

# The Great Awakening of 1857-1858

*The footnotes were left in the USA. Please don't expect them anytime soon.*

## America Prior to the Revival

In the twelve years before the Third Great Awakening (also known as: The Revival/Awakening of 1857-1858; The Prayer Revival; and The Businessmen's Revival), the religious life in America was on a decline. It was a time of prosperity, and people were seeking riches rather than God. The churches were losing people, and worldliness was creeping in. (Orr 7)

A number of Christians who had become concerned over the materialism that pervaded the land, and the fact that the young were growing up without God, began to pray that God would break the love of money over people's lives and send another revival to the nation. "Concerts of Prayer" began to spring up throughout the United States of America and Canada. (8 and 12)

This materialism was broken in many lives by the Bank Panic of October 1857.

Due to the long, hard winter of 1856-1857, transportation and trade transactions were delayed. The spring brought some relief, but by the end of summer, businesses had begun to collapse. Before September, the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company of Cincinnati, with a branch in New York City, failed, causing "a shock to public confidence." (13)

Some banks refused to redeem their promissory notes, while others suspended operations altogether, including eighteen of New York City's leading banks. (14)

"On the 14th of October, 1857, the extensive banking system of the United States collapsed, a far-reaching disaster bringing ruin to hundreds of thousands of people in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and the industrial centers of the nation." (14)

The Panic caused rich men to go broke literally overnight. Suicide and murder increased, as well as "the number of unfortunate women who roamed the streets in the cities." (14)

Yet experts later agreed that the panic by the banks was unjustified. The Secretary of the U.S. Treasury said that New York's banks "had never been sounder" and even at the worst time had plenty of funds to meet the strain. (14-15)

Some felt that the Bank Panic was Divine judgment against a nation that had made mammon their god. Samuel I. Prime, chief editor of the daily New York Observer, felt "as long as men transact business on unsound principles, they will be punished. The law of trade, as well as of God, necessitate the penalty." (18)

J. Edwin Orr, however, states that the Revival was not caused by the Panic. The prayer meeting which became the focal point of the Revival began three weeks prior to the Panic. Within two months, the crisis was over, and it took another two months before the Revival "officially" began. (21-21)

# Revival in Hamilton, Canada West

By 1857, prayer movements were growing in Ontario. In August or September, Walter and Phoebe Palmer, a Methodist physician and his wife from New York, came to hold what turned out to be very successful meetings. Returning to the States, they were delayed in Hamilton. On October 8th, the next day, the Methodist ministers convened a prayer meeting at which sixty-five people attended. The greater number of these people pledged themselves to pray for an "outpouring of the Holy Spirit." That night, Phoebe Palmer felt that God was about to move. (26)

On the evening of the 9th, a larger crowd met in the basement of the John Street Methodist Church. Twenty-one people were converted.

The following meetings were made up mostly of exhortations and testimonies. Many testified of conversion, while those who were already Christians testified to an entire dedication of heart and life to Christ.

The New York Christian Advocate and Journal reported on November 5, 1857, about the "Revival Extraordinary" in Hamilton in Canada West, where twenty to forty-five professions were being made daily, and one hundred were made on the previous Sunday. They wrote:

"The work is taking its range . . . persons of all classes. Men of low degree and men of high estate for wealth and position; old men and maidens, and even little children, can be seen humbly kneeling together, pleading for grace. The mayor of the city, with other persons of like position, are not ashamed to be seen bowed at the altar of prayer beside the humble servant." (27)

The spontaneous revival in Hamilton soon swept the entire community and a large part of the nation. All denominations reported a rise in membership over the following years.

The Canadian Awakening of 1857 sparked the Third Great Awakening in the United States.

## Prayer for Revival

"Longing for Revivals" was published in May 1857 by the "New School" Presbyterian Church. This was an appeal to corporate prayer which had been written some time before it was finally published.

"This longing for revivals we cannot but consider as a cheering indication of the noblest life . . . Next to a state of actual revival is the sense of its need and the struggle to attain it, at any sacrifice of treasure, toil, or time. We trust that the period is not distant, when this state of actual, general, glorious revival shall be ours." (48)

The Presbyterians were not alone in their longing. The Baptists and Methodists were also calling their members to cry out to God to send another awakening to the land.

