

# What Is Awakening?

THE  
AWAKENING  
LIBRARY



## **THE AWAKENING LIBRARY**

Why We Need Awakening

What Is Awakening?

How to Pray for Awakening

How to Host a Meeting with God

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How to Lead Worship for Encounter with Jesus

How to Develop Leadership Culture for Awakening

How to Cultivate Relationships  
That Sustain Awakening

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The Awakening Library represents collected learnings from more than a decade of ministry as Seedbed and New Room. These pieces have been contributed by writers, leaders, and practitioners in fellowship with the goal of providing practical insights for individuals and churches desiring awakening—an encounter with God that both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.

With special thanks to David Thomas for his contribution to this resource.

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## WHAT IS AWAKENING?

*Awakening* is not a word we find in the Bible. It was nearly a century after the events of eighteenth-century New England before historians began to refer to them as the First Great *Awakening*. But while it is an old-fashioned term that can carry varied meanings in different groups, we like to use it simply as shorthand for Christianity at its best—what it looks like when God’s people begin to operate as the answer to the prayer of Jesus that *the kingdom of God would come on earth as it is in heaven*.

To us, awakening is code for honesty. We want to be a fellowship of thirsty, honest Christians who know we are desperate for what only God can do. We will not minimize or rationalize the hard fact that many hearts, homes, churches,

and cities in this cultural moment are broken beyond human repair, past what our best whiteboarding and energies can remedy. We will neither cut a deal with the status quo nor naively charge into it with more strategy, self-studies, and restructuring thinking that somehow our next best idea is the solution. No, human excellence is too small a thing. The church can never program itself back into New Testament vitality. We are the best-resourced Christians who have ever lived, and look where we find ourselves.

What we need instead is a broad, personal movement of God's grace that will lead to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and the transformation of society. That's awakening. There can be outpourings of God's presence that lead to revivals where churches are refreshed and many come to faith in Jesus. But awakening is the protracted culmination of these when a movement of God's power and love extends far and long enough to spill over into the streets of life and the structures of the social order. This is the daring, audacious vision that has captured the New Room fellowship. We are those who will not wait any longer to begin framing reality and organizing our lives around the honest admission that awakening is truly what we need. Not just an uptick in numbers or a flash of greater zeal but an extended and far-reaching encounter with God resetting the trajectory of generations.

## WHAT IS AWAKENING?

When the Spirit does this, we learn that there is more of a passionate, brokenhearted love among us for those who do not yet know the love of God in Christ. Awakening is marked by a great depth of lasting personal change in people's lives, growing by the grace of God in wholeness and holy living. There is a quality of community so rich as to be almost unexplainable in human terms. Awakening is manifested in an overflow of love and power from the church that renews culture, checking, and even reversing trends of decay. It is so compelling that we yearn for it the more we experience it. Awakening is a work of the Holy Spirit as the supernatural becomes more natural to us, involving a rediscovery of the New Testament church and a fresh engagement of people with Jesus.

In the spring of 2018, we convened a community of friends and thought partners who spent the better part of three days praying about and discerning together what we mean by the word *awakening*. The final distillation of that sharing produced a working definition we continue to learn from and want to unpack briefly in this resource:

Awakening is the outcome of encountering Jesus, through whom the love of God the Father is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Awakening both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and

transformation of society. The common thread of the Christian story and the great urgency of our day, awakening unfolds in small ways that produce vast blessings to all of creation. It comes most readily to those who are desperate for more of God, to any disciple of Jesus thirsty for a manner of prayer and quality of relationship that bear the marks of plain, scriptural Christianity—the measure of which is holy love. The church cannot manufacture awakening; it is ultimately a work of God’s power and a sign of his presence. But we can sow for awakening, remove impediments, and posture ourselves to receive it. We do so by the ministry of Word and Spirit, the priority of travailing prayer, in communities of banded discipleship, for the sake of multiplying the church of Jesus Christ and the bold expansion of God’s kingdom.

Let’s work our way through this.

**Awakening is the outcome of encountering Jesus, through whom the love of God the Father is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.**

Nothing about awakening moves an inch until there is an encounter with Jesus. Renewal may bring new theological clarity about Jesus. Reformation has introduced better



polity and practice into the community of Jesus. But awakening emerges out of being arrested by the unsurpassed love of Jesus, by encounter with his true and full person. God will not jump over the human heart to get a better church or an improved society. And no hope for awakening in our family or city will rise above the personal awakening we have known ourselves. Encounter with Jesus is where awakening is bubbling up out of the ground. The crucial move of awakening is in catalyzing communities of encounter.

We saw this during the outpouring at Asbury University in February 2023. People would line up for six to eight hours in the Kentucky winter, but upon entry into Hughes Auditorium were often not interested in a seat. They wanted to go straight to the altar—to the place of encounter. People thronged from around the world into that little town believing that there was a place where Jesus was present and working.

