



Revivals And Church History :: Fire Fell - A Brief Revival History - Part 2

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2. Nineteenth Century

1800 - June-July - Red & Gasper River, Kentucky (James McGready)

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1800

June-July - Red & Gasper River, Kentucky (James McGready)

The Wesleyan revival of holiness brought about a spiritual awakening in England and America. It established the Methodist Church with 140,000 members by the end of the century, and renewed other churches and Christians. By 1792, the year after John Wesley died, this Second Awakening began to sweep Great Britain and America.

In New England, Isaac Backus, a Baptist pastor, addressed an urgent plea for prayer for revival to pastors of every Christian denomination in the United States in 1794. The churches adopted the plan until America, like Britain, was interlaced with a network of prayer meetings. They met on the first Monday of each month to pray. Soon revival came.

James McGready, a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky, promoted the prayer meetings every first Monday of the month, and urged his people to pray for him at sunset on Saturday evening and sunrise Sunday morning. Revival swept Kentucky in the summer of 1800.

McGready had three small congregations in Muddy River, Red River and Gasper River in Logan County in the southwest of the state. The majority of the people were refugees from all states in the Union who fled from justice or punishment. They included murderers, horse thieves, highway robbers, and counterfeiters. The area was nicknamed Rogues Harbour.

'The first real manifestations of God's power came, however, in June 1800. Four to five-hundred members of McGready's three congregations, plus five ministers, had gathered at Red River for a "camp meeting" lasting several days. On the final day, "a mighty effusion of Spirit" came upon the people, "and the floor was soon covered with the slain; their screams for mercy pierced the heavens."

'Convinced that God was moving, McGready and his colleagues planned another camp meeting to be held in late July 1800 at Gasper River. They had not anticipated what occurred. An enormous crowd - as many as 8,000 - began arriving at the appointed date, many from distances as great as 100 miles. ... Although the term camp meeting was not used till

1802, this was the first true camp meeting where a continuous outdoor service was combined with camping out. ...

'At a huge evening meeting lighted by flaming torches ... a Presbyterian pastor gave a throbbing message ... McGready recalled: The power of God seemed to shake the whole assembly. Toward the close of the sermon, the cries of the distressed arose almost as loud as his voice. After the congregation was dismissed the solemnity increased, till the greater part of the multitude seemed engaged in the most solemn manner. No person seemed to wish to go home - hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody - eternal things were the vast concern. Here awakening and converting work was to be found in every part of the multitude; and even some things strangely and wonderfully new to me' (Church History magazine, No. 23, p 25).

1801

August - Cane Ridge, Kentucky (Barton Stone)

Impressed by the revivals in 1800, Barton Stone, a Presbyterian minister, organised similar meetings in 1801 in his area at Cane Ridge north-east of Lexington. A huge crowd of around 12,500 attended in over 125 wagons including people from Ohio and Tennessee. At that time Lexington, the largest town in Kentucky, had less than 1,800 citizens. Now Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist preachers and circuit riders formed preaching teams, speaking simultaneously in different parts of the camp grounds, all aiming for conversions of sinners.

James Finley, later a Methodist circuit rider, described it:

'The noise was like the roar of Niagara. The vast sea of human being seemed to be agitated as if by a storm. I counted seven ministers, all preaching at one time, some on stumps, others in wagons and one standing on a tree which had, in falling, lodged against another. ...

'I stepped up on a log where I could have a better view of the surging sea of humanity. The scene that then presented itself to my mind was indescribable. At one time I saw at least five hundred swept down in a moment as if a battery of a thousand guns had been opened upon them, and then immediately followed shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens' (Pratney 1994:104).

The Rev. Moses Hoge wrote: 'The careless fall down, cry out, tremble, and not infrequently are affected with convulsive twitchings ...

'Nothing that imagination can paint, can make a stronger impression upon the mind, than one of those scenes. Sinners dropping down on every hand, shrieking, groaning, crying for mercy, convulsed; professors praying, agonizing, fainting, falling down in distress, for sinners or in raptures of joy! ...

'As to the work in general there can be no question but it is of God. The subject of it, for the most part are deeply wounded for their sins, and can give a clear and rational account of their conversion' (Church History magazine, No. 23, p. 26).

Revival early in the nineteenth century not only impacted the American frontier, but also towns and especially colleges. One widespread result in America, as in England, was the formation of missionary societies to train and direct the large numbers of converts filled with missionary zeal.

