

Monday #1 Revivals in the Late 1700's

by J. Edwin Orr

The sermon discusses the revivals in the late 1700's, including the Moravian Revival, the Great Awakening, and the impact of the revival on the nonconformists in Scotland and Wales.

Duration: 34:14

Scripture: Acts 2:1, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Revival History"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitfield in Britain during the 18th century. The crowds that attended their sermons were massive, with up to twenty-five thousand people gathering at places like Kennington Common and Clapton Common. The preacher emphasizes that the success of these evangelists was not solely due to their own abilities, but rather the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon both the preachers and the unchurched masses. The sermon also highlights the moral and spiritual decay of the time, with rampant drunkenness, profanity, and immorality prevalent in society.

Transcript

In this series of meetings, it's our desire not only to present the Word of God, but to tell you what God has done in our own times for his people in answer to prayer. Now, of course, you cannot read the history of the American settlement without considering the Puritans. After the Puritan movement in Britain, after the return of Charles II, there was a moral decline.

London had a population of 600,000, and 100,000 owed their livelihood to strong drink. One house in every six was a tavern. A Frenchman visiting England said bluntly, the English have no religion.

The reaction against Puritanism had been so strong that the people went wild in their enjoyment of sin. Blood sports were all the rage. They had boxing barehanded.

A man could keep his thumb out, and if he gouged out the eye of his opponent on his cheek, that was loudly applauded. Crowds would go to see criminals hanged at Tyburn Hill. Drunkenness was epidemic, profanity of the very worst kind.

The theater was so filthy, it was generally operated alongside a brothel. The novel was a mass of trash. It's rather interesting, when the first dirty novel came out in our own time, do you remember a book called

Forever Amber by Kathleen Windsor? Why, that was very mild compared to the trash they have today.

It was based, however, upon that very period in England when sex was treated as a joke. A godly Bishop of the Church of England, the Bishop of Chester, said to one of his clergymen, I have to rebuke you, sir, for being drunk so often. The man stammered an apology.

He said, I'm never drunk at communion. He always was sober when he conducted a communion service. Like people, like king, the king had seventeen illegitimate children.

It was one of the sneers that some men owed their title to the fact that the king wished to honor their father for some deed he had performed for the good of the nation. In other cases, they owed their title to the fact that he had already dishonored their mothers, and he gave titles to his illegitimate children. That was the condition in Britain at that time.

In Scotland, it was much the same. What about the so-called free churches, the two centers? They had lost their power and were slipping into a kind of Unitarianism. The Presbyterian Church of England lost its Calvinistic zeal and went into Unitarianism.

Across the Atlantic were the godly Puritans who had settled New England. But one of their great leaders preached a sermon on Ichabod, the glory has departed from New England. Religion was dying in the American society.

It was at this time that God intervened and poured out his spirit in a worldwide awakening. I intend to tell you briefly about that movement. Some people think that John Wesley and George Whitefield started a movement which finally touched all of the English-speaking world.

But actually, the movement began long before the conversion of John Wesley. The movement began about 1727, and strangely enough, in two places far apart. One was in Germany at a place called Hernhut.

Count Nicholas Zinzendorf was a godly, pietist Lutheran. At that time there were refugees fleeing persecution in Central Europe, and he made room for them in his estates in Saxony. Some were Lutheran, some were Bohemian, some were Sassanian, some were Calvinist, some were Zwinglian, and they were bickering among themselves.

In fact, Nicholas Zinzendorf spent most of his time trying to keep the peace between these bickering Christians. But he challenged them, and they decided they would bury the hatchet, and they would start a time of prayer. And in due course, the Spirit of God moved upon those people at Hernhut and sent what we call the Moravian Revival.

It was on the 12th of May, 1727, that the group of settlers promised they would try and live in peace. And there came what was called in those days an effusion of the Holy Spirit. We would say an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Now notice, that word is scarcely ever used today. It's true that tonight someone prayed that there might be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But even today, most people are concerned for individual blessing, not for an outpouring on the whole body of Christ.

In late July, these brethren decided to establish a watch, a prayer watch, at this hill near Hernhut. And they read the first epistle of John, if we confess our sins, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to

cleanse us from all unrighteousness. At the main congregation at Bethelsdorp, on August the 10th, the pastor who was leading the service was overcome with a sense of the presence of God.

