

The Layman's Prayer Revival



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We come now to the fourteenth in our series of Survey of American Christianity. Our subject for this session is actually two-fold: First, the Layman's Prayer Revival of 1858, a rather unique revival which is characterized majoritively by prayer in America, and secondly, a beginning discussion of the classic perfectionistic cults in America which are part and parcel of the National era. So today I would like to first comment briefly upon the coming of the great Layman's Prayer Revival of 1858 and then begin—but not finish because of time restraints—the emergence of perfectionistic societies and what has been denominated by some, the Classic American Cults in America.

Now first the Layman's Prayer Revival, and if you notice in your notes, some of this material has been prepared and written out. The Layman's Prayer Revival is a unique awakening in American Christianity; it's unique in the sense that while it was a prolifically deep awakening, at least in the results of it and in the manner of it, it is not an awakening that has received a lot of press by scholars. In fact, J. Edwin Orr has perhaps done more work on the Layman's Prayer Revival than any other single historian. But what I'd like to do first is to tell you the story of a unique, profound awakening that somehow has fallen through the cracks.

We talk about the First Great Awakening and we can talk at length about George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards and others. Then we talk about the Second Great Awakening that swept America after the American Revolution, and we can talk about Timothy Dwight, James McGready, Martin Stone, and others. Then we talk about the great Finney era of Dr. Charles Finney and the lesser evangelists of that era, as they are called. But when we come to the Layman's Prayer Revival of 1858, the books fall somewhat strangely silent. So let me begin by describing it.

To set the Layman's Prayer Revival in context, it is an awakening or upheaval of religious interest that followed almost two decades

of religious decline in America. That religious decline has been accredited to the rise of the Apocalyptic Movement in William Miller, who unfortunately founded a movement that was assured of the coming of the day of the Lord; when it did not, it produced great disillusion. Other scholars point to the negative affect of the Revivalists of the Finney era and their sometimes detrimental impact upon religious interest. Others point to the rise of cynical materialists, but for whatever reason it has been demonstrated that religious life declined in the 1840s and 1850s.

Also, in 1858 came the great bank panic of that year. Banks failed, railroads went bankrupt, factories closed—in New York City alone there were 30,000 idle workers. Some have suggested to us that movements of religious upheaval are a fruit of the disorientation of financial panic and the rise of insecurity, or things like that. The only difficulty with that sociological and economic theory is that it does not explain why some awakenings have occurred and why at other times when there was deep panic economically, revivals did not break out. Certainly there was no great revival of religion following the great bank collapse of 1929 or, more recently in our day, almost constant recession since World War II.

There was, of course, the slavery panic and the mountain crisis with the great compromise and Wilmot Proviso, and finally Bleeding Kansas and the tragedy at Harper's Ferry. But it seems to me that while social and cultural historians look at events within culture itself to explain great movements, one thing that is often overlooked is the earnest praying and concern of Christians. And it seems that the Layman's Prayer Revival began as a result of earnest Christians praying that, as the mountain clouds of tragedy appeared on the threshold of the nation, God would intervene.

The characteristics of the Layman's Prayer Revival are unique. As you can see in the notes, the Awakening was largely urban, and only later was it rural. In the history of nineteenth century Revivalism, revivals normally began in the rural area and, depending on their strength, worked to the larger areas. This was quite the opposite. It began in New York City and filtered down into the smaller towns. It was layman led. You do not find dominant pastors, dominant preachers, or dominant evangelists taking the center stage in this Awakening. It was interdenominational. It was as though people began to tire of the denominational wrangling of the nineteenth century. It was characterized by prayer, not preaching, and it lacked the emotional extremism that often accompanied the earlier two awakenings—the Second Great Awakening and the

Finney era.

