

THE NINTH IN A SERIES ON REVIVAL

The Prayer Meeting Revival

BY KEN HORN

A 46-year-old businessman prays alone in an old Dutch Reformed church in New York. It is Sept. 23, 1857, and Jeremiah Lanphier is concerned that no one else is there. He had felt impressed to begin a weekly midday prayer meeting. Now, 30 minutes in and still alone, he wonders if he's made a mistake. By the end of the hour, a handful of men have come and gone.

This prayer meeting began like so many others — with little apparent interest. But Lanphier felt God had told him to do it, so he continued.

Prayer is at the heart of every genuine move of God. When the word revival is spoken — if it is genuine revival — the word prayer will always be associated with it. But there was a move of God — some called it another “Great Awakening” — so bathed in prayer from start to finish, and where prayer took such a central role, that it will forever be known as the Prayer Meeting Revival. It began with Jeremiah Lanphier's solitary half-hour.

Challenging times

In 1857 society was in turmoil. Religion was in decline and the debate over slavery was turning ugly. Revivalist Charles Finney said that New York “seemed to be on such a wave of prosperity as to be the death of revival effort.” But history tells us that in the midst of spiritual decay and nominal Christianity, God raises up people to pray — and the fires of revival first begin to glow in the warmth of humble rooms of prayer.

Days after Lanphier began his prayer meeting, the New York stock market crashed and panic

erupted. Clearly stimulated by the panic, the prayer meeting's numbers grew. On the fourth week there were 100 in attendance — and one of the most remarkable moves of God in this nation's history was well on its way.

Instead of the usual evangelistic services (though there were some of these), this revival was marked explicitly by prayer meetings. There was little preaching. There

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was no consciously organized or coordinated effort. Great preachers of the day — Henry Ward Beecher, for example — approved of the movement but found themselves simple participants or observers, rather than leaders. Pastors delighted in watching their church members take the lead in prayer. Finney said, “The general impression seemed to be, ‘We have had instruction until we are hardened; it is now time for us to pray.’ ”

Prayer meetings exploded. Lanphier's original meeting overflowed three rooms, and it was necessary for other churches to be opened. These, too, quickly

filled, and soon a large theater was too small to accommodate the crowds. Churches started evening prayer meetings.

In short order, there were 150 interdenominational prayer meetings in Brooklyn and Manhattan alone. The fire of prayer leaped to Philadelphia where large buildings — many of them public buildings — could not accommodate the crowds. So prayer meetings began outdoors.

Before the movement was four months old, the prayer meeting fervor had spread across the nation. In the Chicago Metropolitan Theater, as many as 2,000 gathered daily. Cleveland, Ohio; St. Louis, Mo.; and Louisville, Ky., were among the cities that counted daily attendance in the thousands.

The meetings were informal, had little planning, and started and ended promptly. Though the spirit was free, the rules were necessarily rigid. Anyone could pray, testify or exhort as they “felt led,” but none would be allowed to dominate. Typically the meetings had a five-minute limit on individuals who prayed out. Unlike earlier revivals, these meetings were usually orderly and quiet.

And then people began getting saved — right in the prayer meetings. A prayer meeting in Michigan saw 500 conversions; one in Connecticut claimed 400. Everywhere prayer meetings became de facto evangelistic services as thousands were converted.

Zone of holy influence

What has been called the “zone of holy influence” or the “invisible cloud of God's presence” has been clearly documented during times of revival in the United

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States, and especially in the Prayer Meeting Revival.

New York Harbor became an unlikely center of revival as crew members and passengers on a number of ships were saved before going ashore.

When the battleship *North Carolina* was anchored in New York Harbor, four Christians on board met for a prayer meeting. They were mocked and ridiculed as they prayed, but soon the mocking and jeering turned to cries for mercy as the Holy Spirit began convicting the crew.

For several days the Holy Spirit moved. Ministers were sent for, and many former mockers were converted. A number of ships entered this zone of holy influence — and saw lives changed.

From 100 to 150 miles offshore it seems that the Holy Spirit moved as ships approached New York, and many passengers and crew members were converted. Some ships had ministers sent to them before they docked. Many people arrived in New York Harbor as Christians who had embarked on their voyages as unbelievers.

Simplicity and unity

Believers were united. Since the meetings were led by church members rather than clergy (it is also called the Layman's Revival), there was less analysis of differences between the denominations. God used this simplicity to blend the body of Christ into a united front, standing together in corporate prayer and evangelism, lowering walls and minimizing differences, while holding to the important basics of the gospel. In this, many well-educated and experienced ministers learned from the people of their congregations.

New York newspapers gave extensive coverage to the revival. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* devoted an entire issue to it. The *Washington National Intelligencer* said, "The Revivals, or Great Awakening, continue to be the leading topic of the day ... from Texas, in the South, to the extreme of our Western boundaries and our Eastern limits; their influence is felt by every denomination" (March 20, 1858).

It was reported that not one unconverted person could be found in some of the towns of New England. Indeed, during one two-month period, weekly conversions averaged 50,000. Papers nationwide noted a radical, positive change in the moral climate.

At the end, in 1859, 2 million Americans — 1 in every 15 — had been won to Christ.

It is unfortunate that the Prayer Meeting Revival has been largely forgotten by history. This remarkable movement is deserving of the attention of believers — especially those who long for revival. The message is clear. A great move of God requires no superstar revivalist. God uses simple prayer.

The name Jeremiah Lanphier is not well known today — and the names of many God has used in similar fashion are not known at all. Perhaps God would use you in such a way. The means to start a revival have been placed in your hands — even if, like Jeremiah Lanphier, you must begin by praying alone. **e**

KEN HORN is editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

This series began in the Jan. 11, 2009, issue.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

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