

The Awakening of 1859 in Britain

by J. Edwin Orr

The 1859 revival in Britain was a significant Christian revival that swept through the country, leading to widespread conversions and a deepening of faith among the population.

Duration: 28:44

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Matthew 18:19, Acts 1:14, James 5:16

Topics: "Prayer Revival", "Holy Spirit"

Description

This sermon recounts the powerful impact of the Great Awakening of 1858 that spread from Philadelphia to Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Australia, South Africa, and beyond. It highlights the fervent prayers, mass convictions, and mass conversions that occurred, leading to significant spiritual transformations and revivals in various countries. The sermon emphasizes the role of prayer as the catalyst for these widespread movements of God's Spirit, uniting believers across denominations and regions in seeking revival.

Transcript

In Philadelphia, there was a little book published, Pentecost in Philadelphia, describing the impact of the Great Awakening of 1858 in that city. The moderator of the Irish Presbyterian Church and another minister crossed the Atlantic to bring fraternal greetings to the American Presbyterians, and they were deeply impressed with what they saw of the Great Awakening in Pennsylvania. They republished a little booklet in Ireland, and people began praying for revival in Ireland.

Now, of course, Ireland is a Roman Catholic country, but there's a strong minority of Protestants in the North. These people began praying for revival. Many sermons were preached on the subject.

Many prayer meetings were started. The first of the prayer meetings seemed to be one begun in Kells near Ballymena by a young man called James McQuilken. He'd been reading the testimony of George Muller, the great saint of faith, who ran the orphanage at Bristol, and then he heard of the revival in America, so he said to himself, Well, if God answers prayer, why shouldn't we expect such a work of God in Ireland also? He asked God to give him some other young men to join with him in prayer, and soon they met four of them in a barn outside Kells near Ballymena.

Their names, if I remember right, were McQuilken, Manili, Carlisle, and Wallace. Now, this little prayer meeting of four young men increased. They were invited on the 14th of March, 1859, to speak in the First

Presbyterian Church in the town of Ahochill.

I don't expect everyone to be able to pronounce that name, A-H-O-G-H-I-L-L, Ahochill. There was such a large crowd attending that it was deemed prudent to dismiss the meeting lest there be a fatal accident from the falling in of the galleries. Whereupon the laymen stood in the church portico and preached to three thousand people in the streets.

Many began falling to their knees. It was sleet at that time, rain and snow, but people were moved by the powerful preaching of the laymen, fell to their knees in the muddy street. This was the first outbreak of mass conviction in the United Kingdom at that time.

Now, just three miles away was the town of Balimena, and it had a population of about six thousand, largely Presbyterian. The Balimena newspaper noticed the revival on the 26th of March and began chronicling the events. A number of prepared young laymen devoted almost all of their time to helping in the revival because most of the ministers were away south in Dublin at annual meetings.

But in the month of May, 1859, the Awakening made its first appearance in Belfast, a busy city of 120,000. One third of them were Roman Catholic. But before the end of May, the Belfast newspapers were giving half a column or a column of news to the great revival that began in that city.

The attendances went up to 25,000, 40,000. With something like unanimity, the ministers of Belfast started a united prayer meeting in the music hall with the mayor in the chair. A week later, the Bishop of Durham, Conroy and Drummore took the chair, assisted by 146 ministers of all denominations, including the moderator of the General Assembly and President of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference and so on.

Now the revival was underway in the north of Ireland. Out of a population of less than a million, 100,000 people were converted. One of the strange features of this revival, as distinct from the American revival of 1858, was many people were violently prostrated.

They collapsed. At that time, it was called being slain in the spirit. It was a little bit different than what is talked about nowadays because these were not prostrated.

The revival spread throughout the whole of Ireland. Before the middle of summer, they were having 20,000 at prayer meetings in the botanic gardens. The October meetings of the May's race course attracted only 500 people instead of 10,000.

A large distillery capable of turning out a million gallons of whiskey annually was put up for auction. These were the reports that were confirmed by the Evangelical Alliance meeting in Belfast at that time. This was supported by all denominations.

The great movement spread across to Scotland. The population of Scotland at that time was about 3 million. Out of the 3 million, 300,000 were converted.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland noticed in its meetings in Edinburgh in May 1860, General Assembly, taking into consideration the gratifying evidence manifested in many countries and in various districts of our own land of an increased anxiety about salvation and deepening interest in religious ordinances, followed in so many cases by the fruits of desires to record its gratitude to Almighty God. The General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland passed a similar resolution, described it as a mighty rushing wind throughout the country. The same thing happened with the United Presbyterians.

These three branches of the dominant Presbyterians of Scotland, who accounted for about 70% of the population, all supported this great revival spreading throughout Scotland in 1859. The explanation? Prayer, I would say. Here's a sort of report.

