
Revolution or Revival

Last week a member of the congregation shared an article with me from the New York Times in which the author, David French, spoke about a rising religious fervour in North America, seen more clearly in the United States than in Canada. In that article he contrasted Christian revival with Christian revolution. David French warns that what we might be seeing and experiencing today might be much closer to revolution than it is to revival. I find his insights helpful in analyzing the significant Christian movement of the last decade or so.

Revolutions have been part of Western culture for about three centuries. Significant revolutions include the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Communist Revolutions of Russia and China. In these revolutions, the people had become dissatisfied with the dominant powers, and they rose up against them to overthrow them. Typically, these revolutions took the form of removing political rulers and replacing them with new rulers, ones who make the claim that they will rule for the people. For a revolution to begin and to be successful, the people must prove that those who have power are in the wrong and that their continued power will result in the total destruction of society. It is necessary for revolutionaries to malign those in power by blaming them for all that is wrong with the world. Revolutionaries must state things to the extreme, for to admit that there is anything good in those who hold power would be to weaken their perceived right to remove them from power. Further, revolutionaries must be sure to plaster over any cracks in their own ideologies, for to expose a crack would be to betray weakness. Thus, in the American Revolution, for example, British rule was painted as being destructive while the proposed democracy that the revolutionaries would offer was painted as being the absolute best form of government. Democracy, self rule, was proposed as the being the goal to which all others should be expected to attain if they wanted true freedom.

The watchword of revolution is “You are wrong, and we are right.” To put this into Christian-speak, we could say that the watchword of Christian revolution is, “You are completely sinful, and we are completely righteous.” Of course, as we well know as Reformed Christians, neither statement is completely correct. While we believe in total depravity, we do not believe in utter depravity. Utter depravity says that there is no remnant of good in anyone while total depravity says that while there remain remnants of good in everyone (we can still see God’s image), every part is tainted by sin and therefore unacceptable to God. Revolution, by its very nature, must ignore total depravity and adopt a position of utter depravity, at least for those who are perceived to be enemies of Christianity. The other statement, “we are righteous,” also cannot be true, for we know that there is no one who is righteous. We are all sinners, and everything we do, even if it is in the name of Jesus Christ, is still tainted by sin.

In sharp contrast to revolution, revival says something completely different. Revival begins with the admission of personal sin and promotes repentance. A revivalist will say, “I am a sinner, and I repent.” If we look at the great revivals of the last few centuries, we discover that the influential leaders spoke directly to people about our sin. Jonathon Edwards, for example, preached a now famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, in which he likened complacent and sleeping Christians as being spiders hanging

by a thread over a burning candle, in danger of being consumed in a moment. He moved his congregation to think about their own sin and to seek repentance from God. According to David French, “We will know when revival comes because we will see believers humble themselves, repent of their sins, and then arise, full of genuine virtue, to love their neighbors — to help them, not hurt them — and in so doing to heal our nation.” Revival results in life, as the word indicates. Revivification, the bringing again to life that which is dead or dying, is what is needed, not the destruction of those who are in opposition, as revolution demands.

Revival is not about power or about making things conform to one’s own ideologies. That’s revolution. Revival is about the renewal of the heart, and when the heart is renewed, life is renewed and when life is renewed, the world is renewed.

David French is concerned that we are mistaking the increasing religious fervour in the west, which is often tends to toward the revolutionary side, for revival. Revolutions can change things, of course. In the American Revolution, the outside monarchy was sent away and those from within took power of the new country. From that beginning the ideals of independence and freedom were born, but they were not realized for everyone. Democracy is not the rule of the people by the people but, rather, it is the rule of all the people by the dominant portion of the people. For those who were not among the dominant (slave, for example), democracy did nothing to make their lives better. Revolutions change the ones who have the power, and revolutions often do bring a better situation for many. But revolutions always involve the destruction of those who disagree.

Revivals, on the other hand, are life-giving. As we repent of our own sins and as we recognize our need for forgiveness, we are given new life by God. We are awakened to live and we, once again, recognize the value of giving others the ability to live. The intent of the revival is to give life to those with whom we have issue and who may be wrong and sinful.

Revolutionists must make their position strong and give themselves the right to overthrow others, and to do so, as already mentioned, they make the other the sinners and themselves the righteous. Revivalists recognize their own sin and repent of it. They never declare themselves to be righteous or even right. It is that posture of humility that brings life to others rather than take life from them.

It might be helpful if we would consider if we are seeing revolution or revival in the contemporary Christian climate. True, there is an increase in religious fervour, but is it of the right kind?

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