

Tuesday #1 Revival in Early America

by J. Edwin Orr

The sermon discusses the state of the church in early America, the need for revival, and the role of prayer in bringing about revival.

Duration: 36:41

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 2:8, Jeremiah 33:3, Matthew 9:38, Acts 1:14, 1 Timothy 2:1-2, James 5:16

Topics: "Revival History"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the decline of Christianity and moral values in America during the time of the American Revolution. He mentions that many influential figures, such as Samuel Provost Bishop of New York and John Marshall, believed that the church was beyond redemption. The preacher also highlights the lack of belief in God among college students, with Harvard having no believers and Princeton only having two. He further discusses the moral slump during this time, with widespread drunkenness, sexual license, lawlessness, and profanity. The sermon concludes with a mention of a book called 'A Humble Attempt' that promotes prayer for revival and the extension of Christ's kingdom.

Transcript

During the bicentenary, my wife and I were listening to a well-known Christian lady being interviewed on television, and she said, It is about time that the American people knew 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 who helped found this republic, but there were others who were neither men of God nor men of prayer.

Who could call Thomas Paine a man of God? He was a blasphemer, died in disgrace. He did write some useful literature, Common Sense, for example, that pamphlet that helped shape the future of this country. Thomas Jefferson was a much higher character than Thomas Paine, but he was a deist.

He didn't believe in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. I understand that when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, some Christians ganged up and said, You've got to mention God in this. And rather reluctantly he worked it in.

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator. He would concede that all right. He spoke of nature's God.

But he didn't believe in prayer. He wouldn't let anyone pray with him when he was dying. General Charles Lee, one of the heroes of the Revolution, said, Let us tear down the churches.

They stand in the way of progress. And it's not commonly known that in the wake of the Revolution there was a moral slump. Out of a population of five million, three hundred thousand were confirmed drunkards, fifteen thousand of them dying annually.

There was an increased sexual license resulting in greater illegitimacy and venereal disease. There was a surfeit of lawlessness, a multiplication of robberies that became a daily occurrence. Profanity increased, truthfulness declined.

A committee of Congress examined the conditions in Kentucky and discovered that when only one court of justice held in five years, they simply couldn't bring the criminals to justice. In fact, the decent people formed what we would call today vigilante regiments and fought a pitched battle with the outlaws and lost. Peter Cartwright, a whimsical Methodist evangelist, said when his father settled in Logan County, Kentucky, it was known as Rogue's Harbor.

If a man committed a murder in Massachusetts or perjury in Pennsylvania, all he needed to do was get across the Alleghenies. Nobody could lay a finger on him. Now the church people were dismayed about this.

What were they doing? The largest denomination was congregational. Take a typical example. The Reverend Samuel Shepard of Lenox, Massachusetts, complained that in sixteen years he had not added one young person to the congregation.

He was more like a chaplain to a funeral parlor or an old people's home. The second largest denomination was Presbyterian. The first order of business of General Assembly was to deplore the ungodliness of the country.

The most aggressively evangelistic were the Methodists, but in the 1790s, many a year, they were losing more than they were gaining, even though there was immigration coming across the Atlantic. The Baptists confessed that they had the worst season. The Lutherans were so languishing, they discussed uniting with the Episcopalians so they could prop each other up.

The Episcopalians were the worst off. You see, during the Revolution, they had been unpopular because their prayer book required them to pray for King George III, who was not at all popular with Americans at that time. Samuel Provost, Bishop of New York, quit functioning.

He had confirmed no one for so long he decided he was out of work, so he better look for other employment. But John Marshall wrote to the Bishop of Virginia and said, The Church is too far gone ever to be redeemed. Voltaire said, Christianity will be forgotten in thirty years' time.

And Tom Paine was repeating this gleefully all over the country. What about the colleges? They took a poll at Harvard, and discovered not one believer in the whole student body. Now Princeton was much more of an evangelical foundation, and at Princeton they discovered only two believers, and only five who did not belong to the filthy speech movement of that day.

