

JONATHAN EDWARDS and the 1744 CONCERT FOR PRAYER

Derek Swann

In 1748 Edwards wrote a book, the fruit of a series of sermons delivered to his people at Northampton (N. America), bearing 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*". The sermons were based on Zechariah 8 vs 20-22 and Edwards explains that he was prompted to preach and then write on the subject because of the Scottish Concert for Prayer, 1744.

"In October 1744", he writes, "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 spiritual benefites and blessings of his church, and 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 inhabitable 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 unspeakable benefites of the kingdom of our glorious Redeemer, and fill the whole earth with his glory" [Edward' s Works Vol 2, p282].

He then goes on to give details of the 1744 Concert for prayer. It consisted of two major parts:

- a) The setting apart of some time on a Saturday evening and Sunday morning every week for prayer, "*as other duties would allow to everyone respectively*".
- b) The setting apart of the first Tuesday of November, February, May and August, either the whole day or part of the day, "*as persons find themselves disposed, or think their circumstances will allow: the time to be spent either in secret prayer or in private praying societies or in public meetings*".

Saturday and Sunday were chosen because "*these times being so near the time of dispensing gospel ordinances through the Christian world, which are the great means, in the use of which God is wont to grant his Spirit to mankind, and the principal means that the Spirit of God makes use of to carry on his work of grace, it may well be supposed that the minds of Christians in general will at these seasons be especially disengaged from secular affairs and disposed to pious meditations and the duties of devotion and more naturally led to seek the communications of the Holy Spirit and success of the means of grace.*"

Tuesday was chosen rather than Monday because some people had public prayers and a sermon on that day. It had also been suggested that if "*any were hindered from joining with others on the day agreed on, yet they would not wholly neglect bearing their part in the duty proposed, but would take the first convenient day following for that purpose*".

Information concerning the Concert was spread by personal conversation and private correspondence rather than by any formal paper, "*it was considered how this might give a handle to objections which they thought it best to the utmost to avoid in the infancy of the affair*". The Concert was to continue for two years, beginning the first Tuesday of November 1744.

In Scotland, Robert Wightman, an Edinburgh merchant, was informed of the proposed Concert for Prayer by James Erskine and, in replying to William McCulloch of Cambuslang, remarked, "*I am thankful to find myself disposed to join this society and providentially called to it. It is very much to my taste, on that very account that it is a secret one, and therefore, if you please, let me creep in amongst you at the throne of grace*". He then added, "*I wish a precise hour on Saturday evening and Sunday morning were fixed upon because it seems to me to be a material circumstance as it symbolises with celestial worship where such is the union of hearts that unity of voice and words is the natural effect of it*" [Edinburgh Christian Instructor Vol 2, 1839].

The driving forces behind the Concert were undoubtedly the Rev William McCulloch of Cambuslang, James Robe of Kilsyth and John Erskine of Glasgow.

But it seems beyond reasonable doubt that the man who did most to establish the Concert was Dr John MacLaurin described by John Brown as "*the most profound and eloquent theologian of the eighteenth century*". John Gillies, his son-in-law, describes him as "*the chief contriver and promoter of the Concert for Prayer*" [Edinburgh Christian Instructor Vol 2 1839].

He was born in Argyllshire in 1693 at Glenderule [Glendaruel] and studied philosophy at Glasgow University. His divinity studies were also at Glasgow as well as Holland and in 1723 he settled in a large Glasgow parish. Here his "*activity and zeal carried him through a great deal of work. His calls to the sick were frequent. He was often consulted by persons who were thoughtful about their eternal state. He preached once a month to the Highlanders living in Glasgow in their own language. He assisted in concerting measures for the regular maintenance of the poor and particularly, when the erection of the Glasgow Hospital met with considerable obstacles, he promoted this object with great diligence and had a chief hand in composing the printed account of that excellent foundation. In all the schemes for suppressing vice and impiety he was a principal mover and was no less active in carrying them into execution*" [MacLaurin's Works: Introductory Essay by John Brown].

