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Interpreting the Great Awakening

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In his poem, "The Preacher" (written in 1859), John Greenleaf Whittier describes the wistful feelings he had when observing from a distance the spire of the church under which George Whitefield was buried. The piece, written over one hundred years after the Great Awakening in New England, captures graphically the contrast between the glorious conditions that characterized Whitefield's preaching and the "flood of sin" that had set in like the "tide from the harbour bar" during Whittier's day.

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Long shall the traveller strain his eye
From the railroad car as it plunges by,
And the vanishing town behind him search
For the slender spire of the Whitefield Church,
And feel for one moment the ghosts of trade,
And fashion and folly and pleasure laid,
By the thought of that life of pure intent,
That voice of warning yet eloquent,
Of one on the errands of angels sent.¹

I recently visited the same spot celebrated by the nineteenth century poet, the Old South Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Like Whittier, I had feelings of regret, not only that there seems to be no great voice like Whitefield in the world today, but even more significantly, that we do not see the Holy Spirit convicting and converting sinners on such a wide scale now. We cannot, of course, bring back the past, nor should we even try. Still, studying the great works of God in history, even visiting the tombs of the saints, can be a profitable exercise if it turns us to God in prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the modern world.

Although it is difficult at times to sort out reality from exaggerations (or other distortions) in the revival phenomena of the day, there is certainly enough evidence to convince anyone that during the awakening era God worked

supernaturally both in Great Britain and in America. During these glorious days the realities of the eternal world were keenly felt. Sinners were brought under powerful conviction for sin and were converted by the thousands. The saints of God rejoiced. Churches doubled, tripled, and quadrupled overnight. An impartial observer had to be impressed with the moral and spiritual changes which were taking place. George Baxter, president of Washington Academy (now Washington and Lee University), visited Kentucky during the height of the Second Great Awakening and wrote to Archibald Alexander, "I found Kentucky the most moral place I had ever been in . . . a religious awe seemed to pervade the country."² During the awakenings infidel clubs closed down, houses of prostitution were boarded up, and other vexatious social problems were, at least temporarily, solved.³

The Great Awakenings are a fact of history. But what importance do the awakenings have in the development of the Christian church? What spiritual, social, or political causes produced them? Will they happen again, or are they related to certain conditions which will never be repeated, thus ruling out any recurrence? Perhaps we even need to ask, "Do we really want them to happen again?"

When we deal with such questions, for obvious reasons, opinions, theories, and biblical interpretation intrude into the picture. Hindsight is much better than foresight in such matters. Reviewing the past, especially the recent past, is not so difficult. Charting the future is a hazardous business. Still, anyone interested in the welfare of the church of God and our nation must be sensitive to the possibilities for the future. This essay will seek to deal with several issues which are involved in evaluating and interpreting the awakenings. First, we shall seek to assess the *importance* of the awakenings; second, we shall probe into the *causes* of the awakenings, and finally we shall seek to discover a reason for their *decline and departure*.

The Place of the Great Awakenings in Church History

From a historical standpoint, obviously the Christian faith is established primarily on the powerful works of God which are recorded in the New Testament. The greatest of these events was the resurrection of Christ. Other monumental occurrences in the New Testament period include the day of Pentecost, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and the establishment of the church at Antioch which began the world missionary movement.

When we go outside the biblical record we find many important events within and without the church which affected the course of Christianity. Included in this should be the conversion of two mighty figures in history, Constantine and Augustine. Constantine's change led to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, which was, to say the least, a mixed blessing. He brought about an unholy amalgamation of church and state which resulted in the incorporation of a variety of pagan policies and practices into the Christian church. Augustine's acceptance of the gospel is important because of his contribution to the history of theology. It was he who formulated clearly the concept of grace and outlined the system which has been foundational in the development of the Reformation, Puritanism, and the Christian movement in the Western world.