By early 1857, many were praying "that the popular addiction to money-making might be broken." (48)

When the bank panic broke the love of money over many lives, the intercessors focused their prayers on revival.

Prayer meetings increased in numbers and frequency amongst almost all denominations. Theodore Cuyler, pastor of Nineteenth Street Church, New York, said in November 1857, that he was "struck with the earnestness of petitions for the descent of God's Spirit on out city churches." (50)

## **The First Signs of Awakening in America**

Fulton Street in New York City is said by most people to be the beginning of the "Prayer Meeting Revival." Charleston, South Carolina, was, however, already experiencing a revival in the middle of 1857--among its slaves!

Black slaves had their own churches with mostly white leaders. One of these many congregations was found in Charleston with Dr. John L. Girardeau as its minister. Anson Street Presbyterian Church had forty-eight black members and twelve white. In 1857, they began a prayer meeting, petitioning God to send "a spiritual awakening," and waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit." (40)

One evening while leading in prayer, Girardeau felt as if a surge of electricity struck his head and gone through his entire body. He then stated: "The Holy Spirit has come. We will begin preaching tomorrow evening." He dismissed the church, but no one left. "Immediately he began exhorting them to accept the Gospel." By the time he was able to re-dismiss the congregation, it was midnight. (40)

Every night for the next eight weeks, he preached on "sin and repentance, faith and justification, and regeneration" to crowds of 1,500 to 2,000. Many whites as well as blacks were converted. They later joined the various congregations in the city.

The new revival scenes were not limited to the black churches. In the autumn of 1856, Charles G. Finney, one of America's most prominent evangelists, began preaching in Boston and remained there until the following April. He wrote in his Memoirs: "The work was quite extensive that winter in Boston, and many very striking cases of conversion occurred." (Rosell 560)

The Boston correspondent of New York's *The Independent* reported of these meetings: "Members of other churches in the city soon began to come in considerable numbers; then from the neighboring towns; and finally from distant places in New Hampshire and Maine, came ministers by the scores, private Christians by the hundreds if not by the thousands, to hear the word, and catch some of the sacred influences that evidently attended it." (560)

Churches in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Iowa, California, Connecticut, Virginia, in New England as well as other states reported "spiritual outpourings." (Orr 59) Nor were they contained to one denomination. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians,

Episcopalians, Lutherans, and most of the other denominations all reported an increased interest throughout 1857.

When Finney returned to Boston the following winter, the nationwide interest for revival was pretty much underway, so that he could later write:

"This was in the winter of 1857 and '58; and it will be remembered that it was at this time that a great revival prevailed throughout the land in such a tremendous manner, that for some weeks it was estimated that not less than fifty thousand conversions occurred per week." (Rosell 561-562)

and:

"In this revival I had conversation with a large number of the higher classes in Boston, especially those that attended Episcopal worship. But I suppose we shall never know in this world anything like the number savingly affected during this great revival in Boston." (570)

## **Fulton Street and the Revival**

In the middle of September 1857, in New York City, a tall man "with a pleasant face, and affectionate manner . . . shrewd and endowed with much tact and common sense" (Orr 52-53) began passing out handbills that read:

"How Often Shall I Pray? As often as the language of prayer is in my heart; as often as I see my need of help; as often as I feel the power of temptation; as often as I am made sensible of any spiritual declension, or feel the aggression of a worldly, earthly spirit . . . In prayer, we leave the business of time for that of eternity, and intercourse with God."

And on the reverse:

"A day Prayer-Meeting is held every Wednesday from 12 to 1 o'clock in the Consistory building of the North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton and William Streets. This meeting is intended to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers and businessmen generally an opportunity to stop and call on God amid the perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but it is designed for those who find it inconvenient to remain more than 5 or 10 minutes, as well as for those who can spare a whole hour. Necessary interruption will be slight, because anticipated. Those in haste often expedite their business engagements by halting to lift their voices to the throne of grace in humble, grateful prayer." (54)

The man was Jeremiah Lanphier, a 48-year old businessman turned lay city missionary, and he was beginning the prayer-meeting on behalf of the North Dutch Reformed Church. Shortly before noon on September 23 he opened the doors of the church. Out of a population of over a million, only one man showed up for the beginning of the meeting -- Lanphier!

