause division.

Oftentimes, these outpourings have a dramatic impact not only on the life of Christian communities but also on the surrounding communities and societies they are located in. This is seen, for example, in the dramatic social transformation observed in the Welsh Revival or the transformation of indigenous social power relationships among the Tagal in the Dayak Revival.

These dramatic outpouring can heal community relations as observed in multiple testimonies from the Asbury Revival of 1970. Thus, it should not be surprising that revival is happening primarily among believers first and will likely lead to conversions and social transformation. But equally not surprising will be social divisions if they were to occur, as so commonly has been the case throughout history. It is worth the reminder that we are only a week into this outpouring of God’s Spirit – it’s worth a bit of patience as God works in his people.

### **Question #2: “This is just hyped-up spiritual emotionalism, right?”**

Historically, every account of revival reports a wide range of emotive and physiological responses to the presence of the Holy Spirit within an event. It should be noted that emotive reactions to the presence of the Holy Spirit are wildly divergent, not only across multiple events within any given revival, but often even within the same event itself.

Multiple accounts from the 1970 Asbury Revival clearly illustrates this diversity of response to the Holy Spirit within the community in the same event. Occasionally there are shared commonalities to how people experience God’s Spirit.

Historically, communities experiencing revival have often attempted to systematize a specific emotive or physiological manifestation as indicative of the Spirit’s activity, such as weeping during the period of *okucugusibwa* or bodily manifestations later in Tanganyika of the East African Revival. Inevitably, however, these communities would reject such totalizing claims.

There is no consistency to how people respond to the presence of God. Despite the claims that what is happening at Asbury is simply “heightened emotional connection,” my direct observations suggest it is nothing of the sort. The environment I have observed is positively muted compared to many charismatic contexts I’ve worshipped in. The general response has been a hushed, deep reverence for the tangible presence of God that is being experienced in that place. I have heard others who have experienced it the past couple days describe it as a “deep peace” and the “quiet, heavy presence of God.”

### **Question #3: “If it is true revival, where are the dramatic manifestations of God’s power?”**

The same observation about a diversity of emotive responses applies to dramatic manifestations of God’s divine power. Accounts within any given revival record report vastly divergent phenomenon. This is true of occasional healing (like in the Dayak or 1970 Asbury Revival), prophecy (in the Welsh or 1970 Asbury Revival), tongues (in the East African or Dayak Revivals), and even dramatic environmental signs of God’s presence (like in the Welsh or Dayak Revivals).

You do not need to have dramatic demonstrations of God’s power to have revival, although it is worth noting that these demonstrations frequently accompany revival. While some miraculous activity has been previously recorded in prior Asbury revivals, dramatic demonstrations of power have never been a hallmark of these encounters with God’s presence in prior comparable events.

That said, testimonies are beginning to trickle in. I know at least four hours of testimonies were recorded on Monday. It will take time to sort through these accounts. Individuals who are ministering there have said to me that they’ve experienced a clarity and specificity in their prophetic words that they haven’t experienced elsewhere. I’ve heard of at least a couple dramatic healings, including the healing of a blind eye and the disappearance of an oral tumor.

Additionally, there does appear to be deep emotional healing and reconciliation that is occurring, which in some social contexts and within some individuals, these manifestations of divine love are as dramatic as the opening of deaf ears.

### **Final Thoughts**

For what it’s worth, it’s my initial evaluation that this is the real deal. None of the hallmarks of manufactured revival are present. And I’m not alone in this evaluation. As Lawson Stone, an Old Testament Professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, recently stated on social media, “The old

saints know.” Arguably more significant for the evaluation of the revival’s authenticity than the opinions of revival scholars are the testimonies of the prior generations who were present at similar moves of God within the community.

Much like Peter in Acts 11, they can proudly declare that “the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). For those that have seen this before, ‘this’ is indeed ‘that.’

The reality is that people are moved by the tangible presence of God to linger in that place for hours (and even days) on end. Some classes have been canceled. Much work has been postponed. All to make space for encountering God’s presence. The Super Bowl, one of our culture’s most ubiquitous communal experiences, did not even put a dent in the attendance at Hughes Auditorium. Let that sink in.

In our hurry-filled, over-scheduled Western American culture whose obsession with productivity, achievement, and consumerism has saturated every corner of life, life has simply ground to a halt in this little corner of Kentucky so that people can prioritize spending time soaking in the manifest presence of God.

If there is any dramatic outworking of God’s power manifest in our midst through this revival, it is this.

If this wasn’t amazing enough, by all accounts and metrics, things are just getting started. Reports have come in that similar experiences of God’s Spirit have occurred in a multitude of campuses and communities across the nation. Wherever you are, I pray that you will experience God’s presence tangibly in your midst and join me in praying “Come Holy Spirit!”

### **Related Reading**

Mark Nysewander. *Revival Rising: Preparing for the Next Great Wave of Awakening*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2016.

Michael Gleason. *When God Walked on Campus: A Brief History of Evangelical Awakening at American Colleges and Universities*. Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2002.

Robert E. Coleman and David J. Gyertson, eds. *One Divine Moment: The Account of the Asbury Revival of 1970*. 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Wilmore, KY: First Fruits, 2013.

(Photo credit: Craig Keener)

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[ii](#) Aaron Kuecker, *The Spirit and the ‘Other’: Social Identity, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts*, LNTS 444 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 216.