From an evangelical viewpoint, the years between Constantine's conversion and the Renaissance are truly the Dark Ages. It was the period when the church was corrupted by the introduction of unbiblical traditions, the assumption of infallible claims by the Bishop at Rome, and the establishment of the feudal system which tended to hold people in personal and spiritual bondage. The Protestant Reformation, which came in the wake of the cultural and intellectual development known as the Renaissance, was without a doubt one of the most important developments in the visible kingdom of Christ. It profoundly affected not only

the church of Jesus Christ but also the social, economic, and political structure of Western Civilization.

In my opinion, only one series of spiritual upheavals in history can be compared with the Protestant Reformation in so far as the long term effect upon the world is concerned, and that is the Great Awakening which took place, roughly speaking, in the hundre-year span between 1740 and the 1840s. My primary reason for saying this is *the connection between the Great Awakening and the American Republic*. Historians speak of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century as being *Christianized*. At that time, without a doubt, the Christian world view was the predominant one in America. Lord Bryce, an Englishman who studied carefully the American culture, could say without contradiction that "Christianity (in its evangelical Protestant form) is in fact understood to be, though not the legally established religion, yet the national religion."⁴

The connection between the Great Awakenings and the vibrant religious life of America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is well documented. Martin Marty says that the First Great Awakening "was perhaps the most extensive intercolonial event; that it reached into virtually every kind of community and crossroads; that its effects were at first profoundly unsettling to the established order; and that indirect lines connect many of its impulses to those of the War of Independence and nation-building endeavors."⁵ He also cites Perry Miller and Alan Heimert as arguing that the First Great Awakening began "a new era, not merely of American Protestantism, but in the evolution of the American mind,' that it was a watershed, a break with the Middle Ages, a turning point, a 'crisis.'"⁶ Virtually all modern historians (except, of course, those who write textbooks for secondary schools) acknowledge that the spiritual uplift which came through the widespread conversions of the Awakening era had a permeating effect on all aspects of

American life—political, social and cultural.

It was not, as is sometimes claimed, the United States Constitution which established America as a predominantly Christian country, but the Great Awakenings. The fact is that the U.S. Constitution does not even mention God, much less Jesus Christ or the Bible. Although there were evangelical believers, such as John Witherspoon, who had a leading role in the founding of the nation, the predominant figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were more deistic than evangelical. Jefferson particularly sympathized with the philosophies of French rationalism. The myth of the "Christian origins of the American Constitution" is something we must, in the interests of historical accuracy, dispel.

It was, of course, the American church which primarily sponsored the modern missionary movement. Although the awakenings had a counterpart in Great Britain, it was the rapidly growing American church, aided by the industrial and commercial strength of the new nation, which chiefly financed the spread of world-wide Christianity. In the United States the twin blessings of spiritual power and religious freedom were completely wedded for the first time. They obviously nourished each other. Spiritual awakenings inspired a longing for freedom, and freedom made spontaneous worship and evangelism possible in a way that had never before been known on earth.

What Caused the Great Awakenings?

Given the powerful impact that spiritual upheavals have had on the political order it is not surprising that historians of all stripes, secular and ecclesiastical, seek to trace their roots. Since such movements are related to the social changes of their times, many try to find purely natural sources for religious revivals. It was well known that the Reformation was patronized by powerful political forces

from which it benefited, thus some ascribe this movement solely to human causes. The Reformation was part of a breaking up of the feudal system, and it was in the interest of natural enemies of the Catholic church to lend aid to it. A good example of my observation is the protection afforded to Luther by Frederick, the elector of Saxony.

