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John Sutcliff and the Concert of Prayer

Michael A.G. Haykin

This year marks the bicentenary of the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society. Inevitably, as the story of this epoch-making venture is recounted, the name of William Carey (1761-1834) will be prominent. Given the key role played by Carey in the founding of this Society and the central place that he has since occupied in the evangelical mind, this prominence is completely understandable.

Yet, it would be quite disturbing to Carey himself, who, on his deathbed, rebuked the fledgling missionary Alexander Duff (1806-1878) for focusing attention on him and his achievements. "Mr. Duff," the dying Carey said with a gracious solemnity, "you have been speaking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey; when I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey—speak about Dr. Carey's *Saviour*."¹

It is also quite misleading to suppose that it was Carey's single-handed effort that brought about the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society and enabled him to accomplish all that he did in India from 1793 until his death over 40 years later. Carey was part of a close-knit circle of like-minded friends, without whom little of what he longed for would have been realized. Christopher Anderson (1782-1852), who was well acquainted with a number of Carey's close friends, maintained during Carey's lifetime that it was the "strong personal attachment" of close friends to one another that lay behind the "usefulness" of the Baptist Missionary Society: "Carey and [Joshua] Marshman and [William] Ward abroad; [John] Sutcliff, [Andrew] Fuller, and [John] Ryland and [Samuel] Pearce at home."²

It would require a book-length study to carefully delineate the way in which God used the friendship of these men to advance His kingdom, not only through this missionary endeavor, but also through their participation in the renewal of the Calvinistic Baptist cause after a period of lengthy decline during the mid-1700s. This article has a much more modest goal. It seeks to examine God's employment of one

of these friends, John Sutcliff (1752-1814), as a catalyst in the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society and more generally in the renewal of the Calvinistic Baptists at the end of the eighteenth century.

John Sutcliff: His Early Years

Sutcliff's early nurture in the Christian faith came through his parents, Daniel and Hannah Sutcliff, both of whom attended Rodhill End Baptist Church, not far from Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire.³ But it was not until Sutcliff was 17 that he was converted during a local revival in Wainsgate Baptist Church, where his parents worshiped on alternate weeks, since there was a service at Rodhill End only every other week. The pastor of the church, John Fawcett (1740-1817), had himself been converted through the preaching of George Whitefield (1714-1770) and, personally convinced of many of the emphases of the Evangelical Revival, he would in time become a powerful force for revival in the north of England. After a couple of years under Fawcett's watchful care, Sutcliff devoted two and a half years, from 1772 to May of 1774, to theological study at Bristol Baptist College. He then briefly served in two Baptist churches, one in Shrewsbury and one in Birmingham, before he entered upon what would be his life's ministry at Olney, Buckinghamshire in July 1775.

John Sutcliff began to study in earnest the writings of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) not long after he came to Olney. First introduced to the writings of Edwards by Fawcett, the works of this New England divine exercised a great influence in shaping Sutcliff's theology. It was Edwards's evangelical Calvinism which especially led him to the conviction that certain aspects of the High Calvinism which was then regnant in many Calvinistic Baptist churches were unscriptural. For instance, a number of Sutcliff's fellow pastors denied that it was the *duty* of sinners to believe in the Lord Jesus. They reasoned that since the Scriptures

ascribe repentance and faith to the working of the Holy Spirit, neither of these can be regarded as duties required of sinners. In practical terms, this meant that the preaching of these pastors omitted "the free invitations of the gospel" and thus "chilled many churches to their very soul."⁴ Sutcliff's good friend Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) would later recount his own experience of having grown up under such a ministry. According to Fuller his pastor, John Eve (d.1782),⁵ "had little or nothing to say to the unconverted."⁶ Edwards's writings particularly helped Sutcliff to be convinced of "the harmony . . . between the duty of ministers to call on sinners to repent and believe in Christ for salvation, and the necessity of omnipotent grace to render the call effectual."⁷ Sutcliff soon began to incorporate into his preaching these fresh insights regarding the relationship between human responsibility and divine grace. Some of his congregation, however, were deeply disturbed by what they considered to be a departure from the canons of "orthodoxy," and they began to absent themselves from the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. But Sutcliff was not to be deterred from preaching biblical truth, and "by patience, calmness, and prudent perseverance" he eventually won over all those in his congregation who stood opposed to his theological position.⁸