The new president of Yale was Timothy Dwight, and he bewailed at the dregs of infidelity had been vomited upon this country from Europe. Frenchmen subscribed millions of francs at a time when the franc

was equal to the dollar to propagandize young Americans. Christians were so few on campus, and so persecuted, they met in secret like a communist cell and kept their minutes in code so that no one could harass them.

Well, those were the conditions. In case this sounds like the hysteria of the moment, Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great Church historian who died a few years ago, said, It seemed as if Christianity were about to be ushered out of the affairs of men. Now in the wake of the American Revolution came the French Revolution.

The difference between the two was that the French Revolution was anti-Christian. Oh true, they were in favor of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but they were anti-Christian. Practically every church in France was closed.

They crowned a Parisian prostitute goddess of reason in Notre Dame Cathedral, so that in Europe conditions were bad too. Now in 1784, some time before this, John Erskine of Edinburgh republished a book written by some Scottish Presbyterian ministers, A Plea for Prayer for Revival. They suggested that Christians should meet one day a month to pray for revival.

They sent a copy to Jonathan Edwards, who was still alive. That's when he was prompted to write his response. I've already quoted the title, A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of All God's People, an Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Extension of Christ's Kingdom According to Scriptural Promise and Prophecies Concerning the Last Days.

After Jonathan Edwards died, John Erskine republished the two books together. He sent a copy to Dr. John Ryland, the editor of the Baptist Register in Bristol in England. You may never have heard his name, but surely you remember a story about William Carey, who read a paper to Baptist ministers stressing the obligation of Christians to evangelize the heathen.

The moderator said, sit down, young man. When God decides to evangelize the heathen, he'll do it without any help from you or me. That was Dr. John Ryland.

He was a very important Baptist churchman. Now, when he received two copies of this little book, he couldn't drop them in the vertical file. His conscience wouldn't let him do that, so he thought, who will I give them to? He sent one to Andrew Fuller, a Baptist pastor, and the other to another Baptist pastor called John Sutcliffe.

Andrew Fuller took leave of absence from his church and visited practically every Baptist congregation in England, Wales and Scotland, urging them to set aside one day a month to pray for revival. John Sutcliffe could not travel for domestic reasons, but he had a teenager in his congregation, a young man who was very precocious. His name was William Carey.

He was a shoemaker. But he had mastered Latin at the age of fifteen, and Greek at the age of sixteen, and Hebrew at the age of seventeen. By the way, he was a genius.

Between them, they started what was called the Union of Prayer, whereby they'd get congregation after congregation to promise to set aside one day a month to pray for a spiritual awakening. Soon they were joined by the Independents, now called Congregationalists, then by Methodist Societies, then by Evangelicals in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, by Moravians and others, until Great Britain was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings. This was in the 1780s.

1789 came the French Revolution. John Wesley died 1791, still in harness, but in 1792 came the first outbreak of revival. By the way, there is a fad--I can't use any other word for it--in American theological seminaries, that what we call revivalism has originated on the frontiers and has been brought to the cities.

The implication is that only uneducated people get excited about these things. Actually, the revival of 1792 onwards, what we call the Second Great Awakening, began in the industrial heart of England, in Yorkshire. I won't go into details.

It began first among the Methodists, but it spread to the other denominations. It spread all over the British Isles. It affected the Anglicans as well as the free churches.

It affected the Church of Scotland. Two brothers called Haldane traveled the length and breadth of Scotland. They were nephews of Admiral Lord Duncan, who succeeded Lord Nelson, the hero of the Battle of Trafalgar.

Lord Duncan was quite a famous man. These two nephews served in the Royal Navy, and then when they got their discharge, they sold their property, bought carriages and horses, printed their own tracts, and traveled up and down Scotland. Often were arrested for preaching in the open air.