And he and the people continued in prayer and singing, in supplication and weeping, till after midnight. Another Pentecost had begun, and the results were that the gospel began to travel to the far ends of the world. Now what is interesting is this, at the same time, 1727, in the colony of New Jersey, at a place called New Brunswick, that's where Rutgers University is situated, there came a visitation of God's Holy Spirit through a Dutchman.

His name was Theodor Freilinghausen. He was minister to these Dutch settlers in New Jersey. You know, of course, in the Reformed denominations, communion is a quarterly arrangement, and in those days people traveled long distances so as to be able to take part in communion, and they would have two or three days of preparation for the event.

Theodor Freilinghausen took advantage of the opportunity to engage in what he called Eucharistic evangelism. You say, what is that? He preached before communion, and he preached such texts as, whoever eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to his own soul. Some of the older people were indignant.

They said, our previous dominion didn't treat us like that. But the young people were greatly convicted. The result was a revival began, a moving of God's Holy Spirit, which spread all over the American colonies.

But let's consider, first of all, what happened on the other side of the Atlantic. That movement that began in prayer, 1727, continued and gained strength. Now at Oxford, there was a group of young Anglicans, high churchmen, who met for prayer and devotion.

They were sometimes called the Bible Moths, other times they were nicknamed the Methodists, the Holy Club. The reason they were called Methodists was they went to communion every day. They were so methodical about their religion--it was a religion of works--that they were nicknamed Methodists, a nickname that stuck to them long time afterwards.

One of their leaders was John Wesley, and he read to these members of the Holy Club Jonathan Edwards' Narrative of the Surprising Work of Grace at Northampton, Massachusetts. That was 1734. It was some time later that he read the account.

This stirred their hearts to pray for a visitation of God's Spirit. The first to be converted was George Whitfield. It shows that the Lord has a sense of humor.

He reached into a tavern at Gloucester and picked a young man, George Whitfield, who went to Oxford and worked his way through school. Now, Oxford was a university meant for the sons of the wealthy and the noble and sons of the clergy. But George Whitfield was a son of a tavernkeeper, and he went there and worked as a servant to the other students.

He worked so hard that he was such a methodical Christian that he had a nervous breakdown. He broke down in health, and while he was in bed, he read a book by Henry Scougall called The Life of God in the Soul of Man, in which Scougall said religion doesn't consist in doing things. It is union with God.

This made him indignant because he had spent most of his current time doing things. But it led to his conversion, and ultimately to the conversion of John Wesley. George Whitfield made his way to the American colonies.

In those days, navigation was not a very exact science. His ship was headed for Philadelphia, but landed somewhere in North Carolina. The wind blew it out of its course, and he made his way up to Philadelphia by horseback.

In the meantime, John Wesley applied for a chaplaincy in the colony of Georgia. He was always very unfortunate about womenfolk. He fell in love with an English girl in Savannah, but he was so pedantic he couldn't bring himself to propose.

He was so unsure of what the Lord's will might be. Perhaps he felt romantic stirrings and thought they were too carnal, but the girl waited for him, and then when he didn't seem to be willing to propose to her, she married somebody else. What did John Wesley do? He excommunicated her.

He wouldn't allow her to come to communion. Her husband demanded an explanation. John Wesley said, I have refused communion to her because she is a hypocrite.

What do you mean my wife is a hypocrite? Well, he said, obviously she loves me, but she married you. The result was the husband went to the governor Oglethorpe and swore out a warrant for John Wesley's arrest. John Wesley got on horseback, didn't stop riding until he got to Philadelphia and caught the first ship back.

That was convenient grace, of course. It made him one of the world's great horsemen, and that was used in his journey. He was still a horseman until he was 83 years of age.

But he was always rather unfortunate about the opposite sex. After that he kept away from them, but then, as we might say in the vernacular, one snuck up on him and nursed him while he was sick, and he married her, and what a time she gave him. On board the ship he met Moravian missionaries.

At that time the Moravians had missionaries in Greenland, in the Carolinas, in South Africa, and in India. Why did they get that running jump? Because from the revival at Herrnhut, 1727, they maintained nonstop a prayer meeting for a hundred years. It put them in the advance of all other Protestant Christians.

Wesley came back. He wrote in his diary, I went out to convert the Indians, but who shall convert me? Twenty years afterwards he wrote in the margin, this was too severe a judgment. After all, when Wesley went to Georgia, he was a Christian, he was a Protestant, he was an Anglican.

