

The Awakening of 1727 Onward

by J. Edwin Orr

J. Edwin Orr's sermon explores the historical context, key figures, and societal impact of the Great Awakening from 1727 onward.

Duration: 28:00

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 57:15, Joel 2:28, Habakkuk 3:2, Matthew 9:37-38, Acts 2:17, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 5:14, Revelation 2:5

Topics: "Church History", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

This sermon delves into the historical context of the Evangelical Revival in Great Britain and the Great Awakening in America during the 18th century, highlighting the societal depravity, moral decay, and spiritual decline that necessitated these revivals. It explores the transformative impact of key figures like John Wesley and George Whitefield, the beginnings of the Methodist movement, and the widespread revival that reshaped the English-speaking world, leading people back to God.

Transcript

Now, anyone who knows anything about the English-speaking world knows that our history was made by a great event. In Great Britain, it's called the Evangelical Revival. We associate it with the work of John Wesley, George Whitefield, but in this country it's called the Great Awakening.

You can't read an ordinary history book without reading about the Great Awakening in America or the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century in Great Britain. But why did they need such a revival? There's a temptation to an historian to paint the picture blacker to show up the bright lights that followed. But I want you to understand, before the days of John Wesley, when John Wesley was a boy, when George Whitefield was a boy, conditions in the English-speaking world were utterly deplorable.

Now, you can often judge people by their sports. A great British historian, Trevelyan, said society was one vast casino. Gambling was the national pastime.

Cockfighting was one of the popular diversions. The dean of Wales Cathedral had a picture window put in the deanery so that the guests could watch cockfighting from dinner table. Now you know, of course, that over on the other side of the Atlantic they talk about Britain as John Bull.

They always have a bulldog. Why a bulldog? The bulldog had a retractable lower jaw. They used to use those dogs to bait bulls.

Now you know, animals are very sensitive in the nose. They have a stronger sense of smell than we have. In fact, some dogs can't see very far, but they can smell your scent a long way away.

But they can be easily hurt, and so these dogs would fasten their teeth in the nose of the bull. This was bull baiting, another popular sport. Boxing was without any gloves.

They boxed barehanded. But you were allowed to keep your thumb out. And if you knock a man's eyeball out on his cheek, that was loudly applauded.

These prizefighters used to pound each other to a bloody pulp, and this was tremendously popular. Drunkenness was prevalent. Now, English people tend to be beer drinkers just as Germans do, but with the colonizing of the West Indies, rum and gin became popular.

And people became outrageously intoxicated. London at that time had a population of 600,000, but one in every ten, excuse me, one in every six, owed his livelihood to drink. One house in every six in London was devoted to the sale of liquor.

What did such hard drinking do to those people? Well, according to Bishop Benson of Gloucester, it made English people cruel and inhuman. Not only that, the theater was rotten. Addison, a famous writer, said one of the unaccountable things of utter lewdness of the stage and theater.

Sidney and other writers called it coarse, obscene, and scandalous. In fact, the theater was so filthy that most theaters had a brothel alongside. They used the theater for titillation, and then they used the brothel for indulgence.

The popular novel of the time was rotten. Geoffrey said there was never such a mass of rubbish published. Now, isn't it very interesting? The present wave of pornography in this country began some years ago.

Do you remember how it began? It began when a lady, Catherine Windsor, wrote a book called Forever Amber. And this Forever Amber was an historical novel describing the life of this particular period. And of course, that sort of thing becomes popular with the ungodly, and now there seems to be no limit to what people can publish.

Not only that, but at that time, industry was inhuman. Women were used in the coal mines. A woman would wear a belt, a leather belt, around her waist with an iron chain fastened at the navel, and the iron chain passed between her legs to a truck.

And she crept on hands and knees, dragging trucks of coal. It's interesting, when Parliament finally put a stop to this, they put in horses instead. And one of the objections to getting the women out of the mines was because they'd have to make bigger mine tunnels, because you need more space for horses to drag trucks and for women to drag trucks.

The ships coming from Africa to the Western world were full of helpless slaves. I have seen that series called Roots. It wasn't exaggerated, not at all.

Blacks were packed like sardines, neck to ankle, ankle to neck. These people had never been off the land before. Africans were not seafaring people.

