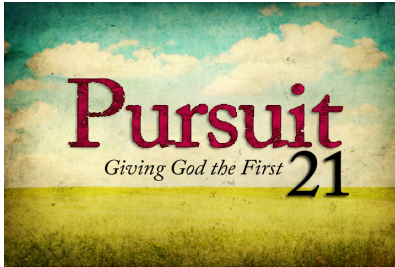


# Concert of Prayer History

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“The Concert of Prayer for the Conversion of the World was first suggested by the leading revivalists in Scotland, in October, 1744.”<sup>1</sup> They recommended that evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic establish a formal spiritual community through a “Concert for Prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

A Scottish Presbyterian minister named John Erskine—who published a Memorial pleading with the people of Scotland and elsewhere to unite in prayer for the revival of religion—sent a copy of this little book to Jonathan Edwards in New England. Edwards was so moved that he wrote a response which grew longer than a letter, so that finally he published it in 1747 as a book, entitled: “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 on earth pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies concerning the Last Time...”<sup>3</sup>

In *An Humble Attempt*, Edwards pled the case for the international Concert of Prayer. Prayer societies weren’t new. In fact, they had been essential parts of the evangelical awakenings. Edwards had organized meetings for prayer and praise for various groups and districts of Northampton since before the revival of 1734-35. The Scottish awakenings were similarly sustained by weekly prayer meetings. The recommendation of the Scottish leaders in 1744 organized two years of concerted prayer at designated times for international revival.<sup>4</sup>

Such concerted prayer, which resulted in the revival of 1730-1755, impacted society dramatically! Minister and historian Joseph Tracy (who gave this revival its name) names the First Great Awakening as a precursor to the War of Independence. The awakening was instrumental in the development of democratic concepts during the American Revolution. As Biblical equalities were preached—all men are equal, all can be saved, and true worth is not based upon class—old Hierarchal structures of society (king, elite and commoner, with deference given to the privileged class) began to erode.

## The Concert of Prayer in the Second Great Awakening

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Following the American Revolution, the nation suffered a moral slump, to put it mildly. Drunkenness was epidemic. Out of a population of five million, there were 300,000 confirmed drunkards. Fifteen thousand alcoholics were buried each year. Churches were losing more members than they were gaining. Harvard had discovered not one believer in the whole of the student body. Princeton, a much more evangelical place, discovered only two believers in the student body.

“How did the situation change?” asks J. Edwin Orr. “It came through a concert of prayer.”<sup>5</sup>

A movement of prayer had started in Britain through William Carey, Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe—and other leaders who began what the British called “the Union of Prayer.” (The year after John Wesley died (1791), the Second Great Awakening began and swept Great Britain.)

When conditions were at their worst in America, a Baptist pastor and man of prayer named Isaac Backus, made an urgent plea for prayer for revival to pastors of every Christian denomination in the United States. In 1794, Isaac Backus and Stephen Gano, along with twenty-three other New England ministers, distributed a circular letter which called for a concert of prayer of believers to pray for a general awakening.

Having been directly influenced by the First Great Awakening, they invoked the memory and authority of Jonathan Edwards, and agreed that, beginning in January 1795, two o'clock on the first Tuesday of the four quarters of the year would be set aside for a concert of prayer in support of the new awakening:

“To the ministers and churches of every Christian denomination in the United States, to humble in their endeavors to carry into execution the humble attempt to promote explicit agreement and visible union of God’s people in extraordinary prayer for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on earth.” In execution of this plan, it is proposed that the “ministers and churches of every Christian denomination should be invited to maintain public prayer and praise, accompanied with such instruction from God’s Word, as might be judged proper, on every first Tuesday, of the four quarters of the year, beginning with the first Tuesday of January, 1795, at two o'clock in the afternoon, if the plan of concert should then be ripe for a beginning, and so continuing from quarter to quarter, and from year to year, until the good Providence of God prospering our endeavors, we shall obtain the blessing for which we pray.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Edwards’s *An Humble Attempt* was reissued along with other works of Edwards’ from the colonial awakening era.<sup>7</sup>