Whenever they discovered it was a nephew of Lord Duncan, no one was going to lock them up. They let them go again. It was pre-Venian grace in that particular respect.

Revival spread throughout Wales, so that you could say from 1792 onward, there was revival in Great Britain. Don't forget that Britain was fighting Napoleon almost alone, and in 1812, fighting the United States as well. Now, I won't worry you with detail.

You know that Norway has more missionaries per head of population than any other country in the world? You can trace that back to Hans Nielsen Hauge, a Norwegian farmer, called of God during that time of revival. He turned Norway upside down. The same sort of thing happened in Denmark and in Sweden.

It also broke out in Finland under Paavo Ruutsalainen. That's what made these Lutherans of the Northern Kingdom so evangelical. Why didn't revival break out in Germany, in Switzerland, and other places like that? Napoleon controlled the whole of Europe until 1815.

Revival had to wait until he was defeated. By the way, Robert Haldane, the Scot, went to France as soon as the Battle of Waterloo had been fought. He found no churches open, but he went on to Switzerland and found the citadel of Calvin, Geneva, dominated by rationalists.

So he took lodgings and invited students at the theological faculty in Geneva to come and listen to him. He used an interpreter at first until he got fluent in French. And the rumor went around, come and hear a man who knows his Bible like John Calvin.

One of the professors, a professor, was so furious, he stood outside Robert Haldane's lodgings and took the names of students who attended these informal meetings and failed them in their examinations. But that started what was called the Revée, the great revival in Switzerland that spread to France and then to Holland, and then in 1816 swept the whole of Germany. Now, of course, you're much more interested in what happened on this side of the Atlantic.

There were preliminary revivals. It's a very interesting thing, I've discovered, that ten years, generally, before the coming of a general revival, the Lord sends little local revivals to prepare leadership, to give people a taste of what is going to happen. So you can find from about 1782 onwards local revivals such as at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, places like that.

Now, in 1794, a godly New England pastor, Isaac Bacchus, addressed a general letter to the ministers of every Christian denomination in the United States. They knew their backs were to the wall. It seemed as if the churches were about to be lost completely, dying out because the young people were alienated from their elders.

He urged them to set aside one day a month to pray for revival. They didn't call it the Union of Prayer. The American term was the Concert of Prayer--in other words, to pray concertedly.

The Presbyterian Synods of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania adopted this for all their churches. The Congregational Associations likewise, the Baptist Associations also. Bishop Asbury accepted it for all the Methodists, and soon there was a network of prayer meetings all over the United States.

Now conditions were bad, but in 1797 revival broke out in the Connecticut Valley. Mark you, it didn't begin on the frontier. If you read the chief debunker of revivals, Professor McLaughlin of Brown University, he says the second great awakening began in the camp meetings of Kentucky and Tennessee.

That is not so. They began in the old, settled part of the country and spread to the frontier last. But the movement was without extravagance throughout the whole of New England and the Middle Atlantic states.

In church after church, you find for instance a church of 200 members suddenly became a church of 800 members. In New Jersey they adopted a new principle. They founded what they called Aaron and Hur societies.

You remember the story of how Israel fought Amalek? While Moses held his hands, Israel prevailed. But when he got tired, the tide went against Israel, so Aaron and Hur came and propped up his hands in prayer. The Presbyterian ministers in Elizabethtown and other towns in New Jersey asked the praying members of their congregation to pray for them while they preached.

And they preached with great power. Now that revival swept the whole of the eastern seaboard. It was rather remarkable.

In each report there would be little references. These meetings were conducted without ranting or without extravagance of any kind. Why did they say that? Because in the wake of the first Great Awakening there was extravagance.

I think I mentioned to you a man called James Davenport, who thrived on exhibitionism. He repented afterwards, but not until after damage was done. That revival turned the tide in the United States.

But it went over the Alleghenies. Now it's interesting, 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 be a Presbyterian minister, but in those days people would stop in the street and say, did you see that face? What does he do? They said, he's a preacher.