Typical of the purely human explanations for the First Great Awakening are those listed by William McLoughlin in his book, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform*. He sees five distinct explanations for the First Great Awakening. These are:

1. Social. McLoughlin points out that some argue "that after several generations of fairly stable communal life, based on the patriarchal social order carried over from Europe, a variety of demographic and psychosocial factors made this system inadequate to the needs of the expanding population."
2. Theological. Although Calvinistic churches had an important part in the Awakenings, particularly the first, some contend that during the Awakening the Calvinistic world view was being challenged by the European Enlightenment.
3. Commercial. This view contends that revivals were a part of the frontier movement which dispersed the population and provided new opportunities for individual enterprise.
4. Political. The revivals were related to the changed relationship of the colonies with the mother country after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.
5. Economic. McLoughlin also mentions the Marxist interpretation which states that as the Industrial Revolution advanced, the old feudal, patriarchal, agrarian system was replaced by a new bourgeois capitalist system.⁷

Who can deny that there were social, political, and economic issues and concerns which were interwoven with spiritual movements in colonial America? No Christian can

deny that there is a human, or natural, element in religious revivals. Even the beginnings of the New Testament church were related to certain socio-political events. The civil decadence of Israel, the expansionism of the Roman power, and the widespread dissemination of the Greek language provided God's chosen context in which He sent His Son as the Redeemer.

But as evangelical Christians, who believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord of human history, we cannot attribute anything as magnificent as a Reformation or an Awakening to merely human conditions. We must search for another explanation. The theological foundations of these movements, as well as the spiritual fruit that came from them, are phenomena that are not sought for by human nature. People will often turn to any remedy in preference to the acceptance of the true gospel and humiliation before its Author.

On an experiential level we can no doubt trace the Awakenings to the persistent prayers of believers who longed for God to intervene in the affairs of church and community. The Holy Club at Oxford, to which the Wesleys, James Hervey, George Whitefield, and others belonged, was a society dedicated to spiritual and theological reform. Jonathan Edwards continually stressed the need for a prayer covenant on the part of believers as a means to attaining genuine awakening. The "Hay Stack Prayer Meetings" at Williams College preceded the Second Great Awakening and the modern missionary movement in North America.

The years following the Revolutionary War were characterized by spiritual lethargy throughout the churches of the East, Middle States, and the South. In the new Western settlements barbarism, uncouthness, immorality, and drunkenness prevailed. Alarmed by these problems there went out from the pastors of this era a call for seasons of supplication for God to intervene with revival power. For example, the leaders of the Kehukee Baptist Association

issued a call for repentance, confession, and intercession for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

As early as the year 1778, a revival was greatly desired, and a fast was proclaimed, to humble ourselves before the Lord, and to solicit the throne of grace for a revival. In 1785 . . . another fast was proclaimed. . . . In 1794 the Association agreed to appoint the Saturday before the fourth Sunday in every month, a day for *prayer-meetings* throughout the churches . . . to make earnest prayer and supplication to Almighty God for a revival of religion.⁸

It was shortly after this that the spiritual and moral revolutions of the Second Great Awakening took place.

Ultimately, of course, we must attribute all the great spiritual revivals and reformations to the sovereign wisdom and good pleasure of God. It is obviously in the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ to establish, extend, and sustain His church with fresh outpourings of the Holy Spirit. When He is pleased to do this, there is no question that usually He creates the circumstances in which the need for it is perceived. The Scriptures tell us that God, in anticipation of the sending of the Redeemer, determined to “shake all nations” (Hag. 2:6). Even so, when God initiates major changes in the course of His kingdom in this world, He stirs up the social order. Still it is *God* who does it, whatever the *secondary* causes or instruments He is pleased to use.

Dr. Lewis Drummond, president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary at Wake Forest, North Carolina, commented recently on the sovereignty of God in giving revivals. He wrote in the *Florida Baptist Witness*:

Why did God come down in power to the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1734 and touch the ministry of the brilliant Jonathan Edwards to spawn America’s First

Great Awakening? Because God chose to do so! Why did our Lord reach down to a little Bible study group of Moravian brethren meeting on London’s Aldersgate Street in 1738 and transform John Wesley, who then was used by the Holy Spirit to birth the eighteenth-century revival in England? Because God chose to do so. Why did the Holy Spirit come mightily on Barton Stone in 1801 at the Cane Ridge Meeting House in Bourbon County, KY that July weekend and explode into America’s Second Great Awakening which wove the deep south’s ‘Bible Belt?’ Because God chose to do so!⁹

Why Did the Awakening Era End?