At 12:30, he heard the footsteps of one man climbing the stairs. Within a few minutes, a total of six men had joined Lanphier to pray. The next Wednesday brought 20; the third week was attended by between 30 and 40 men.

The meetings were so encouraging that it was decided that they should meet daily. The next day, the crowds had again increased. By the following Wednesday, October 14, the day of the crash, "over 100, many of them not professors of religion but under conviction of sin and seeking an interest in Christ" were attending. (54)

By mid-November, the two lecture rooms had to be used, and both were filled. According to Winkie Pratney, within six months time, these noon-time prayer-meetings were attracting over 10,000 businessmen who were "confessing sin, getting saved, [and] praying for revival." (157)

A Boston journalist gives a picture of what the early meetings were like:

". . . The meeting is begun at twelve o'clock precisely, and it closes exactly on the hour [1 P.M.]. The room is full and crowded, and the interest appears to increase from day to day. It began with a modest meeting held once in the week. But attendance and benefit seemed to demand the more frequent observance of the privilege: now it has become a daily service. With the pressure came a larger attendance and a more spirited service. The probability is that the meeting will be adjourned to the church. Any one comes in or goes out as he pleases. It is the rule of the place to leave at any moment. All sects are here: the formal, stately Churchman and the impulsive Methodist who cannot suppress his groan and his "amen;" the sober, substantial Dutchman and the ardent Congregationalist, with all Yankee restlessness on his face; the Baptist and the Presbyterian, joining in the same chorus and bowing at the same altar. Not one woman is present in the meeting, and the singing from 200 male voices is really majestic." (Orr 70)

By mid-February, Fulton Street was holding three simultaneous, standing room only prayer meetings on three floors. This caused editor James Gordon Bennett to begin exploiting the prayer meetings in his New York Herald. Soon, his rival, Horace Greeley gave friendlier editorials in his New York Tribune. In April, Greeley dedicated an entire issue to the Revival. Other papers across the nation quickly followed suit.

In a two column editorial on March 20, the New York Times had this to say about the revival:

"The great wave of religious excitement which is now sweeping over this nation, is one of the most remarkable movements since the Reformation . . . Travelers relate that on cars and steamboats, in banks and markets, everywhere through the interior, this matter is an absorbing topic. Churches are crowded; bank-directors' rooms become oratories; school-houses are turned into chapels; converts are numbered by the scores of thousands. In this City, we have beheld a sight which not the most enthusiastic fanatic for church-observances could ever have hoped to look upon;--we have seen in a business quarter of the City, in the busiest hours, assemblies of merchants, clerks and working-men, to the number of some 5,000, gathered day after day for a simple and solemn worship. Similar assemblies we find in other portions of the City; a theatre is turned into a chapel; churches of all sects are open and crowded by day and night." (4)

The same editorial offers this insight into the thinking of the day:

"It is most impressive to think that over this great land tens and fifties of thousands of men and women are putting to themselves at this time in a simple, serious way, the greatest question that can ever come before the human mind--'What shall we do to be saved from sin?'" (4)

As the noontime prayer meetings increased, attended predominately by the male workers of the city, the effect in the city was tremendous. Many ministers began having nightly services in which to lead men to Christ. A chain reaction of church after church began to hold morning, afternoon, and evening meetings for both prayer and the counseling of those concerned about their souls.

The same scenes were soon reported from all over the nation, from New York to California, Florida to Maine. It affected judges and college students, businessmen and housewives. At times, schools had to close in order to pray and seek God.

People across the nation prayed, and churches filled.

Though it peaked in 1858, it did not stop there. Throughout the Civil War, camps had great revival meetings--over 150,000 were converted in the Confederate army alone. (Orr 237) It also crossed the oceans. In Britain, close to a million people joined the churches due to the revival that swept that land.

