

The Awakening of 1858 in America

by J. Edwin Orr

The 1858 revival in America was a significant spiritual awakening that added a million converts to the membership of major Protestant denominations and had a profound impact on the black population in the South.

Duration: 28:39

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 18:19-20, Acts 1:14, Ephesians 4:3

Topics: "Revival History", "Prayer Power"

Description

This sermon delves into the historical context of the 1857-1858 revival in the United States, highlighting the significant impact it had on various aspects of society, including churches, denominations, and even the Civil War. It emphasizes the power of prayer as a precursor to revival, the unity among denominations, the massive conversions among black slaves, and the lasting effects on missionary endeavors and social ministries. The sermon encourages a reflection on the lessons learned from this revival and a prayer for a similar awakening in modern times.

Transcript

At the present time, the national debt of the United States exceeds one trillion dollars. That's the amount that the government owes the people. One million times a million.

But when President James Buchanan delivered his inaugural address in 1857, he declared that our present financial condition is without parallel in history. No nation has ever before been embarrassed from too large a surplus in its treasury. He proposed paying off the national debt entirely.

Times were good. Profits were predicting a prolific harvest and editorials were captioning a good time coming. And yet, 32 weeks later, every bank in the United States went broke.

Now, about that time, the Protestant churches boasted a membership of about four million. Between 1857 and 1859, there occurred a revival and an awakening in the United States which added fully a million members out of a population of 30 million. It was the most wholesome awakening of all time.

The Episcopal Bishop McElveen of Ohio stated, It is a work so extensive, so remarkable in its rise, progress, and influence, I have no doubt whence it cometh, it is the Lord's doing. And so said all contemporaries, except those whose philosophy rejected evangelism. That was not only the opinion of the moment.

D.L. Moody died in 1899. After a lifetime of service, he declared, I would like, before I go hence, to see the whole Church of God quickened as it was in 1857 and a wave going from Maine to California that will sweep thousands into the kingdom of God. It seems fair to deduce that in 40 years of winning men to Christ, Moody had seen nothing to compare with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in 1858 when he served his apprenticeship.

Moody did not say, I would like to see the whole Church of God quickened as it was in 1893. That was his best year in evangelism. But the year 1858 was the greatest of his experience.

Professor Perry Miller of Harvard made no profession of faith. In a book published after his death, he called the 1858 revival the event of the century. However, Professor William McLaughlin of Brown University named it a religious excitement organized by panic-stricken businessmen that scarcely deserved to rank as an awakening.

However, he used as a definition of an awakening, a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture. Could you imagine applying such a definition to the meeting of the apostles in the upper room at Pentecost? Evangelicals also called it a businessman's revival, but they attribute it to a prayer meeting started at the time of the bank panic by a layman called Jeremiah Lanphier. It was attended only by half a dozen men out of a population of a million, and then it overflowed into thousands of prayer meetings followed by a great revival.

I've had to challenge both interpretations, the secular one and the evangelical one. Now, for a dozen years, religious life in the United States was in decline. Almost every denomination was losing members or not keeping up with the birth rate.

What were the reasons given? Some people had lost faith in spiritual things because of unhappy disillusionment that vexed the followers of William Miller, who had predicted Christ's return and reign in 1844. Other people were making money very easily and very easily forgetting God. But most seriously, the slavery contention divided some denominations and many congregations.

Sometime before the revival, the Reverend William Arthur, a British Methodist, preached a series of powerful messages in Ohio and soon afterwards published them as the Tongue of Fire. Arthur carried his readers back to Pentecost, seeking a revival of its power and appealing for prevailing prayer. His book concludes with a most remarkable prayer to God the Holy Spirit.

Descend upon all the churches. Renew Pentecost in this our age. Baptize thy people generally again with tongues of fire.

Crown this century with a revival of pure religion greater than that of the last century, greater than that of the first, and greater than any demonstration of the Spirit ever yet vice versa to man. Evangelicals of all denominations read this book, and many there were, after a couple of years, who asserted that this extraordinary prayer had been answered. Now, until today, there's been general agreement that the 1857-58 revival began in the United States in early 1858, although it was preceded by a movement of prayer of the humblest origins.

What is not commonly known is that long before that bank panic, there was a concert of prayer, the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and others participating. Fulton Street was only one of thousands of gatherings praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the churches of the

United States and Canada. Denominations were officially committed to prayer for revival and already engaged in it.

Take an example. The Presbyterian General Assembly quoted one Presbytery after another, We would upon our bended knees offer the prayer for Bacchus, O Lord, revive thy work. And then they summed it up by saying, 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 it is not distant when this state of general revival shall be ours. We mentioned the theory that we owe this revival to the bank panic, but Canada was utterly untouched by the bank panic. The people there were praying for revival.