Sutcliff's commitment to Edwardsean Calvinism was shared by a number of other pastors in the geographical vicinity of Olney. In particular this included John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825) at College Street Baptist Church in Northampton, whom Sutcliff had met in the early 1770s, and Andrew Fuller at Kettering Baptist Church, whom Sutcliff first met in 1776 at the annual meeting of the Northamptonshire Association, to which the churches of all three pastors belonged. "A strong attachment to the same religious principles, a decided aversion to the same errors, a predilection for the same authors, with a concern for the cause of Christ at home and

abroad"⁹ bound these three men together in a friendship which soon began to make its presence felt in the affairs of the Northamptonshire Association.

Jonathan Edwards and the Concert of Prayer

In the spring of 1784, Ryland shared with Sutcliff and Fuller a treatise of Edwards which had been sent to him by the Scottish Presbyterian minister John Erskine (1721-1803). When Erskine was in his mid-twenties he had entered into correspondence with Edwards, and long after Edwards's death in 1758 he had continued to uphold Edwards's theological perspectives and to heartily recommend his books. Well described as "the paradigm of Scottish evangelical missionary interest through the last half of the eighteenth century,"¹⁰ Erskine regularly corresponded with Ryland from 1780 until his death in 1803, sending him not only letters, but also, on occasion, bundles of interesting books and tracts which he sought to promote. Thus it was in April 1784 that Erskine mailed to Ryland a copy of Edwards's *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* (henceforth referred to as the *Humble Attempt*).

This treatise had been inspired by information Edwards received during the course of 1745 about a prayer movement for revival which had been formed by a number of Scottish evangelical ministers, including such regular correspondents of Edwards as John McLaurin (1693-1754) of the Ramshorn Church, Glasgow, William McCulloch (1691-1771) of Cambuslang, James Robe (1688-1753) of Kilsyth, and Erskine, then of Kirkintilloch. These ministers and their congregations had agreed to spend a part of Saturday evening and Sunday morning each week, as well as the first

Tuesday of February, May, August, and November, in prayer to God for "an abundant effusion of His Holy Spirit" so as to "revive true religion in all parts of Christendom," to "deliver all nations from their great and manifold spiritual calamities and miseries," and "fill the whole earth with His glory."¹¹ This "concert of prayer" ran initially for two years and then was renewed for a further seven. When Edwards was sent information regarding it, he lost no time in seeking to implement a similar concert of prayer in the New England colonies. He encouraged his own congregation to get involved and also communicated the concept of such a prayer union to neighboring ministers whom he felt would be receptive to this idea. Although the idea initially met with a poor response, Edwards was not to be put off. In a sermon given in February 1747 on Zechariah 8:20-22, he sought to demonstrate how the text supported his call for a union of praying Christians. Within the year a revised and greatly expanded version of this sermon was ready for publication as the *Humble Attempt*.

The *Humble Attempt* is divided into three parts. The first section opens with a number of observations on Zechariah 8:20-22 and then goes on to provide a description of the origin of the concert of prayer in Scotland. From the text in Zechariah, Edwards infers that:

There shall be given much of a spirit of prayer to God's people, in many places, disposing them to come into an express agreement, unitedly to pray to God in an extraordinary manner, that He would appear for the help of His church, and in mercy to mankind, and pour out His Spirit, revive His work, and advance His spiritual kingdom in the world, as He has promised.¹²

Edwards thus concludes that it is a duty well-pleasing to God and incumbent upon God's people in America to

assemble and, with “extraordinary, speedy, fervent, and constant prayer,” pray for those “great effusions of the Holy Spirit” which will dramatically advance the kingdom of Christ.¹³

Part II of the treatise cites a number of reasons for participating in the concert of prayer. Our Lord Jesus shed His blood and tears, and poured out His prayers to secure the blessed presence of His Spirit for His people.

