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When God visits His church according to His promises, effects follow that make people shout, "This is the finger of God!"

—JOHN ELIAS

While the Holy Ghost is always present in His church, there are times when He draws manifestly nearer and puts forth a greater energy of power. Every believer is conscious in his own soul of changes corresponding to this; for the Spirit is always with him, abiding in him, and yet there are times of unusual communion and far more than ordinary life. And as the Spirit draws near to an individual, so does he draw near to a land, and then is revived, spiritual life is revived, spiritual understanding, spiritual worship, spiritual repentance, spiritual obedience.

—ALEXANDER MOODY STUART

DAWN DEFERRED

Michael F. Gleason

What era in history do you believe Increase Mather described when he stated that

... conversions are becoming rare in this age . . . [I]n the days of our fathers, in other parts of the world, scarce a sermon preached but some evidently converted, and sometimes hundreds in a sermon. Which of us say we have seen the like? . . . The body of the rising generation is a poor, perishing, unconverted, and (except the Lord pour down His Spirit) undone generation. Many that are profane, drunkards, swearers, lascivious (obscene), scoffers at the power of godliness, despisers of those that are good, disobedient. Others that are only civil, and outwardly conformed to good order, by reason of their education, but never knew what the new birth means.¹

The era to which Dr. Mather referred was the late seventeenth century—1678 to be exact. From his perspective, all was hopeless unless "the Lord pour down His spirit," and graciously choose to again powerfully walk among the nations. Some may suggest that "hopeless" is too strong a term to describe the prevailing state of faith and culture within both Europe and America in the decades that preceded the Great Awakening. Perhaps, however, the following brief analysis of the conditions within the English and surrounding European societies may lead the discerning reader to a similar conclusion.

FAITH

The Puritan movement began and was notably strengthened during the sixteenth century, as the biblical Reformation was evident within the believing community. Early in the seventeenth century, however, weeds began to grow among the wheat as throughout Europe Satan's folly became evident. An illustration of this point can be seen as early as 1624 when the philosophy known as Deism found its way into contemporary culture. Although many of the early Deists diverged less radically from orthodox Christianity, the evolution of this philosophy, according to one historian, came to produce "a religion of reason which ruled out miracles, prayer, and the deity of Christ."² Possibly one of the best-known Deists, who was also an outspoken enemy of orthodox Christianity, was a Frenchman by the name of Francois-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), or, as he called himself, Voltaire. So influential was the rationalistic, philosophical ideals that he and others of similar mind espoused, that they found a firm anchor in the intellect of the general populace of England, as well as many of the political and religious elite.

While the development of Deistic thought was gradually eroding the Christian worldview, a straightforward attack upon the Puritan faith was launched in 1662 through an edict known as the Act of Uniformity. Simply stated, the Act of Uniformity was an unscrupulous revision of the common *Prayer Book* which promoted alterations favoring the advancement of state concerns. Further, the clauses of this act demanded each clergyman to "declare his unfeigned assent and consent to the use of all things in the said book."³ The two thousand rectors—a fifth of the entire body of clergy at that time—who unconditionally refused compliance were at once dismissed from their parishes without compensation. Tragically, those driven out "were the most learned and the most active of their order,"⁴

including the famous Puritan, Richard Baxter, as well as the great-grandfather and grandfather of the eminent eighteenth-century evangelist, John Wesley.

A further hindrance to the advancement of the gospel was the "office for baptism" prescribed by the Church of England which confirmed salvation upon all baptized infants. Many who grew to adulthood under this teaching gained the mistaken notion that by this singular act they possessed a "secure admission into heaven,"⁵ and therefore could live as they pleased without fear of damnation. Additionally, all English clergymen were bound to offer the Lord's Supper to any person who furnished proof of infant baptism. One can only imagine that the typical communion table of that day overflowed with participants whose souls had never known the cleansing blood of which they so freely partook.

