

# The Awakening of 1792 Onward

by J. Edwin Orr

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*J. Edwin Orr's sermon highlights the profound impact of prayer and revival on American society from 1792 onward amidst a backdrop of moral decline.*

**Duration:** 28:12

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Acts 1:14, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Prayer Movement", "Spiritual Revival"

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## Description

This sermon reflects on the historical context of the American Revolution, highlighting the presence of both men of God and those who were not, the moral decline post-war, and the transformative power of prayer leading to the Great Awakening of 1792. It emphasizes the impact of prayer movements in both Britain and America, resulting in societal transformation, the abolition of the slave trade, advancements in education, and the birth of missionary societies.

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## Transcript

During the bicentennial year, I heard a friend of mine on television say, it's about time people realize that this republic was founded by men of God and men of prayer. I said to my wife, that's only half true. There were men of God and men of prayer in the revolution.

There were some who were not. Who could call Tom Paine a man of God? He died in disgrace. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson was a great man.

But he didn't believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When he wrote the Declaration of Independence, he didn't mention God. And the religious people ganged up on him and said, you must mention God.

So he worked it in. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. They're endowed by their creator with certain rights.

And he spoke of nature's God. One of the heroes of the Revolutionary War was General Charles Lee. And he said, let's tear down all the churches.

They stand in the way of progress. On the other hand, they say that George Washington was a man of prayer. I understand his prayer life reached a climax at Valley Forge.

He needed to pray there, all right. There were evangelicals and there were freethinkers working together for the independence of this country. But what most people don't know is that in the wake of the Revolutionary War, there was a moral slump unparalleled.

Drunkenness was epidemic. Out of a population of 5 million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards. They were burying 15,000 of them a year.

They even had a whiskey rebellion. Just as Abbie Hoffman said not so long ago, every American has the right to grow his own marijuana in his backyard. These men said every American has the right to distill his own whiskey and they wouldn't pay revenue.

And George Washington had to call out the National Guard of four states to put down the armed rebellion to overthrow the government of the country. Profanity was the most shocking kind. Immorality was rampant with venereal disease and illegitimacy and the like.

Women were afraid to go out for fear of assault. Bank robberies had become an altogether daily occurrence. What about the colleges, the hope of the nation, the young leaders of the future? They took a poll at Harvard and discovered not one believer in the whole student body.

At Princeton, a much more evangelical place, they also took a poll and discovered only two believers and only five that didn't belong to the filthy speech movement of that day. What were the churches doing? The largest denomination was the congregational. Take a typical example, the Reverend Samuel Shepard of Lenox in Massachusetts announced that he hadn't taken a single young person into fellowship in 16 years.

He said prospects were altogether melancholy. It was as if he was chaplain to an old people's home dying off. The Presbyterians met in General Assembly and their main topic was to discuss the gross immorality of the country.

The most aggressive were the Methodists and they were losing 4,000 members a year. The Baptists said that had their worst winter. The Lutherans were so languishing they discussed amalgamating with the Episcopalians who were even worse off.

They thought they would prop each other up. Samuel Provost, Bishop of New York, quit functioning. He had confirmed no one for so long he decided he was out of work.

John Marshall was Chief Justice of the United States and he wrote to the Bishop of Virginia, Bishop Madison, he said the church is too far gone ever to be redeemed. Voltaire said in 30 years time Christianity will be forgotten. We went through a siege in this country in the 1770s, 60s and 70s, but nobody suggested the church was going to be wiped out.

But in those days the churches were in deadly fear. Young people had been turned away and the churches were dying off. This may sound like the hysteria of the moment, but Kenneth Scott Lantourette, the great church historian, said it seemed as if Christianity were about to be ushered out of the affairs of men.

Why? In the American Union of States, possibly the result of the war, in wartime, especially war fought on your own territory, there's always a moral slump. But then came the French Revolution and the French Revolution was anti-Christian. They crowned a prostitute goddess of reason in Notre Dame Cathedral.

Practically every church in France was closed and the French were subscribing millions of dollars to enlighten young Americans. Now how did this state of affairs come to be changed? It came through a movement of prayer. I must backtrack a little bit.

A group of Scottish ministers published a plea for prayer for revival. A copy was sent to Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian. Jonathan Edwards had seen the revival of 1734 in Massachusetts and then he had seen the great movement I spoke about under Whitefield in 1740.

This warmed his heart. He was so moved he wrote a response. His response got longer than a letter, became a book.