However, his zeal for true, inward religion was even greater. "*About the year 1742 when numbers of people in different parts of the world became uncommonly concerned about their salvation*", writes John Brown, "*such an appearance engaged all his attention. He was at the greatest pains to be rightly informed about the facts; and having from these fully satisfied himself that it was the work of God, he defended and promoted it to the uttermost of his power. Nothing gave him so much joy as the advancement of vital religion. Being invited by the ministers in whose congregations the religious concern chiefly appeared [McCulloch and Robe], he cheerfully went and assisted them. He did not consult his own ease nor his reputation among many who would pass for wise and prudent men but sacrificed all to what he is as fully convinced was the work of God*".

MacLaurin was probably the first minister in Scotland to open up an active correspondence with New England men such as Cooper, Prince and, above all, Jonathan Edwards. The results of his correspondence he circulated freely to his religious friends in Scotland and in turn wrote to his American correspondents about the state of religion in Scotland. So much was his heart in the work that he met once a week with some of his Christian friends in Glasgow and neighbourhood for mutually communicating religious intelligence and to converse on divine subjects. Glasgow became "*an emporium of religious intelligence from the colonies*" [Revivals of the 18th century with sermons of Whitefield. D. Macfarlan p 222f].

It is more than likely that the 1744 Concert for prayer was prompted by some remarks made by Edwards in his work *"Some thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England" 1742*. *"I have often thought it would be very desirable, and very likely to be followed with a great blessing, if there could be some contrivance for an agreement of all God's people in America who are well affected to this work, to keep a day of fasting and prayer; wherein we should all unite on the same day, in humbling ourselves before God for our past long-continued lukewarmness and unprofitableness; not omitting humiliation for the errors that so many of God's people - though zealously affected towards this work - through their infirmity and remaining blindness and corruption have run into; and together with thanksgiving to God for so glorious and wonderful a display of his power and grace in the late outpourings of his Spirit, to address the Father of mercies, with prayers and supplications, and earnest cries, that he would guide and direct his own people, and that he would continue and still carry on this work, and more abundantly and extensively pour out his Spirit, and particularly on ministers ... I doubt not but such a thing as I have now mentioned in practicable [? impracticable] without a great deal of trouble. Some considerable number of ministers might meet together, and draw up the proposal, wherein a certain day should be fixed at a sufficient distance, endeavouring therein to avoid any other public day that might interfere with the design in any of the provinces, and the business of the day should be particularly mentioned"*.

In the same section Edwards writes: *"If the people of God at this day, instead of spending time in fruitless disputing, in talking about opposers, judging them, and animadverting upon the unreasonableness of their talk and behaviour, and its inconsistency with true experience, would be more silent in this way and open their mouths much more before God, and spend more time in fasting and prayer, they would be more in the way of a blessing. And if some Christians who had been complaining of their ministers and struggling in vain to deliver themselves from the difficulties complained of under their ministry, had said and acted less before men, and had applied themselves with all their might to cry to God for their ministers, had as it were risen and stormed heaven with their humble fervent and incessant prayers for them, they would have been much more in the way of success"*. [Jonathan Edwards Works Vol 1. p427].

All this Edwards suggested in 1742 and in 1744 the Concert for prayer began in Scotland.

News of the Concert spread. In Wales the matter was taken up at the Trevecca [?Trevecca] Association, March 29th, 1745. *"As a proposal was sent from Scotland to keep one day in every three months, beginning Nov 1st a day of prayers for two years and to meet every Sunday morning on account of the late work in England, Scotland, Wales and America, both to praise God for it and intercede and pray for its furtherance and to be humbled for the sins that attended it - we agreed to it - to keep the first of May next (the Quarter's end) and every Sunday morning with as many as we can have and also in private to give it a place in our hearts and time as much as we can every Saturday night and recommend it to others too."*

Wesley, who had read Edwards' Narrative of Surprising Conversions not long after his Aldersgate experience and reprinted the work in 1744, also was involved in the Concert. In a letter to the Rev James Erskine he wrote,

Newcastle March 16 1744-5:

Dear Sir,

I sincerely thank you for the transcript of Mr Robe's letter. It shows a truly Christian spirit. I should be glad to have also the note you mention touching the proposal for prayer and praise.

