

THE ROLE OF PRAYER IN SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

How God Brought About (And Answered) the Concerts of Prayer of History

As you read this, envision in your mind the glory of God descending just as mightily upon the individuals and society of our day, with all of the needs. We must carefully fulfill God's conditions in II Chronicles 7:14 in our own lives, then think in terms of the meaning of "spiritual awakening" these accounts from history require, and actively believe God for nothing less.

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Dr. A. T. Pierson once said, "There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer." Let me recount what God has done through concerted, united, sustained prayer.

Not many people realize that in the wake of the American Revolution there was a moral slump. Drunkenness became epidemic. Out of a population of five million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards: they were burying fifteen thousand of them each year. Profanity was of the most shocking kind. For the first time in the history of the American settlement, women were afraid to go out at night for fear of assault. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence.

What about the churches? The Methodists were losing more members than they were gaining. The Baptists said that they had their most wintry season. The Presbyterians in general assembly deplored the nation's ungodliness. In a typical Congregational church, the Rev. Samuel Shepherd of Lennox, Massachusetts in sixteen years had not taken one young person into fellowship. The Lutherans were so languishing that they discussed uniting with Episcopalians who were even worse off. The Protestant Episcopal Bishop of New York, Bishop Samuel Provoost, quit functioning: he had confirmed no one for so long that he decided he was out of work, so he took up other employment. The Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, wrote to the Bishop of Virginia, James Madison, that the Church "was too far gone ever to be redeemed." Voltaire averred, and Tom Paine echoed, "Christianity will be forgotten in thirty years."

Take the liberal arts colleges at that time. A poll taken at Harvard had discovered not one believer in the whole of the student body. They took a poll at Princeton, a much more evangelical place: they discovered only two believers in the student body, and only five that did not belong to the filthy speech movement of that day. Students rioted. They held a mock communion at Williams College; and they put on

anti-Christian plays at Dartmouth. They burned down the Nassau Hall at Princeton. They forced the resignation of the president of Harvard. They took a Bible out of a local Presbyterian church in New Jersey, and burned it in a public bonfire. Christians were so few on campus in the 1790s that they met in secret, like a communist cell, and kept their minutes in code so that no one would know.

In case this is thought to be the hysteria of the moment, Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great church historian, wrote: "It seemed as if Christianity were about to be ushered out of the affairs of men." The churches had their backs to the wall, seeming as if they were about to be wiped out. How did the situation change? It came through a concert of prayer.

I must go back a little. There was a Scottish Presbyterian minister in Edinburgh named John Erskine, who published a Memorial (he called it) pleading with the people of Scotland and elsewhere to unite in prayer for the revival of religion. He sent one copy of this little book to Jonatan Edwards in New England. That great theologian was so moved he wrote a response which grew longer than a letter, so that finally he published it as a book, entitled: "A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of All God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on earth, pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies concerning the Last Time." That was the title of the book, not the book itself.

But do not miss its message: "A Humble Attempt" (New England's modesty) "to promote explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer for a revival of religion and extension of Christ's Kingdom." Is not this what is missing so much from all our evangelistic efforts, explicit agreement, visible union, unusual prayer?

This movement had started in Britain through William Carey, Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe and other leaders who began what the British called "the Union of Prayer." Hence, the year after John Wesley died, the Second Great Awakening began and swept Great Britain. In New England, there was a man of prayer named Isaac Backus, a Baptist pastor, who in 1794, when conditions were at their worst, addressed an urgent plea for prayer for revival to pastors of every Christian denomination in the United States.

Churches knew that their backs were to the wall. So the Presbyterians of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania adopted it for all their churches. Bishop Francis Asbury

adopted it for all the Methodists. The Congregational and Baptist Associations, the Reformed and the Moravians all adopted the plan, until America like Britain was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings, which set aside the first Monday of each month to pray. It was not long before the revival came. It broke out first of all in Connecticut, then spread to Massachusetts and all the seaboard states, in every case entirely without extravagance or outcry.

However, there were some variations. When the revival reached the frontier in Kentucky, it encountered a people really wild and irreligious. Congress had discovered that in Kentucky there had not been more than one court of justice held in five years. Peter Cartwright, Methodist evangelist, wrote that when his father settled in Logan County, it was known as Rogues' Harbor. If someone committed a murder in Massachusetts or robbery in Rhode Island, all he needed to do was to cross the Alleghenies. The decent people in Kentucky formed regiments of vigilantes to fight for law and order, fought a pitched battle with outlaws and lost.

There was a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister named James McGready whose chief claim to fame was he was so ugly that he attracted attention. It was reported that people sometimes stopped in the street to ask: "What does he do?" "He's a preacher." Then they reacted, saying: "A man with a face like that must really have something to say."

McGready settled in Logan County, pastor of three little churches. He wrote in his diary that the winter of 1799 for the most part was "weeping and mourning with the people of God." Lawlessness prevailed everywhere. McGready was such a man of prayer that, not only did he promote the concert of prayer every first Monday of the month, but he got his people to pray for him at sunset on Saturday evening and sunrise Sunday morning. Then in the summer of 1800 came the great Kentucky revival. Eleven thousand people came to a communion service. McGready hollered for help, regardless of denomination. Baptists and Methodists came in response and the great camp meeting revivals started to sweep Kentucky and Tennessee and then spread over North Carolina and South Carolina, along the frontier.