Revivals began in the Atlantic provinces and in Ontario. About a week before that bank panic, an extraordinary revival broke out in Hamilton, Ontario. Walter and Phoebe Palmer, well-known Methodists who had been up speaking in summer camp meetings, lost their baggage and stayed over in Hamilton unexpectedly.

The ministers arranged special meetings for them on very short notice. Very few attended the first meeting. But there arose such an awakening that the mayor of the town, business leaders, and common people repented.

And this revival in Canada continued through 1858, 59, and 60. Now, the South of the United States, producing cotton, was very little affected by the bank panic. If we were to ask the question, what community in the South was least affected, we'd have to answer, the black slaves.

They didn't have a dime in the bank. Revival began breaking out in the fall of 1857 in Virginia and the Carolinas among the slaves. At that time, blacks met in the same churches with the whites.

Sometimes they occupied a gallery or some separate section. But the churches proved to be too small. So in Virginia, the great warehouses were filled with black inquirers.

One of the most remarkable revivals of modern times occurred during the fall of 57 in Beaufort, South Carolina, where in 15 weeks a pastor baptized 428 believers, of whom 422 were black, making it the world's largest Baptist church. A truly remarkable revival occurred in Anson Street Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where 48 black members outnumbered the dozen white. The minister was Dr. John Gerardo, an outstanding theologian who could have had any church he wanted in South Carolina.

He started a prayer meeting entreating God to send revival. It constantly increased until the sanctuary was filled. He was urged by his officers to commence preaching, but he declined, waiting, he said, for the outpouring of the Spirit.

Then one evening, while leading the petitioners in prayer, he received a sensation as if a surge of electric power had struck his head and diffused itself throughout his whole body. For a little while, he stood speechless under the strange physical feeling. He stood up, then he sat down again.

He was confused. There was nothing in the Presbyterian order of service to account for this. Then he said, the Holy Spirit has come, we will begin preaching tomorrow evening.

So he closed the service with a hymn, dismissed the congregation, came down from the pulpit, but no one left the house. Then he realized the situation. The Holy Spirit had come not only to him, but had taken possession of the hearts of the people.

He immediately began exhorting them to accept the gospel. They began to sob softly like the falling of rain, then with deeper emotion to weep bitterly, or to rejoice loudly according to certain stance. It was midnight before he could dismiss the meeting.

In the greatest event of his ministry, I'm quoting him, he preached to crowds of 1,500 to 2,000 night and day for eight weeks, and converts in great numbers, white and black, joined the churches of Charleston. Now throughout the fall of 1857, intercessors multiplied throughout the country. Some conventions were far-reaching.

The ministers and elders of four Presbyterian synods met in Pittsburgh December 1st to pray for revival. Baptist churches in New York launched united prayer meetings, so did other denominations. Not only so, but Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Lutherans, and Episcopalians reported local revivals in state after state, some as far away as Texas and Iowa.

Now in February of 1858, Fulton Street and other businessmen's prayer meetings overflowed. Horace Greeley, the editor who said, go west, young men, sent one of his reporters around the prayer meetings to count how many men were actually praying at noon. In an hour, the man with horse and buggy could reach only 12 meetings, but he announced 6,100 men at prayer.

In the evenings, the churches were crowded every night to hear the word, and soon converts were coming in at the rate of 10,000 a week. Newspapers gave headlines to the reports of revival. Along the Hudson and the Mohawk, revival stirred the population in town after town.

In several places, the Baptists had so many candidates for believers' baptism that they broke the ice on the river and immersed the candidates in icy water, and when Baptists do that, they really are on fire. Revival was underway in New England. It started in concerts of prayer.

It spread all over Boston. Finney was preaching at Park Street Church and said it was too general to keep any account of the number of converts. New England's church bells rang three times a day to call people to prayer.

In Newark, New Jersey, 2,785 of the city's 70,000 people were converted in a couple of months, according to reports the most mature of the people. In Pennsylvania, there were great revivals in 1857, but six weeks or so after the financial crash, a businessmen's prayer meeting was started in Philadelphia. Only a dozen men came out of a population of half a million, but on the 3rd of February of 1858, the intercessors repaired to an empty room in James Hall, a great theater downtown, where the attendance was picked up to 3,000 a day.

Then the attendance was so great, it overflowed. The hymn written by George Duffield, Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, was written there and sung for the first time by those men. In Washington, the nation's capital, there were five daily prayer meetings.

