

“How to Promote Revival – An Humble Attempt”
(Reformation 2012)

V. How to Promote Revival – An Humble Attempt.

A. Review.

1. We looked at the revival of 1735.
2. We looked at the Great Awakening.
3. We saw what the marks are of a true revival – the Distinguishing Marks.
4. And we’ve seen the marks of a true relationship with God – The Religious Affections.
5. Tonight, we’re going to consider what those who experienced these revivals did further to promote this work of God.

B. How to Promote Revival – An Humble Attempt.

1. Introduction.

- a. There were certainly difficulties Edwards had to deal with during the revival, and afterwards when he became involved in the communion controversy that ultimately led to his dismissal from his church.
- b. But there were also encouragements, which led to major books.

2. One of these encouragements came from his correspondence to Scotland.

- a. His Faithful Narrative was reprinted in Scotland in 1737.
- b. But it wasn’t until 1742 that he had gained a reputation as a theologian in that country.
- c. It was in that year that John M’Laurin of Glasgow and James Robe of Kilsyth, two of the leading evangelical preachers in the Church of Scotland, began to correspond with him.
- d. In 1743, Edwards also began to correspond with William M’Culloch of Cambuslang.
- e. Thomas Gillespie of Carnock soon joined the correspondence in 1746.
- f. And most importantly, John Erskine in 1747.
 - (i) Erskine was part of the Scottish nobility – he was heading for the legal profession when the Lord converted him in his student days in Edinburgh.
 - (ii) Though his family was opposed to it, he entered the ministry at Kirkintilloch in 1744.
 - (a) He went to Culross in 1753.
 - (b) And finally to Edinburgh in 1758.
 - (c) Here he would exercise a tremendous influence until his death in 1803.
 - (iii) He was only 26 when he first wrote to Edwards.
 - (a) This correspondence lasted not only through Edwards life,
 - (b) He continued it with Edwards’ sons and then a grandson, for a total of 56 years.
 - (iv) Erskine also became the first editor of Edwards’ books and his most dedicated overseas promoter in Britain.

- (a) It was through this influence that William Carey brought one of Edwards' books – the Life and Diary of David Brainerd – with him to India in 1792,
 - (b) Becoming a link between Edwards and the missionary movement that began in Britain before the end of the 18th Century.
- g. That his communications with these Scottish evangelicals meant a great deal to him can be seen by the number and length of his letters, as also his determination to correspond, despite the difficulties.
- (i) In those days, there were no telephone calls, texts, emails, or even much of a postal service.
 - (ii) As much as a year could pass between the sending of a letter and the receiving of a reply.
 - (iii) To make matters worse, his friend, Thomas Prince, who received his return letters in Boston, often forgot that he had them.
 - (a) One time, Edwards had to explain to M'Culloch that his last letter,
 - (b) "Lay a long while at Mr Prince's in Boston before I received it... It seems he had forgotten that he had any such letter, and when I sent a messenger to his house, on purpose to inquire whether I had any letter lodged there for me from Scotland, he told him 'No,' when I suppose this letter had been long in his house. And I should probably never have had it at last, had not one of my daughters had occasion to go to Boston, who made a visit at the house and made a more full inquiry (1.xci)."
 - (iv) Though there were several obstacles, they didn't dissuade him from keeping up the communication.
 - (a) It was not only encouraging to Edwards, but it also yielded an important result: it established an international bond of prayer.
 - (b) The letters often ended with such things as, "Desiring that we may meet often at the Throne of Grace."
3. Concert for United Prayer.
- a. In October of 1744, a group of evangelical ministers in Scotland, the leaders of which were Edwards' correspondents, formed a union for the purpose of praying for the world-wide extension and prosperity of Christ's kingdom.
 - b. They decided that "some part of every Saturday evening and Sabbath morning, and the whole or part of the first Tuesday of every quarter (beginning the first Tuesday of November and at three month intervals thereafter), should be given to 'united extraordinary supplications to the God of all grace... earnestly praying to him that he would appear in his glory, and favour Zion, and manifest his compassion to the world of mankind, by an abundant effusion of his Holy Spirit on all the churches and the whole habitable earth, to revive true religion in all parts of Christendom and to deliver all nations from their great and manifold spiritual calamities and miseries, and bless them with the unspeakable benefits of the kingdom of our glorious Redeemer...' (2.282).
 - c. The news of this union reached John Wesley in England, who then suggested that the ministers of North America might also be invited to participate.