The United Presbyterian Church reported that one in every four of its 162,000 communicants were attending private prayer meetings. An average of 40,000 at prayer in 1,205 regular meetings, with 129 new prayer meetings and 16,362 new attenders in 1859. So one has to agree that the revival began with prayer.

The revival came to Glasgow, the great Scottish city, with the suddenness of a thunderstorm in summer. A column was devoted to a public meeting held in the City Hall to describe what was happening in Ireland not too far away. And then suddenly, August the 19th, a public meeting was held in Glasgow Green with 20,000 people attending.

This revival spread through every part of Scotland. Here's the sort of report we get of the times of refreshing in Glasgow. Every Sabbath evening service, since the Bridegate Church was opened, the crowds around the stone pulpit have been increasing.

I should stop to explain that they built a pulpit outside the church because people couldn't get into the church. And until last Sabbath evening, there could not have been fewer than 7,000 hearers. The voice of the preacher appeared to be perfectly audible at the furthest extremity.

At the close of the open-air service, an invitation was given from the pulpit to all who wish to come to decision in the matter of religion to attend a prayer meeting. Within 10 minutes, the church was packed. Upwards of 1,100 thus crowded in.

In other words, they did the preaching in the open air outside the church and used the church as an inquiry room. This was happening in every part of Scotland, spread up through the highlands and the islands. The Reverend W.T. Kerr of Deskworth said, It's the most wondrous work of the Lord, passing along this coast like a mighty wave, having assumed a character identical with the work in Ireland.

And the revival continued year after year. It was summed up many years afterwards, about six years afterwards. The wave of divine blessing came to us apparently from Ireland four or five years ago.

It struck first the west coast of Scotland, then spread over a great part of the country. It was a very blessed season, perhaps the most extensive operation we've ever known among us. Now, this same revival broke out in Wales, independent of the Irish revival.

At that time, Wales was largely Welsh-speaking. I came across some reports of a man called Humphrey Jones who led revival in New York State among the Welsh settlers. He came back to spread the good news to Wales.

He started to preach in a town called Isbety, Iswith. There, the Presbyterian minister went to hear him, but wasn't much impressed with anything that was derived from America or from the Methodists. But when he preached on, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth, David Morgan, the Presbyterian, was deeply convicted and became the great evangelist of Welsh revival.

Again, about 100,000 people were converted in Wales. The revival affected every county in Wales. It began among the Welsh-speaking people, but it spread to the English-speaking and greatly stirred Cardiff,

which was the capital of Wales.

The revival continued in Wales year after year, and people have summed it up for us in their reports. Now, the same revival began in northern England, broke out in Newcastle and Tyne. The Reverend Robert Young, who was president of the Methodist Conference, said the revival which this town has favoured is advancing with increased power and glory.

In Brunswick Place Chapel, we hold a united prayer meeting from 12 to 1, another meeting for exhortation and prayer from 3 to 5, and a similar service from 7 until 10. Many seem filled with the Holy Ghost, and prayer as the Spirit gives them utterance. The revival spread throughout the whole of the north.

Just south of Newcastle and Tyne is Gateshead, and there a young Methodist minister caught fire and became a fiery evangelist. In fact, his church was called a converting shop. People were so scared to go there, they didn't go unless they wanted to be converted.

They were sure of being converted if they went. The name of the young minister was William Booth, and he and his wife Catherine became evangelists in the next 10 years until they founded the Salvation Army. Now, the revival spread throughout the Midlands and throughout the south.

There was a lady in Somersetshire who heard of the revival in Ireland and wrote, Lord, I hear of showers of blessing, thou art scattering full and free, showers of thirsty land refreshing, let some drop now fall on me. Let some drops now fall on me. They had a great meeting in North London in the Islington Hall.

The second week of January is devoted to prayer throughout the whole country, and then revival began spreading throughout London. All the churches were filled. At that time, they had great evening services in St. Paul's Cathedral, led by the Bishop of London, and great services in Westminster Abbey led by the Dean of Westminster.

But where did the poor people go? The churches couldn't hold them. They went to the theatres, all the famous theatres, the Britannia, the Garrick, the Sadler's Wells, and the Covent Garden theatres were filled each evening, each Sunday evening, with crowds of people. The aggregate attendance nightly was 20,000, and I suppose one could say that an aggregate of 865,000 attended one theatre alone, the Victoria Theatre in Waterloo.

The revival spread throughout London. Spurgeon built his tabernacle in London at that time. The Baptists added 20% to their sittings in London.

The revival spread to other parts of southern England and became, of course, the event of the century at that particular time. The difference was that in Britain there was some opposition to the revival as compared to the United States. The Church of England had five distinct parties.

