

1857 Revival

Jeremy Lanphier had hoped for more. But six people were six people. And did not scripture say, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of you"? So on this day, September 23, 1857, at lunchtime, he did not moan about the small number who turned out in response to his advertisement. Instead, he knelt with the others in the rented hall in Fulton Street, New York.

America sure needed prayer. The United States was in spiritual, political, and economic decline. Many people were disillusioned with spiritual things because of preachers who had repeatedly predicted the end of the world in the 1840's. Agitation over slavery was breeding political unrest, and civil war seemed near. Just this year, financial panic had hit. Banks failed, railroads went bankrupt, factories closed, unemployment increased.

In lower Manhattan, a Dutch Reformed church had been steadily losing members, largely because of population changes owing to immigration; they hired the layman Jeremy to reverse the trend with an active visitation program. Despite his visits, church members were listless. So he rented the hall on Fulton street and advertised prayer meetings. He himself enjoyed close fellowship with the Lord and thought others might, too. Conditions in the United States got worse; maybe that was a good thing. Sometimes trouble makes people turn to God. The Bank of Philadelphia failed. The third week of Jeremy's program, his prayer meeting had forty participants and they asked for daily meetings.

On October 10, the stock market crashed. Suddenly people were flocking to the prayer meetings. Within six months 10,000 people were gathering daily for prayer in New York City alone.

Other cities experienced a renewed interest in prayer, too. In Chicago, the Metropolitan Theater was filled every day with 2,000 praying people. In Louisville, several thousand came to the Masonic Temple for prayer each morning. 2,000 assembled for daily prayer in Cleveland, and St. Louis churches were filled for months at a time. In many places tents were set up for prayer. The newly formed YMCA also played an important role in holding prayer meetings and spreading the revival throughout the country.

In February, 1858, Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* gave extensive coverage to the prayer revival. Not to be outdone, the *New York Tribune* devoted an entire issue in April, 1858 to news of the revival. News of the revival traveled west by telegraph. This was the first revival which the media played an important role in spreading.

Lay people, not church leaders led. Prayer, rather than preaching, was the main focus. The meetings themselves were informal -- any person might pray, speak, lead in a song, or give a word of testimony, with a five minute limit placed on each speaker. In spite of loose organization, the prayer meetings avoided the emotionalism displayed in earlier revivals.

Thus the small prayer meeting of Jeremy Lanphier on this day led to the Third Great Awakening. This was the first revival beginning in America with a worldwide impact. The revival spread to Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Europe, South Africa, India, Australia, and the Pacific islands.

All classes became interested in [salvation](#), backsliders returned, conversions increased, and [Christians](#) desired a deeper instruction in spiritual truths. Families established daily devotions, and entire communities underwent a noticeable change in morals. Preaching, which in many places had become intellectual and lifeless, now concentrated on the truths of the gospel of Christ and His cross. As James Buchanan of Scotland summarized, it was a time when "new spiritual life was imparted to the dead, and new spiritual health imparted to the living."

The Layman's Prayer Revival of 1857-1858

By Rev. Oliver W. Price

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In 1856 a Methodist names William Arthur published a book of fiery sermons which closed with a prayer pleading with God to "Crown this nineteenth century with a revival of pure and undefiled religion...greater than any demonstration of the Spirit ever vouchsafed to man." His prayer was answered when the greatest revival in American history began the next year.

In 1857 churches were sliding down hill. Thousands of Americans were disillusioned with Christianity. William Miller, a new England farmer, had captured nationwide attention with his prediction that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. When nothing happened, many abandoned their faith.

America's moral recovery began when Jeremiah Lanphier, a concerned layman, started a noon prayer meeting for New York businessmen. Only six people came to the first prayer meeting on September 23, 1857 on the third floor of the "Consistory" of the Old Dutch Reformed Church on Fulton Street. By spring daily prayer meetings sprang up in many locations and daily attendance grew to 10,000. America's greatest Spiritual awakening was under way. It was called the Layman's Prayer Revival because laymen led it.

During the Layman's Prayer Revival the owner of a hardware store in New York urged businessmen at the Fulton Street prayer meeting to always set a holy example. A well-known manufacturer followed him to his store and confessed that he had cheated him for years and wanted to pay it back.

When the news spread that there were daily prayer meetings where sinners were welcomed, prayed for, and encouraged to turn to Christ, some hardened criminals were saved. A notorious criminal nicknamed "Awful Gardiner" surprised everyone when he found Christ through the prayer meetings. He was not alone.