The course of the Layman's Prayer Revival began in New York City in the fall of 1857. It began out of the Old Dutch Reformed Church of Lower Manhattan. That church found itself in something of a dilemma as the parishioners of the church moved out to the growing suburbs, leaving the immediate surrounding area of the church with the incoming of the immigrant. They became poor areas. The Old Dutch Reformed Church decided not to move out to the suburbs with their constituency, but to simply rebuild the church with the people who were coming in to the Lower Manhattan area.

To do this, the Old Dutch Reformed Church hired a man who's relatively anonymous now by the name of Jeremiah Lanphier. Lanphier was a businessman, having been converted in 1842 at the Broadway Tabernacle formerly pastored by Dr. Finney, and he became a quiet, zealous businessman. He was hired to do lay missionary visitation for the Old Dutch Reformed Church and, after very minimal success, decided that he would rent a hall on Fulton Street. I might add here that the prayer meetings at Fulton Street will last for decades—not simply a few months of the Layman's Prayer Revival—and at Fulton Street, he inaugurated what is called A New Prayer Meeting and advertised for it.

To make a long story short, Lanphier had a small gathering of people. He announced prayer meetings for another two weeks, and this interest in prayer will peak in the early months of 1858. They will turn into daily prayer meetings in New York City. These prayer meetings would begin normally at twelve noon and last for about an hour. People were invited to come when they could and stay as long as they were able to. It was a meeting simply devoted to prayer requests and praying.

My theory is that if people will pray, they often will go home with those prayer burdens they have prayed about and talk to those people who are objects of their praying. I think the Layman's Prayer Revival was people coming together in very large numbers—some 5,000 people during the height of the Awakening in New York City came together every day for what one writer has described as simple, solemn prayer.

Many of those people who would come and say, "Please pray for my wife," or "Please pray for my wayward children," or "Please pray for my relative or my neighbor," and would then go home at

night, burdened not only to pray for them, but also to talk to them. And the Layman's Prayer Revival seems to have begun in these prayer meetings early orchestrated by Jeremiah Lanphier without the noise of deep, big meetings, just simply simple, quiet prayer and reverential worship that had a deep impact across New York City and eventually across America. In New York City alone, it is estimated that the Baptists, after years of either merely holding their own or experiencing attrition, baptized nearly a quarter of a million people as a result of the prayer revival.

A study of the towns in and around New York City evidenced that the Awakening swept from the city down into the smaller communities of New York and New Jersey. The Awakening that began in New York swiftly spread to Philadelphia, where they rented James Hall; there were simple prayer meetings and yet seemingly deep interest in prayer. It spread to Boston. It spread to Chicago. It spread to Sacramento. It spread into the Deep South. What I am describing is a very deep seeming movement of the Holy Spirit in which it is estimated in America, if James Orr is correct at this point, that it was the first awakening in America that clearly has had a worldwide impact. It spread across the United States; estimates in America conservatively speaking state that there were about a million converts.

Orr says then that it spread to Ireland in 1858-1859 where there were about half a million converts. This was much celebrated with a deep cultural impact as a result. It seems to me that a true moving of the Spirit of God, it's really not to be evaluated by the numbers that seem to be impacted upon it or by it, but the impact of those who are impacted upon their general culture. And it seems fair to say that the Layman's Prayer Revival of 1858 had a remarkable impact upon the morals and the moral behavior of many, many people.

So it spread from the United States, the major cities, and if you have a newspaper in your town that goes back that far (the 1850s) I would imagine you will find references to the Layman's Prayer Revival of 1857-1858. I am from the state of New Jersey, and my research of the Layman's Prayer Revival in the little area where I was raised in Salem County shows there was a deep moving of the Spirit of God in many of those little small towns in 1858.

From America, it spread to Ireland where preaching services were thronged. There were unprecedented prayer meetings—just amazing things including the closure of jails because vice seemed

to abate for a least a time. From Ireland, it spread to Scotland where it is estimated again about 500,000 conversions, and from Scotland to Wales, with 400,000 conversions, it is said. From Wales, it spread to England where it is estimated again that there were over a million conversions. And from there it spread into the English-speaking missionary world.