The title of the book, if my memory serves me correctly, was as follows, 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 Extension of Christ's Kingdom According to Scriptural Promise and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time. That was the title, not the book itself. Nowadays titles are scarcely related to content.

If you want to study the weather, meteorology, you do not read *Gone with the Wind*. It has nothing to do with that. But in those days the title told you what was in the book.

Now in case you missed the force of it, A Humble Attempt, that was New England modesty, to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of All God's People in Extraordinary Prayer. That is what is so often missing from our ventures. Some of you may remember Key 73, when they had a great evangelistic drive all over the United States.

But they took the attitude, you Southern Baptists do not need to work with the Missouri Lutherans. Do your own thing, but do it at the same time. You Pentecostals and you Presbyterians do not work together.

Just do your own thing and perhaps we shall secure a great awakening. There was not an explicit agreement and visible union in extraordinary prayer. You may say, well, what do you mean by extraordinary prayer? Well, what is ordinary prayer? Do you pray before you eat? That is ordinary prayer.

Do you pray in church? That is ordinary prayer. But when people pray all night, or get up at six in the morning to pray, or give up their lunch time to pray, that is extraordinary prayer. And that is what Jonathan Edwards pleaded for.

After he died, a Scottish minister called John Erskine published the two books, the Scottish one and the American one together. He sent a copy to Mr. Baptist, Dr. John Ryland, editor of the Baptist register in Bristol, in England. John Ryland did not want to throw away a book on prayer, so he sent the two copies, one to Andrew Fuller and the other to John Sutcliffe.

They were men of prayer. Fuller took leave of absence and traveled the length and breadth of Britain, urging the Baptist to set aside one day a month to pray for revival. Sutcliffe, for domestic reasons, did not travel, but he had a very lively layman in his congregation called William Carey, afterwards the great missionary.

And between them they started what they called the union of prayer. They got every church to set aside one day a month to pray for a spiritual awakening. Then the Congregationalists joined them, then the Methodist societies, and then Evangelicals of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, until

Britain was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings.

This was seven years before the French Revolution. John Wesley, still preaching in his 80s, died in 1791, and the revival began in 1792. It started in Yorkshire, in the industrial heart of Britain, and it started in prayer meetings.

Not so much in preaching services, but in prayer meetings. However, I don't want to wear you with details about the British aspect of the revival, but I told you of the terrible conditions in this country at that time. The first sign of the coming movement was 1792 in Boston, where a First Baptist Church had a series of meetings in the midst of a very cold winter, amidst blizzards and the like.

So many converts were added to First and Second Baptist Churches. Now you know, of course, Boston at that time was a congregational city. But the Congregationalists had been turning to Unitarianism.

In fact, only one congregational church in the whole of Boston remained untouched, and that was the Old South Church. But this little touch of revival did something to encourage people. Then, about 1794, Isaac Bacchus, a godly New England minister, sent out a letter addressed to every Christian denomination in the United States, saying that they ought to set aside time to pray, because their back was to the wall.

It was well received. The Presbyterian synods of New Jersey and Pennsylvania adopted it. Bishop Asbury adopted it for the Methodists.

The Baptist associations, the Congregational associations, all the other denominations, one after the other, adopted this until the United States was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings, praying that God would intervene in national affairs. The revival began towards 1796. By 1798, it was general.

Churches crowded out. Now, the young people had been alienated from the churches, but so great was the power of God that young people would be convicted of sin on the dance floor in the tavern, and then leave and go and seek spiritual counsel. This happened all over New England.

And by the way, I noticed in every report it says, without extravagant outcry or ranting. There was a reason for that. In the wake of the former revival, there was a man called Davenport, who simply tried to exploit all the emotionalism of the previous revival.

And so these ministers were careful to say it was a deep, solemn work of grace without any extravagance of feeling. I told you that in Lenox, Massachusetts, the pastor hadn't taken anyone in to membership for 16 years, but he said the showers of blessing began to fall. And then they took in five times as many people as any previous year in the history of the church.

The revival spread to New York and Philadelphia, and then smaller towns. The western parts of New York, among the settlers, had the most startling displays of excitement. Now, the population of the United States was largely east of the Alleghenies at that time, three-quarters of the population.

And this was a deep, deep movement. Some pastors in New Jersey hit on the idea of having Aaron and Her societies. That's a novel idea.

You remember the story of Moses praying, and while he held up his hands, Israel prevailed over Amalek? But when his arms got tired, then Aaron and Her came and propped up his arms. These pastors got the praying people of the congregation to pray for them while they preached. The result was multitudes of

conversions.