5,000 people attended the one in the Academy of Music. However, Charles Finney, strange to say, reported that the only part of the country not affected by the revival was the South, because they were addicted to their peculiar institution of slavery. But this is not true.

I can document the revival from Richmond, Virginia, around to Waco, Texas. The mayor of Chattanooga called for Thanksgiving in February, not November, to celebrate the coming of the millennium. He thought the millennium had come.

The revival swept Ohio and all the western states. The movement crossed the Alleghenies again in March 1858, crowded all the halls and churches all the way to Omaha. In Ohio, 200 towns reported 12,000 converts in a couple of months.

Was it lasting? Between 1853 and 1857, Methodist churches in Ohio were losing membership annually, but in 1858 they gained 12%. Michigan Baptists won 168 in four years, but in 1858, 2,539. Chicago had a population of 100,000, and yet they had 2,000 men meeting each noon for prayer, and the church was conducting two and three and four meetings a day.

Trinity Episcopal Church had 121 members in 1857. They built a new church for 1,400 in 1860. A concerned shoe salesman offered to teach Sunday school class, but he was told that they had 12 teachers and only 16 pupils.

So he went out to the streets and rounded up 17 urchins and started classes and founded a huge Sunday school. That was the beginning of the life ministry of Dwight Lyman Moody. The news of the awakening back east reached California in hundreds of thousands of affectionate letters, and this caused a flocking of Christians to prayer meetings in the churches and other gathering places.

The California towns reported extraordinary interest in religion, and two months later, daily prayer meetings in San Francisco were continuing with unabated zeal. The results were rather disappointing in the southern part of California, where there was very little Anglo-popular. Before the close of 1857, there was a remarkable awakening among seamen in New York and all the other ports.

The seamen's friend recorded an outpouring of the Spirit in almost every seamen's Bethel around the coasts. There was an extraordinary revival of religion in the United States Navy, and dozens of army volunteer regiments marched to church services. Firemen in the bigger cities were somewhat of a problem because they often would battle each other and fight the police and civilians as well as dousing flames.

They made a great effort to reach firemen in all the great cities, and many, many were converted. In American colleges in New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the South and the West, with scarcely an exception, there was a great student awakening. The work at Yale found no parallel in the whole history of that institution.

In most places, the majority of students professed conversion, and there was a vast increase of candidates for the ministry reported by the seminaries. Now, this 1858 revival was received by great enthusiasm by the secular press. They testified of great changes for good in every place.

With few exceptions, the 1857-58 awakening was supported by every Protestant denomination, including the Lutherans and the Episcopalians, although a minority in each objected. These meetings were commended for their quietness and restraint, and they gained goodwill of citizens in every place. Looking back, none of the objections raised about extravagances in previous movements were even mentioned in connection with the 1857-58 revival.

Looking forward, there were manifested no signs and wonders except extraordinary conversions, no gifts of tongues or healing, but many, many calls to service. Besides a million church members reinvigorated in

the movement, a million converts were added to the membership of major Protestant denominations. The total number of church members was 4 million, and in two years it became 5 million.

Until now, only estimates of the total in gathering have been published. I've examined the statistics of 80% of the Protestant churches and have reached the incomplete figure of 1,1379 added to the churches in two years. Beyond all else, it was a layman's movement in which laymen of every sort of church affiliation gladly undertook both normal and exceptional responsibility.

Now, despite the outbreak of the bloodiest, most homicidal war in the world between Napoleon's time and World War I, the American Civil War, the awakening continued effective in the armies of both North and South. In the civilian population of the North, after a national repentance in 1863, it revived the churches in distressing days and solaced many anguished people. In the South, civilian fervor first waned by 1864.

But in the wartime 60s, fervent and united prayer continued with significant seasons of refreshing reported, especially in the theaters of war. 150,000 Confederate soldiers were converted in the Army of Northern Virginia. But I can document revivals also in the Union Army.

In a little town called Ringgold in Georgia, they marched 150 converts down to the river to be baptized according to preference, some by immersion, some by pouring, and some by sprinkling. And then 400 took communion, and that evening Major General Howard preached the gospel. Eighty-six more soldiers were converted.

Major Howard was killed at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain a month later. But that revival was in Ringgold, Georgia, in the Army of General Sherman, invading Georgia. The evangelists were four young laymen from Illinois, Reynolds, Nichols, Bliss, and D.L. Moody, 1863, ten years before he became famous.

Not only was there a great effect upon the Negro population, both North and South, churches gaining so much strength in numbers, but there were gracious outpourings of the Spirit in West Indian communities before the end of 1858. In 1860, a remarkable awakening began in a Moravian church and spread all over Jamaica. Chapels were once again packed, and widespread conversions followed.

