



The Role of Prayer in Spiritual Awakening

by J. Edwin Orr

Not many people realize that in the wake of the American Revolution, there was a moral slump. For the first time in American settlement, women were afraid to go out at night for fear of assault. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence.

The Methodists were losing more members than they were gaining. The Baptists 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. The Rev. Samuel Shepherd, pastor of a typical church in Lennox, Massachusetts, said in sixteen years he had not taken one young person into the 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 Bishop Madison of Virginia and 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 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.

The colleges at that time were also in poor spiritual condition. A poll at Harvard indicated that there was not one believer in the whole student body. A similar poll was taken at Princeton, a much more evangelical place; it revealed only two believers in the student body and only five that didn't belong to the filthy-speech movement of that day. Student riots were common; 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 Communist cell, and kept their minutes in code so that no one would know what they were doing to persecute them.

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 named John Erskine. He wrote a memorial 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. The great theologian was so moved, he wrote a response, which he

finally published 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's what's missing so much from all our great evangelistic efforts. We must have the explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer.

In New England, there was a Baptist pastor named Isaac Backus who was a man of prayer. In 1794, when conditions were at their worst, he sent out a plea for prayer to ministers of every Christian denomination in the United States.

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 wild and irreligious. Congress discovered that in Kentucky there had not 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."

There was a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister called James McGready, whose chief claim to fame was that he was so ugly, he attracted attention. McGready 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." McGready settled in Logan County to pastor 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 McGready was such a man of prayer, not only did he have the Concert of Prayer the 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. Eleven thousand people came to a communion service. So the great camp meeting revival began, and swept Kentucky and Tennessee, and then burst over North Carolina and South Carolina and swept the frontier.

Out of that second great awakening came the whole missionary movement, the abolition of slavery, and popular education. More than 600 colleges in the middle west were founded by revivalists.

Now, conditions deteriorated in the middle of the 19th century. Why? People were making money "hand over fist," and when they did, they turned their backs on God. But a man of prayer, Jeremiah Lanphier, started a prayer meeting in the upper room of the consistory Building of the 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; they decided to meet every day for prayer, then they filled the Dutch Reformed Church, the Methodist Church on John Street, then every public building in downtown New York was filled.

Horace Greeley, the famous editor, sent a reporter with horse and buggy riding 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 landslide 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 eight in the morning, twelve noon, and six in the evening. The revival went up the Hudson and 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 in the ice, baptized them in cold water...and when Baptists do that, they are really on fire!

Trinity Episcopal Church in Chicago had 121 members in 1860 they had 1,400. This was typical of all the churches. In one year, more than one million people were converted. And that revival crossed Scotland and Wales and England, South Africa, South India—anywhere there was an evangelical cause, there was revival—and its effect 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 New England, in Melbourne, in the Mildrey Hills of India, at Won San in Korea...all around the world people were

praying that there might be another great awakening in the 20th century. God did indeed answer these prayers.

Let me give you two examples: First of all, take the 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. When he was at Yale in 1905, 35% of the student body was enrolled in prayer meetings and Bible studies!

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. Two hundred and forty department stores closed from 11 to 2 each day for prayer and signed an agreement among themselves so that no one would cheat and stay open. That's what was happening in the United States in 1905.

But how did it begin? Well, the most people have heard of the Welsh revival, which began in 1904. It began as a movement of prayer. Evan Roberts was devoted to God and was a man of prayer, praying for revival in Wales. Seth Joshua, a Presbyterian evangelist, came to the New Castle/Emlyn College where Evan Roberts was studying for the ministry. Evan Roberts was 26 and 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 Blannerch. It was there young Roberts prayed brokenly, "Oh, God, bend me."

When he returned to school, he found that he couldn't concentrate on his studies. He went to Mr. Philips, the Principal of his college, and said, "I hear a voice that tells me that I must go home and speak to our young people in my own home church." "You can have a week off," Philips said. He went back home to Loughor and announced to the pastor, "I have come to preach." The pastor wasn't at all convinced, but he said, "How about speaking at the prayer meeting." He said to the 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've 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's prompting. Finally, you must confess your faith in Christ publicly." And by 10 o'clock, all 17 had responded. The pastor was so pleased that he said, "How about speaking for us at the mission service tomorrow night? Mid-week 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: "Rev. Peter Jones has just been appointed chaplain to the Bishop on St. David's." Very interesting—but not earth-shaking. And then it said, "Mulberry Street Methodist Church had a very interesting rummage sale." Then, suddenly—a headline, "Great Crowds of People drawn to Loughor."

The main road between Llanelly 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 in order to get a place in the church. A reporter was dispatched and he described what he saw. "It was a strange thing. It closed at 4:25 in the morning and then the people didn't seem to be willing to go home. The people were still standing outside the church talking about what happened." And then, a British summary: "I felt this was no ordinary gathering."

The news was out. On Sunday, every church was filled. The revival swept like a tidal wave over Wales. There were 100,000 people converted in that five-month period. Five years later, a man named J.P. Morgan wrote a book to debunk the revival. His main criticism was that of the 100,000 that joined that churches in the five months of 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: they had no cases to try. No rapes, no robberies, no murders, no burglaries, no embezzlements, nothing. The District Consuls held emergency meetings to discuss what to do with the police, now that they were unemployed. Drunkenness was cut in half. The illegitimate birth rate dropped 44% in two countries within a year of the beginning of the revival, so great was the impact of that movement.

All of these events began with prayer meetings and soon there came the great time of harvest. So what's the lesson we can learn? It's a very simple one...pray! "If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and

will forgive their sin will heal their land.”

God expects us to pray. But we must not forget Jonathan Edwards' statement of the importance of the “visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer.” When you find people getting up at six o'clock in the morning to pray, or having a half-night 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.

May God help us pray. Amen.