The spiritual void created by the expulsion of pious clergy and erosion of sound doctrine was further widened by the ongoing practice of many rectors being appointed to their posts. For centuries, clergy who served the Church of England were customarily selected by the king, the bishop of the diocese (if funding was secured from outside sources), or by the person or persons who had privately donated the funding required to support their local parish. It was not unusual, therefore, to have pulpits filled not with the most godly candidate available, but with "friends" of kings, bishops, or wealthy townspeople. In fact, when reviewing applicants, some scarcely considered a conversion to the Christian faith to be a relevant requirement for ministry! One could sorrowfully conclude, therefore, that many who replaced the courageous two thousand evicted from their pulpits by refusing to comply with the Act of Uniformity were likely to have been greater friends of the state than of the Savior.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that all the

devoted shepherds had been banished from the land. There were clergy throughout this season of decline who "did their best, according to their lights, to carry out their duties faithfully."⁶ At times their labors were even graced by a stirring of the Spirit which produced a taste of the divine fruit commonly reserved, in its fullness, exclusively for seasons of genuine revival. A review of early eighteenth-century church history indicates that such clergy, and subsequent stirrings of the Spirit, were nonetheless comparatively scarce. On the other hand, the number of clerics who considered the parish as little more than a source of income, rather than a sphere of ministry, were abundant. In fact "scores of villages never saw their Rector, unless perhaps he came to settle some dispute about the tithe."⁷ Whole churches, severely neglected by their spiritual leaders, were left to ruin. When touring his province, the Bishop of Carlisle chronicled the following observations when visiting three "active" parishes: "The room is miserably shattered and broken, not one pane of glass in any of the windows. No flooring. No seats. No reading desk." Of another: "The inside of the church was full of water." And of yet another: "The church looked more like a pigsty than the House of God."⁸ One parish was so pronounced in its corruption that reports indicated "persons playing cards on the communion table, drinking and smoking!"⁹

A majority of the Irish clergy, like many from England, were "sons of the gentry, and accustomed to their sporting, drinking, and riotous habits. They had no preparation for ministerial duties but a college degree; and no education, either literary or moral, which had not been obtained among wild young men at college."¹⁰ One cleric, when rebuked by his bishop for drunkenness, piously defended himself by suggesting that "he was never drunk on duty."¹¹ It is no wonder that the pulpits filled by such reprobates were emptied of divine doctrine and power! Distorted by

Deistic views, the ministers regarded the Bible as simply "a book, and often a despised book; while Jesus Christ, far from being acclaimed as the incarnate revelation of God and Savior of men, was reduced to the level of a mere ethical teacher—and a misleading one."¹² Yet another historian suggested that "the vast majority of sermons were miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything calculated to awaken, convert, sanctify, or save souls."¹³ In Scotland "the old style of preaching" was likewise being laid aside in preference to the exposition of "cold formal addresses."¹⁴ Given the wretched state of the clerical office during this general era, it should come as no surprise that Lord Bolingbroke, when addressing a group of clergymen, vehemently declared that the "greatest miracle in the world is the subsistence of Christianity and its continued preservation as a religion, when the preaching of it is committed to the care of such unchristian men as you."¹⁵

STATE

With the church in such decline, one might believe that a citizen of that time would likely turn next to the state in hopes that the governing authorities would serve vigilantly to restore justice and order to the rapidly decaying culture. Indeed the governing authorities of this day were busy in service, but it was not the concerns of the general populace that were foremost on their agendas, but rather their own fraudulent interest; and their leader, Sir Robert Walpole, set the pace. As an individual, Walpole "was given to drunkenness and gluttony; he lived in open adultery; and having a positive taste for obscenity."¹⁶ As a politician, and England's first prime minister, he believed "that government must be carried on by corruption or by force, and he deliberately made the former the basis of his rule."¹⁷ Illustrations of his personal political ideology are numerous. For example, when surveying members of parliament,

Walpole suggested that "all these men have their price." And right he was, as history records a 1739 victory in the House of Commons in favor of Walpole was secured only because 234 of the 262 who voted in support were likewise recipients of Walpole's financial patronage.¹⁸

A morally-corrupt church and government furthered moral corruption throughout the general society. Illustrations of this fact are also sadly familiar.



