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The Fulton Street Prayer Meetings and the Revival of 1857/58: The Workplace Connection

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A powerful revival occurred in North America in 1857 and 1858. Sometimes known as the "Businessmen's Revival" by its contemporaries, a distinctive aspect of this revival was the extraordinary popularity of well-publicized noon prayer meetings led by business people. These meetings built on the pattern established by the Fulton Street Prayer Meetings in New York City.

There are important lessons that can be drawn from the success of this movement and the manner in which the prayer meetings were organized. I will make the case that their success was due to the fact that they provided business and other working people with an opportunity for prayer and fellowship in the middle of the work day and did so in a way that took into account the daily habits and practices of the participants.

The first section will provide a brief historical overview of the revival and the prayer meetings. The second section will examine more closely the context and design of the prayer meetings themselves and the factors that led to their success. The final section will offer some further thoughts regarding lessons for today.

I. Brief History

In 1857, the North Dutch Reformed Church in lower Manhattan had been experiencing declining membership due to population shifts; middle-class Protestants had been moving out of the surrounding area and were being replaced by both businesses and European immigrants. The church responded by hiring a former business person named Jeremiah Lanphier as an evangelist to reach members of the new immigrant population.[1]

After spending a few weeks making the rounds, Lanphier changed direction after he came to believe that in the midst of social and financial turmoil there might be an opportunity to offer the business and tradespeople of the area an opportunity for prayer in the middle of the week. With the approval of the church, he established a noon prayer meeting on the third floor of the church building and promoted it with handbills and personal contact. The meetings were to be devoted to prayer, hymns, and prayer requests.[2] They were also to be devoid of denominational influences and other contentious issues, and were therefore referred to as "union" prayer meetings.[3] Along the same lines, they were also to be free of

1 J. Edwin Orr, *The 1857-1858 Awakening: "The Event Of The Century"* (Publisher Unknown, 1985) p. 46.
2 Orr, pp. 46f.
3 Heman Humphrey, *Revival Sketches and Manual* (New York: American Tract Society, 1859), p. 280.

preaching and exhortation.[4]

The meetings were begun on September 23, 1857. The first weekly meeting attracted six participants, the second twenty, and the third between thirty and forty. This third meeting was so well received that Lanphier and the group decided to make it a daily meeting and to expand to a second room in the building.[5]

In the meantime, the New York business community was experiencing a financial crisis. The apex occurred on October 13, 1857, when many of the banks in New York City closed because of a lack of funds.

By the end of October, the Fulton Street Prayer Meetings had expanded to well upwards of one hundred participants each day, five days per week, and occupied three lecture rooms in the church building.[6] Word of the prayer meeting's popularity spread, and other churches and groups began establishing similar meetings[7] at the same time that the Fulton Street facility was running out of space.[8] The nearby Methodist Church on John Street opened its doors to daily overflow visitors and it too ran out of space.[9] Burton's Theatre, in a Manhattan commercial district, opened its doors and was full before the start of the meetings.[10] J. Edwin Orr notes that based on contemporaneous newspaper articles there were a large number of other sites in Manhattan and, as of March 26, 1858, there were at least 6,100 people in attendance each day within the city. Specific accounts in the articles referenced by Orr included 600 people at the John's Street Methodist Church, 1,200 at Burton Theatre, and between 150 and 300 at each of seven other locations. Orr notes that this is an incomplete list.[11]

As word of the success in New York spread, the Fulton Street concept was adopted in other cities, especially after it began to receive extensive newspaper coverage. Major cities with Fulton Street style prayer meetings included Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Louisville, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Nashville, Mobile, New Orleans, and Charleston.[12] While attendance data is not always available, there are recorded examples of very well attended meetings. For example, the Philadelphia meetings at Jaynes Hall (according to a letter from the organizers sent to the Fulton Street group)[13] were said to have drawn upwards of 3,000 people on a single day and led to the establishment of multiple meeting sites — including a large tent erected for the purpose of the noon meetings.[14]

The common understanding by church leaders in the period just prior to the revival was that church attendance and interest in religion had been in decline since the thirties.[15] In response to the new revival, however, religious interest and church attendance saw dramatic increases. Kathryn Teresa Long calculates that from 1856 to 1859, 474,000 new members joined the major protestant denominations, including 250,365 Methodists, 122,984 Regular Baptists, 52,971 Presbyterians (both Old School and New School), 20,071 Episcopalians, and 27,840 Congregationalists. Long's figures do not include new converts who joined independent churches and other denominations, nor do they include previously nominal

