

Revival Born In A Prayer Meeting

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It was exactly 12 noon on September 23, 1857—a little more than 100 years ago. A tall, middle-aged former businessman climbed creaking stairs to the third story of an old church building in the heart of lower New York City.

He entered an empty room, pulled out his pocket watch and sat down to wait. The placard outside read: "Prayer Meeting from 12 to 1 o'clock—Stop 5, 10, or 20 minutes, or the whole hour, as your time admits." It looked like no one had the time. As the minutes ticked by, the solitary waiter wondered if it were all a mistake.

For some three months he had been visiting boarding houses, shops, and offices, inviting people to the eighty-eight-year-old Old Dutch North Church at Fulton and Williams streets. The church had fallen on slim days. Old families had moved away. The business neighborhood was teeming with a floating population of immigrants and laborers.

Other churches had gotten out. Many thought that Old Dutch should throw in the towel. But the trustees determined on a last ditch stand. They decided to hire a lay missionary to conduct a visitation program.

The man they picked was Jeremiah C. Lanphier, a merchant who had no experience whatsoever in church visitation work. At forty-nine Lanphier gave up his trade position to knock on doors for a salary of less than \$1,000 a year.

The going was slow. A few families came. But often Lanphier returned to his room in the church consistory weary and discouraged. At such time he "spread out his sorrows before the Lord." And he never failed to draw new strength from his time of prayer.

While going his rounds of visitation, the idea occurred to him that businessmen might like to get away for a short period of prayer once a week while offices were closed at noon. With permission of church officials Lanphier passed out handbills and put up the placard. When the day of the first meeting came, he was the only one on hand for it.

Six Come to Pray

He waited ten minutes, then ten more. The minute hand of his watch pointed to 12:30 when at last he heard a step on the stairs. One man came in, then another and another until there were six. After a few minutes of prayer the meeting was dismissed with the decision that another meeting would be held the following Wednesday.

That small meeting was in no way extraordinary. There was no great outpouring of the Spirit of God. Lanphier had no way of knowing that it was the beginning of a great national revival which would sweep an estimated one million persons into the kingdom of God.

Looking back, historians can see that conditions were ripe for revival. The Revival of 1800 began a golden age of religious interest. But by 1843 a nation intent upon getting and spending had lost interest in religion. The West had opened up. Gold was discovered in California. Railroad building was a craze. The slavery issue was hot. Fortunes ballooned. Faith diminished.

Lanphier did not know much about such things. All he knew was that men stood in need of prayer.

Twenty men came to his second noon-hour meeting. The following Wednesday, forty. Lanphier decided to make the meeting a daily event in a larger room.

That very week—on Wednesday, October 14—the nation was staggered by the worst financial panic in its history. Banks closed, men were out of work, families went hungry.

The crash no doubt had something to do with the astonishing growth of Lanphier's noon meeting (by now called "the Fulton Street prayer meeting"). In a short time the Fulton Street meeting had taken over the whole building with crowds of more than 3,000.

Lawyers and physicians, merchants and clerks, bankers and brokers, manufacturers and mechanics, porters and messenger boys—all came. Draymen would drive up to the curb, tie up their horses and come in for a few minutes.

Rules were drawn up. Signs were posted. One

read: "Brethren are earnestly requested to adhere to the 5-minute rule." Another: "Prayers and Exhortations Not to exceed 5 minutes, in order to give all an opportunity."

It seemed that the Fulton Street meeting had touched a nerve. The revival-prayer impulse flashed from coast to coast.

On November 5, 1857, a New York newspaper carried the story of a revival in Hamilton, Ont., Canada, in which 300 to 400 people were converted in a few days. Accounts of local revivals began to appear in religious papers in November. And in December a three-day Presbyterian convention was held at Pittsburgh to consider the necessity for a general revival. Shortly thereafter a similar one was called in Cincinnati.

New York Bows in Prayer

Within six months 10,000 businessmen (out of a population of 800,000) were gathering daily in New York City for prayer. In January 1858 there were at least twenty other prayer meetings going full tilt in the city. Many of them were sparked by the Young Men's Christian Association. Other cities had them too.

By January of 1858 newspapers were sending reporters to cover the meetings. "The Progress of the Revival" became a standing news head. Remarkable cases of awakening were detailed at length. And there were many.

One time a man wandered into the Fulton Street meeting who intended to murder a woman and then commit suicide. He listened as someone was delivering a fervent exhortation and urging the duty of repentance. Suddenly the would-be murderer startled everyone by crying out, "Oh! What shall I do to be saved!" Just then another man arose, and with tears streaming down his cheeks asked the meeting to sing the hymn, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me." At the conclusion of the service both men were converted.