Might it not be practicable to have the concurrence of Mr Edwards in New England, if not 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?

Whoever agrees with us in that account of practical religion in 'The Character of a Methodist' I regard nor what his other opinions are; the same is my brother and sister and mother. I am more assured that love is of God, than that any opinion whatsoever is so. Herein may we increase more and more.

I am dear Sir,

Your most affectionate servant."

In August 1746, a few months before the two years ended, the Scottish brethren met to consider the future of the Concert and decided to renew it for a further seven years. An account of it was now printed and sent to brethren in England, Wales, Ireland and New England. (500 copies were distributed in almost every county in the province of the Massachusetts Bay, and also in several parts of Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, New York and New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Carolina and Georgia). It was at this point that Edwards added his own spiritual and intellectual weight to the Concert for prayer by producing his "*Humble Attempt*".

The godly David Brainerd fully supported the Concert. Edwards wrote of a conversation that he had with him just two months before Brainerd died: "*He seemed much to wonder that there appeared no more of a disposition in ministers and people to pray for the flourishing of religion through the world; that so little a part of their prayers were generally taken up about it, in their families and elsewhere; and particularly he several times expressed his wonder that there appeared no more forwardness to comply with the proposal lately made in a Memorial from a number of ministers in Scotland, and sent over to America, for united extraordinary prayer among Christ's ministers and people for the coming of Christ's kingdom; and he sent it as his dying advice to his own congregation that they should practise agreeable to that proposal.*" [Edwards' Works Vol II p381].

In a footnote Edwards adds: "*His congregation since this have with great cheerfulness and unanimity fallen in with this advice and have practised agreeably to the proposal from Scotland; and have at time appeared with uncommon engagedness and fervency of spirit in their meetings and united devotions pursuant to that proposal. Also the presbyteries of New York and New Brunswick since this have with one consent fallen in with the proposal as likewise some others of God's people in those parts.*"

On June 28th, 1751 Edwards wrote to John Erskine "*What if you dear Sir and other ministers in Scotland ... should now take occasion to inform ministers in the Netherlands of it (the Concert) and move them to come into it and join with us in our united and extraordinary prayers for an universal revival of religion*". [The Cambuslang Revival Fawcett. p226].

We know that in June 1754 at Glasgow the Concert was re-established for a third period, this time for another seven years. (Gillies Historical Collections Vol II p402 - footnote).

But Edwards' influence in the realm of united extraordinary prayer for an outpouring of the Spirit was not at an end. In April 1784 Dr John Erskine of Edinburgh, one of the early signatories of the Concert, sent a parcel of books to the Northamptonshire Baptist leaders (Andrew Fuller, John

Sutcliffe and John Ryland). One of the books it contained was Edwards' *Humble Attempt*, which was duly circulated among them. Fuller writes in his diary, May 11th, 1784 "*Devoted this day to fasting and prayer in conjunction with several other ministers who have agreed to spend the second Tuesday in every month to seek the revival of real religion and the extension of Christ's kingdom in the world. July 9th Some serious tenderness of spirit and concerned for the carnality of my heart for some days past. Read to our friends this evening a part of Mr Edwards' 'Attempt to promote prayer for the revival of religion', to excite them to like practice. Felt my heart profited and much solemnised by what I read. July 19th ... read some more Edwards on prayer as I did also last Monday night with sweet satisfaction.*"

In the June of 1784 at the Northamptonshire Association Fuller preached an impressive sermon 'On Walking by Faith' which was afterwards published and with it some notes of Fullers, "A few persuasives to 'A general union in prayer' for the revival of religion".