Historian Russell Rohrer writes, “From this perspective we might reasonably mark the beginning of the “Second Great Awakening” at the renewal of the United Concert for Prayer in the early 1790s.” 8

In fact, in 1842, on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, Baptist pastor and writer, F.A. Cox reflected upon the origin of the society—the prayer movement of the late 1700’s:

“The primary cause of the missionary excitement in [William] Carey’s mind, and its diffusion among the Northamptonshire ministers [was] ... the meeting of the Association in 1784, at Nottingham, [when] it was resolved to set apart an hour on the first Monday evening of every month, “for extraordinary prayer for revival of religion, and for the extending of Christ’s kingdom in the world.” This suggestion proceeded from...Sutcliff. Its simplicity and appropriateness have since recommended it to universal adoption; and copious showers of blessing from on high have been poured forth upon the churches.” 9

Looking back from the early 1840s, Cox saw the 1784 Call to Prayer as pivotal. It focused the prayers of Baptist churches in Northamptonshire on the nations of the world. He further notes that the “universal adoption” of the concert of prayer by churches beyond the ranks of the Baptist denomination led to rich times of revival, when God poured forth upon these churches “showers of blessing.” Later historians would describe this period of blessing as the Second Evangelical Awakening (1790-1830).

Some historians, such as J. Edwin Orr and Paul E.G. Cook, concur with Cox and trace the human origins of this time of revival and spiritual awakening to the adoption of the concert of prayer by the Baptists in 1784.<sup>10 11</sup>

“The Presbyterians of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania adopted it for all their churches. Bishop Francis Asbury adopted it for all the Methodists. The Congregational and Baptist Associations, the Reformed and the Moravians all adopted the plan, until America like Britain was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings, which set aside the first Monday of each month to pray. It was not long before the revival reached the frontier in Kentucky. It encountered a people wild and irreligious. Congress discovered that in Kentucky there had not been more than one court of justice held in five years. Peter Cartwright, Methodist evangelist, wrote that when his father settled in Logan County, it was known as Rogues’ Harbor. If someone committed a murder in Massachusetts or robbery in Rhode Island, all he needed to do was to cross the Alleghenies. The decent people in Kentucky formed regiments of vigilantes to fight for law and order, fought a pitched battle with outlaws and lost.

A Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister named James McGready settled in Logan County and became the pastor of three little churches. He wrote in his diary that the winter of 1799 for the most part was “weeping and mourning with the people of God.” Rebellion and lawlessness was prevalent everywhere. McGready was a man of such prayer that, not only did he promote the concert of prayer every first Monday of the month, but he got his people to pray for him at sunset on Saturday evening and sunrise Sunday morning. Then in the summer of 1800 came the great Kentucky revival. Eleven thousand people came to a communion service. McGready hollered for help, regardless of denomination. Baptists and Methodists came in response and the great camp meeting revivals started to sweep Kentucky and Tennessee, then spread over North and South Carolina, along the frontier.

Out of the second great awakening came the modern missionary movement, the abolition of slavery, popular education, Bible societies and Sunday schools—and many other benefits accompanying the evangelistic drive.<sup>12</sup>

## **The 1859 Revival**

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“In September 1857, a man of prayer, Jeremiah Lanphier, started a prayer meeting in the upper room of the Dutch Reformed Church Consistory building, in Manhattan. In response to his advertisement, only six people out of the population of a million showed up. But, the following week, there were fourteen, and then twenty-three, when it was decided to meet every day for prayer. By late winter, they were filling the Dutch Reformed Church, then the Methodist Church of John Street, then Trinity Episcopal Church on Broadway at Wall Street. In February and March of 1858, every church and public hall 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 get to only twelve meetings, but he counted 6100 men attending. Then a landslide of prayer began, which overflowed to the churches in the evenings. People began to be converted, ten thousand a week in New York City alone.

