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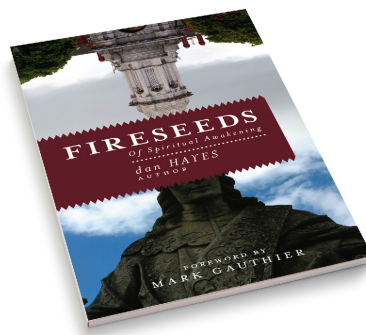
CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE IN PRAYER

FIRESEEDS OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING CHAPTER EXCERPT

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FIRESEEDS OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

“A revival always includes conviction of sin on the part of the church. Back-slidden professors cannot wake up and begin right away in the service of God without deep searchings of heart. The fountains of sin need to be broken up. In a true Revival, Christians are always brought under such conviction; they see their sins in such a light that often they find it impossible to maintain a hope of their acceptance with God. It does not always go to that extent, but there are always, in a genuine Revival, deep convictions of sin, and often cases of abandoning all hope.”

– Charles G. Finney¹

The third prerequisite for revival is confession and repentance. Second Chronicles 7:13-14—our cornerstone passage on revival—states, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” We turn

now to the important caveat: "... and turn from their wicked ways." This is the hinge upon which the door of revival swings open. Without this, our prayerful knocking will be in vain.

While we've had to blow the dust off some of our previous examples, the ink is still pretty fresh on this one, reminding us that revival is not just something God did in the past but also something He is doing today. The following is the account of the 1995 Wheaton College Revival, in which confession and repentance played a significant role:

On Sunday evening, March 19, 1995, two students from Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, spoke during a weekly student-led worship service at Wheaton.

The two students "shared what God had done in their lives" during recent times of revival at their campus and at other schools, said Wheaton professor, Tim Beougher.

After they spoke, there was no exhortation or manipulation, the professor said. "There was no attempt to try and force a repeat experience of what had happened at Howard Payne."

But, "immediately students began to come up to the microphone and confess sin," Beougher said. "The confession was deep. It was painful. God really did a work of breaking people."

The service had begun at 7:30 p.m. Sunday. It did not end until 6 a.m. Monday.

Normally, about 400 students attend the service. That Sunday, about 700 came. It was difficult

to know how many attended because many who were there left and went back to get their roommates and friends.

The “beautiful thing” was that when a person would confess sin, 20 to 50 students would gather around the person and pray for him. “There was a real spirit of love and acceptance,” Beougher said. “You could not point a finger at anyone else,” because “all of us there had been stripped bare before the throne of God.”

When the students broke up at 6 a.m., they agreed to meet again Monday night, March 20. They started at 9:30 that night and attendance climbed to more than a thousand. The seats of Pierce Chapel were filled, and students stood two and three deep along the walls.

As on Sunday night, the service began with praise and worship. Then came more “deep confession.”

Students were given an opportunity to throw away things “that were hindering your walk with God or that might trip you up in the future.” Many went back to their rooms and returned with secular music discs, pornography, alcohol, credit cards and other items. One student even brought a rose, apparently symbolic of an unhealthy relationship. The meeting lasted until 2 a.m.

The next night, about 1,350 students gathered in the church’s 1,500-seat sanctuary. After a time of praise and worship, confession of sin followed again. ...

On Thursday, it was time to celebrate. The students, 1,500 of them, held a “praise and worship service that raised the roof,” the professor said. “It was glorious. ... It was a foretaste of what heaven is going to be like.”²

Sin is the great curse of our existence. The sin of Adam and Eve, and the fall of humankind, meant the human race needed redemption from the pit into which it had fallen. Sin necessitated that the sin bearer, Jesus Christ, take our sins on Himself in order that we might be restored to fellowship with God.

The Hindrance of Sin

Even for forgiven Christians, sin continues as a hindrance to God’s power and plan for our lives. Actually, it does more than just hinder the flow; it puts an elephant on the air hose. It renders Christians fruitless and impotent. It blocks God’s good intentions for each of us and steals, kills, and destroys the good that might have been (John 10:10).