And what lifestyle choices were found among a majority of the governing assembly? On various occasions it was noted that Parliament adjourned early because "the honorable Members were too drunk to continue the business of State."¹⁹ Similar to Walpole, both the King and Prince of Wales were also living in open adultery;²⁰ and so acceptable was immorality that Lord Chesterfield is said to have written his son a patriarchal letter containing explicit instruction in the "art of seduction."²¹ Members of the governing assemblies, in keeping with their leaders, were likewise frequent, public, and shameless in their exercise of infidelity.

A morally-corrupt church and government furthered moral corruption throughout the general society. Illustrations of this fact are also sadly familiar. For example, nineteenth-century historian, T. Smollett, provides the following vista of Britain in 1730:

England was at this period infested with robbers, assassins, and incendiaries, the natural consequences of degeneracy, corruptions, and the want of police in the interior government of the kingdom . . . Thieves and robbers were now become more desperate and savage than ever they had appeared since mankind were civilized. In the exercise of their rapine they wounded, maimed, and even murdered the unhappy sufferers, through a wantonness of barbarity.²²

The government's answer to rising lawlessness, according to Samuel Johnson who himself lived through most of this turbulent time, was to make common and recurring violations punishable by death. The rationale for this, he suggests, was the belief that "one thief on the gallows would terrify other thieves back into honest ways."²³ Thus the government logged 253 capital offenses on the statute-book, including such "crimes" as damaging Westminster Bridge, cutting down a young tree, shooting a rabbit, and stealing property worth five shillings.²⁴ Charles Wesley's journal records a time when he preached to fifty-two felons, each waiting to be hung, including a tender child of ten! When the fated day of execution arrived, all of London was present; "fashionable people paid for seats on the grand stand . . . and thousands who could not afford seats sucked oranges round the gallows, watching the contortions of the poor wretches as they slowly choked to death, for no drop was allowed, and it took a man a good half-hour to die."²⁵ Despite this brutal punishment of the condemned, the public hangings "seemed to have no effect in checking the spread of crime."²⁶

Those imprisoned, however, were only slightly better off than those whose fate at the gallows had already passed. The incarcerated, for example, had no legal claim to food. In fact, Marshalsea prison, which generally housed seven hundred to eight hundred criminals, was found in a 1729

report to have "upwards of 350 literally dying of starvation."²⁷ One decade earlier the same institution buried 300 in less than three months' time! A look inside a typical cell indicates that those not claimed by starvation, commonly fell prey to disease and despair. The castle prison was "horribly overcrowded and disgustingly dirty; men and women, debtors and felons were crowded together all day; at night the women were driven to a dungeon without either windows or beds, to sleep on filthy straw . . . No attempt was made to preserve discipline of any kind."²⁸ Disease in such conditions spread rapidly, with "jail fever," or typhus, small pox, and other pestilences routinely destroying prisoners "in great number."²⁹

FAMILY

Now conceivably after laboring through the preceding accounts which surveyed the collapse of church, state, and society, the reader might be hesitant to inquire about the general condition of the eighteenth-century family. The hesitation is merited, for when wickedness covered the continent, the traditional family also fell under its shadow; and conceivably no vice was more widely used to erode the once pious homes than alcohol. Indeed, so broad was its grasp that in the first decades of this century the death rate, widely attributed to alcohol-related causes, surpassed the rate of birth!³⁰ The great influx of liquors during this era was customarily linked to a dispute with France over brandy trade. In retaliation the English Governors decided to take the national mind off French brandy by lifting all restrictions for the production and sale of British gin. In a few weeks, "six thousand gin shops were opened in London and Westminster," enticing the sinking soul with advertisements such as: "drunk for 1d, dead drunk for 2d."³¹