The sum of the blessings Christ sought, by what He did and suffered in the work of redemption, was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, in His indwelling, His influences and fruits, is the sum of all grace, holiness, comfort and joy, or in one word, of all the spiritual good Christ purchased for men in this world: and is also the sum of all perfection, glory and eternal joy, that He purchased for them in another world.¹⁴

Therefore, Edwards rightly concludes:

If . . . this is what Jesus Christ, our great Redeemer and the head of the church, did so much desire, and set His heart upon, from all eternity, and which He died and suffered so much for, offering up “strong crying and tears” (Heb. 5:7), and His precious blood to obtain it; surely His disciples and members should also earnestly seek it, and be much and earnest in prayer for it.¹⁵

Scripture, moreover, is replete with commands, incentives, and illustrations regarding prayer for the Holy Spirit. There is, for example, the encouragement given in Luke 11:13: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” These words of Christ, Edwards observes, imply that prayer for the Holy Spirit is one request that God the Father is

particularly pleased to answer in the affirmative.¹⁶ Or one might consider the example of the early disciples who devoted themselves to “united fervent prayer and supplication . . . till the Spirit came down in a wonderful manner upon them,” as is related in Acts 1-2.¹⁷

Additional incentives to take part in the concert of prayer are provided by “the spiritual calamities and miseries of the present time.” Among the calamities which Edwards lists are King George’s War (1744-1748), the disastrous attempt by Charles Edward Stuart, the “Young Pretender,” to seize the British throne for his father only a couple of years before, in 1745-1746, the persecution of the Huguenots in France, the decay of vital piety, the deluge of vice and immorality, the loss of respect for those in vocational ministry, and the prevalence of religious fanaticism.¹⁸ Moreover, Edwards finds the drift of the intellectual and theological currents of his day a further reason for prayer, as men and women rejected *in toto* Puritan theology so as to embrace theologies shaped by the world-view of the Enlightenment.

Never was an age wherein so many learned and elaborate treatises have been written, in proof of the truth and divinity of the Christian religion; yet never were there so many infidels, among those that were brought up under the light of the gospel. It is an age, as is supposed, of great light, freedom of thought, and discovery of truth in matters of religion, and detection of the weakness and bigotry of our ancestors, and of the folly and absurdity of the notions of those that were accounted eminent divines in former generations; . . . and yet vice and wickedness did never so prevail, like an overflowing deluge. ’Tis an age wherein those mean and stingy principles (as they are called) of our forefathers, which (as is supposed) deformed religion, and led to unworthy thoughts of God, are very much discarded,

and grown out of credit, and supposed more free, noble and generous thoughts of the nature of religion, and of the Christian scheme, are entertained; but yet never was an age, wherein religion in general was so much despised and trampled on, and Jesus Christ and God Almighty so blasphemed and treated with open, daring contempt.¹⁹

Yet, Edwards also lists a number of events which show that, though his time is a “day of great apostasy,” that should move believers to united prayer just as much as distresses and calamities.²⁰ Edwards especially highlights such “wonders of power and mercy” as God’s granting of military success to the British against the French in the North American hemisphere, and various spiritual revivals on the European continent, in Great Britain, and among the New England colonies. In particular, these “late remarkable religious awakenings . . . may justly encourage us in prayer for the promised glorious and universal outpouring of the Spirit of God.”²¹

The beauty and benefits involved in a visible union for prayer is yet another motive Edwards gives for complying with his proposal. Unity, Edwards maintains, is regarded by the Scriptures as “the peculiar beauty of the church of Christ.”²² In support of this statement, Edwards refers his readers to the Song of Songs 6:9; Psalm 122:3 and Ephesians 4:3-6, 16. Union in prayer would also prove to be beneficial for the church in that it would tend to promote closer rapport between the members of different denominational bodies.

Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying one with and for another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment.²³

Part III, the longest portion of the *Humble Attempt*, is devoted to answering various objections to the idea of a

concert of prayer. These objections range from the charge that the concert is something previously unknown in the history of the church, and therefore suspect, to the assertion that certain eschatological conditions need to be fulfilled before God will answer prayer for such a rich outpouring of the Spirit as Edwards is pleading for. This latter objection launches Edwards into a detailed and lengthy exposition of what was essentially a Puritan perspective on history.²⁴