1821

Wednesday 10 October - Adams, America (Charles Finney)

Charles Finney became well known in revivals in the nineteenth century. A keen sportsman and young lawyer, he had a mighty empowering by God's Spirit on the night of his conversion on Wednesday 10 October 1821. That morning the Holy Spirit convicted him on his way to work. So he spent the morning in the woods near his small town of Adams in New York State, praying. There he surrendered fully to God. He returned his law office that afternoon, assisting his employer Squire Wright to set up a new office. He wrote:

'By evening we had the books and furniture adjusted, and I made a good fire in an open fireplace, hoping to spend the evening alone. Just at dark Squire W--, seeing that everything was adjusted, told me good night and went to his home. I had accompanied him to the door, and as I closed the door and turned around my heart seemed to be liquid within me. All my feelings seemed to rise and flow out and the thought of my heart was, "I want to pour my whole soul out to God." The rising of my soul was so great that I rushed into the room back of the front office to pray.

'There was no fire and no light in this back room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed to me as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. It seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet. It seemed to me a reality that he stood before me, and I fell down at his feet and poured out my soul to him. I wept aloud like a child and made such confession as I could with my choked words. It seemed to me that I bathed his feet with my tears, and yet I had no distinct impression that I touched him.

'I must have continued in this state for a good while, but my mind was too much absorbed with the interview to remember anything that I said. As soon as my mind became calm enough I returned to the front office and found that the fire I had made of large wood was nearly burned out. But as I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Spirit. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any memory of ever hearing the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves of liquid love, for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can remember distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings.

'No words can express the wonderful love that was spread abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love. I literally bellowed out the unspeakable overflow of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after another, until I remember crying out, "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me." I said, "Lord, I cannot bear any more," yet I had no fear of death' (Wessel 1977:20-22).

The result? That night a member of the church choir which Finney led called in at his office, amazed to find the former sceptic in a 'state of loud weeping' and unable to talk to him for some time. That young friend left and soon returned with an elder from the church who was usually serious and rarely laughed. 'When he came in,' Finney observed, 'I was very much in the state in which I was when the young man went out to call him. He asked me how I felt and I began to tell him. Instead of saying anything he fell into a most spasmodic laughter. It seemed as if it was impossible for him to keep from laughing from the very bottom of his heart' (Wessel 1977:22).

Next morning, with 'the renewal of these mighty waves of love and salvation' flowing through him, Finney witnessed to his employer who was strongly convicted and later made his peace with God. That morning, Finney continues, 'Deacon B-- came into the office and said to me, "Mr Finney, do you remember that my cause is to be tried at ten o'clock this morning? I suppose you are ready?" I had been retained to attend this suit as his attorney.

'I replied to him, "Deacon B--, I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause and I cannot plead yours."

'He looked at me with astonishment and said, "What do you mean?"

'I told him, in a few words, that I had enlisted in the cause of Christ, and then repeated that I had a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and that he must go and get somebody else to attend his lawsuit. I could not do it.

'He dropped his head and without making any reply went out. A few moments later, in passing the window, I observed that Deacon B-- was standing in the road, seemingly lost in deep meditation. He went away, as I afterward learned, and immediately settled his suit privately. He then betook himself to prayer and soon got into a much higher religious state than he had ever been before.

'I soon sallied forth from the office to converse with those whom I might meet about their souls. I had the impression, which has never left my mind, that God wanted me to preach the Gospel, and that I must begin immediately. ...

'I spoke with many persons that day, and I believe the Spirit of God made lasting impressions upon every one of them. I cannot remember one whom I spoke with, who was not soon after converted. ...

'In the course of the day a good deal of excitement was created in the village because of what the Lord had done for my soul. Some thought one thing and some another. At evening, without any appointment having been made, I observed that the people were going to the place where they usually held their conference and prayer meetings. ...

'I went there myself. The minister was there, and nearly all the principal people in the village. No one seemed ready to open the meeting, but the house was packed to its utmost capacity. I did not wait for anybody, but rose and began by saying that I then knew that religion was from God. I went on and told such parts of my experience as it seemed important for me to tell. ...

'We had a wonderful meeting that evening, and from that day we had a meeting every evening for a long time. The work spread on every side.

'As I had been a leader among the young people I immediately appointed a meeting for them, which they all attended. ... They were converted one after another with great rapidity, and the work continued among them until only one of their number was left unconverted.

'The work spread among all classes, and extended itself not only through the village but also out of the village in every direction' (Wessel 1977:26-31).

