

The 1858 Revival: A Supernatural Event

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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Man throughout time has continually sought to explain the supernatural by way of the material. In 1858 a revival swept across the United States and later other countries around the world. Many conclude it was a result of political, social, economical and religious conditions of the day. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that a supernatural revival took place in the United States, a revival not the result of natural circumstance but a result of a supernatural God's origination.

To begin, it is necessary to first explain what is meant by revival. The word revival began to emerge in religious circles during the beginning of the 19th century. When the word revival was first used by the clergy, it was used with negative connotations. To hold a revival in the church implied that the church members had fallen away from their earlier holiness, reverence, and worship. Revival was a means of reprimand and exhortation to cause the members to return to their former spirituality.¹ But the term revival can have positive implications as it does bring about a positive change in people's relations to God.

A revival doesn't just affect weary believers, but is meant to affect non-Christians as well. Because this is true, a revival and an evangelical awakening are the same thing. J. Edwin Orr describes a revival or an evangelical awakening as follows:

An evangelical awakening is a movement of the Holy Spirit bringing about a revival of New Testament Christianity in the Church of Christ and its related community. Such an awakening may change in a significant way an individual only; or it may effect a larger group of believers; or it may move a

congregation, or the churches of a city or district, or the whole body of believers throughout a country; or a continent; or indeed the larger body of believers throughout the world. The outpouring of the Spirit effects the reviving of the church, the awakening of the masses and the movement of the uninstructed peoples towards the Christian faith; the revived Church, by many or few, is moved to engage in evangelism, in teaching and in social action.²

To clarify then, a revival can be defined as the means to reach a spiritually dead (those who do not accept Jesus as their Savior) or spiritually asleep (those who have asked Jesus into their lives as Savior and Lord but aren't letting Him have control of their lives--they aren't living for Him) society with the claims of Jesus' love, man's sin and its penalty, and Jesus' forgiveness through faith in Him. A revival can renew or begin a right relation with God.

Because revival is not only a renewal of Christians' love and zeal for the Lord, but also an establishment of that relationship, Acts 2:14-17 can be considered the first written record of revival in the history of the Christian Church even though it is also one of the beginning events in the formation of the church.

Jesus had promised the outpouring of His Holy Spirit to the disciples. While they waited in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, suddenly there was the sound of rushing wind, tongues of fire and the disciples experienced the filling of themselves by the Holy Spirit.³

Peter told the people gathered in Jerusalem of Jesus Christ and His claim to be the Messiah or Savior for mankind. Three thousand men from a variety of nations responded and were baptized. As a result, they "were continually devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of

bread and to prayer."⁴ They began sharing among one another, meeting each other's needs and many people continued to believe in Jesus as Savior and join their ranks. Other long term results, the initial spreading of Christianity in the immediate area, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and the outreach of Christianity are recorded in the continuing chapters of Acts.

This type of outpouring of the Holy Spirit is not to be confused with what are called revivals today in the 1970's. These revivals for the large part have become commercialized, attention-getting devices to attract new members and/or to psyche-up emotionally those currently attending. The key points in Orr's description, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit resulting in social change, evangelism and teaching,⁵ seem to have been forgotten or lost in most of the modern "weekend" services of this current age.

The United States of America has gone through many changing, rearranging times and the mid 19th century was no exception, especially in the areas of politics, social and religious circles and economics. Politically speaking, the United States was going through many changes and trials. During this time, the Democratic Party was splitting and the Whigs, having already fallen apart, regrouped with the Ku Klux Klan and other no-name parties to resurface as the Republican Party. Around the early 1850's a political party called the Know-Nothings emerged into politics. The Know-Nothings, a growing anti-Catholic and anti-foreigner party, reached its peak of power during the 34th session of Congress. Fortunately, even then, they still held no more power than the Democratic or Republican parties. After the 34th session, they began to decline in importance until finally the issue of slavery

split what was left of the Know-Nothings, who had become by then a small party.⁶

Slavery was dividing the nation as well. In the United States, by the middle of the 19th century, slavery was the burning topic in everyone's mind. It effected all aspects of life. Religiously, people wondered if it was morally right. Socially, people wondered if it was proper. Economically, people questioned its necessity for our country's survival. It was left up to the politicians to find the answers and the politicians weren't finding any solution for it. The change within the political parties, the rise of prejudiced political factions and the explosive issue of slavery gave the appearance that politically, America was headed for turbulent times.