A significant number of congregations in America and Scotland observed the concert of prayer throughout the 1750s. Especially during the French and Indian War (1755-1760), the concert enjoyed “a considerable vogue among American Calvinists.”²⁵ In 1759, for instance, Robert Smith informed fellow Presbyterians in Pennsylvania that the concert of prayer would prove to be far more effective in hastening the “brightest period of the militant Church’s glory” than the military victories won by British forces.²⁶ Yet, as we shall see, the *Humble Attempt* would bear much of its greatest fruit long after the death of its author. As Iain H. Murray has noted, “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.”²⁷

The Prayer Call of 1784

Reading Edwards’s *Humble Attempt* in the spring of 1784 evidently had a profound impact on Ryland, Fuller, and Sutcliff. Fuller was to preach that June at the annual meeting of the Northamptonshire Association. On his way to the meeting at Nottingham, Fuller found that heavy rains had flooded a number of spots of the roads over which he had to travel. At one particular point the flooded area appeared so deep that Fuller was reluctant to continue. A resident of the area, who knew how deep the water actually was, encouraged him to urge his horse through the water. “Go

on, sir," he said, "you are quite safe." As the water came up to Fuller's saddle, Fuller began to have second thoughts about continuing. "Go on, sir," the man said again, "all is right." Taking the man at his word, Fuller continued and safely traversed the flooded area of the road. This experience prompted Fuller to preach on 2 Corinthians 5:7 at the Association meeting: "We walk by faith, not by sight."²⁸ During the course of this sermon, which Fuller entitled, "The Nature and Importance of Walking by Faith," Fuller clearly revealed the impression Edwards's *Humble Attempt* had made upon his thinking when he appealed thus to his hearers:

Let us take encouragement, in the present day of small things, by looking forward, and hoping for better days. Let this be attended with earnest and united prayer to Him by whom Jacob must arise. A life of faith will ever be a life of prayer. O brethren, let us pray much for an outpouring of God's Spirit upon our ministers and churches, and not upon those only of our own connection and denomination, but upon "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2).²⁹

At the same meeting, Sutcliff proposed that the churches of the Association establish monthly prayer meetings for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit and the consequent revival of the churches of Great Britain. This proposal was adopted by the representatives of the 16 churches at the meeting, and on the last page of the circular letter sent out that year to the churches of the Association there was a call for them "to wrestle with God for the effusion of His Holy Spirit."³⁰ After recommending that there be corporate prayer for one hour on the first Monday evening of the month, the call, most likely drawn up by Sutcliff, continued:

The grand object in prayer is to be, that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified. At the same time remember, we trust you will not confine your requests to your own societies [i.e. churches] or to your own immediate connection [i.e. denomination]; let the whole interest of the Redeemer be affectionately remembered, and the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of your most fervent requests. We shall rejoice if any other Christian societies of our own or other denomination will unite with us, and do now invite them most cordially to join heart and hand in the attempt.

Who can tell what the consequences of such a united effort in prayer may be! Let us plead with God the many gracious promises of His word, which relate to the future success of His gospel. He has said, "I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them, I will increase them with men like a flock" (Ezek. 36:37). Surely we have love enough for Zion to set apart one hour at a time, twelve times in a year, to seek her welfare.³¹

There are at least four noteworthy points about this Prayer Call. First, very much in evidence in this statement, as well as in the extract from Fuller's sermon, is the conviction that any reversal of the decline of the Calvinistic Baptists could not be accomplished by mere human zeal, but must be effected by the Spirit of God. As Sutcliff noted later in strongly Edwardsean language:

The outpouring of the divine Spirit . . . is the grand promise of the New Testament. . . . His influences are the soul, the great animating soul of all religion. These withheld, divine ordinances are empty cisterns, and spiritual graces are

withering flowers. These suspended, the greatest human abilities labour in vain, and the noblest efforts fail of success.³²

Then there is the catholicity that is recommended with regard to the subjects of prayer. As the Calvinistic Baptists of the Northamptonshire Association gathered together to pray, they were encouraged not to think simply of their own churches and their own denomination, but they were to embrace in prayer believers of other denominational bodies. The kingdom of God consists of more than Calvinistic Baptists! In fact, churches of other denominations, as well as Baptist churches in other associations, were encouraged to join with them in praying for revival.

Third, there is the distinct missionary emphasis of the Prayer Call. The members of the Association churches were urged to pray that the gospel be spread “to the most distant parts of the habitable globe.” Little did these Baptists realize how God would begin to fulfill these very prayers within the space of less than a decade.