By 1725, one of the largest English districts boasted a liquor retailer flourishing at every fifth house!³² Alcohol

sales were likewise common at work. The famous Benjamin Franklin, who in 1725 was employed in a London printing-house, records that an alehouse boy freely roamed the workfloor throughout the day supplying the needs of thirsty workers.³³

The obvious impact of such abuse on the family is readily documented. For instance, the practice of paying weekly wages late Saturday night in public drinking dens caused many a husband and father to return home early Sunday morning "drunk and empty-handed," having only "words and blows" to offer their families.³⁴ Even among men of means it was the custom to spend "evenings at some public-house or tavern" with the "better class of customer" enjoying the stolen fruits of seduction in the adjoining parlor.³⁵ The neglected wives likewise sought, among other vices, distilled liquors to fill their emptiness. Some, so daily consumed, provided their children, infants and youngsters alike, with a constant supply of spirits. Others, ignoring their little ones altogether, left them "starved and naked at home."³⁶ The tendency of drunken husbands toward the insufferable physical abuse of their children was tragically also frequently adopted by their spouses. One horrible story provides a graphic illustration:

There is the case of Judith Dufour who fetched her two-year-old child from the workhouse, where it had just been "new-clothed," for the afternoon. She strangled it and left it in a ditch in the Bethnal green in order to sell its clothes. The money (one and four pence) was spent on gin and was divided with a woman, who (she said) instigated the crime.³⁷

The dear child in the previous illustration was certainly not alone. A document titled the *London Bills of Mortality* certifies that approximately seventy-five percent of children of all classes born in this period died before their fifth birth-

day. Those sent to the workhouse or abandoned at infancy to the care of the parish had a survival rate averaging only one in ten.³⁸ The ones who survived beyond five knew different heartaches. A majority of the children above this tender age in the Taunton clothing region and valleys of West Riding, for example, could be found not playing in the soft green grass of the meadows, but rather hard at work in the cloth industry earning their daily bread.³⁹ In terms of education, it was not until the advent of the Sunday school movement that any provision, with the exception of the woefully inadequate charity schools, was made for the free and substantive instruction of the poor. In place of school, the common lot of the needy was to be indentured from an early age as an apprentice. While in theory an apprenticeship appeared to be a move upward, in practice it was all too often a sentence of slow death. A journalist in the early eighteenth century provides this commentary:

"A most unhappy practice prevails in most places," said a writer on the Poor Laws in 1738, "to apprentice poor children, no matter to what master The master may be a tiger in cruelty, he may beat, abuse, strip naked, starve, or do what he will to the poor innocent lad, few people take much notice, and the officers who put him out the least of anybody. . . . It is the fate of many a poor child, not only to be half-starved and sometimes bred up in no trade, but to be forced to thieve and steal for his master, and so is brought up for the gallows."⁴⁰

In the midst of such perversity, the concept of a traditional Christian marriage was likewise swiftly fading. Even at their delicate beginnings, most weddings were stained by the mixture of drink and depravity that typified the culture. Marriage ceremonies, for instance, were frequently conducted in the morning "to ensure the sober senses of the

contracting parties." Many such services were known to have been officiated in the "sanctuary" of the pub by "vagabond parsons,"⁴¹ one of whom is credited with conducting 173 in a single day!⁴² So eroded was the sanctity of marriage that a later prime minister of England, although united to a wife, thought nothing of attending a public performance with his mistress.⁴³ Accounts of the time indicate laborers selling their spouses, along with cattle, at the common market. Similarly, village baptismal records likewise validate the fact that the spread of immorality was nothing short of rampant.⁴⁴ This was truly a dark age for the family, a time when "purity and fidelity to the marriage vow were sneered out of fashion!"⁴⁵

MORAL BANKRUPTCY

The tragic demise of church, state, society, and family was furthered by the ready availability of vice which caused the masses to swell in their passion for all that was morally perverse. And as one might assume, the sensual appetite found more than enough to oblige its cravings through gambling, contemporary drama, literature, or, if one was so inclined, the brothel. By means of illustration, an eighteenth-century fiction writer, Oliver Goldsmith, describes in the following narrative a few impressions of a London visitor, which are quite historically credible:

Every evening as I return home from my usual solitary excursions, I am met by several of those well-disposed daughters of hospitality, at different times and in different streets, richly dressed, and with minds not less noble than their appearance. . . . One takes me under the arm, and in a manner forces me along; another catches me round the neck, and desires to partake in this office of hospitality; while a third, kinder still, invites me to refresh my spirits with wine.⁴⁶

Indeed, the "taste for the pornographic was avid, if not insatiable," attracting even noted clergy of the day to sample its poison fruit.⁴⁷ One brave clergyman, however, took a bold stand against the vulgarity of his age through the publication of a work which analyzed contemporary theater. With great care he evaluated 7,000 "instances" from plays of his century, noting that no less than 1,400 texts of the Bible had been gravely offended within their collective scripts!⁴⁸ Despite, however, the noble efforts of a few, "the stage seemed to exist for nothing but to preach and propagate vice and almost all literature of the time was stamped with the mark of the Beast."⁴⁹

Conceivably, however, the greatest illustration of the moral bankruptcy evident within numerous eighteenth-century Europeans was the vile plundering, capture, and subsequent vending of fellow human beings.



Gambling likewise flourished. Noblemen, fashionable ladies, and common laborers alike squandered their respective earnings in shameless abandonment. Profits from the English lottery, for example, were so immense that the Westminster Bridge was built chiefly from its revenue.⁵⁰ In many local villages, the brutalization of innocent animals was added to the exchange of gambled earnings as cockfighting grew in popularity. Each participant furnished

his best bird, which fought to the death—winner take all. According to Johnson, "all classes indulged in it. . . . County fought county, town fought town, village fought village; peer and gentlemen fought among themselves."⁵¹ Dogs, bears, bulls, badgers and other species of fowl were also utilized in similar contests to satisfy the swelling cultural passion for loathsome torture and lurid gain.

Conceivably, however, the greatest illustration of the moral bankruptcy evident within numerous eighteenth-century Europeans was the vile plundering, capture, and subsequent vending of fellow human beings. Initiated by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Great Britain agreed to annually furnish 4800 slaves of African descent to South America for a period of thirty years.⁵² This contract they fulfilled, and again renewed, in 1748; but at what cost to the native? One historian suggests that the total number of slaves transported from Africa most probably "runs into millions, while the processes of tribal warfare, capture, transportation, suicide, acclimatization and early 'discipline' account for the death of perhaps equal numbers."⁵³ Indeed, "both numerous and malignant were the economic and political corruptions which, during most of the eighteenth century, attacked the social life of Britain and her expanding empire; but most devastating of them all, by far, was the slave traffic."⁵⁴ To this lamentable statement I most sadly agree.

DAWN DEFERRED IN AMERICA

Now perchance in leaving the despair of eighteenth-century Europe, the reader, in his journey to America, may be experiencing restored hope that within this new land the flame of the Puritan faith was still brightly burning. But alas, although there was indeed a fire in our nation, its origins were not from above. We look to a prominent theologian and pastor of this era, Jonathan Edwards, for a description of the prevailing state of society within his

town, Northampton, Massachusetts:

Licentiousness for some years prevailed among the youth of the town; there were many of them very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others. It was their manner very frequently to get together, in conventions of both sexes for mirth and jollity, which they called frolics; and they would often spend the greater part of the night in them, without regard to any order in the families they belonged to: and indeed family government did too much fail in the town.⁵⁵

The reader may likely observe that the moral and spiritual violations apparent in the small town of Northampton were disgracefully common throughout the entire nation! While it is true that the declension in America was "neither so evident nor so disastrous as on the continent of Europe,"⁵⁶ the citizens in this new land had likewise become so depraved that nothing short of a sovereign work of the holy God would be adequate to restore piety among the people. The following brief overview of the dominant mood of American faith and culture throughout the decades that preceded the Great Awakening will give ready credence to this charge.

