

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE PRAY¹

Craig Parker - April 2023

In the year 1746 an unusual piece of correspondence made its way to the desk of Rev. Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards, a Yale graduate and future president of Princeton, had already distinguished himself as the most influential of the New England Congregational ministers. His terrifying sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, was used significantly by God to launch revival in Enfield, Connecticut following its delivery on July 8, 1741.² Somehow, five years later, Edwards obtained a copy of a Memorial from Scotland. The introduction is as follows: *From several Ministers in Scotland, to their brethren in different places, for continuing a Concert for Prayer, first entered in the year 1744.* Curious as to its contents, Edwards read on:

WHEREAS it was the chief scope of this Concert, to promote more abundant application to a duty that is perpetually binding, prayer that our Lord's kingdom may come, joined with praises: And it contained some circumstantial expedients, apprehended to be very subservient to that design, related to stated times for such exercises, so far as this would not interfere with other duties; particularly a part of Saturday evening, and Sabbath morning, ever week; and more solemnly of some of the first days of each of the four great divisions of the year, that is, of each quarter; as the first Tuesday, or first convenient day after: And the concert, as to this circumstance, was extended only to two years; it being intended, that before these expired, persons engaged in the concert should reciprocally communicate their sentiments and inclinations, as to the prolonging of the time, with or without alteration, as to the circumstances mentioned: and it was intended by the first promoters, that others at a distance should propose such circumstantial amendments or improvements, as they should find proper: It is here earnestly entreated, that such would communicate their sentiments accordingly, now that the the first proposed is near expiring.

Though the 18th century language is perhaps a little stiff for modern readers to fathom, the point of the memorial was simply to continue the concert of prayer for revival that had begun two years previously and that had spread throughout Great Britain and North America. The three page article contained a few simple points:

1. That men and women everywhere who are already engaged in prayer should continue. That ministers should frequently teach the scriptural justification for regular, corporate and devoted prayer.
2. That the memorial should transcend Christian denominations, and be published through out all Christendom.
3. That the concert should be continued for at least seven more years.
4. That discontinuation of prayer would appear to the Lord as "fainting" or losing heart.
5. That the decline of society warranted this type of prayer.

Edwards was so struck with the piece that he wrote a reply to be distributed to all the ministers of New England, entitled: *An 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, Pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time.*³ Judging by his title, it's no wonder that it took him 139 pages to make his reply. Edward launches his *Union in Prayer* (as known by its shorter title - some also refer to it as *An Humble Attempt*) with a careful examination of Zechariah 8:20-23 (KJV):

¹ I originally wrote this in February 2001 when I was serving as a campus minister with the Navigators at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH

² An interesting historical note is that Eleazar Wheelock, founder of Dartmouth College in 1769, was a young congregational minister present in the Enfield sanctuary when his mentor, Jonathan Edwards preached this most famous sermon. Wheelock offered the closing prayer after seeing so many people spiritually affected.

³ The entire text of "*An Humble Attempt...*" can be found at <https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2/works2.viii.html>

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, "it shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of Hosts: I will go also.' Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of Hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray, before the Lord." Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; "In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, 'We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.'"

Edwards began his exposition:

In this chapter we have a prophecy of a future glorious history of the church of God; wherein it is evident, something further is intended that never was fulfilled to the nation of the Jews in the Old Testament. For here are plain prophecies of such things as were never fulfilled before the coming of the Messiah: Particularly what is said is in the last two verses of the chapter, of many people and strong nations worshiping and seeking the true God, and of so great an accession of Gentile nations to the church of God, that by the far the greater part of the visible worshipers of God should consist of this new accession, so that they should be to the other as ten to one; a certain number for an uncertain. There never happened any thing, from the time of the Prophet Zechariah to the coming of Christ, to answer this prophecy: And it can have no fulfillment either in the calling of the Gentiles, in and after the days of the apostles, or in the future glorious enlargement of the church of God in the latter ages of the world...there is a great agreement between what is here said, and other prophecies, that must manifestly have respect to the church's latter day glory: As that in Isaiah 60:2,3-4....Isaiah 61:8-12...⁴