First of all, the old-fashioned high church people. Second, the Tractarians, representing an Anglo-Catholic revival. Third, the broad church people, who weren't too particular about doctrine.

And then the semionic, low church people, and then the very strong evangelicals. The strong evangelicals of the Church of England supported the revival from the beginning. The low church people generally supported it, but not all of them.

The broad church people were not interested in it. The high church people were opposed to it. But the Baptists and the Methodists and other denominations throughout England were in strong support of that revival.

I've estimated the number of conversions in seven years to exceed one million. It's rather difficult to get statistics from a state church which doesn't keep statistics of conversions. But I estimate from all the figures that the total number of people who were converted in the revival in Britain passed one million out of a population of about 27 million.

When I say that not all the evangelicals were in favour, I'm thinking of one case in Bradford in Yorkshire. The Anglicans and free churches got together and decided to have united meetings on Sunday night to try and win people to Christ. But the Anglicans had to have permission from their bishops so to do.

The Bishop of Ripon, by name Bickersteth, was a low churchman, but he refused to give permission to have mixed meetings. He said he did not deny that the free church ministers, such as Baptists and Methodists and Congregationalists, were servants of Jesus Christ according to their light, but they were not priests of the true church. He forbade any mixing.

So the Anglicans and free church people got together again wondering what they should do. Then someone came up with an idea. Why not have the first Sunday of the month under Anglican auspices? The Anglicans don't need permission to have an Anglican service.

Then have the second service of the month free church. The free churches don't need the bishop's permission to have a meeting. And then the third Sunday would be Anglican, the fourth Sunday would be free church turnabout.

The result was on certain Sundays they had the blessing of God and the benediction of the bishop, but on other Sundays only the blessing of God. They managed all right. Now this revival spread throughout Britain and continued on in its effect in Europe.

I've read a book written by a German scholar to say that the effect of that revival when it spread to Germany was 30 years of revival. The Scandinavian countries were affected also. Then on the mission fields the revival was very effective in India.

It stirred up the English-speaking people and also some of the Christian people in the south of India. A great revival began in 1860 in the southern extremity of India and spread throughout the diocese of Tenerife. Old and young men, women and children were suddenly seen crushed by the agony of a deep conviction of sin and then just as suddenly seemed to believe in the forgiveness of sins.

That was written by an Anglican chaplain to his bishop. I mentioned that in the revival in the United States there were no signs and wonders such as tongues and healing. Neither could I find any in the 1859 movement in Great Britain.

But when the movement reached India there were dreams and visions and trances and healings and tongues and interpretations, the whole thing. It's just enough to keep anyone from forming any kind of theory to explain the matter. The revival was felt in other mission fields of the world.

But perhaps I should explain that in certain other parts of the world there was a great impact of revival. For example, there was great movement in Australia. Most Australians ask me the question why has dear old

Australia never seen a great revival? Well, they don't know the facts of their own history.

When the news of the American revival came to Australia some of the newspapers ridiculed it and some warned against it. But Christian people began prayer. A conference of ministers meeting in mid-1857 resolved to pray for a general revival and a revival for themselves.

Seeking a richer baptism of the Holy Spirit and promising to pray for each other and to promote Saturday evening meetings for prayer. The population of Australia at that time was just about one million and the concentrations of population were in Sydney and Melbourne. Towns were very small and churches were very small indeed.

But the revival began through prayer meetings. Sydney editors reported a call for prayer. They said it would be a happy day for Sydney and New South Wales when a similar influence visits us here.

The extraordinary revival began in Melbourne. It began in the town of Brighton and before long it spread to Melbourne itself. Great meetings in the city theatres following the London pattern.

The Theatre Royal in Melbourne was crowded out Sunday by Sunday with 50,000 attending a dozen services. The congregations were very large and attentive and yet regular worship services were not heard in any way. The revival spread to South Australia.

The Reverend J.D. Whittaker, pastor in a town called Coringa, announced 500 conversions in three months in a most glorious revival religion, never such one seen in this colony before. Great revivals in the Victorian goldfields. Revivals services full of Holy Zealand fire.

Revival in Bendigo and Ballarat. Revival in Geelong. Revival spread to other parts, to Tasmania, especially the Tasmanian capital, Hobart, following a week of prayer conducted by Spencer Williams.

There was a 50% increase in membership among the Tasmanian Methodists in a single year. Then a most remarkable thing happened. William Taylor, who was known as California Taylor, who had come up with the settlers of the time of the gold rush, was busy in the eastern states in the United States during the 1858 revival.