“The movement spread throughout New England, the church bells bringing people to prayer at eight in the morning, twelve noon, six in the evening. The revival raced up the Hudson and down the Mohawk, where the Baptists, for example, had so many people to baptize that they went down to the river, cut a big hole in the ice, and baptized them in the cold water.

“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 am sorry, young fellow. I have sixteen teachers too many,

but I will put you on the waiting list.” The young man insisted: “I want to do something just now.” “Well, start a class.” “How do I start a class?” “Get some boys off the street, but don’t bring them here. Take them out into the country and after a month you will have control of them, so bring them in. They will be your class.” He took them to a beach on Lake Michigan and he taught them Bible verses and Bible games; 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 forty years.

“For instance, Trinity Episcopal Church in Chicago had 121 members in 1857; in 1860, 1400. That was typical of the churches. More than a million people were converted to God in one year out of a population of thirty million. Then that same revival jumped the Atlantic, appeared in Ulster, Scotland and Wales, then England, parts of Europe, South Africa and South India, anywhere there was an evangelical cause. It sent mission pioneers to many countries. Effects were felt for forty years. Having begun in a movement of prayer, it was sustained by a movement of prayer.<sup>13</sup>

Evidence of the effects of united, concerted prayer mounts throughout the annals of history. The small portion contained above sufficiently demonstrates how God has worked through movements of prayer to impact not only modern society, but more importantly, His Kingdom! For it is the eternal, spiritual results—the souls destined for Heaven not Hell; the holy, blameless lives lived; the love of Christ displayed; the character of Christ developed; the walk of faith matured; the will of God moved from Heaven to earth—to which we look. And for that, one need look no further than the Bible. It is the living, powerful, authoritative, inspiring source of evidence and instruction!

Know that God has done it in our day and age—He has rained fire down from Heaven—but don’t look to modern history for your motivation and promise in prayer. Look to the Bible. Look to Joshua asking for the sun to stand still, the church praying for Peter’s deliverance from prison, Christ praying through the night, Moses standing in the gap, Hannah drunk with sorrow, Elijah on Mount Carmel, the upper room and those in one accord, Abraham pleading for Sodom, Ezra grieved by the iniquities of his people, Elijah crying to God for the widow’s son, Nehemiah anguished over the ruin of the city, Daniel kneeling three times a day, Peter on the rooftop, Paul praying for the Ephesians...and Jesus praying for you while He was on the cross—for there is the promise of prayer!

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1 Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, p 399. [www.googlebooks.com](http://www.googlebooks.com)

2 Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, p 164. [www.googlebooks.com](http://www.googlebooks.com)

3 [http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra\\_prayer.php](http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra_prayer.php)

4 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: a life*, (city, publisher, year), 334-335

- 5 J Edwin Orr, *The Role of Prayer in Spiritual Awakening*, [http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra\\_conditions.php](http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra_conditions.php)
  - 6 <http://betweenthehours.com/2009/08/02/the-power-of-prayer/>
  - 7 Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards: religious tradition and American culture*, p15-16. [www.googlebooks.com](http://www.googlebooks.com)
  - 8 James Russell Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant*, p 57. [www.googlebooks.com](http://www.googlebooks.com)
  - 9 *History of the Baptist Missionary Society, From 1792 to 1842* (London: T. Ward & Co./G. & J. Dyer, 1842), 1:10-11.
  - 10 J. Edwin Orr, *The Eager Feet: Evangelical Awakenings 1790-1830* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 95, 191-92, 199; Paul E. G. Cook, "The Forgotten Revival" in *Preaching and Revival* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1984), 92.
  - 11 <http://www.andrewfullercenter.org/index.php/2006/10/i-wish-i-had-prayed-more-john-sutcliff/>
  - 12 [http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra\\_prayer.php](http://www.revival-library.org/leadership/ra_prayer.php)
  - 13 *ibid*
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