- (i) Writing to his Scottish correspondent (Lord Grange) on March 16, 1745, he asks, ‘Might it not be practicable to have the concurrence of Mr Edwards in New England, if not of Mr Tennent also, herein? It is evidently one work with what we have seen here. Why should we not all praise God with one heart?’”
 - (ii) By the time he had written his letter, either Robe or M’Culloch had already sent word of this union for prayer to Northampton.
 - (iii) When Edward’s reply was received in Scotland, it was immediately published in *The Christian Monthly History*, November, 1745.
 - (iv) In it, he wrote, “One thing that has been very joyful to me, that I have been informed of in the letters I have received from you, and my other correspondents, your dear neighbours and brethren, is that Concert that is come into, by many of God’s people in Scotland and England, for united prayer to God for the pouring out of his Holy Spirit on his church and the world of mankind. Such an agreement and practice appears to me exceeding beautiful, and becoming Christians; and I doubt not but it is so in Christ’s eyes. And it seems to me a thing peculiarly becoming us, in the state that things are in at the present day. God has lately done great things before our eyes, whereby he has shown us something of his wonderful power and mercy; but has withal so disposed things that events have tended remarkably to shew us our weakness, infirmity, insufficiency, and great and universal need of God’s help; we have been many ways rebuked for our self-confidence, and looking to instruments, and trusting in an arm of flesh, and God is now shewing us that we are nothing, and letting us see that we can do nothing.... It is apparent that we can’t help ourselves, and have no where else to go, but to God, 2 Chron, 20:12, ‘*We know not what to do; our eyes are upon thee.*’”
 - (v) Edwards goes on to say that he had taken many of the letters he received from Scotland into the pulpit with him to read to his people, “using many arguments with them to comply with the thing proposed.”
- d. Initially, the response was poor in Northampton and the neighboring communities.
- (i) Edwards, however, convinced of its important, continued to hold the proposal before his congregation.
 - (ii) He wrote to John M’Laurin on May 12, 1746, who was the primary promoter of this union in Scotland, “With respect to the Concert for Prayer for the pouring out of the Spirit of God, the people of this town have of late more generally fallen in with it. Before the last quarterly season, I preached on a subject tending to excite to the duty of united prayer for a general outpouring of the Spirit.... What was delivered seemed to have a great influence on the congregation and the first Tuesday of February last was pretty generally observed, in whole or part, as a day of prayer, in private societies, for the forementioned blessing.”
 - (iii) The next year, on February 3, 1747, during a Tuesday lecture, he dealt again with this theme from Zechariah 8:20-22, “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....

- e. Edwards' Humble Attempt.
- (i) In Scotland, the "Concert for United Prayer," which was originally set for two years, was renewed for seven more in 1746.
 - (ii) A short memorial to explain its purpose was drawn up by the Scottish ministers, and about 500 copies were sent to New England.
 - (iii) In February, 1747, Edwards determined to explore the theme of his Zechariah sermon more fully. By the time he wrote to William M'Culloch on September 1747, his work was done.
 - (a) He wrote, "The propagation of it is but slow, but yet so many do fall in with it, and there is that prospect of its being further spread, that it is a great encouragement to me. I earnestly hope, that they that have begun extraordinary prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit of God, and the coming of Christ's kingdom, will not fail, or grow dull and lifeless, in such an affair but rather that they will increase more and more in their fervency. I have taken a great deal of pains to promote this concert here in America, and shall not cease to do so, if God spares my life, as I have opportunity, in all ways that I can devise. I have written largely on the subject, insisting on persuasions, and answering objections; and what I have written is gone to the press (1.xci)."
 - (b) It was slow at the printers, but it finally appeared in January, 1748, with the title, *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.*
 - (1) In its first edition, it was about 168 pages long.
 - (2) Samuel Miller writes, "Instead of making his *Humble Attempt* a pamphlet of twenty or thirty pages, as most men would have done, he made it a volume; rich, instructive, carefully reasoned and of permanent value.... On all subjects, he wrote, not for his contemporaries alone, but for posterity."
 - (3) Edwards intended to promote earnest prayer, but he did so in a biblical framework. He saw in Scripture that,
 - (A) The kingdom advances when the power of the Holy Spirit accompanies the Gospel.
 - (B) And it has by no means reached its full scope, for "a very great part of the world is but lately discovered and much remains undiscovered to this day" (2.286).
 - (C) Scripture indicates that there is a far greater day coming.
 - (4) Edwards first reviews the biblical passages dealing with the subject, then concludes,
 - (A) "The Apostle, in the 11th of Romans, teaches us to look on that great outpouring of the Spirit, and ingathering of souls into Christ's kingdom, in those days, first of the Jews and then of the Gentiles, to be but as the first-fruits of the intended harvest, both with regard to Jews and Gentiles, as a sign that all should in due time be gathered in... the Apostle speaks of the fulness of both Jews and Gentiles, as what shall hereafter be brought in, distinctly from the ingathering from among both, in those