Edwards argues that the church should commit herself to extraordinary prayer in the spirit of these passages and others. By extraordinary prayer he refers to prayer which is above and beyond the normal prayer of personal devotions or Sunday worship. He is describing the kind of extraordinary prayer displayed when Jesus prayed all night before selecting the 12 disciples, or when he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Similarly, we see the extraordinary commitment of prayer by Paul on behalf of the churches in I Thessalonians 3:10 where he says, "We pray day and night that we might see your face so as to complete what is lacking in your faith." And we can imagine the intense prayer of Epaphras in Colossians 4:12 where he labors (*Greek-agonizo*) in prayer on behalf of his beloved friends in Colossae.

Edwards wrote in another place that he believed it was God's will,

...through his wonderful grace, that the prayer of his saints should be one great and principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom in the world. When God has something very great to accomplish for his church, it is his will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of his people; as is manifest by Ezekiel 36:37: "I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, it for them." And it is revealed that when God is about to accomplish great things for his church, he will begin by remarkably pouring the spirit of grace and supplications, Zechariah 12:10.⁵

And I hope that such as are convinced it is their duty to comply with and encourage this design [for concerted prayer], will remember we ought not only to go speedily to pray before the Lord, and seek his mercy, but also to go constantly."⁶

Edwards' influence was felt over the next two centuries throughout North America, Europe and beyond. The concert of prayer became the appeal and practice of many leaders, churches and movements, as men and women sought God to pour out His blessing on an unbelieving world.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries many were found referring to Edwards' idea of a concert of prayer, as in this excerpt from an early missionary journal:

It is altogether suitable, that in times of extraordinary difficulty and danger, the people of God should have recourse to extraordinary prayer..Infidels, some of them, have no God; these therefore cannot pray. Others have a God, whom they own, but in works they deny him; for there is not the will to pray to him...Let

⁴ Edwards, *An Humble Attempt*...p.1

⁵ Edwards, *Works*, Vol.1, p.426

⁶ Edwards, *Works*, Vol.2, p.312

Christians form concerts of prayer, to beseech the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to pull down the kingdom of Satan and build up the kingdom of his dear Son...This matter is set in a clear point of light in President Edwards' "*An Humble Attempt...*"⁷

Interestingly, Park Street Church in Boston was born out of a concert of prayer among three other churches in the early 1800's⁸. Later, in the 1840's, discouraged at the overall decline of spiritual life in Boston, another prayer concert was begun at Park Street Church. A daily prayer meeting was launched that lasted over two years and was joined in by other churches. In time all churches involved reported a substantial growth in numbers and in spiritual depth.⁹

In England between 1784 and 1804 Edwards' works were received by Andrew Fuller and disseminated among many churches. Fuller challenged pastors to enter into the concert of prayer that Edwards described. One of those who responded to Fuller's appeal was a shoe cobbler named William Carey, who in 1792 wrote a booklet entitled "*ENQUIRY Into the OBLIGATIONS OF CHRISTIANS, To use Means for the CONVERSION of the HEATHENS*". In his last chapter Carey essentially summarized Edwards' "*An Humble Attempt*". Believing that God would have him go to India as a result of his study, Carey began a life work in foreign missions, working as an evangelist, Bible translator and professor of Bengali. He is referred to by many church historians as the father of modern missions.

Throughout the 19th century the prayer concert continued in varying forms and with many results. For a six-year period culminating in 1857 thousands of people throughout Boston prayed daily seeking God's blessing and outpouring. Similar prayer movements spread to New York City and beyond leading to a significant time of awakening and revival:

When a true revival occurs, very quickly within a town, city, or region, scores of unsaved come to the cross of Christ. For example, in The Great Prayer Revival of 1857-58, on September 23, 1857, Jeremiah Lanphier started a prayer meeting from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. for business people. It met at the Old Dutch Church on Fulton Street in New York City. The first week, six came. The next week, 20 showed up. Within six months, 10,000 businessmen out of a population of 800,000 were gathered for prayer. By January 1858, there were at least 20 other prayer meetings occurring throughout New York City. Almost simultaneously, noon prayer meetings arose across America. Among the daily prayer meetings reported: 150 towns in Massachusetts, 200 in New York, 60 in New Jersey, 65 in Pennsylvania, 200 in Ohio, 150 in Indiana, 150 in Illinois, 50 in Missouri, and 60 in Iowa.