FAITH AND CULTURE

One who has seriously pondered the eminent works of our Puritan founders will realize that theirs was a faith in which the ardent study of sound biblical doctrine was inseparably joined with earnest and heartfelt obedience. Seventeenth-century church members, for example, who demonstrated little evidence of a genuine conversion experience would likely have been challenged by their Puritan brethren as to the authenticity of their profession; for it was

the founder of their faith who taught that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."⁵⁷ It is therefore easily understood how the following words, written by Increase Mather and his colleague, were indeed an accurate portrayal of the general moral conditions evident in New England approximately one-hundred years prior to the ministry of Jonathan Edwards: "I have lived in a country seven years, and all that time I never heard one profane oath, and all that time I never did see a man drunk in that land.' Where was that country? It was New England!"⁵⁸ If such was the common state of early American religion and society, what then caused the wretched dismantling of this authentic faith throughout the subsequent decades?

The reasons for the breakdown of faith throughout this dismal era were manifold, but undoubtedly one of the greatest influences was the historic "Halfway Covenant," established at the Synod of 1662. Briefly stated, this agreement granted church membership to unregenerate persons, baptized in infancy, who demonstrated

... understanding [in] the doctrine of faith, and publicly professing their assent thereunto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the covenant before the church wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the government of Christ in the church, their children are to be baptized . . .⁵⁹

Therefore, under the instruction of this doctrine, reasonably civil, baptized, but unconverted adults were denied nothing within the church except participation in holy communion, which was still reserved strictly for the converted. Tragically, it was Solomon Stoddard, grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, who later led a crusade to elimi-

nate this one last precious distinction and permit unconverted church members to join the regenerate around the Lord's table because, in his words, ". . . sanctification is not a necessary qualification to partaking of the Lord's Supper," and "the Lord's Supper is a converting ordinance."⁶⁰ This clear apostasy, although violently opposed by Mather and numerous others, soon became a common practice throughout much of New England. So established did this procedure become in future years that clergymen who refused the Lord's Supper to baptized unconverted members of a local church could be taken to civil court and duly prosecuted!⁶¹ The result, according to one historian, was that within the church at large "the unconverted soon outnumbered the converted."⁶²

One can naturally understand how over a period of time many of the young men raised in such churches, who also decided to enter the ministry, were likewise themselves unconverted. Stoddard was an advocate of this view as well, believing that "unconverted ministers have certain official duties which they may lawfully perform."⁶³ Thus many pulpits were filled with clergy who called the masses to follow a Savior they themselves never knew. And what was the fruit of their labor? In New Jersey the common parishioners were known to be "careless and carnal." The distinguished Samuel Blair, who resided in Pennsylvania, lamented the fact that a "true religion" among the churches in his region "was dying and ready to expire its last breath of life." The majority of the churches in Virginia and Maryland were in a similar plight. Samuel Whitman, a native of Connecticut, declared that religion had "degenerated into an empty form" and is "languishing in all parts of the land."⁶⁴ Truly, Mather was in fact correct when he stated that

. . . conversions are becoming rare in this age . . . [I]n the days of our fathers, in other parts of the world, scarce a ser-

mon preached but some evidently converted, and sometimes hundreds in a sermon. Which of us say we have seen the like? . . . The body of the rising generation is a poor, perishing, unconverted, and (except the Lord pour down his Spirit) undone generation. Many that are profane, drunkards, swearers, lascivious (obscene), scoffers at the power of godliness, despisers of those that are good, disobedient. Others that are only civil, and outwardly conformed to good order, by reason of their education, but never knew what the new birth means.⁶⁵

From his perspective, all was pitifully hopeless unless "the Lord pour down His spirit," and graciously choose to again powerfully walk among the nations. But take heart, dear reader, for remember our loving Lord who, at first through gentle visits to sporadic villages and towns, and then through a blaze that covered the continents, did indeed "pour down His Spirit," and walked afresh with sovereign rule among the nations.

Author

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