Finally, the sole foundation for praying for revival is located in the Scriptures. Only one text, Ezekiel 36:37, is actually cited, but those issuing this call to prayer are aware of “many gracious promises” in God’s Word which speak of the successful advance of His kingdom. At first glance this passage from Ezekiel hardly seems the best text to support the Prayer Call. Yet, Edwards had cited this very verse in his *Humble Attempt* and said the following with regard to it:

The Scriptures don’t only direct and encourage us in general to pray for the Holy Spirit above all things else, but it is the expressly revealed will of God, that His church should be very much in prayer for that glorious outpouring of the Spirit that is to be in the latter days, and the things that shall be accomplished by it. God speaking of that blessed event (Ezek. 36), under the figure of “cleansing the house of Israel

from all their iniquities, planting and building their waste and ruined places, and making them to become like the Garden of Eden, and filling them with men like a flock, like the holy flock, the flock of Jerusalem in her solemn feasts” [vv. 33-38] (wherein He doubtless has respect to the same glorious restoration and advancement of His church that is spoken of in the next chapter, and in all the following chapters to the end of the book) he says, v. 37, “Thus saith the Lord, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them.” Which doubtless implies, that it is the will of God that extraordinary prayerfulness in His people for this mercy should precede the bestowment of it.³³

Here, Edwards interprets Ezekiel 36:37 in the light of the larger context of Ezekiel 37-48. According to Edwards, since these chapters speak prophetically of the latter-day glory of the church—a millennial period in which “love will abound, and glorifying God by word and deed will be characteristic”³⁴—then Ezekiel 36:37 must refer to the united prayers of God’s people that will usher in this glorious period of the church’s history. Edwards had directed his own congregation to “observe what you read [in the Scriptures]. Observe how things come in. Take notice of the drift of the discourse. . . .”³⁵ Here, in the *Humble Attempt*, he was practicing what he preached. Now, while Edwards’s particular interpretation of these passages from Ezekiel is open to debate, as Sutcliff later admitted,³⁶ the principle that he draws from Ezekiel 36:37 is not; namely, that preceding times of revival and striking extensions of Christ’s kingdom there invariably occur the concerted and constant prayers of Christians. It is clearly this principle which those who issued the Prayer Call of 1784 wanted to stress, although most of them probably concurred with Edwards’s postmillennial vision. The proof of this statement may be found in the fact that when Sutcliff brought out an edition of

Edwards's *Humble Attempt* in 1789, he stated in his "Preface":

By re-publishing the following work, I do not consider myself as becoming answerable for every sentiment it contains. An *Author* and an *Editor* are very distinct characters. Should any entertain different views respecting some of the *prophecies* in the inspired page, from those that are here advanced, yet, such may, and I hope will, approve of the general design.³⁷

Revival and Its Fruit

The Association meetings at which this Prayer Call was issued were held on June 2-3. At the end of that month, on June 29, the church which Sutcliff pastored in Olney resolved to establish a "monthly meeting for prayer . . . to seek for a revival of religion."³⁸ Two years later, Sutcliff gave the following progress report and exhortation regarding the prayer meetings that had been established in his own church and others in the Association:³⁹

The monthly meetings of prayer, for the general spread of the gospel, appear to be kept up with some degree of spirit. This, we hope, will yet be the case. Brethren, be not weary in well-doing, for in due time ye shall reap, if ye faint not. We learn that many other churches, in different, and some in distant parts of the land, and some of different denominations, have voluntarily acceded to the plan. We communicate the above information for your encouragement. Once more we would invite all who love truth and holiness, into whose hands our letter may fall, to unite their help. Let societies, let families, let individuals, who are friends to the cause of Christ unite with us, not only daily, but in a particular manner, at the appointed season.