They reacted. They said, then he really must have something to say with the handicap of a face like that. Now he followed the immigrants over the Cumberland Gap into the Kentucky settlements.

At that time there were practically no towns in Kentucky, just clearings. They were settling the land. That was the West at that time.

He settled in Logan County. He was pastor of three little box-like churches. He said the winter of 1799-1800 was, for the most part, weeping and mourning with the people of God.

It was like Sodom and Gomorrah. He was such a man of prayer, not only did he adopt what was called the concert of prayer, one day a month to pray for an awakening, but he asked his Presbyterian members to pray for their pastor at sunset on Saturday and at sunrise on Sunday morning for half an hour. I wondered why sunset and sunrise.

Those people didn't have watches or clocks. They went by the sun. So when the sun went down, pray for your pastor Saturday evening, and when the sun comes up on Sunday morning, pray for your pastor.

Now you know, among Reformed people, they have a quarterly communion. You can judge McGrady's amazement when, in July of 1800, 11,000 came to communion. They came in their wagons, Conestoga wagons and so forth, camped for days.

Thus began the great camp-meeting movement on the frontier. I read somewhere not so long ago that the American addiction to camping in the summer grew from those great religious meetings, but that's not so. Before the Revival, the Kentuckians and the Tennesseans and others got together camping in what we would call today woodstocks, huge rallies for drunkenness and gambling and fighting and fornication.

But these meetings increased. The military, of course, were interested. This was the frontier, and they discovered sometimes that 25,000 would come.

McGrady was very broad-minded. He hollered as loudly as he could holler, any preacher, any kind who loves the Lord Jesus, come and help me. So Baptists and Methodists and members of other denominations would come along, and sometimes 12 preachers would be preaching to 1,000 each in a congregation of 12,000.

But in these meetings there were extravagances unlike the Eastern Seaboard. There were people, for instance, who screamed sometimes under conviction. Some who fainted, fell down.

That was called prostration. There were people who trembled under conviction of sin. Sometimes the trembling got out of control and became jerking.

Now, I've been interested in these phenomena, and I remember I was preaching in Riga, Soviet Latvia. While I was conducting the meeting, a woman in the congregation suddenly cried out and collapsed. The pastor was interpreting for me.

I couldn't speak Latvian. So he left me, and he and the woman's husband and two deacons of the church carried the woman out. He came back still very upset.

He said, I don't know what this is about. He said, she's one of the pillars of the church. She's our superintendent of the Sunday school.

And she was crying about her sins. Well, I thought of sin. Well, I didn't do it.

Then I thought, what did I say? Then I remembered I had just been saying something about we can't cover secret sin up forever. That's when she collapsed. We discovered next day what it was.

She and her husband had never been married legally, and Latvia being such a small country, it was embarrassing for them to get married after they were already prominent in the church. They had even thought of going off for a vacation to Sweden and getting married there. But you know, with a family of children, all the rest of it just grew.

But she was under subconscious conviction and cried out like that. Now, you can understand when people collapse like that. For instance, I remember World War II, a soldier collapsing at a court-martial.

He thought he was going to be shot. He couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't face it.

On the other hand, I've seen a schoolboy tremble when he thought he was going to be expelled. As far as dancing for joy is concerned, have you ever seen some women folk at one of these giveaway programs on television? Now, I could understand these things, but one thing I couldn't understand was the report of barking. I mean, why would anyone bark? So I decided to research this a called Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals, in which he said during the Kentucky Revival, there was jerking and trembling and weeping and dancing for joy.

And then he said rather mildly, there was some barking, but it was not too common. Now, I looked for a footnote. You see, when you write history, you document it.

I would look to see, but he didn't give a footnote. He didn't say this happened at Cane Ridge or this happened at Hogs Hollow or some such place. That was about a hundred years after the Revival.