Don't allow it to be lost on you, the explicitly trinitarian language in this first statement: encounter with Jesus, the love of the Father, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Aspiration for awakening is a longing for all of God in all of life. And it is holy love he gives to quench that longing. Romans 5:5 is the undertone here that John Wesley referenced to characterize a Methodist as “one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.’” “Love is the end,” he wrote, “the sole

end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things.”

**Awakening both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.**

Awakening is no formula. There is no recipe or machinery for it. We have no more guarantees that awakening will result from our prayer and work than a harvest will come from the seeds we sow. But there is a clear dynamism in awakening that we can enter with faith.

You have perhaps seen this in short-term mission teams. Those who participate in cross-cultural ministry for the first time often come home transformed by the crisis they have confronted of identifying with people God loves who are different from themselves. Perhaps they have engaged with poverty or come up close to a different religion or ideology, and it has broken open new access for God to work in them. They return with a new humility or heart for prayer or eagerness to give. So, mission can lead to awakening. But then we have the historical facts of the late nineteenth-century Student Volunteer Movement and others like it, which was a wave of missionary fervor emanating out of the Second Great Awakening through which thousands of emerging adults invested their lives in

cross-cultural ministry in the nations of the earth. Clearly, awakening can also lead to mission. Similarly, banding can both precede and sustain awakening, just as we who refresh others will ourselves be refreshed (Prov. 11:25). There is dynamism in how “awakening both results from and leads to” God’s work in us and in the world.

In history, and particularly in our Wesleyan legacy, this work of awakening has found expression in deep wholeness in people (see *How to Cultivate Relationships That Sustain Awakening* in the Awakening Library), renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.

**The common thread of the Christian story and the great urgency of our day, awakening unfolds in small ways which produce vast blessing to all of creation.**

Awakening is often controversial. It is innovative. Circumstances would seem to make it impossible. And yet, awakening is the common thread through the entire Christian movement. A good way to understand the arc of church history is as a succession of awakening or renewal movements. Many if not most of the theological developments, denominations, missionary expansions, and institutions of service and learning comprising the worldwide body of Christ today—trace them back to their

origins, and you will likely discover they are the output of an awakening movement.

Awakening advances through all Christians, not just clergy, and usually first among those with an eye for the small (see *How to Develop Leadership Culture for Awakening* in the Awakening Library), from hidden, humble women and men in prayer closets and distant corners of obscurity. Consider the urgent petitions of Peggy and Christine Smith, two elderly sisters whose all-night prayers in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland were heard to make way for what some historians consider the last real awakening in the Western world. Or see the pioneering Moravians, a remnant of brave refugees surviving the counter-Reformation camped out on the property of a young German noble, who were among the first Protestants captivated by a global call to the *missio Dei*. Or look at Father Nash, an unexceptional pastor traveling in a boarding house bedroom on the tattered edge of the American frontier, imprinting the spiritual posture of the Second Great Awakening. Any person, young or old, willing to press into God with longing and confidence, to bring him a heart of Gethsemane love for this world Jesus died to save, can be one he uses to catalyze awakening. And its blessing extends as far as the grace of God will go.

It comes most readily to those who are desperate for more of God, to any disciple of Jesus thirsty for a manner of prayer and quality of relationship that bear the marks of plain, scriptural Christianity—the measure of which is holy love.

During those sixteen extraordinary days and nights at Asbury in February 2023, it was often acknowledged from the front that each day was a collaboration to build and hold community under outpouring, to form a vessel in our common life for receiving the fullness of God’s presence. *Community under outpouring* isn’t too bad of a description of what happened at Pentecost or what we want our churches to express, what we want typical Christianity to look like. Awakening can seem unusual and exceptional, an occurrence seen all too rarely and by too few people. But we are those who understand awakening as normal, and inert, asleep, domesticated church as the exception, far less than what Christ loved and gave his life for. Jonathan Edwards understood awakening as the “intensification and acceleration of the *normal* work of the Holy Spirit.” We are desperate for “plain, Scriptural Christianity,” in Wesley’s words.

*Desperate* is a heavily freighted word and we don’t throw it around lightly. Desperation can lead to mistakes and excess. And it is hard even to feel desperate in the West when you look around at our venues and technology and resources. This has been one of our greatest dangers: the laminating of

a veneer of abundance and capacity over the actual desperation of our need for God.

But we have fallen in love with the normal church at its heights in Scripture and in awakening history. And we engage the compromised church of our everyday experience. The gap between these two has become intolerable to us. We choose to band together in that gap with desperate prayer and humble hands and hearts until God closes it.

**The church cannot manufacture awakening; it is ultimately a work of God's power and a sign of his presence. But we can sow for awakening, remove impediments, and posture ourselves to receive it.**

See *How to Prepare for Outpouring* in the Awakening Library for discussion of these themes.

**We do so by the ministry of Word and Spirit, the priority of travailing prayer, in communities of banded discipleship, for the sake of multiplying the church of Jesus Christ and the bold expansion of God's kingdom.**

See *How to Pray for Awakening* for discussion of "the priority of travailing prayer." See also *How to Cultivate Relationships that Sustain Awakening* for discussion of "communities of banded discipleship."