In a certain way he was evangelical. But he lacked one thing. He did not have the assurance of salvation.

On the 24th of May in 1738, that's, remember, eleven years after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in New Jersey and in Germany, he attended Evensong in St. Paul's Cathedral, and the choir sang, Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord. He was deeply moved. He went to a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street, and there he heard someone read Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation. And an assurance was

given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

In other words, he experienced what he believed in his head. That was the secret of the first Great Awakening. Whitefield and Wesley and Selina Curtis of Huntington and the other leaders preached that you may know that you're a child of God.

It was not merely a theological proposition. Wesley, in his journal, he kept a remarkable journal. He began to pray with all his might, and then he testified openly to all there what he now first felt in his heart.

It was the first time in his career that he knew he was a child of God. Now, on the 14th of February, 1739, George Whitefield went down to his boyhood home, Bristol, the second largest town in Britain. A malicious report preceded him, so the churches closed their doors against him.

Whitefield turned to the open air and began to preach in Kingswood. It was a rendezvous for the worst people of Bristol. The coal workers there, the colliers, as they called them, were ignorant, violent, brutal, blasphemous, drunken, and criminal.

They met there to get drunk, to gamble, and to fight. But he began to preach to a couple of hundred, and before long he had 20,000 people. John Wesley was asked to substitute for him.

Wesley was such a high churchman at the time, he said in his diary he thought it was a sin to preach in the open air. But Whitefield said, try it, you'll like it. So he tried it, and on the 31st of March he arrived in Bristol, and he said, I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in church.

But 24 hours later, that would be on the 1st of April, All Fools' Day, he preached in the open air, as he said, making a bright succession of appeals to the reason, the conscience, and the heart. He was a very methodical man. And then he said, I propose to preach here next Sunday.

And now the work had begun. He formed his converts into societies within the Church of England. This was the beginning of the great Methodist movement.

Now in the meantime, Whitefield went up to London to preach. 25th of April he began in London. Only one church was willing to receive him, St. Mary's Islington, because the vicar there had been a member of the Holy Club, had been converted through them.

But the vicar was overridden by church wardens. They said he shall not use the church. So he took to the churchyard, and that began his great open-air meetings in London.

He used to go to Kennington Common and Clapham Common. The crowds that attended were 25,000. People came in their carriages.

Enterprising businessmen set up booths and sold food to people who walked long distances to get there, because in those days there were no trains to carry them. There was a great deal of opposition. But now Whitefield and Wesley were preaching to multitudes up and down Britain.

Now as I said once before, I used to think that John Wesley, like George Whitefield, was such a genius of an evangelist that strong men, for the first time hearing him, broke down and wept before God. But I find that the secret was not so much that, as the fact that when the Holy Spirit was outpoured upon these godly men, the same Holy Spirit fell in convicting power upon the multitudes of unchurched people in Britain. It wasn't long before there was opposition.

Clergy of the Church of England would stir up mobs to stone them. Wesley always kept his composure. He'd take out his handkerchief and wipe away the blood from his face, and just continue preaching.

He was superb in his courage and unruffled in his composure. But this continued for quite a while. Now how can we sum it up? A high church historian, Canon Overton, said, it would be no exaggeration to say that morally and spiritually, the dominant religious power, both inside and outside the Church of England at the close of the 18th century, was the one that had been evoked by the evangelical revival.

What effect did it have upon the nonconformists, what we would call free churches, not the state church? Let me just give you an idea. In 1740, the number of permanent places of worship registered by dissenters, Baptists, Congregationalists, and others had dwindled to twenty-seven. Twenty-seven in the whole country.

The number of temporary chapels was 506. After sixty years, in other words, at the end of the 18th century, the number of permanent chapels had increased from twenty-seven to nine hundred and twenty-six, and the temporary ones increased from five hundred and six to three thousand four hundred and ninety-one. By the way, Whitefield had a great reception in Scotland.

Now John Wesley was honored in Scotland. Several Scottish cities gave him what they called the freedom of the city, honoring him as a great man. But they didn't take him so warmly as they did to George Whitefield, because George Whitefield was a brother Calvinist.

In 1742, Whitefield arrived in Scotland. It is very interesting that he was invited to Scotland by a seceding group of Presbyterians, the seceding church, led by the Erskine brothers. When he arrived, they wanted to ordain him.