Sin takes many different forms, but on campus its form has changed little over the centuries. Historian J. Edwin Orr described the campus climate in 1790, prior to the Second Great Awakening.

In 1790 America had won its independence, but it had lost something as well. In the wake of the Revolutionary War, French infidelity, deism, and the generally unsettled condition of society had driven the moral and spiritual climate of the colonies to an all-time low. Drunkenness was epidemic; profanity was of the most vile kind; bank robberies were a daily occurrence; and for the first time in the history of the American settlement women were afraid to go out at night for fear of being assaulted. Conditions on

campus were no better. A poll taken at Harvard revealed not one believer in the whole student body. At Princeton, where a similar survey showed there to be only two Christians on campus, when the dean opened the Chapel Bible to read, a pack of playing cards fell out, someone having cut a rectangle from each page to fit the deck. Conditions on campus had degenerated to the point that all but five at Princeton were part of the “filthy speech” movement of that day. While students there developed the art of obscene conversation, at Williams College they held a mock communion, and at Dartmouth students put on an “anti-church” play. In New Jersey the radical leader of the deist students led a mob to the Raritan Valley Presbyterian Church where they burned the Bible in a public bonfire. Christians were so few on the average campus and were so intimidated by the non-Christians that they met in secret. They even kept their minutes in code so no one could find out about their clandestine fellowship.³

It’s easy to think that revival can’t happen today because things have grown so much worse, but clearly that isn’t the case. Give or take a laptop or cell phone, it might as well be 1790. As Solomon said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Without revival and God’s supernatural intervention, like a black hole, sin’s gravity extinguishes all light and inexorably pulls every campus down into the same mire of spiritual rebellion. And that rebellion looks pretty much the same in the twenty-first century as it did in the eighteenth century—or eighth century for that matter.

For we Christians, it is easy to be appalled by the grosser

manifestations of sin that surround us on campus, even thinking ourselves immune or innocent because we would never consider doing *that* (whatever “that” might be). But it’s important to understand that sin runs far deeper than just the more obvious acts of rebellion. Romans 3:23 states, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That “all” refers not only to those who are flagrantly sinful but also to those of us who are more subtle and socially acceptable in our rebellion; it refers, in part, to a category we’ll call “Christian sin.”

Coldheartedness, apathy, criticism, backbiting, bitterness, pride, lust, jealousy, cynicism, prayerlessness, and caring more about the approval of others than the approval of God are just as sinful and sometimes more difficult to detect and mend as flagrant sins. Such a list could go on and on. In fact, it does go on and on and includes compromise with evil, cheating, lying (even little “white” lies), materialism, unrestrained anger against a brother or sister in Christ, uncaring attitudes toward the lost, lack of giving to the poor and needy, lack of respect to parents and authority, and general indifference to spiritual issues. The list could also include racism, gossip, crudeness, laziness, selfishness, and various other conscience-troubling issues. These all qualify as sin, short-circuiting God’s mighty power in our lives and polluting our souls. But before God can bring revival and spiritual awakening, we who are burdened for it and are humbled before Him must be cleansed and empowered.

And that is why every revival precludes with confession and repentance from sin, as demonstrated by this account of the Hebrides Revival (1949–52) in Scotland, as reported by J. Oswald Sanders.

Around 1950, there was a powerful movement of the Spirit in the Hebrides. The awakening did not just happen. For some months a number

of men met three nights a week for prayer; they often spent hours. The weeks passed and nothing happened until one morning at about two o'clock. A young man read Psalms 24, verses 3 to 5, "Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. These shall receive a blessing from the Lord."