Hundreds of people who had always spent their nights in the gates of hell came to the prayer meetings that had begun in the evenings. Thousands forsook crime and became devoted followers of Christ. Crime and vice drastically declined. Wealthy people generously helped the poor whom they regarded as their brothers and sisters.

Ships coming into New York harbor came under the power of God's presence. On one ship a captain and thirty men were converted to Christ before the ship docked. Four sailors knelt for prayer down in the depths of the battleship North Carolina anchored in the harbor. They began to sing and their ungodly shipmates came running down to make fun, but the power of God gripped them and they humbly knelt in repentance.

"Do you have to stop business at noon and go to a prayer meeting?" A customer from Albany asked a New York City merchant. "Yes, I must. Why don't you go with me?" The customer went with him and received Christ. He returned to Albany and started prayer meetings there.

In March of 1858 a religious journal reported that "The large cities and towns from Maine to California are sharing in this great and glorious work. There is hardly a village or town to be found where 'a special divine power' does not appear displayed."

In Chicago 2,000 men met at noon for prayer in Metropolitan Hall. In Jayne's Hall in Philadelphia 4,000 were meeting. An elderly philanthropist named John Crozer wrote in his diary, "I have never, I think, been present at a more stirring and edifying prayer meeting, the room quite full, and a divine influence seemed manifest. Many hearts melted, many souls devoutly engaged."

In December of 1857 in Utica, New York attendance at a weekly union prayer meeting increased so rapidly that by the third meeting the main floor and the balcony of the First Presbyterian Church were filled with deeply burdened people. Then daily prayer meetings were started each morning.

One night when Dr. John L. Girardeaux dismissed the prayer meeting for spiritual awakening at Anson Street Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, no one left. The congregation stayed until midnight while the Lord powerfully worked. Eight weeks of nightly meetings followed reaching crowds numbering from 1,500 to 2,000. Many turned to the Lord.

The New York Observer published a report from Waco, Texas of a mighty moving of God. "Day and night the church has been crowded during the meeting...Never before in Texas have we seen a whole community so effectually under a religious influence...thoroughly regenerated."

The power of prayer touched every aspect of business. There had never been a higher tone of honor. The Bible became the standard. Any business that injured the community was regarded as wrong. People in every kind of business began to be more honest, truthful and conscientious.

At least three thousand came to Christ in Newark, New Jersey. In many smaller towns scarcely any unconverted people remained. In Haverhill, Mass., the Spirit deeply moved the crowded daily prayer meeting. Sometimes half of the assembly silently wept. One pastor found at least one person in every home in his congregation deeply concerned about their relationship with God.

An unsaved man went to the prayer meetings on Fulton Street in New York hoping someone would help him. But none did. Then one day he heard a mother's request for her son's salvation. He discovered that note was from HIS OWN mother! Soon afterwards he found Christ. In Kalamazoo, Michigan a woman turned in a request for her husband's salvation. One man responded, "Pray for me. I'm that man." Four more men did likewise. A wealthy young New Yorker was born again at a noon prayer meeting. Upon returning home he read from the Bible and knelt to pour out a fervent prayer for his wife and sister. His wife and his sister knelt beside him and wept as they also received Christ. One man disowned his daughter when she confessed Christ. However, when he fell deathly sick, he sent for her and asked her forgiveness. She shared Christ with him. Within three days her father, mother, two brothers, and a sister entered the family of God.

Even Hell-Corner, New Hampshire was touched. It all started when one man's outrageous profanity led to a joking call for a prayer meeting. A notorious backslider tried to lead but he broke down while praying. The meetings continued under the leadership of a man from another town and four or five hardened men were convicted of sin and turned to Christ. Many in Hell-corner became praying people.

In March of 1858 the voice of prayer and praise to God was heard beginning at 8:30 every morning in the halls of the New York state capitol. Six people began a prayer meeting for the Legislature. By the fifth day tow rooms were filled and interest was growing.

In 1858 in Louisville, Kentucky 1,000 attended the daily union prayer. One writer exclaimed, "The spirit of God seems to be brooding over our city, and to have produced an unusual degree of tenderness and solemnity in all classes." An amazing work of grace was changing the city.

Some of the leading businessmen of Boston were attending prayer meetings. An unusual number of people who had lived wicked lives also came. One write said, "Publicans and sinners' are awakened, and are entering the prayer meetings of their own accord. Some of them manifest signs of sincere repentance."