But Whitefield said, my good brethren, I am ordained. I am ordained by the Church of England. They said, but that's not true Presbyterian ordination.

Well, they said, that's too bad. Well, they didn't know what to do. Then they decided, all right, we will license him.

So they gave him a license. They wanted to do everything in order. In the meantime, a man called William McCullough in the big dead church of Scotland had heard of Whitefield's remarkable ministry in the American colonies, and invited him to come to Cambuslang, outside Glasgow, to preach there at a communion service.

What he saw far outdid what he had ever seen in America. He preached at two, at six, and at nine p.m., to crowds of twenty and thirty thousand. And then the ministers had to work for hours dealing with seekers after God.

On Saturday, July the fourth, July the ninth, Whitefield preached to twenty thousand on the preaching braise on the hills, a little amphitheater of hills. And then on the fifteenth of August, McCullough and twelve assisting Presbyterian ministers held a second communion with thirty thousand attending. So now they're having revival in Scotland as well as in England.

They also had great revival in Wales, but there isn't time to tell you of all this. You're much more interested in what happened on this side of the Atlantic. I wish I could have heard George Whitefield preach.

You know, that man had such a voice that when those little sailing ships would sail across the Atlantic, they formed a V on Sundays, like ducks going across the pond if it was a nice Sunday. It took, of course, many, many weeks to sail the Atlantic on those days. And George Whitefield would conduct divine worship for the fleet from the first ship.

The captain would line up the passengers and the crews on each ship, and he would preach to the whole fleet. His enemy said he could reduce an audience to tears by the way he pronounced the word Mesopotamia. That was an exaggeration, of course.

Now, I told you the first sign of revival was in New Jersey in a Dutch Reformed congregation. It's rather interesting that not only did the great revival of the 18th century begin in a Dutch Reformed congregation, but the great revival of 1858 began in a Dutch Reformed congregation in Manhattan. Now this is rather significant because the Dutch Reformed are a very sober people, not easily carried away.

You could describe them as Presbyterians with a little extra starch. There was an Irishman just north of Philadelphia at a place called Neshemany, had built a log college. His name was Tennant, William Tennant.

He was from the north of Ireland. He had four sons in the ministry, and one of them, Gilbert Tennant, went up to New Brunswick to become pastor of the Presbyterian congregation there. They were English-speaking, or rather Scotch-Irish.

They spoke English the way the Scotch-Irish spoke English. And the revival spread from the Dutch to the Scotch-Irish, and then made a sweeping move throughout Presbyterianism in Pennsylvania. It communicated itself to the Baptists.

At that time, the Baptists had only 500 members in the colonies. Today, they claim something like 20 million. So apparently this revival did them some good.

I remember once I was speaking at Forest Home when a minister, a Presbyterian minister, came to me and said, you know Orr, it's all right to talk about revival to Nazarenes and Baptists and Pentecostals, but we in the Presbyterian church believe in an educated ministry and an orderly service. I said, where did you learn this? He said, I'm a Princeton man. I said, that's very interesting, because you know, this long college that was started by the Presbyterian revivalists in this great revival grew until it became the College of New Jersey, and today it's known as Princeton University.

Now the revival jumped from the South up to the North, broke out in Northampton, Massachusetts under Jonathan Edwards, and there were phenomenal things there. Now most people remember Jonathan Edwards by one sermon. I remember once I took a course, the time I was doing my doctorate in education at UCLA.

The professor was Jewish, and one evening he thought the class needed some entertainment, so he read some extracts from Jonathan Edwards' sermon on Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, and they laughed at some of the wise cracks he made about this. I raised my hand afterwards. I said, do you know, sir, how many of Jonathan Edwards' sermons are still extant? He said, no, Dr. Roth.

I said, about 506, and that's the only one of its kind. But of course, the world likes to make fun of Jonathan Edwards because of his sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. It doesn't suit the easygoing temper of today.

The revival spread from Northampton, Massachusetts to other parts, but then in 1740 Whitfield came across the Atlantic for another visit, and that was the crisis, the climax of the Great Awakening, as it's called. In Britain it's called the Evangelical Revival, but I think we ought to mark it by saying the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century, or the Great Awakening of the 18th century, because some people have never heard of any other. That's all they know about it.