Socially, people were becoming more materialistic and wealth-oriented.⁷ The industrialization of cities and immigration sent many city dwellers, who could afford to do so, scurrying to the suburbs.

Streets once filled with the families of substantial and opulent citizens were invaded by shops and warehouses, and in a short time entire rows of houses which formerly had served their occupants at once for a place of business and a place of dwelling, were replaced by stately blocks adapted solely to business purposes.⁸

The exchange of past parishioners with new immigrants had an adverse effect on the churches. The middle city churches began to lose membership.⁹ New layman were contracted in the effort to reach the new immigrants but not always ending with huge success.¹⁰

Churches were in a state of confusion also. Suffering from a previous setback, a false prediction of Christ's return, many had rejected the reliability and authenticity of the Christian truths.

After years of Bible study, William Miller declared he had discovered the date Jesus was to return again. In 1828, he felt the inner urgings to tell everyone of his discovery. Society began to look for the coming of the millenium. As the time drew nearer, he amassed more and more followers; 50,000 during the peak of his career. But when the time came and passed, his followers became bitter, disbelieving.¹¹ Many turned away from faith in God. The Church became a source of humor for many; not the best atmosphere for a revival.¹²

Another important event during this time was the financial crash of 1857. A collapse of the banking system in October of 1857 spread panic through out the land. Banks failed, the railroads went bankrupt, the shipping industry was crippled, and factories closed down. Laborers were hit hardest as the unemployment rates grew, and there was no relief to be found in the labor market as it was letting people go right and left.¹³ In New York City, as a result of the crash some 30,000 men were unemployed by 1858.¹⁴

Comparing this financial crash to others in history, it was less severe than crashes before and after it. The crash in 1837, which reverberated throughout the world was said to be "ten fold more disastrous" than the succeeding crash of 1857.¹⁸ As compared to the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, the financial crash of 1857 was mild. Yet amid political change, social materialism, religious skepticism, and financial crisis, "...there came another great awakening surpassing previous movements in extent, wholesomeness, effects and lasting impact,..."¹⁵

The revival of 1858 began on Wednesday, September 23, 1857; with a man named Jeremiah Lanphier. On July 1, 1857, Lanphier

was appointed missionary to the city from the North Dutch Church on Fulton Street in New York City. Due to the loss of membership, he was appointed to recruit new members for the church. He chose to go door to door canvassing the neighborhood. By September Jeremiah Lanphier decided to hold a prayer meeting at noon on Wednesdays. He had found strength and comfort in prayer and wanted to provide an opportunity for others to reap the benefits of prayer.¹⁶

He began to mention the prayer meetings scheduled for the 23rd of September as he canvassed the area. He distributed flyers 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 spirit. In prayer we leave the business of time for that of eternity,¹⁷ and intercourse with men for intercourse with God.

Jeremiah Lanphier posted the flyers throughout the neighborhood. On the reverse side the flyer made it clear that all were invited and could come and go as they had time.¹⁸

On that first Wednesday, at noon, Lanphier was the only one present. At 12:30 he heard footsteps on the stairs coming up. Later another, then another, until six men gathered together for prayer that day. The second week twenty persons were there. At the third meeting, it was decided that they should meet daily for prayer.¹⁹

At first, the attendance was small, but by the end of six months at least 60,000 men were meeting daily for prayer.²⁰ In the beginning those in attendance were all men, but after a period

of time, women began to come also.²¹ Eventually, the meetings became so crowded that they had to find other spots throughout the city to pray.

"During the weeks that followed the increase in attendance was slow but sure. Men of all classes and conditions attended the service. Capitalists and laborers, manufacturers and artisans, professional men, merchants, and clerks, butchers and bakers, men from every walk in life were represented from day to day. Laymen would drive up to the curbstone and securing their teams would enter the service long enough for the singing of a hymn or a season of prayer, and then be off to their work."²²

About the time of the third prayer meeting in the city of Hamilton, in Ontario, Canada, Walter and Phoebe Palmer were beginning to reap the rewards of their own evangelism. Mr. and Mrs. Palmer were to report that an estimated three to four hundred people made public professions of faith in Jesus as their Savior. The conversions here were largely a result of lay efforts that were to spread throughout the city. The mayor of the city even participated in the services. Attendances at the meetings were recorded as having been between 5,000 and 6,000 for the entire fall period.²³

Back in the States the revival continued to spread. Although New York was not then an irreligious city, religious changes began.²⁴ By the Spring of 1858, there were twenty daily gatherings of people for prayer. Fire departments and police stations opened their doors as prayer sites.²⁵ At the Thirteenth Presbyterian Church, one hundred thirteen people made public their profession of faith.²⁶

It was not until February that newspapers began to notice something was happening. Soon the New York papers had to publish extras to give the public the details of what was really taking place.²⁷ The publicity fanned the flames of revival.