Suddenly revival and awakening broke out. It is estimated that at the high tide of the revival, 50,000 people a week were converted. The number of people who joined the churches in the two years of the revival averaged 10,000 a week. One student of prayer and revival has estimated that if a revival of like magnitude were to come to the United States today, it would result in the salvation of roughly 18 million people.¹⁰

And in England by the 1890's Charles Haddon Spurgeon said in a sermon:

Only wrestle in prayer, meet together in your house, go to your closets, be instant, be earnest in season and out of season, agonize for souls, and all that you have heard [about past revivals] shall be forgotten in what you shall see; and all that others have told you shall be as nothing compared with what you shall hear with your ears, and be hold with your eyes in your own midst.¹¹

⁷Western Missionary Magazine, September 1804 as found in Bakke, Ray. *The Power of Extraordinary Prayer*, Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 2000

⁸ https://web.archive.org/web/20081013145053/http://www.parkstreet.org/our_beginnings.vv"In a time of increasing apostasy from the gospel and rising Unitarianism in New England, a small group of devoted Christians, primarily from Old South Church, formed a "Religious Improvement Society" in 1804 to hold weekly prayer meetings and lectures. Though they faced opposition from all sides, the group continued to meet for six years, founding Park Street Church in February of 1809."

⁹ *Prevailing Prayer: An Account Of The Old South Chapel Prayer Meeting, Boston, With Interesting Narratives, And Instances Of Remarkable Conversions, Related At It (1859)*

¹⁰ Schlafer, Dale, *Revival 101, Understanding How Christ Ignites His Church*, Colorado Spring, CO, Navpress, 2003

¹¹ Spurgeon, Charles H., *Three Sermons on Revival*, Pasadena TX, Pilgrim Publications, pp 31-32

In tracing the history of revival¹² on college campuses in North America it is clear that revivals always began at least with a movement of prayer among students. In 1787 at Hampden Sydney College a few students (none of whom were actively Christian) met together to pray because of their concern for the moral state of the college.¹³ They met in secret for fear of their classmates, but were found out nonetheless and a small disturbance ensued. The President of the College quieted the opponents and invited the students to pray in his office. The commitment of these students to prayer eventually led to the conversion of half of the student body and had a great influence in the surrounding community.

One of the most notable college prayer meetings occurred in 1806 with five students at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Gathering for prayer in a maple grove outside the campus, the five dove into the shelter of a haystack when a thunderstorm arose.

Hidden in the hay, they prayed over a plan to reach the unevangelized world for Christ—their plan beginning at Williams. This "Haystack Prayer Meeting" prompted these five to meet regularly for prayer. Four years later, while attending Andover Theological Seminary, they persuaded several ministers to form the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions—the first missions society in America. Incidentally, a stone memorial at Williams College commemorates this prayer meeting as being a turning point in world missions; the student missions movement that resulted had global effects.

The National Day of Prayer, instituted by President James Madison in 1815, led to a period of great revival at Princeton. Similar movements of prayer at Amherst, Brown, Dartmouth, Middlebury, Williams and Yale brought about conversions of 30-50% of the student bodies.

In England in 1882 at Cambridge University a group of students began "the morning watch" - a time of Bible reading and prayer to begin each day. A revival ensued, culminating in the sending of the Cambridge 7, a group of businessmen and athletes who committed to foreign missions, the most notable of whom was C.T. Studd, a national cricket hero.