And after some ministry in the states, he made his way to Australia and got there in 1863. He became the great harvester of the revival, winning tens of thousands of people to Christ, most of whom joined the Methodists, but some other denominations. Those seven fruitful years in Australia showed an increase among the Anglicans of 22%, Presbyterians 25%, Methodists 72%, Congregationalists 20%, Baptists 40%, and Lutherans 55%, although that was partly due to German immigration after the Crimean War.

The revival spread to other parts of the South Seas, but the same revival had a great effect in South Africa. Now, the South Africans heard of the revival from American missionaries coming back from Boston and other parts to their field in South Africa, but they were not too much impressed with news from America. They said to themselves, anything can happen over there.

But when missionaries began to arrive from Scotland, telling of the Church of Scotland being in revival, they were deeply impressed, and they started prayer meetings for revival in South Africa. At Easter time, 1860, in a town called Worcester, about 100 miles upcountry from Cape Town, there was a meeting of ministers, 137 gathered from all over the country, chiefly Dutch-speaking, but also some English-speaking. They heard the reports of the missionaries from the United States and the United Kingdom, and they

redoubled their prayer for revival in South Africa.

Seven weeks and one day later, at Quitsunday, the celebration of Pentecost, the young Dutch Reformed people were having their youth meeting in the prayer hall near the Dutch Reformed church at Worcester. A black girl, she was a Fingo, speaking the Xhosa language, got up to her feet and asked if she might give her testimony. The young man in charge, by name Jan Christian de Vries, gave her permission.

She gave such a sweet testimony, there was a hush of the sense of the presence of God. Then de Vries heard what he thought was an approaching tornado, and the whole prayer hall shook, he thought. And then all the young people were on their feet praying simultaneously audibly.

Now Dutch Reformed people are not used to this. They're a very sober people. You could describe Dutch Reformed people as Presbyterians with a little extra starch.

They were completely overwhelmed by this. An elder was walking by, his name was Jan Raby, heard the commotion, went in to see what was happening and didn't like what he saw, rushed up to tell the minister. The minister came down right away and came in and said to de Vries, What is happening? He said something about the presence of God.

The minister said, I hold you responsible. He spoke up and he said, Mensa, blaze still. Everybody be quiet.

Nobody took any notice. He said, I am your minister sent by God. Will you be quiet? They didn't even see him.

He went back to de Vries, he said, start a hymn. The two men started to sing in Dutch, but nobody joined them. And the minister stomped out.

He said, God's a God of order, this is nothing but confusion. By the way, that was Andrew Murray. I didn't know Andrew Murray personally, but I knew his grandsons.

I knew his biographer. And Opal Douglas told me that when Andrew Murray was a mellow old saint, three times moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, famous in the United States and the United Kingdom, famous as author of many books, his friends used to tease him by saying, Tell us, Dr. Murray, how you tried to stop the revival. On Saturday night, he called a meeting in the schoolroom.

More than a thousand people packed the place out. There were hundreds standing outside. He read the scripture, gave a short commentary, then he said the meeting is now open for prayer.

Again, he heard the sound of an approaching tornado, and then all thousand people on their feet praying simultaneously audibly. A stranger outside forced his way in and touched Andrew Murray on the shoulder. He said in English, Are you the minister of this congregation? He replied that he was.

He said, Be careful what you do, this is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And that was the beginning of the greatest revival South Africa ever knew. Fifty young men out of that one parish entered the ministry, went to study at Stellenbosch, and the revival continued throughout the years.

Here's what van der Lingen, who was a scholar, pastor at Parle, said about enjoying the glory of the church in the first century. After five years, the attendance has never been so good as in the year that has just passed. On many occasions, not only were all the seats and benches fully occupied, but people sat in

the aisles and on the steps.

Often many people were turned away because they could not get a place. William Taylor, from Australia, came on to South Africa and began preaching to English-speaking people, saw a most remarkable revival among the English-speaking whites. But the greatest work he did was among the black people of South Africa, the Xhosa-speaking and the Zulu-speaking.

He was a great preacher. He had a very wonderful interpreter, a Xhosa chief called Charles Pamela. He began preaching with this chief interpreting, and they began having extraordinary meetings, sometimes as many as 800 converted in a single meeting.

How did they sum it up? The Methodists in London said, after the lapse of more than half a century since Wesleyan missions were commenced in South Africa, a great and favorable change has taken place in the native work. There has been a glorious revival of religion in South Africa in the European and native populations. It's impossible in the space allotted to tell what happened throughout the world in that revival, but one could sum it up by saying wherever there was an evangelical cause, there was revival.

And wherever missionaries were preaching the gospel, the old-time gospel, there were phenomenal results. This was the 1859 revival throughout the Eastern Hemisphere, just as the 1858 revival spread throughout the West.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/VpKcKW5sNgl.mp4>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/j-edwin-orr/the-awakening-of-1859-in-britain/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net