This revival was a layman's revival. Though ministers helped to counsel people, it was the laypeople that carried it.

## **Stories from the Revival**

In order to show the power and effect of the Revival on the people of the various communities, the following incidents are given:

Edwin Orr relates the story of a visiting merchant to New York City who was selecting goods when noon came. "He requested the city wholesaler to work through the noon hour" so that he would be able to return to Albany by the evening riverboat. "He was resolutely told, 'No! I can't help that. I have something to attend that is of more importance than the selling of goods. I must attend the noon-day prayer meeting. It will close at one o'clock, and I will then fill out your order.'" They both attended the meeting and the visitor was converted.

When he returned to Albany, he immediately began a noontime prayer meeting in the state's capital. (55-56)

Charles Finney tells of a traveler in a Boston prayer meeting who got up and said: "I am from Omaha the capital of Nebraska. On my journey east I have found a continuous prayer meeting all the way. We call it about two thousand miles from Omaha to Boston; and here was a prayer meeting about two thousand miles in extent." (Rosell 563)

There is also the story of a European cargo ship, which was boarded by the harbor pilot while sailing into New York harbor during the Awakening. The Christian pilot began telling the captain and crew what was happening in the city. This so caught the attention of them all, that before they had docked, the majority of the crew had become Christians. (Christian History 33)

At a prayer meeting in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a request was read: "'A praying wife requests the prayers of this meeting for her unconverted husband.' A burly man stood up and blurted, 'I am that man. I have a praying wife and this request must be for me. I want you to pray for me.' No sooner had he sat down than another man arose with sobs and tears to claim, 'I am sure that I am that man, and I want you to pray for me.'" Within a few minutes, three other "unconverted husbands" had stood and asked for prayer. (Whitaker 71)

In the Christian Equippers International's Spirit-Led Evangelism textbook's section on revival, they gave this story from the 1858 Revival:

"A schoolboy in class became so troubled about his soul that the schoolmaster sent him home. An older boy, a Christian, went with him, and before they had gone far led him to Christ. Returning at once to school, this new convert testified to his teacher: 'Oh, I am so happy! I have the Lord Jesus in my heart.' These simple words had an astonishing effect; boy after boy rose silently and left the room. Going outside, the teacher found these boys all on their knees in a row along the wall of the playground. Very soon, their silent prayer became a bitter cry; it was heard by another class inside and pierced their hearts. They fell on their knees and their cry for mercy was heard in turn by a girls' class above. In a few moments, the whole school was on their knees! Neighbors and passers-by came flocking in, and, as they crossed the threshold, they all came under the same convicting power. Every room was filled with men, women, and children seeking God." (B6)

## **The Results of the Awakening**

Churches benefitted greatly from the Revival. At its peak, there was an estimate 50,000 converts per week. During a two year period, 10,000 were joining churches weekly, and Sunday schools flourished. (Orr 77)

The Awakening of 1857-1858 brought over one million new converts into the American Church, and revived the over four million members present before the Revival. The new life within the churches was shown most dramatically by the resurgence of evangelism.

Under the First Great Awakening, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards sparked a mass movement of evangelism. This was also seen during the Second Great Awakening under the ministries of Charles Finney, Peter Cartwright, and others. These two movements were mostly led by the ordained clergy. Under the Third Great Awakening of 1858, it was the laymen who moved out to evangelize. The famous D.L. Moody began his ministry during the Revival, yet he was never ordained. Even though he founded a Bible college and pastored churches, he always remained a layman.

This new wave of evangelism became a "specialized evangelism," where specific groups were targeted, whether they be lawyers, sailors, the poor, drunkards, or prostitutes. (310)

It wasn't only the churches which benefitted from the Awakening. Businessmen began to pay off honest debts, and "places of debauchery and taverns by the hundreds" closed down. There was also an increased concern in helping the needy and destitute, with great growth in volunteer work, and the financing of the work. (315-316)

## **The Conclusion**

Though the Revival of 1857-1858 is barely remembered by secular historians today, it was probably the greatest of the three Great Awakenings experienced by the United States of America.