He wrote the book in the 1900s. Then in 1940, Professor Alice Tyler, 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 don't know where she got that.

I looked for a footnote that said C. F. M. Davenport, but he didn't say that. Then I saw another footnote, I should say another book, by a man called Francis Xavier Curran. Not a Southern Baptist, you could tell by the name.

And he, I've forgotten the title of the book, but he said there was barking on the frontier and it was altogether disgraceful. So I thought, now where did he get that? I looked for a footnote that said C. Davenport and Tyler, and they didn't say that. So what does an historian do? I thought, I must read something written at the time.

You go back to the source. I thought, now, David Benedict, he wrote the history of the Baptists. He had a huge compendium of information about Baptists up to about 1840.

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, said, give me your statistics, tell me when your church was founded, what association you belong to, and so forth. I could hardly wait.

I turned to the Revival in Kentucky, and sure enough, the Baptists did not bark. But it said the Presbyterians did. I thought, let's not be nasty to the Presbyterians.

So I got David Rice's history of Presbyterianism in Kentucky, no mention of barking. There was mention of criticism of some of the extravagances, but no mention of barking. So I went around my various friends, where did this come from? One said, well, there was a man called Richard McNamara.

I thought, yes, I have heard that name. He was a Presbyterian minister, friend of Barton Stone, who was one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ. But Richard McNamara joined a rather fanatical group called the Shakers.

The Shakers died out because one of their doctrines was deadly. They didn't believe in sex. That's why they died out, I suppose.

Well, I shouldn't say they died out, because someone corrected me the other day. There were four old ladies in Massachusetts, over 90 years of age, sitting on a fortune. They had been heard of the whole of the Shaker empire, as it were.

Richard McNamara joined them, and I got his book, and sure enough, said in his book, some Kentucky men fancied themselves as dogs and barked. But it didn't say where. Barton Stone, on the other hand, a Presbyterian minister at the time, said there was no barking.

The nearest thing to barking was people who sobbed. You know the way when a child is spanked? Like that. When people, for instance, sobbed and cried and made grunting noises, that was the nearest thing to barking.

The whole legend, you've heard the American legend of barking up a tree, came from an old Presbyterian minister, weeping before the Lord because of his shortcomings, and because he was over 84, he was holding on to a little tree for support, and gave somebody a chance to start a tall tale. I have read it in dissertations. I saw in Northern Baptist Seminary a dissertation written by a student which said, during the Kentucky Revival, Christians went out like flocks of spaniels and barked until they grew hoarse.

You see, British humor is understatement. American humor is always exaggeration. Tall tales.

The same can be said of Canadians, too. They tell tall tales. And this became one of the tales of the frontier.

I raised this question at Capital University in Ohio before 300 historians. They jumped on me. They said, oh, you're spoiling good classroom fun.

In other words, what they meant was church history is rather a dry subject to teach. So you have to throw in a few jokes now and again, and you're spoiling it for us. Well, it's just a legend.

But, you know, the world loves those sort of stories. If someone were to make a documentary for television on religion in America, you can be sure they'd work in snake handlers. Now, how many people here in this audience have handled snakes as a religious exercise? It's rare.

But they always work it in. It's a way of knocking down the Christian faith. They can't resist it.

And that's how some of these stories... But Kentucky was completely changed. A very famous theologian, George Baxter, went up from Philadelphia and visited Kentucky. He said he'd never come across such a moral place in the world.

Now, you say, what were these meetings like? The revival spread from Kentucky through Tennessee down to the Carolinas first, before it touched Virginia. It broke out in North Carolina, South Carolina, and often began through Presbyterian quarterly communions. For instance, near what today is Spartanburg, South Carolina, there was a Presbyterian church called Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church.

And in 1802, they had a communion service there. 3,500 people came to that. They came in wagons and carts and some on foot.

But a lot of scoffers came too. Some came fortified by strong drink. And by the way, when you hear about people being prostrated, someone said to me, well, is that like at Catherine Kuhlman's meetings? I said, no, not quite the same.