There was a break of about one-half a century between the two Great Awakenings. But for our purposes we can consider the hundred-year period between the 1740s and the 1840s “The Revival Era.” If we include the prayer revival of 1857-59 as another awakening of this type, we can extend the period about 20 years. Either way, by any method of calculation, it has been over 130 years since a powerful, far-reaching, spiritual awakening has come to America. Why is this? What are we to make of this absence of awakenings?

Let me begin by saying that the decline in the Awakenings follows the pattern which has followed every great work of God in human history. Look how soon the nation of Israel turned away from God after the deliverance from Egypt, the establishment of the kingdom under David and Solomon, and the victories under Elijah. Consider just how soon after the apostolic era that theological and spiritual corruption devastated the Christian church. Consider how quickly the theological foundations established in the Protestant Reformation were eroded soon after its great leaders, Martin Luther and John Calvin, were dead.

Perhaps we can simply fall back on the sovereignty of God as the ultimate cause of the decline of such periods. After all, if revivals come, as Drummond says, simply be-

cause God chooses to send them, then logically we must say that God simply chooses not to send them when they do not come. Yet in light of the fact that God works through human means and that there are secondary causes for revival and reform, we can certainly inquire as to what the human factors might be in why there has been no wide-scale revival over the past 130 years.

Can we say that there simply has not been any *desire* on the part of believers in the past 130 years? Can we say that the saints have not prayed for, or prayed enough, or prayed in faith? This would be most difficult to prove. My own impression, based on the reading of current periodicals, as well as personal correspondence and conversation, is that there has been, particularly so in recent years, a great renewal of emphasis on prayer for revival. Many classic books on revival have been and are being reprinted. Names such as Edwards, Whitefield, and Nettleton are becoming familiar to modern Christian readers. This seems to me, at least, to point toward an increased desire on the part of believers for a fresh awakening in our generation. The magazine, *Herald of His Coming*, seems to be devoted almost exclusively to meeting the conditions of God for revival. This particular magazine, which now has a worldwide circulation, continually presses upon Christian believers confession, fasting, and prayer for revival. In fact, the July 1991 edition boldly proclaims, "1991—A Year of Fasting and Prayer for Revival."

Can we trace the lack of evangelical awakening to theological causes? Has God withheld the powerful outpouring of His Spirit because the true gospel has not been preached or because His name has not been honored by adherence to biblical truth? What is the answer to this question? Certainly we know that the evangelical church in America has been seriously hampered at times by heresy and compromise. Following the Civil War many of the theological

underpinnings of the main line denominations were removed through liberal views of the Scriptures, God, and salvation. Of course there can be no true evangelism or missionary zeal, much less real revival, when the spiritual dynamics of the New Testament message are removed.

Still, it remains true in many places that pastors have faithfully, diligently, hopefully proclaimed the true gospel, yet without spiritual awakenings, at least in the sense that we are speaking of in our consideration. God blesses His Word wherever it is taught and preached faithfully. Few, if any, instances exist where a truly God-honoring ministry does not bear fruit. But the point is this: Orthodox doctrine, preached powerfully and effectively, does not in itself guarantee revival from God.

An interesting illustration comes to mind here. It may serve to point out the dilemma with which I am dealing. It comes through the experience and testimony of one of the greatest biblical expositors in this century, the late David Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Great Britain. Dr. Lloyd-Jones began his pastoral ministry in his native Wales in the early part of this century and was privileged to witness there a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit, resulting in hundreds of real and powerful conversions. God eventually led him to London where for many years he occupied the pulpit of the famed Westminster Chapel. Here in the heart of the great metropolis, although he enjoyed a powerful ministry and saw many conversions, he never saw the kind of awakening he did in his native country. I have seen it noted that this was one of the great disappointments of his life, that he did not see revival in the heart of London.