Out of that second great awakening after the death of John Wesley came the whole modern missionary movement and its societies. Out of it came the abolition of slavery, and popular education, Bible societies and Sunday schools, and many social benefits accompanying the evangelistic drive.

Conditions had deteriorated by the middle of the nineteenth century. Why? It sounds familiar, the country was seriously divided, as by the Vietnam War, over the issue

of slavery; and, second, people were making money lavishly.

In September 1857, a man of prayer, Jeremiah Lanphier, started a prayer meeting in the upper room of the Dutch Reformed Church Consistory Building, in Manhattan. In response to his advertisement, only six people out of the population of a million showed up. But, the following week, there were fourteen, and then twenty-three, when it was decided to meet every day for prayer. By late winter, they were filling the Dutch Reformed Church, then the Methodist Church on John Street, then Trinity Episcopal Church on Broadway at Wall Street. In February and March of 1858, every church and public hall in downtown New York was filled. Horace Greeley, the famous editor, sent a reporter with horse and buggy racing around the prayer meetings to see how many men were praying: in one hour, he could get to only twelve meetings, but he counted 6100 men attending. Then a landslide of prayer began, which overflowed to the churches in the evenings. People began to be converted, ten thousand a week in New York City alone. The movement spread throughout New England, the church bells bringing people to prayer at eight in the morning, twelve noon, six in the evening. The revival raced up the Hudson and down the Mohawk, where the Baptists, for example, had so many people to baptize that they went down to the river, cut a big hole in the ice, and baptized them in the cold water: when Baptists do that they really are on fire.

When the revival reached Chicago, a young shoe salesman went to the superintendent of the Plymouth Congregational Church, and asked if he might teach Sunday School. The superintendent said, "I am sorry, young fellow. I have sixteen teachers too many, but I will put you on the waiting list." The young man insisted: "I want to do something just now." "Well, start a class." "How do I start a class?" "Get some boys off the street, but don't bring them here. Take them out into the country and after a month you will have control of them, so bring them in. They will be your class." He took them to a beach on Lake Michigan and he taught them Bible verses and Bible games; then he took them to the Plymouth Congregational Church. The name of the young man was Dwight Lyman Moody, and that was the beginning of his ministry that lasted forty years.

For instance, Trinity Episcopal Church in Chicago had 121 members in 1857; in 1860, 1400. That was typical of the churches. More than a million people were converted to

God in one year out of a population of thirty millions. Then that same revival jumped the Atlantic, appeared in Ulster, Scotland and Wales, then England, parts of Europe, South Africa and South India, anywhere there was an evangelical cause. It sent mission pioneers to many countries. Effects were felt for forty years. Having begun in a movement of prayer, it was sustained by a movement of prayer.

That movement lasted for a generation, but at the turn of the twentieth century, there was need of awakening again. A general movement of prayer began, with special prayer meetings at Moody Bible Institute, at Keswick Convention in England, and places as far apart as Melbourne, Wonsan in Korea, and the Nilgiri Hills of India. So all around the world believers were praying that there might be another great awakening in the twentieth century.

Now, some people say that we are in the midst of another great awakening today. I certainly believe that the tide has turned, that we are on the move again, but I do not think that we have reached anything like what God has done in the past. Take examples, from the student world, and the community.

In the revival of 1905, I read of a young man who became a famous professor, Kenneth Scott Latourette. He reported that, at Yale in 1905, 25% of the student body were enrolled in prayer meetings and in Bible study. I live next door to U.C.L.A., which has a population of 36,000, and I do not believe that there are 9,000 enrolled in Campus Crusade, Inter-Varsity and other evangelical groups, or in all of the church groups put together. We have not reached that yet.

As far as the churches were concerned, the ministers of Atlantic City reported that, of a population of 50,000, there were only fifty adults left unconverted. Take Portland in Oregon, 240 major stores closed from 11:00 till 2:00 each day to enable people to attend prayer meetings, signing an agreement so that no one would cheat and stay open. Take First Baptist Church of Paducah in Kentucky: the pastor, an old man, Dr. J. J. Cheek, took in a thousand members in two months and died of overwork, the Southern Baptists saying, "a glorious ending to a devoted ministry."

That is what was happening in the United States in 1905. But how did it begin? Most people have heard of the Welsh Revival, which started in 1904. It began as a movement of prayer. I knew Evan Roberts personally (of course, I met him thirty years later) a man devoted to God. Seth Joshua, the Presbyterian evangelist, had come to the Newcastle Emlyn College where Evan Roberts was studying for the ministry. Evan Roberts, then 26, had been a coal miner. The

students were so moved that they asked if they could attend his next campaign nearby, so they cancelled classes to go to Blaenauferch, where Seth Joshua prayed publicly "O God, bend us." And Evan Roberts went forward, where he prayed with great agony, "O God, bend me."