I forgot to mention to you that the worst conditions in the United States at that time were in Kentucky and Tennessee. A committee of Congress discovered that there hadn't been more than one court of justice held in five years in Kentucky. The decent people formed vigilante regiments and fought the outlaws in a pitched battle and lost, so that Kentucky and the Christians.

Peter Cartwright, the Methodist evangelist, said that when his father settled in Logan County, Kentucky, it was known as Rogue's Harbor. If anyone committed a murder in Massachusetts or a robbery in Rhode Island, all he'd do is get across the mountains. Nobody could lay a finger on him.

Now, there was a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister called James McGrady, whose chief claim to fame seemed to be that he was so ugly he attracted attention. People would stop in the face. What does he do? They said he's a preacher.

Then they reacted. They said a man with a handicap like that really must have something to say. So they'd come to hear him preach.

They said his voice was tremulous, his gestures were coarse, and it was altogether unprepossessing. He followed the immigrants over the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and settled in Rogue's Harbor. He had three little box-like Presbyterian churches.

He said the winter of 1799, for the most part, was weeping and mourning with the people of God. But he was such a man of prayer, he not only promoted the concert of prayer one day a month that all the churches were doing, but he asked his people, will you pray for me when the sun sets on Saturday for half an hour and when the sun rises on Sunday for half an hour. It was heartbreaking work, but in 1800 there came a deluge of blessing.

17,000 people showed up for a communion service. Lots of them were not converted, so they had preaching before that. Then they had meetings as large as 25,000.

This was the beginning of the great camp meeting movement. I said that in the eastern parts of the states there were no extravagances, but in the western parts there were. There were people, for instance, who would scream under conviction, some who would faint, some who would tremble, some who trembled so much they jerked.

I read about all these things, but one thing I couldn't understand was the reports that I'd heard of barking. Now, I have seen people who trembled. I saw a schoolboy tremble when he thought he was going to be expelled.

I saw a soldier faint when he thought he was going to be shot at a court-martial. As far as dancing for joy is concerned, just look at the giveaway programs on TV and you'll see people dancing for joy. These things you can understand, but why should anyone bark? I decided to try and research this.

I read a book by F. M. Davenport which said it was called Primitive Trites in Religious Revivals. It said there was barking on the frontier, but it was not too common. I looked for a footnote to see where he got this.

He didn't have any footnote. He didn't say where it happened. Then, 40 years later, Professor Alice Tyler of University of Minnesota wrote a book called Freedom's Ferment in which she said there was barking on the frontier and it was altogether too common.

I looked for a footnote. It cited Davenport, but he didn't say that. Then, a Catholic writer, Francis Xavier Curran, wrote a book, I've forgotten the title, in which he said there was barking on the frontier and it was disgraceful.

I looked for footnotes, Davenport and Tyler. So I thought, well, let's go back, that's what a historian does, go back to books written at the time to see what they said then. I got David Benedict's History of the Baptists, a huge tome.

He knew how many Baptists there were in Islington and London, how many Baptists there were in Hogs Hollow and Tennessee. He wrote to them all, got all their statistics and wrote this great encyclopedia of Baptists. So I could hardly wait to turn to the Revival in Kentucky, 1800, and there it said the Baptists did not bark.

But, but it said the Presbyterians did. Then I got the writings of Barton Stone, one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ. He was there.

He said there was no barking. There were some people, you know, you know, like a child sobbing, sobbing like this, grunting while they sobbed. He said that was the nearest thing to barking.

But you see, American humor is always exaggeration. British humor is always understatement. But in America we always tell tall stories, and this story is told all over the United States in our seminaries, that that's the way Christians carry on.

I raised this matter at the Conference of Faith and History to 300 historians at Capital University in Ohio. They fell on me like a ton of bricks. They said, oh, you're spoiling good fun.

But it simply was not true. Now this Revival spread from Kentucky and Tennessee to the Carolinas into Georgia. It swept the whole of the United States.

You say, what good did it do? It did untold good. Now, of course, this was a country being settled in those days. At that time, Great Britain was the industrial workshop of the world, and they had problems we were to face later.

But it was out of this Revival that came the abolition of the slave trade. William Wilberforce went into Parliament to stand for God and righteousness. The result was the abolition of the slave trade.

You have read or seen that film Roots. It's not exaggerated. The conditions on the slave ships were so terrible that 50 percent of the slaves never reached the plantations.

And it was interesting that while Britain was fighting Napoleon, they passed this law. And then they used the Royal Navy, which was the strongest military force on earth at the end of that war, to hunt down the slave traders on the high seas. Actually, the number of deaths went up for a while.