They were seasick. They vomited over each other and were hosed down with salt water. That gave them ulcers.

And if they couldn't make it, they were thrown overboard. The prisons were cesspools of iniquity. And one of the sports for Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon was to watch hangings.

Berkeley, for whom Berkeley, California's name, said morality and religion have collapsed to a degree that's been never known in a Christian country. So you could say there was decline everywhere. You say, what were the churches doing? The church had declined too.

The church was corrupt. Butler, the famous apologist, refused to become Archbishop of Canterbury. He says, the church is too far gone.

You'll find that godly people, the Puritans, were driven out. I remember when I went to stay at Oxford, I stayed in the Baptist manse at a place called Abington, seven miles from Oxford. Why was that Baptist church built there? Because Baptists weren't allowed to live within seven miles of a city.

They were persecuted. That's why the Puritans fled the country and came to New England. There was a case where a godly bishop, the Bishop of Chester, rebuked a clergyman for drunkenness.

And the surprised clergyman, he'd never been pulled off before, he said, but sir, I never get drunk on duty. In other words, he was drunk most of the time except at Holy Communion. He said, I have a conscience.

I never get drunk at Holy Communion. One of the great unbelievers of the day was Lord Bolingbroke. He told the clergy in a meeting in London that the greatest miracle of Christianity was that the preaching of it was committed to such an ungodly bunch as they were.

He said, well, what about the others? What about the Baptists and the Congregationalists and the others? They'd lost their power. And the same thing was happening in Scotland. And the same thing was happening in Wales.

But what about those godly Puritans that ran away from all this and settled in New England and other parts of the American colonies? The tide had gone out there, too. Now, you may not know that when the New England Commonwealth was set up, you had to be converted to be a member of a church. And you had to be a member of a church to vote in the election.

You couldn't vote unless you were a church member, and you couldn't be a church member unless you were converted. That meant that about a tenth of the voting population voted. The others paid taxes, and they didn't like it.

So they grumbled. Americans always have had this idea of taxation without representation. So they grumbled.

And finally, the Puritans, instead of separating church and state as Roger Williams suggested, the Puritans worked out a compromise. They said if any man had a father or mother or grandparents who were church members, he could be an associate member and vote. And that let the world into the church.

Now, you know, for instance, supposing this church was identified with this community in the valley. And supposing the issue came up whether or not we should have drinking and dancing on church premises. Most of the church people would say certainly not.

But when the issue would come up, I'm judging from those New England days, they'd call a town meeting. If it were left to the people of the San Fernando Valley to decide whether or not you had drinking and dancing on the property, they wouldn't vote as you vote. So the world came into the church.

Now remember, the church should be in the world just as a ship should be in the ocean. But the ocean should not be in the ship, and the world should not be in the church. You've heard perhaps of a great American Puritan, Dr. Increase Mather.

And he published a sermon called *The Glory Departed*. He said we're the posterity of the good old Puritans who were a strict and holy people. Such were our fathers who followed the Lord into this wilderness.

He said you that are aged can remember what New England was like 50 years ago when the churches were in their first glory. Time there was when many were converted and there were added to the church daily such as should be saved. But are not sound conversions rare this day? Cotton Mather said there's been a horrible decay.

Now you may say why did the Puritans lose their spirituality? Well, this was a rough country. They were settling a wilderness. Brutalizing contacts with primitive red Indians and with African slaves, lack of enforcement of the law, increase of wicked vice and brutal pleasures, gambling, cockfighting, horse racing, prize fighting, and all the rest.

Profanity and drunkenness demoralized the American colonists. It seemed as if the whole of the English-speaking world was corrupt. Now don't forget at that time the population of Great Britain was much greater than the American colonies.

You know when these colonies became independent there were only 5 million people here. Only 5 million. At the time I'm speaking about much fewer in number then.

But the revival began about the year 1727. Almost simultaneously in New Jersey and in Herrnhut in Germany among the Moravians. I won't wear you now with the details about the Moravians.

They were the ones who developed such a missionary conscience. But there was in America a Dutchman called Theodor Frelinghuysen. He had been soundly converted and became a pietist.

He preached a pure religion. When he was appointed to the Dutch Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, near Princeton, he found the church full of ungodly people. Anyone who spoke Dutch could be a member of the church.

