

## **Revival Born in a Prayer Meeting**

It was exactly 12 noon on September 23, 1857. The placard outside read: "Prayer Meeting from 12 to 1 o'clock." It looked like no one had the time. 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.

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. 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. But often Lanphier returned to his room in the church consistory wear 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.

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. When the day of the first meeting came, he was the only one on hand for it.

The minute hand 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.

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. That very week on Wednesday, October 14 the nation was staggered by the worst financial panic in its history. 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.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

A prize fighter nicknamed "Awful Gardiner" was a prayer-meeting convert. 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 noontday prayer meeting.

By the summer of 1858, news of the prayer meeting had crossed the Atlantic.

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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?

An eyewitness account, from 1858:

*We take our seat in the middle room, ten minutes before 12 o'clock noon. 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.*

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

*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.*

*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.*

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

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.

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

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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.

The start was dismal. Only about forty came. But suddenly there was a change. On March 8, 1858, 300 people were present. On Wednesday, March 10, 2,500 people jammed into a larder 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.

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.

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. In Chicago, 2,000 showed up for prayer in the Metropolitan Theater, 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. Then general impression seemed to be, “We have had instruction until are hardened; it is time for to prayer.”*

In a church in the Midwest twenty-five women got together once a week to prayer 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.”

Another man got up and said, “I am that man.”

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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.

Request for prayer came to the Fulton Street meeting from all parts of the country and Europe. 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.

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 wars end more than one-third of the officers and soldiers of the Confederate Army were professing Christians. (For more reading on this subject read, *The Great Revival in the Southern Armies* By: W. W. Bennett, Sprinkle Publications)

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! The revival also had repercussions in the awakening which swept the British Isles.

Statistically, the greatest gainers were the Methodist churches.

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 1857-1857 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 long-lasting 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.

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- It was a layman'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 person 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.

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

The Revival of 1857-1858 was the last great national revival. But it by no means closes the story of revival in America.

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