He closed the Bible and, looking at his companions on their knees before God, he cried: "Brethren, it is just so much humbug to be waiting thus night after night, month after month, if we ourselves are not right with God. I must ask myself, is my heart pure, are my hands clean," and at that moment something happened. God swept into that prayer group and at that wonderful moment, seven Elders discovered what they evidently had not discovered before, that revival must be related to Holiness. ... They found themselves in the searching power of the presence of God and discovered things about themselves they had never suspected. That the blood of Calvary heals and cleanses. ... These men found themselves lifted to the realm of the supernatural. These men knew that revival had come.⁴

Proverbs 28:13 says that, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." This verse specifically warns that we should not attempt to cover our transgressions. Concealing them is hypocrisy and leads to disaster in our Christian lives. Rather, we are called to confess and forsake them. Religious words (*repentance*, for example) are notoriously vague and

as shift as Jell-O. So we will need to look carefully at both confession and repentance to provide some definition and draw some distinctions.

Confession: Agreeing with God

The literal meaning of the word *confession* is to “agree with” or to “say the same thing as,” and in its biblical context it means that we are to agree with God about our sin. First, we are *agreeing* with God that we have sinned. This stands opposed to rationalizing (lessening the crime), justifying (arguing that there was no crime), denying (pretending there was no crime), and blaming (pinning the crime on someone else).

Second, we are *agreeing* with God that Christ died for that sin and that it was forgiven at the cross. He died for all our sins, even the ones we’ll commit ten years from now. We agree that He has paid the price, and we accept this by faith. This stands opposed to guilt, berating ourselves, and self-loathing (this is really assuming the punishment ourselves through self-inflicted suffering).

Confession also involves the exercise of faith, specifically in God’s Word and what He has said concerning our forgiveness. First John 1:9 tells us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” This is a promise from God and is the truth about our confessed sin. To experience it, we must choose to trust it, rely upon it, and have faith in it (reckon it to be true). Then—and only then—does it become operative in our lives.

Confession means that I bring each individual sin before God. I acknowledge it as wrong and thank Him that it is forgiven. I do not seek to hide it. Rather, I bring it into His light and the light of His Word.

Let me give you an example. At the height of the radical student movement in 1970 an event occurred at Asbury College in Kentucky. This was a spiritual awakening that

showed the power of confession, as a typically fifty-minute chapel service lasted 185 hours nonstop.

It began when a few concerned students began to meet to pray for spiritual awakening. On February 3, Asbury students went to a normal 10 a.m. chapel service. As sometimes happened, the dean did not give a message but instead asked students to share testimonies.

Those who came forward were unusually fervent in telling what God was doing in their lives. One senior said, "I am not believing that I am standing here telling you what God has done for me. I have wasted my time in college up to now, but Christ has met me, and I am different. Last night the Holy Spirit flooded in and filled my life and now for the first time ever, I am excited about being a Christian." As the end of the chapel hour approached, the bell sounded for classes to begin, but went unheeded.

Students confessed sins such as cheating, stealing, bitterness and drug use. The editor of the school newspaper had skipped chapel, but when he heard what was going on he came and hid in the corner. Eventually the Holy Spirit touched him: "I knew things in my life were a lie. ... I was a sick and miserably lonely young man. Yet I sat there for two hours refusing to do anything. ... There came that critical moment when I was forced to admit that my self sufficiency was failing me and I needed to be dependent upon Jesus Christ. I prayed at the altar for an hour and a half undergoing a spiritual revitalization."⁵

Sometimes sins need to be confessed publicly (as in the case of the student newspaper editor). And as we noted in the last chapter, what makes public confession so powerful is that it combines two of the prerequisites for revival (humility and confession) and, short of uploading it to the Internet, there are few things more humbling than confessing our sin to an audience.

But sometimes sins are best confessed only to the Lord. As J. Edwin Orr says, the amount of public confession should be “just enough to enlist the prayers of people right with God. The public confession of secret private sins might be dangerous.”⁶ We don’t want to release the burden of our sin at the expense of a weaker brother or sister who might be hurt or tempted by what we’ve shared. Revival is never an excuse to dispose of discretion, for voyeurism is a part of everyone’s sin nature.