So he adopted what we call Eucharistic evangelism. You say now I haven't heard of that before. Every three months all these people got together for Holy Communion.

It's the same among Presbyterians. And they would have one or two preparatory services before they partook of the bread and wine. They'd come in in their wagons.

Conditions were very primitive. But he began preaching evangelism before communion. He preached on whoever eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to his own soul.

Now some sinners began to tremble and some got very angry. In fact, they appealed to the governor of New Jersey. They appealed to the classes of New York.

They appealed to Amsterdam to have him removed. The old people resented this. They said that the former minister didn't keep us away from the Lord's table.

He said, I'm not keeping you away. I'm telling you, you've got to live right to come to the Lord's table. But the young people responded.

And that was the beginning of the revival there. Now the same revival, of course, affected England. I must condense what I say about conditions across the Atlantic.

You know that John Wesley, a very godly young man, went to be a chaplain in Georgia in the colony of Savannah. But he fell in love with a girl there. He couldn't bring himself to propose.

He was a very introspective sort of fellow. The girl waited patiently to see what he was going to do, and then on the rebound she married somebody else. What did John Wesley do? He refused to let this girl and her husband come to communion.

He was asked why. He said, because she's a hypocrite. What do you mean she's a hypocrite? Well, she loves me and she married him.

The husband had a warrant sworn out for his arrest. And John Wesley decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He got on a horse and didn't stop galloping until he reached Philadelphia.

Then he took ship for England. You might call that prevenient grace. He was a great horseman after that.

When John Wesley got back to England, he met George Whitfield. And he said, I'm thinking of going to America. And John Wesley said, don't go.

It's hopeless there. But they drew lots, and George Whitfield decided to come. Now, in England, John Wesley, when he was a student, belonged to a little club.

They were called the Bible Moths. The nickname that stuck most was the Methodist. They went to communion every day.

They visited the sick. They fasted. They had a method of living.

It was all works, works, works. But they meant them. And that's where the name Methodist came from.

It was a nickname. But the first to be converted in that group was George Whitfield. He worked so hard at it, he got ill.

And while he was in bed, he read a book called The Life of God and the Soul of Man by a man called Henry Schugel. And this book upset him. Schugel said, religion is not a lot of duties and exercises.

It's the life of God in your soul, union with God. And as a result of that, George Whitfield was converted. After Wesley came back from America, he was very unhappy.

He had met an Arabian missionary on the ship. And he told the missionary, I just don't have the faith. And Peter Bowler said something to him that was very strange.

He said, preach faith until you have it. In other words, don't give up the ministry, but preach it until you get it yourself. Now one night, John Wesley went to St. Paul's Cathedral, that lovely cathedral in London.

And the choir sang a magnificent number. He went to a prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street afterwards. And someone was reading from Luther's introduction to the Epistle to the Romans.

And suddenly it dawned on John Wesley that sins were forgiven. Now it's strange today that something like that dawns on our soul. We show it in certain ways, don't we? They fell to their knees and sang, we praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.

Those old-fashioned words. From that time on, John Wesley became a powerful preacher of the gospel. Now, George Whitefield started preaching in Bristol, the second largest city of England at that time.

But he had to move off to somewhere else. So he asked John Wesley, would you take my place? The churches were closed to them. They were preaching in the open air.

John Wesley said in his diary, I thought it was a sin to preach in the open air. He believed as a clergyman you ought to preach in a consecrated building, a parish church. He said I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday.

I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in church. But he tried it. Twenty-four hours later, John Wesley preached in the open air.

And in his diary, he said, I made a bright succession of appeals to the reason, the conscience, and the heart of my hearers. Now, I used to think John Wesley must have been a genius of an evangelist, that strong men were broken down and wept. Not at all.

He was a very stuffy high churchman. But the point was this, the Holy Spirit at that time was poured out upon believers to revive the church. And at the same time, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the people to awaken the masses.

The result was these minors who had come out to gamble and to fight and to misbehave in every possible way were deeply convicted of sin and began to repent and be converted. So John Wesley formed a society. See, the churches wouldn't open their doors to him.

But formed a little society that meant, quote, to confess their faults one to another and pray for one another that they may be healed. That was the first Methodist class meeting, and out of that came the whole Methodist denomination. In 1739, by the way, John Wesley was converted in 1738, George Whitefield began his London ministry.