You might say, why? If a Portuguese slave trader running from Angola to Brazil saw a British warship on the horizon in those days of sail, they said, it'll be five hours before they overtake us. Clean the decks. And they threw them overboard to the sharks.

So the death rate went up for a while. But at the end of the war, Britain made treaties with each country, including United States. No more slave trading.

That came out of the revival. Most Americans don't think much of George III. But I was interested to notice that Prince Charles on television the other day said, we regard him as a good king.

He blundered in his American policy, but he was very good in England. He heard that a single teacher was teaching a school of 800 boys. I wonder if there's a Sunday school teacher here who has eight boys.

That's your problem. They've got a very short attention span, to say the least. You have to control them.

The king thought, how could one teacher run a school of 800 boys? He got his coach, and coachmen went down to visit the school on Borough Road in London. Joseph Lancaster was a man. He was a Quaker, and this was in the revival.

The king said, my good man, how do you maintain order? And Lancaster said, by the same principle, thy majesty's army is kept in order by the chain of command. What he had done was to take a dozen boys off the streets. At that time, people were working a 16-hour day.

They had no time for their children. The children were little vandals running the streets, wild. He said to the boys, I'll teach you to read and write.

They said, what good would it do us? He said, then you'll get a job, and he persuaded a dozen. After teaching them for a year, he said, now if I teach you next year, second year, would you teach first year? And then when they got to third year, he taught third year, they taught second year, and second year taught first year. You say, would that work? Just take a 14-year-old boy and put him in charge of some cub scout's 10 years of age.

Will he exercise authority? Of course he will. And that was the beginning of what they called moneterial education. Out of it came popular education.

Up to that time, education was only for the wealthy and the privileged. That came out of the revival. Out of that came the abolition of the use of women and coal mines to drag the coal, like peace of burden.

Out of that came so many things. For instance, a little Welsh girl during the revival walked 30 miles on her bare feet to try and buy a Bible. She got there, they're all sold.

She returned in tears. Thomas Charles, one of the leaders of the revival in Wales, was so concerned he took his carriage and went up to London to beg people to print Bibles. Nobody seemed willing to do it, so he formed his own committee, and it was called the British and Foreign Bible Society, the first of the Bible societies.

That came out of the revival. You remember I said that in the colleges, conditions were bad? At Williams College in Massachusetts, they had a mock commune to make fun of Jesus Christ. Christians were so few on campus in those revolutionary days that they kept their minutes in code and met in secret like a communist cell.

A group of them who were revived met under a haystack, sheltering from the rain, and promised God they'd go anywhere in the world he would send them. You say, well, that happens at Forest Home, that happens at lots of camps. In those days there were no missionary societies to take them.

These young men finished their studies and then went down to Boston to the headquarters of their denomination and asked to be sent overseas as missionaries. Someone said, who do they think they are? Another man said, we don't have money to do it. One man said, if God has spoken to these young men, I think we should help them.

So they formed a committee called the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. That was the first American missionary society. The first missionary they sent out was Adoniram Judson.

He went to India, then to Burma. On his way to Calcutta, he became convinced of Baptist principles and asked William Carey to baptize him in Calcutta. Rather embarrassing to go out as a congregational missionary and become a Baptist on the field.

So he sent some of his friends back to raise money, and out of that came the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. One denomination after another, all the missionary societies of the denominations came out of that revival. There were so many other things that were done that all you could say was the place had been completely transformed.

George Baxter from Philadelphia went up to Kentucky, that place which had been so wicked in its ways, and he said, I have never come across such a moral community in all my life. The whole of the young United States was changed. Young people were converted on the frontier, went back to these colleges where they were having religious revivals right along, and there they trained for the ministry, went out as missionaries or became pastors of home churches.

And the young United States became a comparatively Christian country. Most important, its leading edge, the frontier, was Christianized as it moved west. In 1860, of 180 colleges in the Middle West, 144 had been started by evangelists and revivalists.

It all came out of that revival. Now some people may say, how long did the revival of 1792 continue? Some say for 50 years, unbroken revival. Sometimes, of course, the tide goes out and it has to come in again, but in this case, 1830, there came another revival that strengthened the work.

But that's another story. All I'm trying to tell you is this. The great awakening of 1792 came about because in Britain they formed a union of prayer, and because in America, they formed what they called the concert of prayer.

Prayer is the least of what we can do to bring about a spiritual awakening in our time. May God grant it. Amen.

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