Repentance: Change Your Thinking

While the two are often clumped together, repentance is not the same thing as confession. Nor does repentance mean feeling sorry about our sin, though repentance certainly can be accompanied by sorrow. Recall Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever confesses and renounces them [sins] finds mercy.” Indeed, godly sorrow for sin may produce repentance, but sorrow itself is not repentance.

Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia* and means to change or transform (*metamorphosis*) our thinking. Implied is a change of action, a change of direction. It involves forsaking sin. Theoretically, I could confess my sin and feel sorry for it but not forsake it, and as I have at times done this, there is really nothing theoretical about it. When people repent of their sin, they cannot go on consciously committing it without remorse.

Repentance brings results that affect what we do. Students stop getting drunk. Racial attitudes are changed. People live with greater compassion. Sexual immoralities

cease. Members of the opposite sex treat each other with respect. Cheating ends; theft stops; and backbiting and unjust criticism become things of the past. Lives and situations dramatically change in times of genuine repentance.

Yet it needs to be emphasized that repentance is not a guarantee against failing or falling, nor is it a resolve or pledge to never sin in such a way again. It is a decision to move in the opposite direction from that sin, to never stop fighting against it, to do all in one's power to resist it, to never accept or tolerate its presence, and to always pursue holiness in that area. It is a decision to vigilantly fight until victory, not a vow to never suffer defeat—a commitment to wage a war, not win a battle (for such a commitment is not within our power to make). This is a critical distinction.

Living in sin is like living in a house with termites and never giving them a second thought but acquiescing to their shared occupancy of the home. Repentance is making a decision and commitment that the termites (a specific area of sin) must go. A commitment, that even if it takes years to be rid of them, and reliance on the most powerful pesticides (confession, accountability, fasting, the Spirit's empowerment, and so forth): you will never stop fighting to get rid of them, and you will never return to a state of peaceful coexistence with their living in your house (life).

Repentance is often fueled by conviction, a sensation of guilt aroused by the Holy Spirit in us, pricking the heart and throbbing the conscience like a migraine. What is so radically different about revival is the power in which people experience conviction. Any revival could serve as an example, but as we have not yet considered the revivals of Northern Ireland, let us turn there. Once again it was college-aged individuals—four of them—who provided the combustion.

Four young men, converts from Conner, gave their testimony in a crowded service in the First

Presbyterian Church. Several thousand were present. Suddenly a number of people began to call out to God for mercy.

That night many of the people could not sleep. Some wept in their homes for hours. Others cursed and swore in anger. Monday night again there was a united service in the First Presbyterian Church. The building was overcrowded but the ministers spoke calmly. "The meeting felt still as a grave; the stillness was fearful. Those who were present will never forget it. At length the silence was broken by unearthly cries, uttered simultaneously by several in different parts of the church." In a few minutes the vestry was filled with people "who lay in mental agony and absolute bodily prostration."⁷

Here is one account among hundreds of those who attended the service:

A well-educated merchant ... suddenly saw hell opened before his eyes, and an irresistible power seemed to force him headlong into it. He looked around and said to himself, "I know where I am. This is the church where I usually worship. I am under a delusion." But as he looked down, there was hell.

He arose from his seat and seized the back of the pew in front of him. The smoke from hell seemed to rise in his face. He shuddered and his heart cried out, "My sins! My sins! I am lost!" He staggered out of the building and went home. Had anyone asked me, where are you going? I

would have answered, in calm despair, "I am going to hell."