The small beginnings of missionary churches were reported in Brazil in 1859, and at this time was also an enterprise pioneered in Mexico. And following 1858, American Missionary Society expanded ministries in Asia and Africa. Among the products of the revival were John Clough, a Baptist, converted in Iowa, who maintained the ministry of prayer and became a key figure in a movement in India baptizing 9,606 in three days, 2,222 in one day.

Now, this revival became worldwide, but its effect in the United States was very significant. Let me give an example. In Kalamazoo, all the denominations united in a public prayer meeting.

At the very first meeting, a request was read out. A praying wife asked the prayers of this meeting for her unconverted husband. All at once, a muscular man stood up and said, I'm that man, I have a praying wife, this request must be for me, I want you to pray for me.

He was a blacksmith, he was converted then and there. Just as soon as he took a seat, another man arose, ignoring his predecessor, and he said with tears, I'm that man, I have a praying wife, she prays for me, and now she's asking you to pray for me. I'm sure I'm that man, I want you to pray for me.

He was a lawyer, and he was converted. Half a dozen convicted husbands were converted in the first five minutes. In times of evangelism, the evangelist seeks a sinner.

In times of revival, the sinners come chasing after the Lord. There's that difference. One of the significant things was the number of conversions among the black slaves in the South.

I didn't know that there was an army of liberation in training in the South, planning an insurrection in 1857. They were going to march on Atlanta. A hundred thousand drilled men.

But so great was the revival that the leader of that underground movement apparently was converted and decided that a higher power was going to intervene in the struggle for liberty. So he called off the insurrection. Supposing it had not been called off, what would have happened? The South was well prepared.

They would have slaughtered the blacks. There would have been a lot of innocent blood shed. There would have been reprisals taken.

And so the insurrection was called off. It was almost as if the Almighty told the black slaves, Slavery is a sin and it demands a blood atonement. Actually, there were 600,000 white soldiers lost their lives in the Civil War.

But the blacks weren't to blame for this. And they were told to remain quiet, which they did. Had there been a slaughter of the blacks in the South, perhaps they would have turned their back on Christianity.

And you would have seen a situation somewhat like Haiti where they have voodoo or Brazil where they have Candomblé and Macumba and the other African cults. Now this revival continued for 40 years. It didn't continue as an exciting revival for 40 years.

But D.L. Moody, for example, extended the revival by his ministry for 40 years. Not only that, but the denominations took up evangelism and made it the usual practice of their meetings. Most churches planned evangelistic campaigns and most churches united in evangelistic efforts to reach a whole city for Christ.

It not only recruited candidates for the ministry. For instance, Union Theological Seminary had the largest class in its history. The same is true of all the theological seminaries.

But it recruited quite a number of missionaries for the foreign field. And following this revival, following the Civil War, there was a great expansion of missionary endeavors throughout the whole world. The revival continued in Canada also for a matter of three or four years and continued on in the following decades.

You could say that the Moody years. Moody began ministering in 1858 and continued until 1899. 41 years represent the extent of that revival.

But that's another subject we can talk about somewhat later. It has been complained that there was not much social effect due to that great awakening. Actually, there was a great social ministry, chiefly for soldiers and prisoners of war and those dislocated by the war.

But in the meantime, a revival broke out in Britain. And there the new social developments occurred. Home missions in the Salvation Army were extended in the evangelistic social outreach of the awakening worldwide.

And then after the war was over, these new developments were brought across the Atlantic to take root in United States. Every great awakening has its social impact. Sometimes it takes some years before it's truly felt.

But books have been written on the social impact of the 1859 revival in Britain. And nearly all of those social developments were paralleled by similar developments in the United States. It's interesting also that out of that British revival came the rise of the China Inland Mission through Hudson Taylor, who was busy working in the revival in London.

That was the first of the interdenominational faith missions. Now, how are we to account for this great awakening of 1858? I think it can be summed up in one way. And that is, it was preceded by prayer.

The bank panic had some influence on people, but it was not the cause of the revival. The revival movement, especially in its prayer concerts, had started before the bank panic and continued all the way through until it ran its course. And then it produced one of the greatest awakenings of all time.

The denominations were one in brotherly love. Everyone committed upon the extraordinary fraternal good feeling at that time. It was one of the most cooperative periods of Christian history when the denominations worked together as one man.

What lessons can we learn from it? Although things have changed and many other features of Christian work have arisen, I think we could say this was the most wholesome revival in American history, and we ought to pray that the same sort of thing may happen again. God grant it.

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