In Brooklyn, there was recorded seventy-five converts for the month of January.²⁸ Burton's Theatre in Brooklyn was requested as a place for noon prayer. Mr. Burton, the owner, was in hearty agreement and even asked that he be the target of some of their prayer. At the first prayer meeting, by 11:30, the theatre was crowded. By noon no one could get within sight of the stage. As many as fifty clergymen were in attendance. The majority of those present were men, although two hundred women did come. "People clung to each projection along the walls, and they piled themselves upon the seats, and crowded the stage beneath, above, and behind the curtain."²⁹ In nearby Yonkers during the month of January there were ninety converts³⁰ as a result of a local revival.

The revival spread on to Albany. Six legislators decided to begin an early morning prayer breakfast in addition to the daily noontime meetings. They used the Court of Appeals rooms for prayer, but these soon became overcrowded.³¹

The revival spread to Philadelphia, Boston, and other big cities.³² But "small towns and rural communities were as powerfully affected as the great cities."³³

In Philadelphia, a young member of the Y.M.C.A. attended one of the prayer meetings in New York. Encouraged and motivated, he returned, explained what was going on in New York, and expressed the desire to start a prayer meeting in Philadelphia. At first, there were never more than thirty-six in attendance. Then they

changed the locale to a more centralized location. Then the number of those in attendance increased to the point that for weeks 3,000 were coming daily for prayer. The city established a prayer time for the firemen. It was estimated that 10,000 people were converted within a year's time.³⁴

In Bethel, Conneticut, businesses were stopped between the hours of 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. so there might be a time of prayer. Two hundred people were converted in two months. One unnamed town in Conneticut reported there was not one unconverted adult in the town.³⁵

The revival spread from the Northeast, over the Alleghenies and into the deep South. One New York paper published an inter-denominational account of the conversions occurring during the few months preceding May, 1958.

Maine	2,670	Illinois	10,460
New Hampshire	1,376	Wisconsin	1,467
Vermont	770	Minnesota	508
Massachusetts	6,254	Iowa	2,179
Rhode Island	1,331	Missouri	2,027
Conneticut	2,799	Kentucky	2,666
New York	16,674	Tennessee	1,666
New Jersey	6,035	Delaware	179
Pennsylvania	6,732	Maryland	1,806
Ohio	8,009	Virginia	1,005
Michigan	8,081	Deep South	1,494
Indiara	4,775	California	50

During the few months before May, 1858, he estimated 96,216 conversions across the country.³⁶ Another estimated 50,000 converts a week and 10,000 new members were added to the church.³⁷

Over the Alleghenies, by the beginning of 1858, four hundred and eighty towns reported 15,000 public professions of faith at prayer meetings. Cleveland, Cincinnati, Louisville, Indianapolis, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and Dubuque began to see revival.

Village and country areas were affected also throughout Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Iowa.³⁸

In Kentucky, a Masonic Temple was designated as the place for prayer meetings. More than 1,000 people flocked to attend. On one Ohio river steamer, the topic of conversation was revival. A prayer meeting began "spontaneously and crowded" in, of all places, the main saloon. Fifty towns in Missouri reported 2,000 converts.³⁹

Another interesting incident of revival in the West occurred in Minnesota. Tired of being cheated, conned and pushed out of their territory, the Sioux Indians, led by medicine men, staged an all-out attack covering 20,000 square miles. They killed 600 people, destroyed missions and burnt Christian Indians' homes. Finally, the army stopped them, executed 38 of the warriors and imprisoned 400 others. Two men, William and Breggs took this opportunity to tell these warriors about personal relationships with Christ, teaching them reading and writing skills also. Within less than a year, 300 braves were asking to be baptized. The squaws were not overlooked either; but instead had opportunities to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Four years later, when the families were reunited, 400 of them grouped together to build a church.⁴⁰

