

A Simple Fix for Modern Church's Dire Problem

During the fall and winter of 1857-58 a third Great Awakening swept across America. It came unexpectedly and swept hundreds of thousands into the kingdom of God. It helped end slavery and provided the spiritual resources necessary to preserve the nation through its darkest hour.

This awakening had some peculiar features, including the fact that people did not want to hear preaching or be entertained—they wanted to pray. This Great Prayer Awakening was also characterized by a unique simplicity—a simplicity of format, purpose and leadership that hearkened back to Jesus and the New Testament.

More than anything, the contemporary church would do well to learn these three simple lessons from the Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58.

Lesson 1

A Simple Format and Structure

This nation-shaking revival began when a businessman and home missionary with the Dutch Reformed Church decided to begin a noon prayer meeting for businessmen in downtown Manhattan. His desire was that businesspeople in the area would come during their lunch break and pray for the conversion of the many new non-Christian immigrants that were pouring into the city.

The format for this prayer meeting on Fulton Street was simple. At 12 noon, the leader of the meeting would open with one or two verses of a well-known hymn, an opening prayer and then read any prayer requests. Anyone was then free to pray, share a prayer request or give a testimony.

No one, including visiting ministers, was allowed more than five minutes, and if anyone took more than their allotted time, the leader would ring a bell signaling for that person to conclude their prayer or comments. Promptly at 1 p.m., the meeting was dismissed with a concluding prayer by the leader or someone appointed by him.

Although very punctual and simple in format, the meetings were accompanied with great spiritual power. An overwhelming sense of God's presence seemed to pervade the very atmosphere and marvelous answers to prayer began to occur. As if drawn by an invisible force, people began to come from all parts of the city to be in the prayer meeting.

The room they were using was soon filled and then two adjoining rooms were opened and filled. It was standing room only with men and women being drawn from throughout the city.

From this simple prayer meeting on Fulton Street, a Great Prayer Awakening spread across America. Many of the prayer meetings that sprung up in different cities used this same simple format and saw incredible results.

Lesson 2

A Simple Purpose

The simple purpose of the Fulton Street prayer meeting was to pray for the conversion of those who did not know Christ. Yes, they prayed for other needs and requests, but the conversion of the unsaved was their stated purpose for gathering to pray.

God honored their simple purpose. Along with the many Christians who were drawn into the prayer meetings, many non-Christians begin to come and experienced overwhelming conviction of their need for Christ.

One notorious criminal nicknamed "Awful Gardiner" came into the meeting and was gloriously saved and transformed. This

created a further sensation and news of the prayer meeting spread throughout the city and beyond.

During another meeting, a man wandered in 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 nonbeliever arose, and with tears streaming down his cheeks, asked the meeting to sing the hymn, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," which he remembered from his youth. As the praying throng enthusiastically lifted their voices in song, both men were converted on the spot (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 20).

This simple purpose of reaching the lost guided the revival as it spread throughout the land. Finney estimated that at the height of the revival, 50,000 were being converted per week—and that without the aid of modern communication and technology.

Conservative estimates place the total number of conversions at around one million, but some have suggested that as many as two million may have been converted. The March 1858 issue of a religious journal reported,

The large cities and towns from Maine to California are sharing in this great and glorious work. There is hardly a village or town to be found where "a special divine power" does not appear displayed (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 26).

Lesson 3

Simple Leadership

The Great Prayer Awakening began with a simple layman who did not claim any special gift or calling, and it continued to be

led by laypeople who claimed no special position or title. Pastors, ministers, and revivalists seemed to be laid aside.

The prayer meeting on Fulton Street was begun by Jeremiah Lanphier, a Christian businessman who was a nobody in Christian leadership circles. He had no desire to be a pastor or revivalist, but began the prayer meeting out of a deep burden and concern for those in his city that did not know Christ.

The daily meetings were led by Lanphier or some other simple, nameless believer. As the revival spread to other cities, these meetings, for the most part, were led by more nameless, faceless believers, unknown on earth but renowned in heaven.

The famous revivalist Charles G. Finney was still alive at the time but played no leading role in the revival. He later wrote in his memoirs:

This revival had some very peculiarly interesting features. It was carried on to a large extent through lay influence, so much so as almost to throw the ministers into the shade ... the people very extensively seemed to prefer meetings for prayer to meetings for preaching. The general impression seemed to be, "We have had instruction until we are hardened; it is time for us to pray" (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 31).

This was a New Testament expression of the body of Christ. The New Testament church knows nothing of the sharp division that exists today between a professionalized clergy and the people known as the "laity." This division comes from historical developments, not from the New Testament.

"Laity," in fact, comes from the Greek word *laos*, which is translated as "people" in the New Testament and always refers to the whole people of God. Paul, Peter, John and Barnabas, though obvious leaders, are all part of the *laos*, that is, the people of God. In the New Testament Church, the *laos* (people)

are all filled with the Spirit and equipped to carry out the work of the ministry.

One of those profoundly impacted in this revival was a young D. L. Moody who later became the nation's most successful evangelist/revivalist. Interestingly, Moody never sought ordination, influenced, no doubt, by what he saw God accomplish through the simple people of the Great Prayer Awakening.

Expect God, in the days ahead, to raise up an army of simple, nameless, faceless people and use them to ignite the greatest revival America has yet seen.

Concluding Thought

What the contemporary church needs more than anything is not a new revelation, impartation, program, order or structure, but a return to the simplicity of Jesus and the gospel. As Paul said to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 11:3, "But I fear that somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve through his trickery, so your minds might be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ." {eo}

*This article was derived from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt's** latest book, The Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58, available from Amazon in both Kindle and paperback. To read about his vision for another Great Awakening, check out his website at .*