

The Role of Prayer in Spiritual Awakening

by J. Edwin Orr

The role of prayer in spiritual awakening is a catalyst for change, as seen in the examples of the American Revolution and the Second Great Awakening.

Duration: 25:54

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Proverbs 28:13, Matthew 10:32, Acts 3:19, 2 Corinthians 7:1, James 4:7, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

In this sermon, the pastor emphasizes four important steps for spiritual growth. First, he urges the audience to put away any doubtful habits from their lives. Second, he emphasizes the importance of obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Third, he encourages the audience to publicly confess their faith in Christ. Finally, he highlights the need for explicit agreement and visible union among God's people in extraordinary prayer for revival and the extension of Christ's kingdom. The sermon also shares the story of Evan Roberts, a young man who sparked a revival in Lochor, Wales, through his preaching and emphasis on confession of sin and making things right with others.

Transcript

Dr. J. Edwin Orr, speaking on the topic, The Role of Prayer in Spiritual Awakening. This presentation was recorded at the National Prayer Congress in Dallas, Texas, during October of 1976. We present to you now, Dr. J. Edwin Orr.

Dr. A. T. Pearson once said, There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer. I'd like to talk to you today about 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 was epidemic. Out of a population of 5 million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards. They were burying 15,000 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 largest denomination at that time was the Methodists, and they were losing more members than they were gaining. The second largest was the Baptists. They said they had their

most wintry season.

The Presbyterians met in General Assembly to deplore the ungodliness of the country. The Congregationalists were strongest in New England. Take a typical church.

The Reverend Samuel Shepard of Lenox, Massachusetts, said in 16 years he had not taken in one young person into fellowship. The Lutherans were so languishing, they discussed uniting with the Episcopalians, who were even worse off. The Protestant Episcopal Bishop of New York, Bishop Samuel Provost, quit functioning.

He had confirmed no one for so long 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, Bishop Madison, and he said the Church is too far gone ever to be redeemed. Voltaire said Christianity will be forgotten in 30 years' time, and Tom Paine preached this cheerfully all over America.

In case you think it was the hysteria of the moment, Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great church historian, said it seemed as if Christianity were about to be ushered out of the affairs of men. The churches had their backs to the wall. It seemed as if they were about to be wiped out.

How did God change that situation? It came through the concert of prayer. I must go back a little. There was a Scottish Presbyterian minister in Edinburgh called John Erskine.

He wrote a memorial, he called it, pleading with the people of Scotland and elsewhere to unite in prayer for a revival of religion. He sent a copy of his little book to Jonathan Edwards in New England. That great theologian was so moved he wrote a response which got longer than a letter, and finally he published it as a book.

If my memory serves me right, the title of the book 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 Advancement of Christ's Kingdom. That was the title of the book, not the book itself. Nowadays, titles are often unrelated to contents.

If you study weather, you're interested in meteorology, you don't read *Gone with the Wind*, it has nothing to do with weather. But in those days, a title was more like a synopsis of what was in the book. But don't miss the message of the title, A Humble Attempt, that was New England modesty, 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.

That's what's missing so much from all our great evangelistic efforts. We must have explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer. Now this movement began in England, through William Carey and Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe and others.

They started what the British called the Union of Prayer. And the year after John Wesley died, the Second Great Awakening began and swept Great Britain. There isn't time to give you the details of that.

But in New England, there was a man of prayer named Isaac Bacchus, a Baptist pastor. And in 1794, when conditions were at their worst, he sent out a plea for prayer. Take the colleges at that time.

They took a poll at Harvard and they discovered not one believer in the whole 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 didn't belong to the filthy speech movement of that day.

Students rioted. They had a mock communion at Williams College. They had anti-Christian plays at Dartmouth.

They burned down Nassau Hall at Princeton. They forced the resignation of the president of Harvard. They took a Bible out of a Presbyterian church in New Jersey and burned it in a public bonfire.

Christians were so few on campus, they met in secret like a communist cell and kept their minutes in code so that no one would know what they were doing to persecute them. Isaac Bacchus addressed his plea for prayer to ministers of every Christian denomination in the United States. The churches knew their backs were to the wall.