4 Orr, pp. 46f.
5 Orr, p. 47.
6 Cf. Orr, p. 47.
7 Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 140.
8 Orr, p.61.
9 William C. Conant, *Narratives of Remarkable Conversions and Revival Incidents, Including a Review of Revivals* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1858), p. 36.
10 Conant, pp. 366f.
11 Orr, p. 62.
12 Long, pp. 36f; Cf. Conant, pp. 367ff for more examples.
13 Talbot W. Chambers, *The New York City Noon Prayer Meeting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Wagner Publications, 2002 (from original: New York: Dutch Reformed Church, 1858), p. 48.
14 Frank Grenville Beardsley, *Religious Progress Through Religious Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1943), p.46.
15 Beardsley, p. 40.

members who found or strengthened their faith during this period. Other writers have suggested that between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people came to faith during the revival; this presumably includes the people left off of Long's list.[16,17]

While the Fulton Street prayer meetings and its successors were not the sole vehicles for the1857/58 revival, it is clear that these meetings did indeed have a powerful and important impact. We will now turn to look for the key factors in their success.

II. The Context and Design of the Prayer Meetings

When Lanphier developed the idea of the noon prayer meetings, business and tradespeople were under considerable social and financial stress.

First, New York City was experiencing a great deal of growth and industrialization. The population of the city had been 124,000 in 1820 and was on its way to 814,000 in 1860.[18] This represented more than six-fold growth in a short forty years and consequently was a time of great change. The combination of population growth and industrial development led to social stresses which at times broke out in violence, including riots.[19]

This was also a time of approaching war. While people may not have been anticipating the Civil War and its magnitude, there were nevertheless many events which must have been troubling to the extent that they represented a breakdown in public comity (friction over slavery, Dred Scot, the breakdown of political consensus, etc.).

Added to this was a severe financial crisis — the Panic of 1857.

The financial crisis began with the collapse of the New York branch of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company, which collapse was caused by the trust's over-dependence on railroad investments and loans to wheat farmers at a time when wheat prices were plummeting due to the end of the Crimean War and the consequent re-establishment of Russia as a major supplier of wheat to Europe. The managers of banks, many of whom were heavily invested in Ohio Life, panicked and began calling in loans from merchants and manufacturers. The resulting evaporation of credit meant the bankruptcy of hundreds of merchants (985 in Manhattan by December 1857) and their suppliers, and high unemployment (estimated at 100,000 in New York City alone as early as October 1857).[20]

On October 13, eighteen banks suspended payments "and crowds milled from Water to Broadway, numb with fear and disbelief."[21] The toll in terms of human anxiety must have been enormous. George Templeton Strong wrote that "people's faces on Wall Street look fearfully gaunt and desperate."[22]

It was during the time leading up to the crisis that Lanphier decided it would be beneficial to offer the business people working in the area an opportunity for prayer in the middle of the week. As Lanphier himself described the genesis of the idea (from his unpublished diary, as recorded by Samuel I. Prime):

16 Conant, pp. 358ff. Cf also below.
17 Frank Grenville Beardsley, pp. 47ff.
18 Eric Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), p. 70.
19 Orr, p. 38.
20 Edwin G. Burrows, and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 842ff.
21 Burrows and Wallace, p. 843.
22 As quoted in Burrows and Wallace, p. 843.

> Going my rounds in the performance of my duty one day, as I was walking along the streets, the idea was suggested to my mind that an hour of prayer, from twelve to one o'clock, would be beneficial to business men, who usually in great numbers take that hour for rest and refreshment. The idea was to have singing, prayer, exhortation, relation of religious experience, as the case might be; that none should be required to stay the whole hour; that all should come and go as their engagements should allow or require, or their inclinations dictate.[23]

This may have been an unusual idea, at least to his contemporaries. After seeing the success of the meetings in 1858, William Conant wrote:

> In fact, if the idea of a single meeting of the character of any of the dozen or more now held daily in different parts of the city, had been proposed six months ago, with any probability that it would be attended to such an extent as soon to require a multiplication of rooms to accommodate the increasing congregations, the idea would have been regarded as hardly less than preposterous.[24,25]

Lanphier's intentions are spelled out more specifically in the first handbill he wrote and distributed. The section which described the forthcoming meeting said:

> A Day Prayer Meeting is held every Wednesday, from 12 to 1 o'clock, in the Consistory building, in rear of the North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton and William streets, (entrance from Fulton and Ann streets). The meeting is scheduled to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers, and business people generally, an opportunity to stop and call upon God amid the daily perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but it is also designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain more than 5 or 10 minutes, as well as those who can spare the whole hour. The necessary interruption will be slight, because anticipated; and those who are in haste can often expedite their business engagements by halting to lift up their hearts and voices to the throne of grace in humble, grateful prayer."[26]

In this short piece, we can see the basic benefit (a chance to "call upon God…"), as well as the steps being taken to remove time pressure as an obstacle.