In 1905 at Asbury College during a blizzard, a prayer meeting prompted many students to begin a time of extended confession, repentance and awakened hearts to God. The whole campus was touched. Similar prayer movements spread to other colleges in America. One of the students present at Asbury, E. Stanley Jones, was deeply touched and went on to become a great missionary evangelist in India.¹⁴

In 1911 Kenneth Scott Latourette, a student at Yale, saw the results of a student prayer revival at McMinnville in Oregon. He returned to Yale where God used him to touch the lives of 1000 undergraduates who became involved in campus Bible studies and prayer meetings.

At Dartmouth College a revival began in 1970 through the lives of 2 freshmen students, Peter Conway and Eric Wadsworth. Both of them were new in Christ—they began a prayer meeting and Bible study in their room; soon other students began to come to Christ. By 1976 over 300 students were regularly meeting for prayer, fellowship and the serious study in the word of God. At their 20th college reunion

¹² By revival I mean the type of awakening of God that occurs when great numbers of people in a region are turned to the Lord in repentance. An occurrence of this sort occurred in the region around Dartmouth early in the 19th century as recorded in the *Accounts of Religious Revivals in the U.S. from 1815–18* by Joshua Bradbury. On Page 93 Bradbury writes, "Hartland shared in this work. Norwich had a very refreshing shower. Many souls were brought home to God. Lebanon experienced some mercy drops. Hanover was richly favored, especially in the northeast part of town (that's where we live!). Large numbers were awakened, and a considerable number were made alive to God, and united with the churches in the region. The writer is happy, in having it in his power to inform the publick that the College, from which many pious young men have come forth to preach Jesus, and have been very eminent in the ministry, was not passed by. On that distinguished seat of literature the Spirit made known its omnipotent energies."

¹³ This and the other revivals described are documented in J. Edwin Orr. *Campus Aflame*. Wheaton, IL: International Awakening Press, 1971

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Asbury_revival: Asbury University has a history of revivals, dating back to 1905, 1908, 1921, 1950, 1958, 1970, 1992, and 2006. The 1970 revival at Asbury had far-reaching cultural effects, and remains central to the construction of Asbury's spiritual identity. **On Wednesday, February 8, 2023**, a handful of students remained in the chapel following a regularly scheduled service. Student body president Alison Perfater was one of them, and said it was after a fellow student decided to openly confess some of his sins to the small group that "the atmosphere changed". According to Perfater: "For seemingly no reason at first on Wednesday, February 8 it didn't end. That's kind of the logistical side of what's been going on. On the deeper side of things, what's been happening here since Wednesday is there's a young army of believers who are rising to claim Christianity, the faith, as their own, as a young generation and as a free generation, and that's why people cannot get enough. Initially only student publications and Methodist circles shared news of the event. The revival has been described as calm, with some commentators having noted the absence of many contemporary worship features. The revival was additionally significant because of its spread on social media, particularly among Generation Z, the most irreligious generation in US history. On February 15, hashtag #asburyrevival" had over 24 million views on TikTok, which increased to 63 million by February 18.

Eric and Peter reflected on the many lives that were touched in their experience, estimating that the number is in the thousands.

In February of 1994, a group of students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute resolved to engage in 2 days of prayer. They produced a prayer guide entitled *The Scroll* which included the names of fellow students for whom to pray. As it was passed from individual to individual over a 48 hour period more names were added, so that by the end a great portion of the student body had been prayed for by name.

In February of 2001, a group of students at Dartmouth appealed to various campus ministries and churches to a joint call for prayer entitled 403, based on the picture of a voice calling the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3. Over 200 people participated in a rich outpouring of praise, prayer and appeal to God to bring revival to the campus.

For me, disciplined, focused prayer resembles bringing the like ends of two magnets together. The closer I get to undistracted time with God the more my mind bends away from Him. In the fall of 1994 I sought to spend three morning hours a week in Rollins Chapel at Dartmouth where I paced, knelt, stood or sat-praying for my family, for the students, for my friends and for missionaries. A prayer partner immensely helped me keep at it. However, I failed to keep up the pace in the winter, and since then have sputtered of and on with varying degrees of success. This past fall (2000) I tried again for as many mornings a week as I could at Rollins Chapel. I resolved that I would pray individually for all the students on our Navigators directory, and begin to pray through the entire freshmen face book (1100 students).