As far west as San Francisco, more than a dozen churches grew to 9,000 in membership and many persons were converting to Christianity. "An increasingly great interest was reported from the interior of California, with prayer meetings multiplying in Sacramento, Marysville, and San Jose."⁴¹

Although Charles Finney did not believe the South was affected

by revival due to the hold "sinful" slavery had upon it, other more recent sources differ.⁴² Bishop Candler noted the South's participation in revival was, with regard to proportions of the populations, greater than that of the North. The South was not urbanized, the population being more spread out than in the North. During the years of 1858, 1859 and 1860, the South had a total of 100,000 converts in the Methodist Church. The Baptists are recorded as having an equal amount of conversions also.⁴³

The services during these revivals were not devoted so much to preaching as to prayer. They were void of the fanaticism, mass hysteria and over indulgent emotionalism.⁴⁴ Referring to prayer as the fulcrum, one man attending one of Finney's meetings said, "I am from Omaha, in Nebraska. On my journey east, I have found a continuous prayer meeting all the way. We call it two thousand miles from Omaha to Boston; and here was a prayer meeting about two thousand miles in extent."⁴⁵

This revival did not affect the United States alone. It went on to Ireland, Scotland, Wales, India, and Africa to name just a few countries. In Wales, crime dropped so much that the policemen had to try to find new ways to occupy their time. Saloons began to file for bankruptcy.⁴⁶ But, this thesis deals with the revival of 1858, and its events in the United States.

Now, two terms need to be defined to clarify this thesis, supernatural and miracle. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines supernatural as: "of or pertaining to existence outside of the natural world, not attributed to natural forces, attributed to the immediate exercise of divine power, miraculous,..."⁴⁷ This dictionary defines a miracle as "an event that appears unexplainable by the laws of nature and so is held

to be supernatural in origin or an act of God."⁴⁸ More simply a miracle, or something miraculous, is the same as something supernatural. The key is that they attribute something that cannot be accounted for by natural sources to the Divine. These terms do not mean to imply that natural forces are not involved; but it does mean to imply the act originated with God and natural forces should not be credited with the origination of the event.

In order for something to be supernatural the human element may or may not be present. Very often man has been described as God's hands on earth, not that God needs man but as men are yielded God chooses to use them for His glory. This is seen in both the Old and New Testaments. Humans do not have to be active participants. They can at times function as observers only, but they also can be tools (not to be confused with the Originator) in miracles.

The above then answers the question could God act through men and in concert with men. Yes. God does act through men but He is always the Originator of the miraculous. Thus although the thesis is God caused, or originated, the circumstances leading to and the supernatural events during the revival of 1858, the human element was active in many ways.

The question may be asked does the presence of "timely" circumstances disprove divine action? No, the presence of such circumstances does not disprove God's intervention. But a second question should be asked and answered. Were the circumstances surrounding the 1858 revival "timely", in the sense that they lead up to or were causal for the revival?

Many historians credit the financial crash of the banking system in 1857 as the originator of the great awakening of 1858. Historians record that man in his desperate straits seeks comfort from a god like being; something familiar to cling to in a time of insecure instability. Yet, the financial crash of 1837, which was described earlier as 10 times more disastrous than the crash of 1857, shook the world's financial system. At that time there were scattered camp meetings and evangelism occurring throughout the country. But there were no great masses turning to God. In the stock market crash of 1929 the world's financial system was dealt another heavy blow, but the people through the world again did not experience conversions in the same proportions as in the revival of 1858 by any stretch of the imagination.

This does not mean to imply that the financial crash did not effect the revival of 1858. The financial crash did take place and it surely had an impact on many individuals' personal lives. But just as other, more severe crises did not have enough impact to convert men's hearts to Christianity, the impact felt by this less severe financial crisis lacked the power needed to change men's hearts.

Another important point to mention is that the crash succeeded the beginning incidences surrounding the great awakening of 1858. The prayer meetings led by Jeremiah Lanphier had already begun. Also, recall that Walter and Phoebe Palmer were already seeing men's hearts changed by the hundreds in Canada by this time. Another point is that the financial crash did not hit countries like Wales or India first hand, yet an evangelical awakening did.