Finney continued for the rest of his life in evangelism, revival, and pastoral work and he founded Oberlin college to train evangelists and ministers.

1857

October - Hamilton, Canada (Phoebe Palmer)

Revival broke out at evangelistic meetings led by Walter and Phoebe Palmer in Hamilton, Ontario in Canada during October 1857. Attendances reached 6,000, and five to six hundred professed conversion including many civic leaders. It was widely reported.

Walter Palmer, a Holiness Methodist physician, assisted his talented wife Phoebe, a firebrand preacher. 'Her preaching, teaching, half-a-dozen books, and editing of The Guide to Holiness left "an indelible impact on both Methodism and the wider Church." ...

'Finney, the reformer, Mrs. Palmer, the pioneer of many benevolent and missionary enterprises, and William E. Broadman, organizer and executive head of the United States Christian Commission, did not seem like mystic dreamers to their generation ... they rang the changes on ... the theme that the Spirit's baptism was the secret of pulpit power and the fountain of that energy which alone could accomplish the evangelization of the world' (Pratney 1994:107).

Jeremiah Lanphier, a city missionary, began a weekly noon prayer meeting in Fulton Street, New York in September that year. By October it grew into a daily prayer meeting attended by many businessmen. Anticipation of revival grew, especially with the financial collapse that October after a year of depression.

1858

March - New York, America (Jeremiah Lanphier)

At the beginning of 1858 that Fulton Street prayer meeting had grown so much they were holding three simultaneous prayer meetings in the building and other prayer groups were starting in the city. By March newspapers carried front page reports of over 6,000 attending daily prayer meetings in New York, 6,000 attending them in Pittsburgh, and daily prayer meetings were held in Washington at five different times to accommodate the crowds.

Other cities followed the pattern. Soon a common mid-day sign on businesses read, 'Will re-open at the close of the prayer meeting.'

By May, 50,000 of New York's 800,000 people were new converts. A newspaper reported that New England was profoundly changed by the revival and in several towns no unconverted adults could be found!

In 1858 a leading Methodist paper reported these features of the revival: few sermons were needed, lay people witnessed, seekers flocked to the altar, nearly all seekers were blessed, experiences remained clear, converts had holy boldness, religion became a social topic, family altars were strengthened, testimony given nightly was abundant, and conversations were marked with seriousness.

Edwin Orr's research revealed that in 1858-59 a million Americans were converted in a population of thirty million and at least a million Christians were renewed, with lasting results in church attendances and moral reform in society.

1859

Monday 14 March - Ulster, Ireland (James McQuilkin)

Revival swept Great Britain also, including the Ulster revival of 1859.

During September 1857, the same month the Fulton Street meetings began, James McQuilkin commenced a weekly prayer meeting in a village schoolhouse near Kells with three other young Irishmen. This is generally seen as the start of the Ulster revival. The first conversions in answer to their prayer came in December 1857. Through 1858 innumerable prayer meetings started, and revival was a common theme of preachers.

On 14 March 1859 James McQuilkin and his praying friends organised a great prayer meeting at the Ahoghill Presbyterian Church. Such a large crowd gathered that the building was cleared in case the galleries collapsed. Outside in the chilling rain as a layman preached with great power hundreds knelt in repentance. This was the first of many movements of mass conviction of sin.

The revival 1859 brought 100,000 converts into the churches of Ireland. God's Spirit moved powerfully in small and large gatherings bringing great conviction of sin, deep repentance, and lasting moral change. Prostrations were common - people lying prostrate in conviction and repentance, unable to rise for some time. By 1860 crime was reduced, judges in Ulster several times had no cases to try. At one time in County Antrim no crime was reported to the police and no prisoners were held in police custody.

Edwin Orr noted that this revival made a greater impact on Ireland than anything known since Patrick brought Christianity there. By the end of 1860 the effects of the Ulster revival were listed as thronged services, unprecedented numbers of communicants, abundant prayer meetings, increased family prayers, unmatched scripture reading, prosperous Sunday Schools, converts remaining steadfast, increased giving, vice abated, and crime reduced.

Revival fire ignites fire. Throughout 1859 the same deep conviction and lasting conversions revived thousands of people in Wales, Scotland and England.

Revival in Wales found expression in glorious praise including harmonies unique to the Welsh which involved preacher and people in turn. There too, 100,000 converts (one tenth of the total population) were added to the church and crime was greatly reduced. Scotland and England were similarly visited with revival. Again, prayer increased enormously and preaching caught fire with many anointed evangelists seeing thousands converted.