The rest of the handbill continues the heavy emphasis on prayer. For example, the headline and first section read as follows:

How Often Should 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, earthly spirit. In prayer we leave the business of time for that of eternity, and intercourse with man for intercourse with God."[27]

23 Samuel I. Prime, *The Power of Prayer* (Edinbugh, U.K.: Banner of Truth, 1998; original published 1859), (Chapter 5 as reproduced in http://www.revival-library.org/index.html?http://www.revival-library.org/catalogues/world4/prime/title.htm (9/29/06)).
24 Conant, p. 361.
25 Each of the elements had been used elsewhere. Roman Catholics, for example, had a tradition of noon intercessory prayer. The YMCA had had downtown prayer meetings. The uniqueness of Lanphier's innovation had more to do with the combination of the elements and their application. Cf. John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) pp. 25f.
26 Chambers, p. 36.
27 Chambers, p. 36.

The lower half of the handbill consisted of two poems – one concerning the benefits of prayer, the other concerning how to pray. In all, approximately 75% of the handbill dealt with prayer.

This emphasis on prayer appears to have been reflected in the meetings themselves. The printed agenda called for the meeting to be opened with a hymn and a prayer, followed by prayer requests and prayer responses, and ending with a benediction.[28] A similar picture is presented by Samuel Prime in his account of a Fulton Street prayer meeting that he attended; the only difference between his account and the printed agenda is that in his account two hymns were sung (rather than just one), and one passage of scripture was read in addition to the prayers.[29]

It would not be unreasonable to expect that prayer would be seen as an effective and calming response to anxiety and changing circumstances. This certainly seems to have been the opinion of the participants. As Talbot Chambers wrote contemporaneously, the happiest and most memorable meetings were those with the most prayer.[30] Charles Finney noted (apparently approvingly) about the Boston counterparts to the Fulton Street meetings:

> But there was such a general confidence in the prevalence of prayer, that 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."[31]

One of the Fulton Street participants said:

> Prayer never was so great a blessing to me as it was at this time! I should certainly either break down or turn rascal, except for it… If I could not get some half hours every day to pray myself into a right state of mind, I should certainly either be overburdened and disheartened, or do such things as no Christian ought.[32]

Not only did the Fulton Street model offer prayer as a response to crisis and anxiety, but it also removed some of the potential obstacles to participation.

The first potential obstacle was that of location. In New York, as apparently elsewhere, the Fulton Street style prayer meetings were often most effective not at one's home church but rather at a location within the business district. This reflects a significant change in the urban landscape which had been taking place, particularly in lower Manhattan (the North Dutch Church on Fulton Street was located in lower Manhattan's Third Ward, underneath what later became the World Trade Center site).

The Industrial Revolution had come to the United States during the first half of the 19th century. As noted above, the population of New York City swelled and immigration increased. In the case of lower Manhattan, the middle class moved out and businesses and immigrants moved in. Middle-class homes were replaced by business establishments[33] and by the mid-1850s single-family private residences ceased to exist in much of the area.[34] This process had been accelerated by the 1835 and 1845 fires, after which burned out residential areas were rebuilt as industrial space.[35]

28 Chambers, p. 38.
29 Prime, Chapter 5.
30 Chambers, p. 43.
31 Charles G. Finney, Garth M. Rosell (ed), Richard Dupois (ed), *Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) p. 40.
32 Conant, p. 357.
33 Chambers, pp. 26f.
34 Burrows and Wallace, p. 715.
35 Homberger, p. 78.

These changes led to the new phenomenon of commuting as people worked in lower Manhattan but lived several miles away in the newer residential areas uptown. On rail line maps of the period, one can clearly see the pattern of new local rail lines running from lower Manhattan to uptown residential areas; most served the business district which encompassed the area close to the North Dutch Church. In fact, seven rail lines running from lower Manhattan to uptown residential areas were built between 1831 and 1858.[36]

This migration presented the lower Manhattan churches with a dilemma: they could either follow their congregations north, or they could attempt to attract immigrants to replace their lost members. Finney's Broadway Tabernacle (originally six or so blocks from Fulton Street) and others opted to move north.[37] The North Dutch Church opted to stay and attempt to attract the immigrants.