- primitive ages of Christianity.... These things plainly show that the time is coming when the whole world of mankind shall be brought into the church of Christ; the fulness of both, the whole lump....” (2.286).
- (B) Edwards believed this final period, which would be one of world-wide blessing, would come after the conversion of Israel.
- (C) This, for Edwards, is the latter day glory or the millennium of Revelation 20.
- (5) Edwards had expressed some hope earlier (in a work published in 1743) that the revival might be leading up to this glorious age. “It is not unlikely that this work of God’s Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or, at least, a prelude of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture” (1.381).
- (A) “What is now seen in America, and especially in New England may prove the dawn of that glorious day” (1.383).
- (B) Chauncy had accused Edwards of teaching that the millennium had begun. But that’s not what he said, only that the revival *could* be the forerunner of that great time.
- (C) In his Humble Attempt, he expresses the same belief, “That the Spirit of God has been of late so wonderfully striving with such multitudes – in so many different parts of the world and even to this day in one place or other continues to awaken men – is what I should take encouragement from that God was about to do something more glorious, and would, before he finishes, bring things to a greater ripeness, and not finally suffer this work of his to be frustrated and rendered abortive by Satan’s crafty management. And may we not hope that these unusual commotions are the forerunners of something exceeding glorious approaching, as the wind, earthquake, and fire at Mount Sinai, were forerunners of that voice wherein God was in a more eminent manner?” (2.294).
- (D) Edwards did not believe that one had to calculate the date when these future blessings were to begin in order to pray for them.
- (E) The fact that there was so much unfulfilled prophecy was enough.
- (6) There was at least one other reason he took up this subject.
- (A) He knew there were certain views some entertained that actually discouraged prayer.
- (B) A number believed that the darkest hour of the church – symbolized by the slaying of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 – was still to come, and that the millennium of Revelation 20 was still a long ways off.
- (C) Edward argued that the two witnesses were already fulfilled in the desolation of the pre-Reformation church.
- (D) He held to the same view of Moses Lowman (1682-1752) that they were currently at the pouring out of the sixth vial (Rev. 16:12).

- (E) He was however critical of Lowman's date-setting, particularly his argument that the end of Antichrist's reign would not be until after the year 2000.
 - (F) He urges that instead of expecting these things to happen at one stroke, we should expect them to happen more gradually.
 - (G) Murray writes, "The overthrow of unbelief in Christendom, the conversion of the Jews, and the full enlightenment of all Mahomedan and heathen nations, will not, he asserts, be accomplished 'in one great conflict' (2.306). Rather such great things will come to pass, in answer to prayer, through successive revivals – a succession in which the Awakening of 1740 played its own notable part.
 - (H) "Thus, he argues: 'If God does not grant that greatest of all effusions of his Spirit so soon as we desire... there will be all reason to hope that we shall receive some blessed token of his acceptance. If the fall of mystical Babylon, and the work of God's Spirit that shall bring it to pass, be at several hundred years' distance, yet it follows not that there will be no happy revivals of religion before that time, which shall be richly worth the most diligent, earnest, and constant prayer'" (2.310).
- (7) From this it's clear that Edwards held to the historicist interpretation of Revelation, which has largely been rejected today.
- (A) Even so, the Humble Attempt is still an important work.
 - (B) Edwards believed the Gospel would advance "throughout all parts of Africa, Asia, America and Terra Australis" (2.306), and it did.
 - (C) Murray writes, "It is arguable that no such tract *on the hidden source of all true evangelistic success, namely, prayer for the Spirit of God*, has ever been so widely used as this one. In the 1820's, over seventy years later, when for the first time world-wide missionary endeavour was becoming a reality, S. E. Dwight could speak of his grandfather's book as having, 'through the Divine blessing... exerted an influence, singularly powerful, in rousing the church of Christ.' Unquestionably Edwards' words were used to implant his own faith in the world-wide success of the gospel in others, and this conviction, Dwight could say, 'has been a prime cause of the present concentrated movement of the whole church of God to hasten forward the reign of the Messiah'" (1.xciii).
- (iv) Edwards saw the unity in prayer that was experienced by both sides of the Atlantic as a gracious act of God.
- (a) The problems that were present in the Great Awakening and that followed were all part of God's plan so that the church might learn to wait on God alone *in prayer*.
 - (b) These difficulties didn't weaken Edwards's faith, but strengthened it.
 - (1) He knew that even though he didn't see any present success that was no indication of what God ultimately intended to do.