Lloyd-Jones was, without a doubt, one of the foremost authorities on the subject of revival in our century. He preached, lectured, and wrote extensively on this subject. It was a profound burden to his spirit. His views on revivals carry great weight, including explanations for why they

have declined in our age.

In a lecture Lloyd-Jones delivered titled "Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey," he addressed this matter. He gave this lecture to the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference in connection with the one-hundredth anniversary remembrance of the 1859 revival. He defines revival, gives a brief historical survey of the subject, and then takes up the matter of the waning of true revivals. With his surgeon's skill he cuts to the roots of the departure of the revival phenomenon. He cites as reasons for their departure:

1. The decline in Reformed theology. He says, "The whole Modernist movement that had started in the forties of the last century gained great momentum in the sixties. It increased at an alarming speed, and the Reformed theology in particular fell into the background. Until that date—speaking at any rate for Nonconformity—the prevailing theology was almost entirely Calvinistic, apart from that of the Methodist bodies. But there was a very sad decline and sudden waning of all of that. The change took place very rapidly, and those who are familiar with the life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon will know how he not only saw the fact but deeply regretted it and bemoaned it."¹⁰

2. The influence of the writings of Charles G. Finney. Lloyd-Jones comments on this point, "Finney's whole outlook and teaching seem to have become a governing factor in the outlook of the church. It has led to the notion of what we call 'evangelistic campaigns.' Finney is the man of all men who is responsible for the current confusion with regard to this matter."¹¹

As is well known, Finney contended that revivals are not miraculous gifts of a sovereign God, but rather are direct and inevitable consequences of the proper use of certain means. In other words, if we do certain things correctly, then revival must occur. This humanistic outlook on revival

is connected with theological shifts of the mid 1800s. Historians have written extensively concerning these changes. McLoughlin says that revivals were "at first spontaneous, but, since 1830 routinized."¹² Clifton Olmstead discusses the debate on the frontier on the issue of divine sovereignty and free will. He writes, "On the whole the debate went rather badly for Calvinism. Concepts of an aristocratic God who determines all things in His creation were not in accord with the democratic and optimistic ideas of the frontier mind."¹³ But back to the analysis of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

3. Intellectualism. The churches began to demand an educated clergy, and this was itself commendable. But as Lloyd-Jones says, "It does seem to be the case in practice that as men become more and more learned they tend to pay less and less attention to the spiritual side of things... I have known this very thing in my own life. Unconsciously one can become so interested in the purely intellectual aspect of Christianity, and in learning and understanding and knowledge, as to forget the Spirit. I am therefore putting it simply as a possibility for consideration that perhaps the increase in theological seminaries may have been a factor in discouraging people from thinking about revival."¹⁴

4. Increasing lack of interest in the subject of revival. In 1959 Lloyd-Jones lamented the fact that even in Reformed circles there was an antagonism toward reflection and discussion concerning awakenings. He noted that William Sprague's *Lectures on Revival*, which had just been published, was not selling well. He also comments on the fact that not only dispensational Calvinists such as Lewis Sperry Chafer did not discuss the subject of revival in his chapter on pneumatology, but even Charles Hodge did not seem interested either. As to why, Lloyd-Jones's answer was that Hodge did not think of the church in terms of a concrete situation but in terms of "great abstract systems of truth."¹⁵

This was written over 30 years ago. I believe now that the situation has changed considerably.

5. Lloyd-Jones mentions also the influence of the Puritans and the Plymouth Brethren as militating against concern for revival. He notes that the Puritans did not discuss the subject (and as usual he discusses why they did not). As for the Plymouth Brethren, they taught that Christians should not pray for the power of the Holy Spirit since the Spirit had already come once and for all at Pentecost. They reasoned that since the Spirit was poured out once and for all it is useless to pray now for the power of the Spirit to *come* once again.