Upon reaching his room, for several hours he called to God for mercy. Then God's promises came to his mind. He joyously seized them, and "a heavenly radiance" spread over his soul. He arose a Christian. He raced out into the night across town and knocked on his business partner's door. When the door opened, he called out, "I have found Christ and have come to tell you!" They prayed together, and three days later his partner was converted.⁸

And one final account:

In some instances those prostrated while seemingly oblivious to all else showed wonderful anointed memory. One pastor told of a girl who lay with fixed eyes turned to heaven for four hours. She quoted over a hundred scriptures all related and applied to her own case. She repeated sermons and exhortations that the pastor had preached over previous months, quoting large sections of these verbatim. Afterward the pastor questioned her, but she could not remember the sermons or quote those Scripture passages as she had done when gripped by the Holy Spirit.⁹

Of course, we see a milder form of this conviction and repentance all the time as people come to Christ, but revival deepens the experience, intensifying conviction and fueling "deep tissue" repentance.

J. Edwin Orr provides us this endnote on the Northern Ireland revivals of the late nineteenth century, further

supporting the centrality of the campus and students to revival. Not only was this revival started by the testimonies of the four young men, but also it was spread to other countries through the conduit of students. “As usual in such movements, the student awakening developed a missionary trend. In fifteen years the Missionary Union of Great Britain and Ireland had sent more than a thousand of its choicest graduates to the mission field, a third of them to India.”¹⁰

Restitution: Making Repayment

After confession and repentance of sin, restitution sometimes needs to be made. *Restitution* simply means “repayment.” If I have sinned against someone by word or deed, I may need to ask for his or her forgiveness or make some sort of repayment for what I have done. This is one of the hardest corollaries of confession and repentance. For example, even after I’ve confessed and repented, I may need to tell my professor if I have cheated on a test. It may cost me a lot. It may cost me my place in college, or it may cost me a grade in that course, but it will not cost me nearly as much as refusing to make restitution. If I have stolen, I need to repay. If I have assassinated someone’s character, I must make it right with that person.

Restitution is a powerful concept. Dr. Stephen Olford illustrates its results:

During a time of spiritual awakening in Africa, we are told that the police authorities were astounded at the genuine repentance and restitution that was made not only by converts, but by backsliders who were restored to the Lord. The Daily Dispatch of East London, South Africa, listed the following articles returned by repentant believers: 80 sheets, 25 blankets, 24 jackets, 34 trousers, 11 overcoats, 6 women’s coats, 25 dresses, 27 skirts, 50 shirts,

22 bedspreads, 64 hats, 23 towels, 1 table, 4 chairs, 50 pillow slips, 15 scissors, 5 hair clippers, 9 wallets, 4 cameras, 4 wristwatches, 3 revolvers and ammunition, 30 tumblers and an assortment of jewelry, tools, cigarette lighters, crockery, cutlery, boots, shoes, pressure stoves, frying pans, lanterns, and safety razors.¹¹

After I had spoken at a conference, a young professional woman came up and asked if I could help her solve a problem. She had garnered many honors during her university years and had been the outstanding student in her field of study. She was an officer in her sorority and in many clubs. She had already made many friends among the faculty and the administration. Her grade-point average was 4.0.

While she was taking an examination during the spring quarter of her sophomore year, her professor snatched the test paper from her in the middle of the session and instructed her to meet him in his office afterward. Startled, she complied.

At their meeting he said to her, “Young woman, you know why you are here—you know you were cheating on that exam. You have two choices: you can take an automatic F in the course, or because we have an honor code here, you can bring it before the honor council and appeal it. But I am sure you would not want to do that, because we both know you were cheating.”

Her response was one of outrage. She replied, “I most certainly will appeal. I was not cheating. I will take it before the honor council.” She stalked from the room, called her parents and the president of the university to protest this miscarriage of justice, and began to gather character references.

When the hearing was held, the professor presented his case for her cheating, and she presented hers. She was

exonerated and received an A in the course.

In her junior year she encountered Campus Crusade for Christ, became a Christian, and grew to be very involved in the movement. The next year, she graduated from that university as the outstanding student in her major and then moved into her chosen profession.

Showing her sadness, she continued. “The only problem with this story is that I really was cheating on that exam. I couldn’t admit it because I knew what it would mean to my reputation, my academic standing, and my parents and friends. Even after I became a Christian and God began to speak to me about setting this right, I didn’t have the courage to do it.”