The only church in London that was willing to have him was that great St. Mary's Church in Islington in North London. But the vicar was overridden by the church wardens. They locked the doors against Whitefield.

The result was he preached in the churchyard. And then he began preaching in the open airs. And he used to have 10,000, 20,000.

Oh, I would have loved to have heard George Whitefield preach. In those days, there was no amplification, no loudspeakers. You know that when Whitefield was crossing the Atlantic, on those little sailing ships, they would form like a V of ducks for a convoy, for protection against the wind to help each other if a storm came up.

And if it was a calm Sunday, because it took a month or more to come across, if it was a calm Sunday, Whitefield would conduct divine worship for the fleet. He had such a voice, he could lead worship from the leading ship to the whole ship and all the ships present. When he preached in Philadelphia at the Custom House Steps, crowds used to gather across the river in New Jersey to listen to him.

Benjamin Franklin was no fool. He was a mathematician. He calculated by pi r squared and all the rest of it that the total number listening to Whitefield's unaided voice was 25,000.

His enemy said he could reduce an audience to tears by the way he pronounced the word Mesopotamia. Now when he came, there had been glimmerings of revival in the American colonies already. Revival began 1727 in New Jersey under Frelinghuysen.

It spread from the Dutch Reform to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Now most Americans misunderstand the word Scotch-Irish. They think, well, that means his mother was Scotch and his father was Irish.

No, no, the Scotch-Irish are the north of Ireland people, largely Presbyterian, very rugged lot. I remember reading in the history of the Allegheny Presbytery the prayer of a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian elder in the Kirk Session. He prayed, Grant, O Lord, that I may always be right, for thy knowest, Lord, that I am hard to turn.

I thought that was a very good Presbyterian prayer. Now the revival spread from the Dutch Reform through a man called Gilbert Tennant to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who spoke English with a Scotch-Irish accent. They had so many candidates for the ministry, they started a little log college just north of Philadelphia in a place called Nishimene.

That log college Whitfield visited and described for us. And he said that from it were going forth many faithful servants of Jesus. Just a rough log college.

That college grew and grew until today it's known as Princeton University. Do you know that most of American universities, the old ones, came out of that revival? I won't go into all the details, but most of them came out of that revival. It spread from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians to the Baptists.

Before the Great Awakening, there weren't more than 500 Baptists in the colonies. Now they've got 21 million. You can trace them right back to that revival.

Then it jumped north and broke out in Northampton, Massachusetts under Jonathan Edwards in that great revival of 1738. And then it began to spread. And then who should arrive but George Whitfield.

George Whitfield was on a sailing ship headed for Philadelphia, but it landed in North Carolina. They weren't very exact in those days. He meant to get to Philadelphia, so he had to go the rest of the way by horse.

But when he started preaching, he had phenomenal response. Benjamin Franklin said his preaching was the most powerful he'd ever heard. Benjamin Franklin once was talking to George Whitfield.

Whitfield said, I'm going to start an orphanage in Savannah. Franklin said, You're crazy. Not Savannah.

Way down there. Philadelphia is the center of all the colonies. Now you build it here, and I'll help you financially.

Whitfield said, God has spoken to me, and I'm going to start it in Savannah. So Benjamin Franklin said, he's not going to get any money from me. Now he went to one of these meetings, and he saw that George Whitfield was going to take up a collection for his orphanage.

He said in his pocket he had a \$5 gold piece, some silver dollars, and some copper. But he determined not to give anything. He didn't approve.

But when the plate was passed, he relented and decided to put in the copper. George Whitfield was preaching so powerfully, he decided, well, I'll give him the silver as well. And finally, he put in gold, silver, and copper and everything.

He said that man could really preach. Now what was the result of this awakening? It completely turned the colonies around from being a rough frontier society to being a godly nation again. And what was it affect in England? It was the great event of that century.

It turned the English speaking people towards God. Now some people say, well, why do we have to talk about these things that happened such a long time ago? It's very simple. The scripture tells us to tell our children and our children's children what God has done.

Why? That they may not forget his commandments. They might put their trust in God. He will answer in due course.

You'll find many, many times revival has broken out among God's people when they heard of what God has done and what God can do. Now that's only part of my message. I want to give you the rest a little later.

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