Besides the financial crash of 1837, the other "timely"

circumstances were supposed to be the issue of slavery and the religious temperature during this time period. If these circumstances are being labeled "timely" to infer the possibility of their causal then they are being labeled incorrectly. The issue of slavery caused a war to devastate much of our country. How could an issue that split apart even families unite men into a harmonious spiritual brotherhood? How could an issue that fired a hatred, so great, to kill one's own countrymen, then bring others into a loving bond of fellowship? Granted the slavery issue may have led men to prayer, but those men must have believed that God would hear and intercede prior to coming in prayer before Him. Slavery was a preceding circumstance but hardly a causal factor concerning the revival. Granted there are 'no atheists found in foxholes', in other words, many men in war turn to God when faced with death. But the war couldn't be a cause as it took place after the revival.

Another argument is that the time was ripe religiously for the revival. But recall, religion at the time was scorned, it was a time of disbelief. Widespread disbelief is not a "timely" circumstance for revival with the exception that there are more people to be revived. Disbelief in the church did have an effect on the people, but it certainly didn't seem to be a positive effect that would lead men to tell others about God. A needed time for revival is when men's hearts are spiritually dead, asleep, unyielding, or starving; but just because a revival is needed in the church doesn't mean the church causes it. An analogy would be the dry ground and rain. For instance, when the ground is dry it would be the perfect time for rain. But droughts have taught

men that dry ground does not cause rain. Dry ground merely needs rain and benefits most from rain at this time.

Even looking back over the events of the revival, the thousands affected across our country, the world wide spread of its impact, makes the revival seem not to come from one natural force or a group of natural forces but appears to be originated from the Divine. This is not to say men were not involved. On the contrary, the human element was involved, thousands were converted, and thousands grouped together for prayer. To summarize the whole, this thesis attempts to say God (the Originator, the cause) put a hunger in men's hearts that led them to pray (the human element) in the midst of a changing world (the circumstances). As they got down on their knees (the act of yielding); He blessed them with a revival, renewal, and evangelical awakening of hearts towards Him (the result).

Footnotes

- ¹Winthrop S. Hudson, Religion in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973).
- ²J. Edwin Orr. The Fervent Prayer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. vii.
- ³Acts 2:14-17 (NAS). [NAS=New American Standard Bible].
- ⁴Acts 2:42 (NAS).
- ⁵Orr, Prayer, p. vii.
- ⁶Ray Allen Billington. The Protestant Crusade (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), pp. 380-431.
- ⁷Orr, Prayer, p. 1.
- ⁸Frank G. Beardsley. A History of American Revivals (New York: American Tract Society, 1912), p. 218.
- ⁹Beardsley, Revivals, p. 218.
- ¹⁰Orr, Prayer, p. 1.
- ¹¹Winthrop S. Hudson. Religion in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 194, ff.
- ¹²Orr, Prayer, p. 1.
- ¹³Thomas A. Bailey. The American Pageant, A History of the Republic, Vol. 1 (Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto, London: D. C. Heath and Company, 1975), pp. 323, 336.
- ¹⁴Beardsley, Revivals, p. 217.
- ¹⁵Orr, Prayer, p. xx.
- ¹⁶Beardsley, Revivals, pp. 219, 220.
- ¹⁷Orr, Prayer, p. 4.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Beardsley, Revivals, pp. 220, 221.
- ²⁰Orr, Prayer, p. 5.
- ²¹Beardsley, Revivals, p. 222.
- ²²Ibid., p. 221.

- ²³Orr, Prayer, p. 2.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 7.
- ²⁵Beardsley, Revivals, p. 222.
- ²⁶Orr, Prayer, p. 8.
- ²⁷Ibid., p.7.
- ²⁸Ibid.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 8.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 7.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 16.
- ³²Beardsley, Revivals, p. 224.
- ³³Timothy L. Smith. Revivalism and Social Reform (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1957) p. 9.
- ³⁴Beardsley, Revivals, p. 224.
- ³⁵Orr, Prayer, p. 14.
- ³⁶Ibid., p. 10.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 11.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 20.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 21.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 27.
- ⁴²Beardsley, Revivals, p. 228.
- ⁴³Orr, Prayer, p. 29.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 8.
- ⁴⁵Beardsley, Revivals, p. 227.
- ⁴⁶J. Edwin Orr, National Prayer Congress. The Rule of Prayer. October, 1976, Dallas, Texas, Campus Crusade for Christ.
- ⁴⁷The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College ed., s. v. "supernatural".
- ⁴⁸Ibid., s. v. "miracle".

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