- (2) He wrote to one of his Scottish correspondents, “Jacob and the woman of Canaan met with great discouragements while they were wrestling for a blessing, but they persevered and obtained their request.”
4. And that brings us to what we can do today to promote revival.
- a. Even though we may not see the success of the Gospel today,
 - (i) That is no indication
 - (ii) Of what the Lord ultimately intends to do.
 - b. Perhaps we can also find encouragement in Edwards’ book, *An Humble Attempt*.
 - (i) It’s clear that the key to advancing the kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit.
 - (ii) It’s also quite clear that the way to get the Spirit’s help is through pray.
 - (iii) But only that prayer which is offered in faith prevails with God.
 - (iv) If we are to pray with faith, we must have Scripture promises to plead.
 - (v) Edwards believed there were many.
 - c. Let’s consider the opening statements of his book:
 - (i) First, the passage it’s based on, Zechariah 8:20-23, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘*It will yet be* that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one will go to another, saying, “Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go.” So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.’ Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you”’” (Zech. 8:20-23).
 - (ii) “In this chapter we have a prophecy of a future glorious advancement of the church of God; wherein it is evident, that something further is intended than ever was fulfilled to the *Jewish* nation under the Old Testament. For here are plain prophecies of such things as never were fulfilled before the coming of the *Messiah* [and] particularly, what is said in the two last verses in the chapter, of *many people and strong nations worshipping and seeking the true God*; and of so great an accession of *Gentile* nations to the church of God, that by far the greater part of the visible worshippers 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 anything, from the time of the prophet Zechariah to the coming of Christ, to answer this prophecy. It can have no fulfillment, but 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, so often foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament, and by the prophet Zechariah in particular, in the latter part of his prophecy. It is most probable, that what the Spirit of God has chiefly respect to, is that *last* and greatest enlargement and most glorious advancement of the church of God on earth [and] in the benefits of which especially the Jewish nation were to have a share, a very eminent and distinguished share.
 - (iii) “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 Isa. 60:2-4,

“The Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee: and the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see; all they gather themselves together, they come to thee.” That whole chapter, beyond all dispute, has respect to the most glorious state of the church of God on earth. So Isa. 66:8, “Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Shall a nation be born at once?” verse 10, “Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her.” Verse 12, “I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream.” – Micah 4:1, etc., “But in the last day it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills, and people shall flow unto it; and many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob. — And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” See also Isa. 2 at the beginning. — There has been nothing yet brought to pass, in any measure, to answer these prophecies. And as the prophecy in my text, and the following verse, agrees with them, so there is reason to think it has a respect to the same times. And indeed there is a remarkable agreement in the description given throughout the chapter, with the representations made of those times elsewhere in the prophets. . . .

- (iv) “So that however the prophet, in some parts of this chapter, may have respect to future smiles of heaven on the Jewish nation, lately returned from the Babylonish captivity, and resettled in the land of Canaan, in a great increase of their numbers and wealth, and the return of more captives from Chaldea and other countries, etc. yet the Spirit of God has doubtless respect to things far *greater* than these, and of which these were but faint resemblances. We find it common in the prophecies of the Old Testament, that when the prophets are speaking of divine favors and blessings on the Jews, attending or following their return from the Babylonish captivity, the Spirit of God takes occasion from thence to speak of the incomparably greater blessings *on the church*, that shall attend and follow her deliverance from the spiritual or mystical Babylon, of which those were a type; and then speaks almost wholly of these latter and vastly greater things, so as to seem to forget the former.
- (v) “And whereas the prophet, in this chapter, speaks of God *bringing his people again from the east and west to Jerusalem* (Zech. 8:7, 8) *and multitudes of all nations taking hold of the skirts of the Jews*; so far as this means literally that nation of the posterity of Jacob, it cannot chiefly respect any return of the Jews from Babylon and other countries, in those ancient times before Christ; for no such things attended any such return. It must therefore have respect to the great calling and gathering of the Jews into the fold of Christ, and their being received to the blessing of his kingdom, after the fall of *antichrist*, or the destruction of mystical Babylon.”

d. Since it's impossible to pray in faith without a particular promise from the Lord,