It also meant that business people were no longer working near their homes and their home churches. Even if their home churches had set up a weekday noon prayer meeting they would not have been able to attend. This is an especially important issue since the stress and crises of their work lives occurred during the week. If they were to benefit fully from a prayer meeting, it would have to be held in the middle of the work day at a location near where they worked — in the business district. This seems to have been a key insight for Lanphier; while the Fulton Street church had been losing members, it was ideally situated to offer noon prayer meetings to people who worked in the area.

At the same time, attempting to appeal to a cross-section of local business people meant that denominationalism was a potential obstacle. One would not want to limit the attendees to any one denomination; therefore, Lanphier made the meetings non-denominational or "union." As Chambers noted at the time, the prayer meetings would not have survived had they not been non-sectarian.[38]

To reinforce their non-denominational character, Lanphier took several additional steps. A hymnal was selected that was published by a non-denominational benevolent association rather than a denomination.[39] Leaders were selected from the lay membership of all available religious bodies.[40] One of the formal rules of the meeting was that "no controverted points" were to be discussed.[41]

This non-denominational character can also be seen in Lanphier's written material, as quoted above. The language expresses a simple desire to engage in prayer and perhaps to experience a relationship with God. Even the Unitarians, who had a significant presence in New York at the time, could feel welcome.

Another key potential obstacle to religious participation was that of time; business people, especially during times of crisis, generally face a severe shortage of time.

As Lanphier noted in the diary extract quoted above, business people usually took the hour between 12 and 1 o'clock as a period for rest and refreshment. This made the noon hour a logical time to hold the meetings. He also made it clear in his handbill that the meetings would start and end on time, and that one could come for only a few minutes if that was all the time that was available.[42] By implication, one could leave early if dissatisfied with the experience, thereby lowering the risk of misspent time.

36 Homberger, p. 77.
37 Orr, p. 39.
38 Chambers, pp. 23f.
39 Chambers, p. 40.
40 Chambers, p. 40.
41 Chambers, p. 41.
42 Chambers, p. 35.

The emphasis on punctuality appears to have been carried out in practice with much made of the need for a prompt start and finish to the meetings.[43] Samuel Prime noted this businesslike punctuality in the account of the meeting he attended.[44]

In all of this, we see that Lanphier designed a program which appealed to the desire of business and tradespeople for prayer and religious experience in the middle of the week while at the same time removing potential obstacles to their participation. He did this deliberately, utilizing his knowledge of the needs of the prospective participants.

III. Conclusion and Reflections

As a layperson who had worked in the New York business culture, Lanphier seemed to have an intuitive grasp of the situation and of what would be helpful to the prospective participants. Not only did he see the need, but he was also able to design a program that fit within their daily habits and activities and was sensitive to their time and location constraints.

As we consider possible lessons for today, two general points appear to be obvious. First, then as now there is a persistent human desire to connect with the sacred, and this pertains to our work lives as well as to any other sector. We catch glimpses of this in the wide range of spiritual practices in which people intend to engage during the week.

And second, it is critically important to design such programs around the daily habits and practices of the prospective participants, rather than those of the church or other religious entity. This suggests that programs like this should be designed and led by people with deep experience in the workplace culture of the prospective participants.

The lessons are less clear when we turn to the possibility of adopting the specifics of the Fulton Street program today. There are both similarities and differences between the working environments of 1857 and those of our time.

There are multiple similarities. People in business have spiritual needs that do not appear to be very different from those that Lanphier was attempting to address. The geographical separation between the workplace and neighborhood churches has in most cases become greater. The time pressure under which most people work is probably greater now, or at least it feels that way. And there is little reason to believe that people are more interested in theological disputation now than they were in 1857.

At the same time, however, there are significant differences. Today, few people in business take a sixty-minute break for lunch at noon, and when they do it usually involves a business meeting of some sort. Privacy might be a larger concern now than it was then; it is not hard to imagine people being more reluctant to engage in religious activities with strangers and less likely to engage in public singing even with friends. And the religious pluralism and desire for inclusivity within most workplaces make it harder to generate the sort of social energy that probably contributed to the 1857 movement.

Despite these differences, I believe it would be worthwhile to experiment with this concept. The location would need to be accessible to a large number of people, whether on foot, using quick mass transit, or needing easy parking. The language would need to be very ecumenical. The participants' time would be respected. And the focus would be on prayer.

43 Chambers, p. 43.
44 Prime, Chapter p. 5.

The human desire for prayer and a sense of connection with the sacred is real and powerful even though it might be subconscious most of the time. Our work lives are not exempt from this desire, nor should they be. The challenge is to find ways to help people fulfill this desire and to do so in a manner that fits with their current circumstances.