We are convinced by how the New Testament understands the Spirit-filled life to be Christian life. The Word of God gives shape to our encounter with the Spirit of God, as the Spirit brings life to our engagement with the Word.

The Spirit is both the essential giver and object of all prayer. He himself is the greatest gift. And he gives gifts as he chooses in order to involve us in his work in the world. All spiritual gifts in the Bible are legitimate and operating today. No spiritual gift is normative for all, and no person has them all. We simply desire eagerly to receive whatever the Spirit will give us, resisting any comparison with one another. Scripture allows for quite a diversity of experience of the Holy Spirit, and wide-ranging vocabulary for describing it. We evangelicals can grow in openness; we charismatics can grow in discernment, all coached a bit by Wesley from his *Journal*, that “from this time, I trust, we shall all suffer God to carry on His own work in the way that pleaseth Him.”

We are not alarmed when there is no outward manifestation of the Spirit’s ministry, as if something were necessarily wrong. Neither are we unsettled by the reality that when the infinite love of God is poured into finite people it can overwhelm them. The main thing is that we want nothing less than to be filled with the Holy Spirit, again and again throughout life, which is our hope for every person in the global church: that each of us could come to

a new yieldedness, a deeper surrender, a fresh effusion of that love divine, all loves excelling.

Awakening is the overflow of this holy love that produces the “multiplying [of] the Church of Jesus Christ and the bold expansion of God’s Kingdom.” We understand church multiplication to:

- be both the catalyst and outworking of awakening.
- embody a robust advance of the gospel in community. The call to church multiplication emerges from and complements the deeper life of healing and transformation experienced in banded discipleship.
- be the expression of our fellow-laboring with God in his mission. Church multiplication is the work of Jesus. It is of, by, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- originate in holy love for others, that all may know Jesus.
- be about the creation of disciple-making culture and the reproduction of disciple-making communities. The same DNA of trusted, empathic relationships as context for the work of God is found in both the bands and the large gatherings of an awakened, multiplying church.
- encompass both the launching of new, discrete communities of Christians as well as the formation of revitalized fellowships within existing churches. We anticipate both fresh growth as well as shoots-in-stumps.



## WHAT IS AWAKENING?

- be the outflow of the spiritual gifts and empowered generosity of the whole people of God, led by well-equipped and authorized laity.
- offer a permission slip for Christians to break free of inertia and embody the cultural attunement, hospitality, and invitational nature of an awakened church.
- be defined neither by the purchase of property nor the construction of buildings but by the formation of Christianity communities living together as the body of Christ in the world.

## SOMETHING FOR THE YOUNG TO STAND ON

This is what we long for, the multiplication of communities of encountering Jesus that lead to emulation of him and living on mission with him together. This would be, as we said earlier, a protracted movement of God's power and love extending far and long enough to spill over into the streets of life and the structures of the social order. For this, we must instinctively think generationally. We operate from a multi-decade vision, a long-term arc of that makes new room for emerging leaders to step up.

When a young John Wesley was at university, his dad, Samuel, pressed him to return to Lincolnshire and follow him in parish work at Wroote, neighboring

Epworth. And John said no, upsetting his dad, because something new, something more, was already being birthed in him. It was symbolic years later when John returned to his hometown, and officials locked him out of the church he had grown up in. So, for six weeks Wesley preached every day on his dad's grave, literally standing on his legacy.

We will never squeeze new life out of our Wesleyan legacy any more than we can restructure ourselves back into vibrancy. But we can cast that inheritance forward, calling up emerging adults to be the vanguard of a fresh work of grace in their generation. These are days for grappling with the frustrations of the young, taking on their critique, repenting over the church we have given them, and inviting them to stand on our legacy, compromised as it seems to them—that our ceiling might be their floor.

In a sense, we are a fellowship of the frustrated. Not a finger-point frustrated. We don't blame those before us, those above us, those with more power or influence than we have. We have simply become frustrated with things as they are, convinced there has to be more. Discontent and unwillingness to settle have become sacred in our midst, so much so that they are what we have come to cherish and steward as the primal move of awakening.

We will need a Barnabas generation before we have an awakening generation: men and women who seek out

the young like Barnabas did Saul, lend our credibility to them, journey patiently with them as they bump around in kingdom work, and then step back as they come into their calling. Time is out for building our careers. The old ladders and metrics and titles simply do not matter to those coming next. Now is the opportunity to give our lives and legacies away in a manner that the young can stand on.







Sow righteousness for yourselves,  
reap the fruit of unfailing love,  
and break up your unplowed ground;  
for it is time to seek the LORD,  
until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.

Hosea 10:12

The Awakening Library is a series of  
print and digital resources that represent  
collected learnings of Seedbed and New Room.

This suite of resources shares practical  
experience and accessible teaching with  
Christians seeking to partner with the Holy  
Spirit in sowing for a great awakening.



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