The Presbyterian synods of New York and New Jersey and Pennsylvania adopted it for all their churches. Bishop Francis Asbury adopted it for all the Methodists. The Baptist associations and the Congregational, the Reformed and the Moravians all adopted it until America, like Britain, was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings.

They set aside the first Monday of each month to pray. It wasn't long before the revival came. It broke out first of all in Connecticut, then it spread to Massachusetts.

Entirely without extravagance or outcry. Every report mentions this. However, there were some differences.

When the movement reached the frontier in Kentucky, those people were really wild and irreligious. Congress discovered that in Kentucky there hadn't been more than one court of justice held in five years. Peter Cartwright, a Methodist evangelist, said when his father settled in Logan County, it was known as Rogue's Harbor.

If someone committed a murder in Massachusetts or a robbery in Rhode Island, all he needed to do was to get across the Alleghenies. The decent people in Kentucky formed regiments of vigilantes to fight for law and order. They fought a pitched battle with the outlaws and lost.

There was a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister called James McGrady, whose chief claim to fame was that he was so ugly he attracted attention. Nowadays you have to be good looking to get attention. But McGrady was so ugly that people stopped in the street and said, what does he do? They said he's a preacher.

Then they reacted and said, a man with a face like that must have something to say. McGrady settled in Logan County, pastor of three little churches. He said in his diary that the winter of 1799, for the most part, was weeping and mourning with the people of God.

It was like Sodom and Gomorrah. But McGrady was such a man of prayer. Not only did he have the concert of prayer every Monday, first Monday of the month, but he got his people to pray for him at sunset on Saturday evening and sunrise on Sunday morning.

In the summer of 1800 came the great Kentucky revival. 11,000 people came to a communion service. McGrady hollered loud and long, anyone come and help me? So Baptists and Methodists came and the great camp meeting revivals began and swept Kentucky and Tennessee and then burst over North Carolina and South Carolina and swept the frontier.

That was the turning point. Out of that second great awakening after the death of Wesley came the whole missionary movement, all the missionary societies. Out of it came the abolition of slavery.

Out of it came popular education. I could mention so many social benefits as well as evangelistic drive. More than 600 colleges in the Middle West were founded by revivalists.

Now conditions deteriorated in the middle of the 19th century. Why? Sounds familiar. The country is seriously divided over the issue of slavery, just like the Vietnam War.

Second, people are making money hand over fist. And when they do, they turn their backs upon God. But a man of prayer, Jeremiah Lanphier, started a prayer meeting in the upper room of the consistory building of the North Dutch Reformed Church in Manhattan.

He advertised a prayer meeting. Only six people out of a population of a million showed up. But the following week there were 14 and then 23.

Then they decided to meet every day for prayer. Then they filled the Dutch Reformed Church, then the Methodist Church on John Street, then Trinity Episcopal Church at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway. By February of 1858, every church and every public building 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 only get to 12 meetings, but he counted 6,100 men. And then the landslides of prayer began.

People began to be converted, 10,000 a week in New York City. The movement spread throughout New England. Church bells would bring people to prayer at 8 in the morning, 12 noon, 6 in the evening.

The revival went up the Hudson, down the Mohawk. For example, the Baptists had so many people to baptize, they couldn't get them into their churches. They went down to the river, cut a big square hole in the ice, baptized them in the cold water.

And 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'm sorry, young fellow, I've got 16 teachers too many.

But I'll put you on the waiting list. The young man said, I want to do something now. Well, he said, start a class.

How do I start a class? Get some boys off the street. Don't bring them here. Take them out into the country, and after a month you can have control of them.

Bring them here, they'll be your class. He took them to a beach on Lake Michigan, and he taught them Bible verses and Bible games. And 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 40 years. For instance, Trinity Episcopal Church in Chicago had 121 members 1857, 1860, 1400. This was typical of all the churches.