Now, as far as this work is concerned, Whitfield began preaching the vast crowds. Do you know that when he was preaching at the Custom House Steps in Philadelphia, people would gather across the Delaware in Camden, New Jersey, to listen to him? Of course, that would be a calm Sabbath evening, it would not do during a storm, but of course there were no factory noises and no automobiles and so forth. He was a remarkable preacher.

Not only that, but he had a great burden for education. I've read some of the stories about Whitfield's visit to Philadelphia. One of his great admirers was not a professing Christian, Benjamin Franklin.

He was a deist, but he admired George Whitfield. You'll find at the statue of George Whitfield outside the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin's tribute to his integrity. One evening, Benjamin Franklin went to hear Whitfield.

He had argued with Whitfield. Whitfield wanted to start an orphanage in Savannah. Franklin said, look, Philadelphia is the center of the colonies, it's the biggest town.

What do you want to start an orphanage way down there for? Start it here and bring the orphans from Savannah or from Boston. Build your orphanage here. But Whitfield said, the Lord has spoken to me, and he wouldn't argue.

So Franklin said to himself, he's getting nothing from me. Now, in the course of the address, Franklin said he perceived that Whitfield was going to take up an offering for his project, and he had determined to give him nothing. In his pocket, he had a gold five dollar piece, and several silver dollars, and a certain amount of copper.

But he said as he proceeded, his heart softened a little bit, and he decided to put the copper in the offering. And as he proceeded, he changed his mind again and decided to give the silver as well. And finally, when Whitfield finished with a plea for the orphans, he put gold, silver, and copper and everything in the plate.

I heard a variation of that story. I haven't been able to document it, but there was a Scotsman standing alongside Benjamin Franklin, and he showed him his pockets. He pulled the lining of his pockets out and said, I've come here with empty pockets because that man can get money out of a stone.

And he ended up borrowing a dollar from Benjamin Franklin to put in the offering. Now, what was it like? He went to New York. Gilbert Tennant said, I never saw such attentive audiences in all my life.

All that Whitfield said was demonstrative of light and power. The people's eyes were fixed on him, and their ears hung upon his words. Then he came back to Philadelphia through New Jersey, preaching to vast concourses.

Then he went up to Boston. Now, I remember in 1950, Billy Graham called me from the Bellevue Hotel in Boston. He had preached in Boston Common to 15,000 people.

But at that time, Boston had a population of over two million. But in Whitfield's day, when Boston had a population of less than 20,000, he preached as big crowds as Billy Graham ever had--vast crowds. One of the Boston ministers, Benjamin Coleman, wrote to Isaac Watts, the hymn writer in England, and said, a year later, our meetings flourish, Sabbaths are joyous, our churches increase, our ministers have new life and spirit in their work.

These showers of blessing continued for 18 months after Whitfield's visit. In Boston, 30 new congregations came together. Out of a population of 300,000 in New England, 30,000 were converted.

The Congregationalists formed 150 new congregations in 20 years following the Revival. And the moral improvement of New England was so great that it was the most glorious and extensive revival of religion and reformation of manners that the country had ever known. There were some debit items.

One of Whitfield's admirers was a man called James Davenport. During the Revival, there was some emotion, so he tried to promote emotion, tried to work up things, and worked up a lot of excesses, brought the movement into discredit. But I think everyone who has studied the history of this country would agree that one of the formative influences, one of the greatest of all in the formation of the Republic, was the great awakening that climaxed in 1740.

How long did it last? Well, perhaps you could say that from 1727 it lasted 50 years. That takes you to 1776. Isn't that a significant year? You say, why would that affect it? Sad to relate, there was a lot of dissension.

The Anglicans, Episcopalians, and the Methodists supported the mother country. The Baptists, the Congregationalists, the Lutherans, and the Presbyterians supported the Revolution largely. The Quakers and the Mennonites were very neutral.

They used to burn each other's churches down, which rather hurt the ecumenical goodwill. And so the Revival had declined by the time of the war. Conditions got to be the worst in the history of the American settlement, but that's another story, and I'll tell you that on another occasion.

Now, why do I tell you these things? It's because it seems to be a pattern of God's working. When conditions get to be deplorable, and God's people cry out to him for intervention, he answers their prayers by outpouring his Holy Spirit and sending another renewal of Christian life that sweeps back the tide of unbelief and immorality. Surely we need that today.

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