Another time an aged pastor got up to pray for the son of another clergyman. Unknown to him, his own son was sitting some distance behind him. The young man, knowing himself to be a sinner, was so impressed at hearing his father pray for another man's son that he made himself known to the meeting and said he wanted to submit to God. He became a regular attender at the prayer meeting.

A prize fighter nicknamed "Awful Gardiner" was a prayer-meeting convert. He visited his old friends at Sing Sing Penitentiary and gave his testimony. Among those who were converted was a noted river thief, Jerry McAuley, who later founded

the Water Street Mission. It was one of the first missions for down-and-outs.

On March 17, Burton's Theater, on Chambers Street, was thrown open for noonday prayer meeting. Half an hour before the first service was to begin, the theater was packed from the pit to the roof.

By the summer of 1858, news of the prayer meeting had crossed the Atlantic. In August two Presbyterian ministers from Ireland came to see what it was all about. "We have connected with our synod 500 churches and congregations," they said. "And we have a strong desire that the same gracious dispensation which has blessed you here be bestowed upon all our churches at home." They asked for the prayers of the Fulton Street prayer meeting.

Eyewitness Describes Meeting

The Fulton Street prayer meeting may well be the model for effective prayer meetings today. How was the early meeting conducted? Why did it have such power?

Fortunately, an eyewitness account, published in 1858, has come down to us. You feel that you too are there as you read:

We take our seat in the middle room, ten minutes before 12 o'clock noon. A few ladies are seated in one corner, and a few businessmen are scattered here and there through the room. Five minutes to 12 the room begins to fill up rapidly. Two minutes to 12, the leader passes in, and takes his seat in the desk or pulpit. At 12 noon, punctual to the moment, at the first stroke of the clock the leader arises and commences the meeting by reading two or three verses of the hymn,

Salvation, oh the joyful sound,
 'Tis pleasure to our ears;
 A sovereign balm for every wound,
 A cordial for our fears.

Each person finds a hymnbook in his seat; all sing with heart and voice. The leader offers a prayer—short, pointed, to the purpose. Then reads a brief portion of Scripture. Ten minutes are now gone. Meantime, requests in sealed envelopes have been going up to the desk for prayer.

A deep, solemn silence settles down upon our meeting. It is holy ground. The leader stands with slips of paper in his hand.

He says: "This meeting is now open for prayer. Brethren from a distance are specially invited to take part. All will observe the rules."

All is now breathless attention. A tender solicitude spreads over all those upturned faces.

The chairman reads: "A son in North Carolina desires the fervent, effectual prayers of the righteous of this congregation for the immediate conversion of his mother in Connecticut."

In an instant a father rises: "I wish to ask the prayers of this meeting for two sons and a daughter." And he sits down and bursts into tears, and lays his head down on the railing of the seat before him, and sobs like a broken-hearted child.

A few remarks follow – very brief. The chairman rises with slips of paper in his hand, and reads: "A praying sister requests prayers for two unconverted brothers in the city of Detroit; that they be converted, and become the true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Another, "Prayers are requested of the people of God for a young man, once a professor of religion, but now a wanderer, and going astray...."

Two prayers in succession followed these requests – very fervent, very earnest. And others who rose to pray at the same time, sat down again when they found themselves preceded by the voices already engaged in prayer. Then arose from all hearts that beautiful hymn, sung with touching pathos, so appropriate too, just in this stage of this meeting with all these cases full before us,

There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
 And sinners plunged beneath that flood
 Lose all their guilty stains.

Then followed prayer by one who prays earnestly for all who have been prayed for, for all sinners present, for the perishing thousands in this city, for the spread of revivals all over the land and world.

It is now a quarter to one o'clock. Time has fled on silver wings

... There arose a sailor, now one no more, by reason of ill-health, but daily laboring for sailors. He was converted on board a man-of-war, and he knew how hard it was for the converted sailor to stand up firm against the storm of jeers, and reproaches, and taunts of a ship's crew. "Now I am here," he said, "to represent one who has requested me to ask your prayers for a converted sailor this day gone to sea. I parted from him a little time ago, and his fear is, his great fear, that he may dishonor the cause of the blessed Redeemer. Will you pray for this sailor?" Prayer was offered for his keeping and guidance.

Then came the closing hymn, the benediction, and the parting for twenty-three hours.