More than a million people converted to God out of a population of 30 million in one year. And that revival jumped the Atlantic, broke out in Northern Ireland, in Scotland, in Wales, in England, South Africa, South India. Anywhere there was an evangelical cause, there was revival, and its effect was felt for 40 years.

It began in a movement of prayer. It was sustained by a movement of prayer. Now, that movement lasted a generation, but at the turn of the 20th century, there was need of awakening again.

There were special prayer meetings at Moody Bible Institute, at the Keswick Convention in England, in Melbourne, in the Nilgiri Hills of India, at Wonsan in Korea. All around the world, people were praying that there might be another great awakening in the 20th century. Now, some people tell me we're in the midst of a great awakening today.

I certainly believe that the tide has turned. I certainly believe that we're on the move again, but I don't think we've reached anywhere like what God has done in the past. Let me give you two examples.

First of all, take student world. One of the leaders of the revival of 1905 was a young man called K.S. LaTourette, who became the famous professor Kenneth Scott LaTourette. He said when he was at Yale in 1905, out of the student body, 25% were enrolled in prayer meetings and Bible studies.

Now, I live next door to UCLA. There's a population there of 36,000. I don't believe there are 9,000 enrolled in Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, Power & Light Company, and the other evangelical groups, or in all the church groups put together.

We haven't reached that yet. As far as the churches are concerned, the ministers of Atlantic City reported of a population of 50,000 in Atlantic City. There were only 50 adults left unconverted.

Take Portland, Oregon. 240 department stores closed from 11 to 2 each day for prayer. Signed an agreement among themselves so that no one would cheat and stay open.

Take First Baptist Church Paducah, Kentucky. The pastor was an old man, Dr. J.J. Cheek, and he said as he was committed to the revival, he was going to win souls to Christ. He took in a thousand new members in two months and died of overwork.

And the Southern Baptist said a glorious ending to a devoted ministry. That's what was happening in the United States in 1905. But how did it begin? Well, most people have heard of the Welsh Revival, which began in 1904.

It began as a movement of prayer. I knew Evan Roberts personally. Of course, I met him 30 years later.

But he was devoted to God and was a man of prayer, praying for revival in Wales. Seth Joshua, a Presbyterian evangelist, came to the Newcastle Emland College where Evan Roberts was studying for the ministry. Evan Roberts was 26.

He had been a coal miner. The students were so moved that they asked if they could go to his next campaign, so they cancelled classes and went to Blannanurch. And it was there that Seth Joshua prayed, O God, bend us.

And Evan Roberts went forward and prayed with great agony, O God, bend me. He couldn't concentrate on his studies. He went to Principal Phillips, the principal of his college, and said, I hear a voice that tells me I must go home and speak to our young people in my own home church.

Mr. Phillips, he said, is that the voice of the devil or the voice of the Spirit? And Phillips answered very wisely, the devil never gives orders like that. You can have a week off. He went back home to Lochor and announced to the pastor, I've come to preach.

The pastor wasn't at all convinced, but he said, how about speaking at the prayer meeting on Monday? He didn't even let him speak to the prayer meeting. He said to the praying people, our young brother Evan Roberts feels he has a message for you if you care to wait. Seventeen people waited.

Evan Roberts said to them, 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 out of your life.

Third, you must obey the Spirit promptly. Finally, he said, you must confess your faith in Christ publicly. And by ten o'clock all seventeen had responded.

The pastor was so pleased, he said, how about speaking for us at the mission service tomorrow night? Midweek service Wednesday night. He preached all week. They asked him to stay for another week and then the break came.

You say, what do you mean the break? I've read the Welsh newspapers of the period. In them were little snippets of ecclesiastical news. The Reverend Peter Jones has just been appointed chaplain to the Bishop of St. David's.

Very interesting, but not earth-shaking. And then it said, Mowbray Street Methodist Church had a very interesting rummage sale. But then suddenly a headline, great crowds of people drawn to Lochor.

And it said, 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 from wall to wall, people trying to get into the church. And people were closing shops and stores early to get a place in the church.

Now the news was out. They sent a reporter down and he described what he saw. He said it was a strange meeting.