As this text shows, Sutcliff, like his mentor Edwards, was

convinced that not simply the individual prayers of God's people presaged revival, but the prayers of God's people when they gathered together to pray in unison.⁴⁰ And, as Sutcliff went on to indicate, God was already answering their prayers by providing "an open door in many places, for the preaching of the gospel."⁴¹

The passing years did not diminish Sutcliff's zeal in praying for revival and stirring up such prayer. For instance, Ryland wrote in his diary for January 21, 1788:

Brethren Fuller, Sutcliff, Carey, and I kept this day as a private fast, in my study: read the Epistles to Timothy and Titus; [Abraham] Booth's charge to [Thomas] Hopkins; [Richard] Blackerby's Life, in [John] Gillies; and [John] Rogers of Dedham's Sixty Memorials for a Godly Life: and each prayed twice—Carey with singular enlargement and pungency. Our chief design was to implore a revival of godliness in our own souls, in our churches, and in the church at large.⁴²

And in 1789, the number of prayer meetings for revival having grown considerably, Sutcliff decided to bring out an edition of Edwards's *Humble Attempt* to further encourage those meeting for prayer. Measuring only six and one quarter inches long, and three and three-quarter inches wide, and containing 168 pages, this edition was clearly designed to be a handy pocket-size edition. In his "Preface" to this edition, Sutcliff reemphasized that the Prayer Call issued by the Northamptonshire Association five years earlier was not intended for simply Calvinistic Baptists. Rather, they ardently wished it might become general among the real friends of truth and holiness.

The advocates of error are indefatigable in their endeavors to overthrow the distinguishing and interesting doctrines of

Christianity; those doctrines which are the grounds of our hope, and sources of our joy. Surely, it becomes the followers of Christ, to use every effort, in order to strengthen the things which remain. . . . In the present imperfect state, we may reasonably expect a diversity of sentiments upon religious matters. Each ought to think for himself; and every one has a right, on proper occasions, to shew his opinion. Yet all should remember, that there are but two parties in the world, each engaged in opposite causes; the cause of God and of Satan; of holiness and sin; of heaven and hell. The advancement of the one, and the downfall [sic] of the other, must appear exceedingly desirable [sic] to every real friend of God and man. If such in some respects entertain different sentiments, and practice distinguishing modes of worship, surely they may unite in the above business. O for thousands upon thousands, divided into small bands in their respective cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods, all met at the same time, and in pursuit of one end, offering up their united prayers, like so many ascending clouds of incense before the Most High!—May He shower down blessings on all the scattered tribes of Zion!⁴³

In this text Sutcliff positions the Prayer Call of 1784 on the broad canvas of history, in which God and Satan are waging war for the souls of men and women. Prayer, because it is a weapon common to all who are “friends of truth and holiness,” is one sphere in which Christians can present a fully united front against Satan. Sutcliff is well aware that evangelicals in his day held differing theological positions and worshiped in different ways. He himself was a convinced Baptist—convinced, for instance, that the Scriptures fully supported congregational polity and believer’s baptism—yet, as he rightly emphasizes in the above “Preface,” such convictions should not prevent believers, committed to the foundational truths of Christianity, uniting together to pray for revival.

Hard on the heels of the republication of Edwards’s treatise came the events leading to the formation of the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen in 1792, later known as the Baptist Missionary Society. Included among the items recommended for prayer in the Prayer Call of 1784 had been “the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe.” As those who heeded the Prayer Call began to make this “the object of . . . [their] most fervent requests,” God began to answer: first, by providing a man with the desire to go and evangelize peoples to whom the name of Christ was completely unknown, namely, William Carey; and then, by giving other believers—among whom Sutcliff, Fuller, and Ryland were central—the strength and courage to support him as he went and labored.⁴⁴ Over the next four decades Carey’s example would spur numerous others to offer themselves for missionary service. Of these missionary candidates, a good number would be sent to Sutcliff to be tutored by him in a parsonage seminary which he opened at the close of the 1790s.

In 1794, two years after the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society, John Rippon (1750-1836), pastor of Carter Lane Baptist Church in Southwark, London, published a list of Calvinistic Baptist congregations and ministers in his *Baptist Annual Register*. Rippon estimated that there were at that time 326 churches in England and 56 in Wales, more than double the number which had existed in 1750.⁴⁵ He printed another list of churches four years later, according to which the numbers had grown to 361 churches in England and 84 in Wales.⁴⁶ Reflecting on these numbers, Rippon wrote: “It is said, that more of our meeting houses have been enlarged, within the last five years, and more built within the last fifteen, than had been built and enlarged for thirty years before.”⁴⁷