Revival Hits Front Pages

For the first time modern means of communication spread revival news. Prayer meetings exchanged telegraph messages. Newspaper coverage and printed propaganda made it impossible for anyone not to know about the revival. One man who came to the Fulton Street meeting said he had been given a handbill advertising the meeting six months before while standing on the west bank of the Mississippi River, 1,000 miles away.

But mostly, the revival spread by means of people with changed lives.

One of the six at the first Fulton Street meeting was a twenty-one-year-old Philadelphian. "Why not a prayer meeting in Philadelphia?" he thought. He and some of his fellow members of the YMCA asked for permission to hold a meeting in the Methodist Episcopal Union Church.

The start was dismal. Only about forty came. The meeting was moved to another building more centrally located. Still the crowd stayed around sixty.

But suddenly there was a change. On March 8, 1858, 300 people were present. On Wednesday, March 10, 2,500 people jammed into a larger auditorium. Seats were set up on the stage. After that, not less than 3,000 people attended the meeting every day. In May a tent was put up. Within four months 150,000 people had prayed in the tent.

Meetings sprang up in other parts of the city. It is estimated that there were 10,000 conversions in Philadelphia in 1858. One denomination received 3,000 new members.

In Boston, where Evangelist Charles G. Finney was preaching, a prayer meeting was held in historic Old South Church and in Park Street Church. At least 150 Massachusetts towns were moved by the revival, with 5,000 conversions before the end of March. The Boston correspondent of a Washington newspaper wrote that religion was the chief concern in many cities and towns of New England.

Newspapers everywhere thought the revival was front page news. Headlines similar to these might have told the story:

New Haven, Conn. – City's Biggest Church Packed Twice Daily for Prayer.

Bethel, Conn. – Business Shuts Down for Hour Each Day; Everybody Prays.

Albany, N. Y. – State Legislators Get Down on Knees.

Schenectady, N. Y. — Ice on the Mohawk
Broken for Baptisms.

Newark, N. Y. — Firemen's Meeting Attracts 2,000.

Washington, D. C. — Five Prayer Meetings Go Round
the Clock.

New Haven, Conn. — Revival Sweeps Yale.

Early in 1858 the revival power poured over the Appalachian Mountains and into the West. Every major town fell before it—Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha — and on to the Pacific Coast.

Chicago Stirred

In Chicago, where 2,000 showed up for prayer in the Metropolitan Theater, a newspaper commented:

So far as the effects of the present religious movement are concerned, they are apparent to all. They are to be seen in every walk of life, to be felt in every phase of society. The merchant, the farmer, the mechanic — all who have been within their influence — have been incited to better things; to a more orderly and honest way of life. All have been more or less influenced by this excitement.

And everywhere, it was a revival of prayer. There was no hysteria, no unusual disturbances. Just prayer.

Finney said:

There is such a general confidence in the prevalence of prayer, that the people very extensively seemed to prefer meeting for prayer to meeting for preaching. The general impression seemed to be, 'We have had instruction until we are hardened; it is time for us to pray.'

In a church in the Midwest twenty-five women got together once a week to pray for their unconverted husbands. The pastor traveled to the Fulton Street meeting to testify that on the Sunday he had left the last of the twenty-five husbands had been received into the church.

At the very first union prayer meeting held in Kalamazoo, Michigan, someone put in this request: "A praying wife requests the prayers of this meeting for her unconverted husband, that he may be converted and made an humble disciple of the Lord Jesus."

At once a stout, burly man arose and said, "I am

that man. I have a pious, praying wife, and this request must be for me. I want you to pray for me."

As soon as he sat down, another man got up and said, "I am that man. I have a praying wife. She prays for me. And now she asked you to pray for me. I am sure I am that man, and I want you to pray for me."

Three, four or five or more arose and said, "We want you to pray for us too." That started a revival that brought at least 500 conversions.

Requests for prayer came to the Fulton Street meeting from all parts of the country and Europe. Some were addressed to New York's mayor, who forwarded them to the meeting. A ledger was filled with the requests. Requests such as this:

For pity's sake, lend me your prayers for a first-born son. He curses me, his widowed mother; and, with a demon scowl, has turned his back on me for life... For God's sake, pray for Willie that he may be a minister of Christ. For this I dedicated him before his eyes opened on this sinful world.

And this:

The prayers of the Christians of the Fulton Street meeting are earnestly implored by a young lady who has been once a backslider from God, and who, in the midst of peculiarly harassing temptations, is now endeavoring to return fully to her former rest. Do not — do not forget her.

And this:

I am a little girl, and scarcely know how to write to a perfect stranger on so important a subject. But oh! I want to be a Christian so much; and I have been asking God for a long time to make me one, but He has not answered my prayer yet... I am afraid that I have not asked Him in the right way.