I asked about the consequences she was experiencing as a result. She replied that whenever she sought to advance spiritually, it was as if Satan had her on a leash. He would jerk that leash and say, “Yes. Great Christian. You are really a spiritual giant. You made a professor in his first major teaching job look stupid, and you did not have the courage to admit your guilt. How can you ever move forward?”

She asked what I thought she should do. I repeated Dr. Orr’s advice: public sin needs to be confessed publicly and private sin needs to be confessed privately. I asked her, “How public was it?”

Sheepishly, she replied, “How public was it? The president of the university was involved. My parents were involved. Faculty members were involved. Everybody knew about it.”

Since her sin was very public, I suggested she needed to find those involved, confess, and make any restitution needed.

She said, “How could I do that? I might lose my degree, my academic standing. It even might affect my career.”

I asked if she would rather have short-term pain now or long-term pain for the rest of her life.

She saw what I meant. I offered to pray for her, hold her

accountable, and call her if she wished. I also asked her to let me know about the progress she made.

Six to eight weeks later, I received a letter that included another letter. In her letter she described her efforts to get things right with those to whom she had lied at her university and how she had tracked down her former professor (who was now at another college). She also described how she had confessed to her parents and received their forgiveness. The second letter was the response from the wronged professor.

In his letter the professor responded with astonishment that she had contacted him after the intervening years and acknowledged that it had been difficult knowing that, despite her denial, she really had cheated. He then expressed his forgiveness to her. He added,

I am deeply impressed with your willingness to admit that you cheated on the exam. That single act shows a significant depth of character that most people lack. I know that you spent many sleepless nights and anguished over writing the letter before finally doing so. The fact that you wrote is an indication of your moral fiber and your conviction as a Christian. I will always be impressed that you contacted me after all these years. Good luck with your career and with your future. Both are extremely promising.

When I called to ask how she was doing now, she replied, “I’m free. I’m really free.”

In the years since, I have seen her on several occasions. Both her career and her life have moved forward with great fruitfulness. The lessons are obvious. Even when there is great personal cost and risk, the process of confession, repentance, and restitution is worth it.

Confession, repentance, and restitution—none of it is

easy. But if our campuses are to see spiritual awakening, we Christians must be cleansed. We cannot hold on to sin, short-circuiting God's mighty power. When we confess our sin and repent of it, we are cleansed vessels, available for the Holy Spirit to fill and use us. We are able to be confident in our walk with Christ, bold in our witness, and our prayers begin to be answered in greater abundance and fruitfulness.

If we do not confess and repent, the Holy Spirit is grieved and His power is quenched in our life. Now, the fire of God may still fall upon our campus, but we can be sure it won't be in response to our efforts.

You who are burdened for your campus, and for the work of God in your life and at your college or university, need to come before God. Confess the sins He lays on your heart and repent; make restitution when necessary; and be available to be filled with God's mighty power by faith. Calvary precedes Pentecost. If we want the Spirit to manifest Himself in resurrection power, the "crucifixion" that is repentance and restitution must come first.

Here is an exercise that has worked for thousands of students. Take a sheet of paper, a pencil, and your Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you any areas of your life that are displeasing to Him. Take thirty minutes to an hour and make a list of those sins. Then tell the Lord that you acknowledge them as sin and by faith accept His forgiveness. In fact, write out 1 John 1:9 ("If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness") across the list and tear up the paper. Those sins have been completely paid for, never to be remembered—unless you forget to throw out the paper. So do throw out the paper.

Now determine by His power to turn from those sins (resolve to move away from them, even if the exodus is at times marked by failures), and make restitution or public confession where necessary. (It may be tough, but it will be worth it.) If you were sincere when you did this, you will be

a cleansed vessel ready to become a glowing spark of revival and awakening on your campus. You will also be ready for the fourth prerequisite of spiritual awakening—fervent prayer.