Rippon was not exaggerating. There was indeed steady

growth among the Calvinistic Baptists during the last four decades of the eighteenth century, but it was not until the final decade of the century that there was a truly rapid influx of converts.⁴⁸ It is surely no coincidence that preceding and accompanying this growth were the concerts of prayer that many churches had established in response to the Prayer Call of 1784.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, F. A. Cox, reflecting on the origins of the Society, stated that:

The primary cause of the missionary excitement in 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 the venerable 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.⁴⁹

From the vantage point of the early 1840s, Cox saw the Prayer Call of 1784 as pivotal in that it focused the prayers of Calvinistic Baptist churches in the Northamptonshire Association on the nations of the world, and thus prepared the way for the emergence of the Baptist Missionary Society and the sending of Carey to India. Yet he also notes that the "universal adoption" of the concert of prayer by churches beyond the ranks of the Calvinistic Baptist denomination had led to rich times of revival, when God poured forth upon these churches "copious showers of blessing." Later historians would describe this period of blessing as the Second Evangelical Awakening (1790-1830). Some of them,

like J. Edwin Orr and Paul E. G. Cook, would concur with Cox and rightly trace the human origins of this time of revival and spiritual awakening to the adoption of the concert of prayer by the Calvinistic Baptists in 1784.⁵⁰

However, in one area Cox's statement is somewhat misleading. In describing Sutcliff as "the venerable Sutcliff" he leaves the reader with an idyllic impression of the Baptist pastor. How sobering to find that this man, who was at the heart of a prayer movement that God used to bring so much spiritual blessing to His church, also struggled when it came to prayer. When Sutcliff lay dying in 1814 he said to Fuller: "I wish I had prayed more."⁵¹ For some time Fuller ruminated on this statement by his dying friend. Eventually he came to the conviction that Sutcliff did not mean that he "wished he had prayed more frequently, but more *spiritually*." Then Fuller elaborated on this interpretation by applying Sutcliff's statement to his own life:

I wish I had prayed more for the influence of the Holy Spirit; I might have enjoyed more of the power of vital godliness. I wish I had prayed more for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, in studying and preaching my sermons; I might have seen more of the blessing of God attending my ministry. I wish I had prayed more for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to attend the labours of our friends in India; I might have witnessed more of the effects of their efforts in the conversion of the heathen.⁵²

- 1 George Smith, *The Life of William Carey, Shoemaker & Missionary*, p. 303.
- 2 *The Christian Spirit Which Is Essential to the Triumph of the Kingdom of God*. pp.22-27, *passim*. London: 1824.
- 3 Comparatively little research has been done on the life or theology of John Sutcliff. There is a biographical sketch by Andrew Fuller attached to his funeral sermon for Sutcliff: "The Principles and Prospects of a Servant of Christ" [*The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Andrew Gunton Fuller and revised Joseph Belcher. Volume I (1845 ed.), pp.342-356. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988. Kenneth W. H. Howard, who was pastor of Sutcliff Baptist Church in Olney from 1949-1954, has written a fine biographical piece: "John Sutcliff of Olney," *The Baptist Quarterly*, 14, pp. 304-309, 1951-1952. More recently, I have written "Can We Pray and Work for Worldwide Revival? Revival—The Perspective of John Sutcliff (1752-1814)," *Reformation Today*, Issue No. 104, pp. 9-17, July-August, 1988, and an unpublished manuscript titled "A Habitation of God, Through the Spirit: John Sutcliff (1752-1814) and the Revitalization of the Calvinistic Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century," both of which examine aspects of Sutcliff's theology.
- 4 Susannah Spurgeon and J. W. Harrald, *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1:310.
- 5 For a brief autobiographical sketch of John Eve, see Kenneth A.C. Parsons, ed., *The Church Book of Independent Church (Now Pound Lane Baptist), Isleham, 1693-1805*, p. 255. Cambridge: Cambridge Antiquarian Records Society, 1984.
- 6 John Ryland, Jr., *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope, Illustrated in the Life and Death of Rev. Andrew Fuller* (2nd. ed.), p. 11. London: Button & Son, 1818.
- 7 Fuller, "Principles and Prospects" in *Works*, 1: 350.

- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 John Ryland, Jr., *The Indwelling and Righteousness of Christ No Security against Corporal Death, but the Source of Spiritual and Eternal Life*, pp. 35-36. These words are actually used by Ryland of his friendship with Fuller, but they can also be applied to the friendship between Sutcliff, Fuller, and Ryland. In the "Postscript" to this sermon, Ryland describes Sutcliff and Fuller as "my dearest brethren" (p. 47). In his *Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, Ryland states that he always regarded Fuller and "Brother Sutcliff, and myself, as more closely united to each other, than either of us were to any one else" (p. ix).
- 10 J. A. DeJong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea: Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-America Missions, 1640-1810*, p. 166. Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok N.V., 1970.
- 11 Stephen J. Stein, ed., "Humble Attempt," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 5:321. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1977.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 5:317.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 5:320.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 5:341.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 5:344.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 5:347-48.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 5:356.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 5:357-59.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 5:359.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 5:362.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 5:363. The inclusion of military and political events alongside those more specifically "religious" reveals Edwards's conviction that "God directs the course of history in intimate detail." Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context*, p. 231. New York/Oxford: Oxford

- University Press, 1991. Edwards and most of his fellow New England preachers had a “deep-seated conviction, nurtured over three New England generations, that if they did not know their history they did not know God.” Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, p. 136. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- 22 Edwards, *Humble Attempt*, 5:365.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 5:366.
- 24 For a brief overview of Edwards’s eschatological perspectives in the *Humble Attempt*, see Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, pp. 296-99. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.
- 25 Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, p. 336. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- 27 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 299.
- 28 Andrew Gunton Fuller, ed., *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 1:117.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 1:131.
- 30 John Ryland, Jr., *The Nature, Evidences, and Advantages of Humility*, p. 12.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 32 *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts Illustrated*, p. 12. London: W. Button, 1791.
- 33 Edwards, 5:348.
- 34 John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, p. 96. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987.
- 35 Stephen J. Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 70, p. 108, 1977.
- 36 See below.
- 37 “Preface” to Jonathan Edwards, *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, pp. iv-v.

- 38 “Baptist Meeting at Olney Minutes,” June 29, 1784.
- 39 *Authority and Sanctification of the Lord’s Day, Explained and Enforced*, pp. 1-2.
- 40 Crawford, *Seasons of Grace*, p. 229.
- 41 *Authority and Sanctification of the Lord’s Day*, p. 2.
- 42 Jonathan Edwards Ryland, “Memoir of Dr. Ryland” in *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the Late Revd. John Ryland, D.D. of Bristol*, 1:17. Abraham Booth (1734-1806) was a well-known Baptist minister in London. His charge to Thomas Hopkins, when the latter was ordained pastor of Eagle Street Baptist Church, London, contains the following admonition, which would not have been lost to Sutcliff and his friends: “With humility, with prayer, and with expectation, the assistance of the Holy Spirit should be daily regarded.” (“Pastoral Cautions: An Address to the Late Mr. Thomas Hopkins,” *The Works of Abraham Booth*, 3:178.) Richard Blackerby (1574-1648) and John Rogers (d. 1636) were both Puritan authors. The book of John Gillies (1712-1796), the son-in-law of John McLaurin, one of the initiators of the concert of prayer in Scotland, is his *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel, and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It*. This book is reputedly the earliest history of revivals.
- 43 “Preface,” pp. iv-vi.
- 44 For the details, see especially Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey*, Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1991.
- 45 *The Baptist Annual Register*, 2:16,23. London: 1797.
- 46 *The Baptist Annual Register*, 3:40,42. London: 1801.

- 47 *Ibid.*, 3:40.
- 48 Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People. Itineracy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780-1830*, p. 38. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 49 *History of the Baptist Missionary Society, From 1792 to 1842*, 1:10-11. London: T. Ward & Co./G. & J. Dyer, 1842.
- 50 J. Edwin Orr, *The Eager Feet: Evangelical Awakenings, 1790-1830*, pp. 95, 191-92, 199. Chicago: Moody Press, 1975. Paul E. G. Cook, "The Forgotten Revival" in *Preaching and Revival*, p. 92. London: The Westminster Conference, 1984.
- 51 Fuller, "Principles and Prospects," 1: 344.
- 52 J. W. Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 443. London: 1816.

Author

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin serves as Professor of Church History at Central Baptist Seminary, Gormley, Ontario, Canada.