- (i) It's important that we come to grips with the meaning of these passages,
 - (ii) And many others in Scripture.
 - (iii) Does the Lord intend to extend His kingdom beyond what we now see?
 - (iv) Does He intend to fill the earth with His glory?
 - (v) And move all nations to seek the Lord?
 - (vi) We may not necessarily agree that the fulfillment will involve ethnic Israel, but it's very likely that it will be the true Israel of God – the church.
- e. The church in Edwards' day strongly believed these prophecies looked forward to a great day for the church. Consider the comments an American editor wrote in the preface:
- (i) "The ruin of Satan's miserable kingdom, and the advancement of the universal and happy reign of Christ on the earth, were included, and hinted at, in the *sentence* denounced on the *serpent*, that *the seed of the woman should bruise his head*. What was a *terrible threatening to Satan*, in the surprised ears of *our first guilty parents*, implied a *joyful prophecy*, to keep them from despair, and enliven their hopes, for themselves and their descendants, of obtaining by *this seed of hers* an eternal triumph over him who had so sadly foiled them. And it is likely, that their hope and faith immediately arose, laid hold on the reviving prophecy, earnestly desired its happy accomplishment, and transmitted it to their posterity.
 - (ii) "But though this prophecy was at first only delivered in the form of a *threatening to Satan*, it was afterwards directly given in the form of a *promise to Abraham*, though still in general terms, that *in his seed should all the nations of the earth be blessed*. Yet this general promise was more clearly by degrees explained in the following ages, to mean a DIVINE KING, no other than the SON OF GOD, assuming *human nature* of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David; that should be born of a virgin in Bethlehem of Judah; and at first despised, abused, rejected, and put to death; but should rise to immortal life, ascend to heaven, and thence extend his blessed kingdom over all nations; not by outward force, but inward overcoming influence, by his *word* and *Spirit* making them *his willing people in the day of his power*; and reigning in glorious light and holiness, love and peace, forever: and the advancement of this universal and happy reign has been the earnest *desire* and *prayer* of the *saints* in all ages to the present day.
 - (iii) "But how great the honor, and how lively the encouragement, given in Scripture to those *their prayers*, by representing them as offered by CHRIST himself with the fragrant *incense* of his own merits and intercession, on the *golden altar before the throne*, and ascending together in one grateful perfume to GOD! And how cheering to every saint is that promise, *from the rising of the sun, even to the going down of the same, my name shall be great among the Gentiles, and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering!* How pleasing to God and all the *heavenly hosts* to see, as the sun goes round the globe, this grateful incense rising from every part on high! The more extensive and incessant are these prayers, ascending from the circle of the earth, the more does this blessed promise go into its desired fulfillment, and the holy God is more pleased and glorified. To promote the *increase* and *constancy* of these acceptable

prayers, is the great intention both of the pious *Memorial* of our reverend and dear *brethren*, in Scotland, and of the worthy *author* of this exciting *essay*. And this design we cannot but recommend to all who desire the coming of this blissful *kingdom* in its promised extent and glory, in this wretched world.”

- f. This is what the church believed, and so this is what they sought the Lord in prayer:
- (i) “In October, A.D. 1744, a number of ministers in Scotland, taking into consideration the state of God’s church, and of the world of mankind, judged that the providence of God, at such a day, did loudly call upon such as were concerned for the welfare of Zion, to *united extraordinary* applications to the God of all grace, suitably acknowledging him as the fountain of all the spiritual benefits and blessings of his church, and earnestly praying to him, that he would *appear in his glory*, and favor Zion, and manifest his compassion to the world of mankind, by an abundant effusion of his Holy Spirit on all the churches, and the whole habitable earth, to revive true religion in all parts of Christendom, and to deliver *all nations* from their great and manifold spiritual calamities and miseries, and bless them with the unspeakable benefits of the kingdom of our glorious Redeemer, and *fill the whole earth with his glory*. Consulting one another on the subject, they looked upon *themselves*, for their own part, obliged to engage in this duty; and, as far as in them lay, to persuade *others* to the same: and to endeavor to find out and fix on some *method*, that should most effectually tend to promote and uphold such extraordinary application to heaven among God’s people.”
 - (ii) They sought the Lord, and He answered them:
 - (a) But He did it in His time.
 - (b) Before the end of that century, the Lord began the great missionary movement in England, of which William Carey was part.
- g. So then, what can we do to promote the extension of God’s kingdom?
- (i) We can pray.
 - (a) We can pray diligently,
 - (b) And in faith,
 - (c) That the Lord would grant His Spirit,
 - (d) To accomplish what He promised in His Word,
 - (e) Remembering the encouragement of Edwards, “Jacob and the woman of Canaan met with great discouragements while they were wrestling for a blessing, but they persevered and obtained their request.”
 - (ii) And at the same time, we can do our best,
 - (a) To bring the Gospel to others,
 - (b) In a way they can understand,
 - (c) And feel.
 - (d) Relying on the work of the Holy Spirit,
 - (e) To bring that message home to their hearts.
 - (f) May the Lord give us the grace to do so.

Resources: Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*.

Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Attempt*.

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