It closed at 4.25 in the morning and then the people didn't seem to be willing to go home. He said the people were still standing outside the church talking about what had happened. And then a very British summary.

He said, I felt this was no ordinary gathering. The news was out. Next day, every grocery store in that industrial valley was packed out.

People buying groceries, people had come to the meetings. On Sunday, every church filled. And it went like a tidal wave over Wales.

I could tell you so much about it. There were 100,000 people converted in that movement. Five years later, a man called J.V. Morgan wrote a book to debunk the revival.

His main criticism was that of the 100,000 that joined the churches in the five months of the excitement of the revival, after five years, only 80,000 still stood. Only 80,000. But the social impact was astounding.

For example, judges were presented with white gloves. Not a case to try. No rapes, no robberies, no murders, no burglaries, no embezzlements, nothing.

The district councils had emergency meetings to discuss what to do with the police now that they were unemployed. In fact, they sent for a sergeant of the police and said, what do you do with your time? He said, well, before the revival, we had two main jobs. One was to prevent crime.

The other to control crowds, as at football games. But since the revival started, there's practically no crime. So we just go with the crowds.

Our councillor said, what does that mean? Well, he said, you know where the crowds are. They're packing the churches. But how does that affect the police? Well, he said, we have 17 police in our station, but we have three quartets.

And if any church wants a quartet, they simply call the police station. That 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 didn't cause a strike, just a slowdown.

So many Welsh coal miners were converted and stopped using bad language that the horses that dragged the trucks in the mines couldn't understand what was being said to them. And transportation slowed down for a while until they learned the language of Canaan. When I first heard that story, I thought it was a tall tale, but I can document it, even from Westminster Abbey.

That revival, for instance, affected moral standards also. I discovered, through the figures given to me by the British government experts, that in Radnorshire and Marianthshire, the illegitimate birth rate dropped 44% within a year of the beginning of the revival. So great was the impact of that movement.

That revival swept Great Britain. It broke out in Norway. It so moved Norway that the Norwegian parliament passed special legislation to permit laymen to conduct Holy Communion because the clergy couldn't keep up with the number of converts who wanted to take Holy Communion.

It swept Sweden and Denmark and Germany, Canada from coast to coast, all of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, North Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Chile. I could talk... Well, in fact, I teach a course on this. I have a... Here's the interesting thing.

Until 1973, no one ever knew about the extent of that revival until I published my book, *The Flaming Tongue*. And it began through a movement of prayer. It began with prayer meetings all over the United States.

And sooner came the great time of harvest. So what's the lesson we can learn? It's a very simple one. It's that familiar text.

If my people, 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's involved in this? God expects us to pray. But we must not forget what Jonathan Edwards said when he said to

promote explicit agreement and visible union of all God's people in extraordinary prayer.

What do you mean by extraordinary prayer? When you find people getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning to pray or having a half-night of prayer till midnight, that's extraordinary prayer. When they give up their lunchtime and go and pray at a noonday prayer meeting, that's extraordinary prayer. But it must be united and concerted.

It doesn't mean that a Baptist becomes any less of a Baptist or that an Episcopalian is less loyal to the Thirty-Nine Articles or that a Presbyterian turns his back on the Westminster Confession. Not at all. But they recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and they're prepared to pray together in concerted prayer that God may hear and answer.

We haven't reached that stage yet. This National Conference on Prayer is unprecedented in some ways. It's a sign of the direction in which we're moving.

It's what I call extraordinary prayer. But you folk who are here, those who listen to my voice, must take it back to your churches. And when they're prepared to set aside time to pray for a spiritual awakening, that's when God is going to answer.

Now some people say, that means then it's up to us. Oh no, we can't say that either. Matthew Henry said, when God intends great mercy for his people, he, first of all, sets them up praying.

Even God is sovereign in this matter. But we must respond. He has chosen never to work without our cooperation.

So whether your interpretation of revival is Calvinistic or Arminian, it's a very simple thing. You must pray. Then God will work.

May God help us so to pray. Amen.

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