Lloyd-Jones then gives an interesting discussion as to why Calvinistic preachers are apathetic about the subject of revival. His reasons are as follows:

1. They, like all fundamentalists, have been occupied with defending the faith, and thus are distracted from a more positive emphasis.
2. The fear of seeming to be too emotional.
3. An overreaction to Pentecostalism.
4. The reasoning that since Arminians have been involved in revivals they must not be all that great. "If men like Wesley and Finney and other Arminians can be involved in revival and used in it, well, we ought to be suspicious of revival." He blasts this objection as thoroughly wrong-headed because it fails to recognize that God is sovereign in whom He uses in revival. To buttress his case he points out that "George Whitefield received his baptism of power in 1737, but did not become a Calvinist in his theology until about 1739, when he was out in America."¹⁶ The same is true in the case of Howell Harris.

Lloyd-Jones concludes this lecture by giving some good, sound, pastoral counsel to those who are laboring and praying for revival. First, he reminds us that we are not to despise the ordinary or regular work of the Holy Spirit in the

church. He cautions against two extremes: giving all of our attention to revivals and being satisfied with nothing else, or never praying for or expecting God to intervene in the extraordinary movements of revival.

Second, he encourages modern believers to simply press on and be patient in prayers for revival. He quotes George Smeaton who said, "As to the peculiar mode of praying, we may say that in every season of general awakening the Christian community waits just as they waited for the effusion of the Spirit, with one accord in prayer and supplication in the interval between the Ascension and Pentecost. No other course has been prescribed; and the church of the present has all the warrant she ever had to wait, expect, and pray."¹⁷

There have been, unquestionably, some very positive changes since Lloyd-Jones delivered this lecture some 30 years ago. There is a revival of Calvinistic literature in our generation as well as a growing number of pastors and churches who are firmly established in the doctrines of grace. Also, the republication of Jonathan Edwards's works, modern biographies of Whitefield and Nettleton, and related works are being used to stir up the people of God to seek a fresh visitation in our generation. I see more and more indications that believers in various denominational connections are praying for and expecting another true awakening. This is heartening! The Holy Scriptures are filled with promises that God will pour out His Spirit on the thirsty, and will reward earnest, believing prayer.

Will we see another wide-scale awakening? God alone knows. Some feel that the next event we should anticipate is the Second Coming, not a major revival. Certainly that is the ultimate solution to the spiritual problems of our planet. But until this glorious day comes, we should keep before us the goal of being the means of bringing about spiritual rebirth and reformation. Let us preach, pray, and trust God

for this heaven-given blessing. It would be nothing short of idolatry to trust in our own efforts to bring such a true revival, but it would be sinful neglect and gross presumption to expect it without the use of God's appointed means.

"How many of us," asks the late Lloyd-Jones, "have stirred ourselves up to take hold of God? How many?"

- 1 Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:508.
- 2 John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805*, p. 93.
- 3 There are many modern books on the First and Second Great Awakenings. Arnold Dallimore's *George Whitefield* is an important source. In my own, *God Sent Revival, the Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, I deal with the New England phase of the Second Great Awakening. Boles's book, cited above, is an excellent work on the same phenomena in the western and frontier settlements. A serious study of the awakenings should also include the writings of the primary participants in the revivals, such as those of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Also, *The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*, which gave an ongoing account of the marvelous revivals in the first decade of the nineteenth century, can be consulted with profit. It is published as *New England Revivals*, edited by Bennett Tyler, and reprinted by Richard Owen Roberts Publishers.
- 4 William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform*, p. 106.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. viii.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. viii.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, Boles, p. 34.
- 9 Lewis Drummond, "Revival and the Sovereignty of God," cited in *The Founders Journal*, Issue No. 5, p. 15.
- 10 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey," in *How Shall They Hear?* p. 41.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 12 *Op. cit.*, McLoughlin, p. xiii.
- 13 Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States*, p. 304.
- 14 *Op. cit.*, Lloyd-Jones, p. 42.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

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