Prayer Requests Flood In

These earnest requests weighed deeply on those who attended the Fulton Street meeting. Some feared that "a kind of superstitious feeling might be encouraged in those who send these communications and a sense of self-complacency be engendered in those who received them."

They feared that the meeting would become *the* meeting, the panacea for all spiritual troubles. However, it was decided that no request could be refused. All they could do was to pray in humility. A flood of letters proved that many of their prayers were answered.

The revival rolled on into 1859 and 1860. There is no telling how long it might have lasted if the Civil War had not broken out. Some writers say that it carried right through the war. It was maintained that 150,000 Confederate soldiers were converted and that at war's end more than one-third of the officers and soldiers of the Confederate Army were professing Christians.

There is disagreement on how far the revival penetrated the South. A Methodist bishop reported that the Southern Methodists gained 43,388 members as a result of the revival.

When the revival was at high tide through the nation, it was judged that 50,000 persons a week were converted. And the number who joined the churches in 1858 amounted to almost 10 percent of the country's total church membership! If the estimate of one million converts is correct (some say the number is closer to 300,000), that accounts for one-thirtieth of the total United States population of that time—and almost all in one year! The revival also had repercussions in the awakening which swept the British Isles.

Statistically, the greatest gainers were the Methodist churches. In 1858 the northern churches received 135,517 new members. Between them, the northern and southern wings of Methodism garnered 12 percent of their membership from the revival.

The second largest denominational group, the Baptists, gained 92,243 members in 1858—10 percent of their total membership. The Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians also jumped.

How did this revival of 1857-58 compare with preceding revivals? It may not have had the spiritual depth of the Great Awakening of 1735 with its theological overtones. It may not have had the pervading and longlasting influence on the life of the nation that the Revival of 1800 had. But certainly it was the most intense and fastest-spreading of the great revivals.

Three things stand out about this spiritual awakening.

- It was a laymen's movement—almost entirely. Except for Finney and a few others, ministers were on the sidelines. It began an era of lay participation in the general work of the church, the Sunday school, and the YMCA.
- It was nonsectarian. At the first Fulton Street meetings, of the six persons present one was a Baptist, one a Congregationalist, one a member of

the Dutch Reformed Church, and one a Presbyterian. It was the same thing wherever the revival struck. Denominational differences were forgotten in a concern for people's souls.

- As pointed out before, it was a revival of prayer. Never, since that time, have Americans bowed before the Lord so unitedly.

Revival's Lesson

What lesson does this revival teach this generation? Certainly it demonstrates again how God can use one dedicated life to work out His purposes.

Jeremiah Lanphier is an inspiration to all unsung, seemingly unappreciated church workers everywhere. Surprisingly little has been written about him. He was still connected with the Old Dutch Church twenty-five years after the meeting was founded. At that time (1882) someone wrote of him:

Out of that solitary consecration to the service of Christ, who can tell what results have come?... [He] has been most richly blessed in personal work with persons who have attended the service. He quickly recognizes a stranger, and seems instinctively to know the man whose heart is sore. Many a visitor has wondered when he has been greeted and addressed in words that only a tried soul could fully appreciate, 'How do you know that I am in trouble?' ... Men under the deepest conviction have come here, and the missionary [Lanphier] has taken them to his study, there to pray with them, and to point them to the Lamb of God...

Lanphier's dedication to the work came only after a struggle and total surrender to God. He testified:

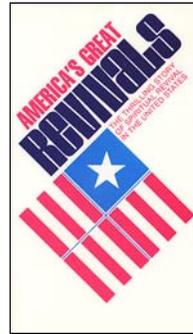
The subject was laid upon my heart, and was a matter of constant consideration for some time. At last I resolved to give myself to the work, and I shall never forget with what force, at the time, those words came home to my soul:

'Tis done, the great transaction's done,
I am my Lord's, and He is mine;
He drew me, and I followed on,
Charmed to confess the voice divine.

The Fulton Street prayer meeting became a permanent institution. It meets today. In September [1957] its one-hundredth anniversary will be commemorated.

The Revival of 1857-58 was the last great national revival. But it by no means closes the story of revival in America. Revivals blazed before and after

this awakening. The story of these revivals—in many respects just as significant in the history of our nation as the nationwide revivals—must be told through the lives of the faithful men of God who labored throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.



In the 2004 issues of *Knowing & Doing*, the account of one of America's great revivals will be featured, drawn from the republished accounts included in Bethany House's *America's Great Revivals*.

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