The people who were prostrated in this revival were the scoffers, not the seekers. I went twice to hear Catherine Kuhlman, and I saw some people go forward praying for healing, and they collapsed very gently on their backs. Nobody seemed to get hurt.

But these people, it was quite different. They fell forward on their faces as if the Lord had taken a baseball bat and hit them with a smart crack in the back of the head. Some of them lay there for hours.

It had a very salutary effect on the ungodly. They'd go there to break up the meeting, drinking whiskey out of a bottle, shouting abuse at the minister leading the service, and so forth. Down at Old Waxhaw, for instance, one man collapsed, and about two o'clock in the morning, a Presbyterian minister went around to talk to him.

And he said, Brother, you must pray for yourself. You must pray. The man was still defiant.

He said, I'll be damned if I do. So he just left him, and there were too many others to deal with. But at six o'clock in the morning, when daybreak came, they saw this fellow creeping away like a crab, pulling himself along by the branches of the bracken.

It was a frightening experience. Now, this revival completely changed life in the United States, especially on the frontier. You remember I mentioned that there's a lot of ungodliness in the colleges? At Williams College, Massachusetts, a group of six students met in a maple grove one August to pray.

I wondered why they chose a maple grove. Maples are very leafy trees, so maybe it hid them from the other students. A thunderstorm threatened, so they raced to a haystack to continue their prayer meeting.

And underneath the haystack, they promised God they'd go anywhere in the world he would send them. You say, well, that happens at camp meetings every summer. In those days, there were no Protestant missionary societies to take them.

When these young men finished their studies at Andover, they went down to Boston and offered their services to their denomination. Some ministers said, who do they think they are? Why should we send them overseas? No one said, we don't have the money to do it anyway. But one man said, if God has spoken to these young men, we should help them.

They formed a committee called the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first of the American missionary societies. That's how the whole missionary movement began. I think there are 35,000 North American missionaries on the field today.

That movement stemmed from that revival. Remember I mentioned the revival in Wales? There was a little Welsh girl called Mary Jones, a servant girl, 15 years of age, walked barefoot 30 miles to buy a Bible. She had saved her pennies.

She got there, and they were all sold. She came back in tears. Thomas Charles, her pastor, was upset.

He went by coach up to London, went around the various committees to see if they wouldn't print Bibles. But no one would do it, so they formed a special committee to do it, and they called it the British and Foreign Bible Society, the first of the big Bible societies. The American Bible Society fell in with that.

Out of that came all the missionary societies. Out of that came the abolition of the slave trade. Out of that came the abolition of the 96-hour week.

People worked 16 hours a day, six days a week. Out of that came the abolition of the use of women in coal mines. They used women to drag the coal trucks.

A woman would creep on her hands and knees with a leather belt around her waist with an iron chain fastened at the navel and passed between her legs. She dragged it like a burden. But in Britain they brought in legislation into Parliament forbidding that.

Also forbade the use of children under six years of age working in factories. All these benefits came out of that. They used to exhibit insane people in cages.

You've heard people say the place was like Bedlam. Bedlam was a mental hospital in London for the sick people of the wealthy. But if anyone was mentally afflicted among the poor, they simply sold them to a circus.

And he was exhibited in a cage and people threw rotten vegetables at him to throw him into a rage. That was abolished because of the revival. Out of it came so much good, it's incalculable.

And this was all felt in the Frontier Society and the Agricultural Society of the United States as well. There's much more I can say about it, but this came out of a concert of prayer. What happens when we pray? The Lord says, no, I can use these people.

And he calls them to do what he wants them to do. Whether to go into Parliament like Wilberforce and fight the slave trade, or become an evangelist or a missionary like William Carey to India. That's what happens in times of revival.

Why do I tell you this? Because it's our greatest need today. Not more plans, not more committees, not more organizations, but more prayer.

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