Upon his return, he could not concentrate on his studies. He went to the principal of his college, and explained: "I keep hearing a voice that tells me I must go home to speak to our young people in my home church. Principal Phillips, is that the voice of the devil or the voice of the Spirit?" Principal Phillips answered, very wisely, "The devil never gives orders like that. You can have a week off."

So he went back home to Loughor and announced to the pastor, "I've come to preach." The pastor was not at all convinced, but asked: "How about speaking at the prayer meeting on Monday?" He did not even let him speak to the prayer meeting, but told the praying people, "Our young brother, Evan Roberts, feels he has a message for you, if you care to wait." Seventeen people waited behind, to be impressed with the directness of the young man's words. Evan Roberts told his fellow members: "I have a message for you from God. You must confess any known sin to God and put any wrong done to man right. Second, you must put away any doubtful habit. Third, you must obey the Spirit promptly. Finally, you must confess your faith in Christ publicly." And by ten o'clock, all seventeen had responded. The pastor was so pleased that he asked, "How about your speaking at the mission service tomorrow night? Midweek service Wednesday night?" He preached all week, and was asked to stay another week; and then "the break" came.

I have read the Welsh newspapers of the period. In them were snippets of ecclesiastical news, such as: "The Rev. Peter Jones has just been appointed chaplain to the Bishop of St. David's." "Mowbray Street Methodist Church had a very interesting sale." But suddenly there was a headline, "Great Crowds of People Drawn to Loughor." For some days a young man named Evan Roberts was causing great surprise. The main road between Llanelli and Swansea on which the church was situated was packed, wall to wall, people trying to get into the church. Shopkeepers closed early to find a place in the big church.

Now the news was out. A reporter was sent down and he described vividly what he saw, a strange meeting, which closed at 4:25 in the morning, and even then the people did not seem willing to go home. They were still standing in the street outside the church, talking about what had taken place. There was a very British summary: "I felt that this

was no ordinary gathering." Next day, every grocery shop in that industrial valley was emptied of groceries by people attending the meetings, and on Sunday, every church was filled. The movement went like a tidal wave over Wales, in five months there being a hundred thousand people converted throughout the country. Five years later, Dr. J. V. Morgan wrote a book to debunk the revival, his main criticism that, of a hundred thousand joining the churches in five months of excitement, after five years only 75,000 still stood in the membership of those churches. The loss of 25,000 could be explained by a drifting away of unsympathetic people, or of others attracted to mission halls and the emerging groups of Pentecostals after glossolalia in 1907, or emigration.

It was the social impact that was astounding. For example, judges were presented with white gloves, not a case to try: no robberies, no burglaries, no rapes, no murders, and no embezzlements, nothing. District councils held emergency meetings to discuss what to do with the police now that they were unemployed. In one place, the sergeant of the police was sent for, and asked: "What do you do with your time?" He replied, "Before the revival, we had two main jobs, to prevent crime and to control crowds, as at football games. Since the revival started, there is practically no crime. So we just go with the crowds." A councillor asked: "What does that mean?" The sergeant replied: "You know where the crowds are. They are packing out the churches." "But how does that affect the police?" He was told: "We have seventeen police in our station, but we have three quartets; and if any church wants a quartet to sing, they simply call the police station."

As the revival swept Wales, drunkenness was cut in half. There was a wave of bankruptcies, but nearly all taverns. There was even a slowdown in the mines. You say, "How could a religious revival cause a strike?" It did not cause a strike, just a slowdown, for so many Welsh coal miners were converted and stopped using bad language that horses that dragged the trucks in the mines could not understand what was being said to them, hence transportation slowed down for a while until they learned the language of Canaan. (When I first heard that story, I thought that it was a tall tale, but I can document it, even from Westminster Abbey.)

That revival also affected sexual moral standards. I had discovered through the figures given by British government experts that, in Radnorshire and Merionethshire, the actual illegitimate birth rate had dropped 44% within a year of the beginning of the revival. That revival swept Britain. It so

moved all of Norway that the Norwegian Parliament passed special legislation to permit laymen to conduct Communion because the clergy could not keep up with the number of the converts desiring to partake. It swept Sweden, Finland and Denmark, Germany, Canada from coast to coast, all of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, touching also Brazil, Mexico, and Chile . . . yet until 1973, the extent of that revival was unknown until I published my account of it.

As always, it began through a movement of prayer, with prayer meetings all over the United States as well as the other countries; and soon there came the great time of the harvest. So what is the lesson we can learn? It is a very simple one, as direct as the promises of God in Scripture:

"If my people, who are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." What is involved in this? As God requires us to pray, we must not forget what was said by Jonathan Edwards: "To promote explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer." What do we mean by extraordinary prayer? We share in ordinary prayer in regular worship services, before meat, and the like. But when people are found getting up at six in the morning to pray, or having a half night of prayer until midnight, or giving up their lunchtime to pray at a noonday prayer meeting, that is extraordinary prayer. But it must be united and concerted. A Baptist does not become any less a Baptist, or an Anglican less loyal to the Thirty-nine Articles, or a Presbyterian to the Westminster Confession. But they recognize each other as fraternal intercessors.