

Andrew Cook:

At the moment here on *Serving Today*, we're going through a series on church history.

As you may know, 2017 is the 500th anniversary since the start of the Protestant Reformation. So far we've covered reasons why many today don't think that church history is that important. Then, Philip Parsons who's helping us with this looked at why it's actually helpful to have some understanding of what happened in the past.

And in our previous programme, Philip highlighted what church history teaches us, which is that God deals with his people in sovereign grace. In other words, that the way God works is a matter of his choice, and not ours.

Well with more on this, here are Philip Parsons and Derek French.

Derek French:

What else does church history teach us?

Philip Parsons:

Well, it teaches us that the main means of progress of the kingdom of God is through revivals.

Derek:

Why is that so important?

Philip:

Well, it does follow the biblical sequence of events. If we read the Old Testament record, we find that there are these periods of decline, of spiritual decline, sometimes quite serious. And then there are these periods when God stirs up a prophet or one of the judges and things are a lot better for a while. And then they begin to decline again and so on.

And so the whole of the Old Testament is punctuated by this cycle of God working and then men falling away and then God working again and so on.

Derek:

Then there is revival, yes.

Philip:

So really this is also true if we look at church history of the work of God since then, that these periods of revival have given such a huge impetus to the church, a huge move forward that really just could not have been achieved without them.

Derek:

No. Perhaps we could just interject there, Philip. Perhaps you might like to make a comment on this.

We need to understand that the term 'revival' is used slightly differently in some parts of the world today. Churches will say we are having a revival and what they really mean is that they are having an evangelistic meeting or event.

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

That's not the revival that you're referring to here, is it?

Philip:

No. The revival is where there's this clear work of God, where the church is sunken to a low state and then God raises up particular people, preachers and there's a remarkable work started, many conversions.

Derek:

God comes down, doesn't he, on his church.

Philip:

Yes, yes.

Derek:

That's something that we can't manufacture. 'We're having one of these at 6.30 on Saturday.' You can have an evangelistic meeting at 6.30 on Saturday.

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

So this is something rather special, isn't it?

Philip:

It is yes, but very important.

Let me give you an example as to the effects of these revivals. The 18th century awakening, which we associate with the Wesley brothers and George Whitfield, was more than 200 years ago. It's getting on for 300 years ago now. But some of the effects of that awakening are still to be felt, certainly in the English speaking world.

Derek:

But I think even wider, isn't it, Philip? You think of the number of missionaries that went out and brought the gospel all around the world. [...]

Philip:

Yes, certainly there is a definite connection between the 18th century awakening and the modern missionary movement.

The event which I find fascinating is that Jonathan Edwards was very concerned about praying for revivals. He felt that it was something we should be doing.

Derek:

And he was a minister in America, wasn't he, at the time?

Philip:

Yes, he was. And he was in the middle of the revival. The remarkable sermon he preached which sparked off the revival in that area. But he felt that we should be praying for more of these revivals.

And there were a group of ministers, baptist ministers in England: Andrew Fuller.

Derek:

William Carey?

Philip:

William Carey and others. They corresponded with Jonathan Edwards about this question and they covenanted together to have these special seasons of prayer what they used to call, 'a concert of prayer' on a specific day usually.

So they would pray in America and also pray in England on this particular day, perhaps once a month or whenever it was. And it was that particular group of ministers, with William Carey, that was the beginnings of the modern missionary movement in our times.

Derek:

So the revival then is bearing fruit, even until today, isn't it?

Philip:

One can say that in a revival more can be accomplished by one sermon than by many years of preaching previous to it.

One of the problems today within the church is that the majority are not convinced of the need for revival. If however Christians knew more church history, I'm sure they would be convinced that revival is our greatest need.

The biblical writers show their belief in this principle; and also it comes out in the Revival Psalms. Also in Acts chapter 3 and verse 19, there's a reference which is very interesting, if you'd read that, please Derek?

Derek:

Yes and we read, *'Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.'*

Philip:

Yes. I think that's a very interesting verse and it's the plural 'times of refreshing'. And not just on the personal level but on the wider level. I think the apostle certainly believed this and had obviously been taught that by Christ himself; that there would be these times of refreshing.

Derek:

I think that's helpful because revivals don't occur all the time, do they? There are periods where they don't.