Prayer is like running or any other exercise—I don't particularly like to do it, but the benefits are great. So, I'm striving again. Ironically, the verse that God used to motivate me to join the staff of the Navigators in 1980 is Acts 6:4, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

The challenge for us all today is to respond to the call to extraordinary prayer that Edwards declares in 1746. In his conclusion he writes:

And now, upon the whole, I desire every serious Christian, that may read this discourse, calmly and deliberately to consider whether he can excuse himself from complying with what has been proposed to us and requested of us, by those ministers in Scotland, that are the authors of this late memorial. God has stirred up a part of his church, in a distant part of the world, to be in extraordinary manner seeking and crying to him, that he would appear to favor Zion, as he promised. And they were applying themselves to us, to join with them; and make that very proposal to us, that is spoken of in my text....What these servants Ask of us, is not silver or gold, or any of our outward substance, or that we would put ourselves to any cost, or do anything that will be likely to expose us to any remarkable trouble, difficulty or suffering in our outward interest; but only that we would help together with them, by our prayers to God, for the greatest mercy in the world.¹⁵

Will we commit ourselves to extraordinary prayer? Can we excuse ourselves as Edwards asks? I believe that God would have us re-enter the school of prayer that Andrew Murray describes in his book *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

It is time for Christ's followers everywhere to stop talking about prayer—and to pray. I know that I am a spiritual weakling in prayer. But I'm convinced that God would have me, and us, learn about prayer as we have never learned it before.

Let's believe the promise of Zechariah 8:20-23. And let's begin to pray.

¹⁵ Edwards, *An Humble Attempt...* Conclusion

1. A Bible Study on Extraordinary Prayer:

What observations do you make about the importance of praying for the people around us and for the city and nation in which we find ourselves?

I Samuel 7:15

I Samuel 12:19-25

2 Chronicles 7:11-18 (2 Chronicles 15:1-15)

Psalms 122:6-9

Isaiah 59:15-60:3

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Ezekiel 36:22-28, 37-38

Zechariah 8:20-23

Habakkuk 1:5; 2:2-3,14; 3:2

Luke 18:1-8 (Luke 11:1-13)

Acts 1:12-14

Acts 2:14

Acts 2:42-47

Acts 4:23-35

Acts 6:1-7

Ephesians 6:18-19

I Timothy 2:1-7

2. Practical suggestions to develop our prayer "muscle" as we seek God for revival:

1. Believe that God is the author of revival and that somehow, through prayer, He wants us to enter into the blessing of seeing it become reality.
2. Team up with a few others to enter into serious, concerted prayer. Create:
 - a time
 - a place
 - a plan
3. List and pray for all the people with whom you and your friends have contact. Pray for the wider circle of people within your influence. Pray for your town or city, for your state, for your nation, for the nations. Pray earnestly and regularly for them.
4. Develop consistency, longevity and agreement. Do you really want this thing to come to pass? (Psalm 5:3 "...I will order my prayer and eagerly watch.")
5. Work at integrating a prayer movement among the believers in your area and beyond. Think in terms of:
 - Individuals
 - Small groups
 - Other ministries
 - Area churches
 - Email networks
6. Look for "pools of renewal" in your midst. Celebrate and report to others the things that God is doing.
7. Continue to develop a library of resources to equip you in your prayer life.
8. Visit other prayer-ers and prayer movements to learn more about the power and secret of prayer.
9. Don't give up! (Luke 18:1)

During your days of backsliding, prayer was a victim. Do not let it happen again. Prayer must not be thought of as a good, but nonessential part of life. Prayer is as important to you as food and water. You must give as much diligence to preparing for prayer and for engaging in it as you give to any other necessity of life:

—Richard Owen Roberts

The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless study, prayerless work, prayerless religion: he laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray.

—Samuel Chadwick