In it seven points are urged:

1. *Consider Christ's readiness to hear and answer prayer, especially on these subjects.*
2. *Consider what the Lord has done in times past, and that in answer to prayer...*
3. *Let the present religious state of the world be considered to this end ...*
4. *Consider what God has promised to do for his church in times to come ...*
5. *If we have any regard to the welfare of our countrymen, connexions and friends, let that stimulate us in this work ...*
6. *Consider that what is requested is so very small ...*
7. *And lastly; It will not be in vain, whatever be the immediate and apparent issue of it ...*

'Could we but heartily unite and make an earnest effort, there is great reason to hope great good might follow. Whenever these glorious outpourings of God's Spirit shall come, all over the world, no doubt it will be in answer to the prayers of God's people. But suppose we shall never live to see those days, still our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord. God would be glorified, and is this of no moment? It would convey this piece of intelligence to the world, that God has yet some hearty friends in it, who will continue to pray to him in the darkest times. But this is not all: our petitions may prove like seed in the earth, that shall not perish, though it may not spring up in our days. Thus the "prophets laboured, and the apostles entered into their labours" [John 4:38]; and what if we should be the sowers, and our posterity the reapers, shall we grudge at this?'

(Nine months prior to the 1784 Prayer Call a young man had been baptised and begun preaching, but was not yet a pastor, only 'a poor journey-man shoemaker'. His name? William Carey).

In 1785 the Northamptonshire Association resolved "*without any hesitation, to continue the meetings of prayer on the first Monday evening in every calendar month.*" In 1787 at Leicester the decision was renewed and at Warwick. Soon the Yorkshire Baptist Churches followed suit.

In 1789, to meet a growing demand, Sutcliff decided to issue Edwards' "*Humble Attempt*" and in the preface wrote: "*In the present imperfect state, we may reasonably expect a diversity of sentiments upon religious matters. Each ought to think for himself; and everyone has a right, on proper occasions, to show his opinions. Yet all should remember 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 of the other, may appear exceedingly desirable to every real friend of God and man. If such in some respects entertain different sentiments, and practise 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 neighbourhood, all met at the same time, and in pursuit of the same end, offering up united prayers like so many ascending clouds of incense before the Most High."

The Independents, too, felt the power of Edwards' book. At Warwick, in the house of Mr Moody, was convened a meeting of ministers on the 27th June 1793 to consider the momentous question, "*What is the duty of Christians with respect to the spread of the Gospel?*" After conversation and prayer it was solemnly agreed to recognise it as "*the paramount duty of ministers and people to seek it both at home and abroad ... to unite in promoting and recommending it to others ... to commence forthwith contributions for the work*" and "*to propose to the churches the 1st Monday evening in the month as a season for united missionary prayer*" [*Independency in Warwickshire. Sibree and Caston 1855 p 140*].

In 1795 the L.M.S. was formed and in 1814 Rev George Bunder, the Secretary, prepared and published an abridgement of Edwards' '*Humble Attempt*' (It was in that same year, 1814, that John Sutcliff died. Almost his last words were, "*I wish I had prayed more.*")

In April 1815, ten days before he died, Fuller wrote in his diary, "*We have some who have been giving out of late that if Sutcliff and some others preached more of Christ and less of Jonathan Edwards, they would have been more useful. If those who talked thus, preached Christ half as much as Jonathan Edwards did, and were half as useful as he was, their usefulness would be double what it is. It is very singular that the mission to the East should have originated with men of these principles, and without pretending to be a prophet, I may say if it ever falls into the hands of men who talk in this strain it will soon come to nothing.*" [*Fuller's Works p IXXXIV*].

In 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was formed. "*It was this book*" (*Edwards' Humble Attempt*) writes Ernest Payne, the Baptist Historian, "*that was instrumental in stirring individuals and churches to importunate prayer for revival and the extension of Christ's kingdom. It was the American pamphlet that helped to prepare the way for the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society for the parallel advance in the Northampton Association and for many another movement of the Spirit of God.*" [*The Prayer Call of 1784. E. A. Payne p 5*].