The Layman's Prayer Revival, a much unheralded awakening, was perhaps our deepest awakening in American history. It certainly was our first worldwide awakening that scattered through the English-speaking world. It seems to me that the Layman's Prayer Revival helps to explain some of the deep movements of the late nineteenth century in England, as well as America. For instance, Moody, the great Chicago evangelist, had success in the British Isles and seems to have been a fruit of the Layman's Prayer Revival.

The emergence of William Booth and the Salvation Army seems to be of the same variety. The success of the YMCA, founded by George Williams, J. Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission, the rise of the Keswick Conferences in England and the rise of Keswick Theology of piety and sanctification, and the coming of the great evangelists like F.B. Meyer, P.B. Bliss, R. A. Torrey, J. Wilbur Chapman, and G. Campbell Morgan and their worldwide travels. The emergence of the Student Volunteer Movement, our first great college para-ecclesiastical movement of the nineteenth century, as well as the early Bible institutes of England and America.

The Layman's Prayer Revival was a unique, deep awakening that unfortunately has not come under the careful scrutiny as the other great revivals have by our historians. And yet the fragmented picture that seems to be emerging would indicate to us that this indeed was a deep and important movement whose impact may have lasted for over five decades. To me, it certainly is a call to the importance of prayer, and I do not think that a servant of God can minimize the efficacy of prayer. We look upon a society that is broken and twisted, and one wonders if there is any hope for it or if there's any sanity to be found. Yet I am encouraged to believe that God is a worker of great miracles, and if God would encourage us to pray, He might be pleased to bring to our culture a deep moving of the Spirit of God.

Our second topic is the rise of the cults, a strange topic to connect to the Layman's Prayer Revival. Nonetheless, when discussing

nineteenth century Christianity and religion, a word should be said about the major cults. I'd like to break our discussion of this second topic into two parts: First to say something very briefly about the spread of utopian and experimental societies in the nineteenth century, and then to say something about the rise of what has been denominated in our major texts on the subject of the classic America cults and describe just a bit about each one of them.

First, the spread of utopian experimental communities and the meaning of them. If you read the diaries or reports of the Europeans that came to America in the nineteenth century—and I'm thinking of Frances Trollope or Charles Dickens or perhaps the most famous was Alexis de Tocqueville—they commented much upon religion in this new democracy. They commented upon the proliferation, the depth, and the almost universal dissemination of religious views and religionists in the nineteenth century. And it's out of that experience that I want to say something about the spread; first the utopian societies and then the cults.

First, the meaning of the Utopian Experiment. What does that say? Why would people give up a free enterprise system and often move into a communal setting? It seems to suggest several things to me: that this era was an era of experimentation, an era in which people, because of abundance of land and other factors, were free to investigate and experiment. I'm saying that utopian religious and political experiments reflect the optimism of the nineteenth century, just as much in a sense that the great Charles Finney does. The other religious manifestations do, too.

It was an era of optimism. It was an era of millennialist hope. By millennialist hope, I think I mean in both cases of Dr. Finney as well as these religious expressions, it was a time of belief that society could be changed, and that good could be brought for in the world. It was not a century characterized by religious pessimism or religious paranoia. It was a century of optimism and millennialist utopianism; many of the religious expressions of that era reflect these very basic characteristics.

Here's some example of utopian experiments: The Shakers we have talked about briefly when we talked about the Second Great Awakening. Shakers were founded by Mother Ann Lee; sometimes they were called Shaking Quakers, a pious group of French Protestants sometimes called Camisards. We said that Mother Ann Lee felt at times that she was the incarnation of

Christ restored in her person. They stressed purity, sinlessness and celibacy, believing that sex was the root of all evil. Ann Lee migrated to America in 1774 and practiced communal living. After Ann died, communities were established at New Lebanon in 1787, and by 1794 there were over twelve. Each commune was independent in its organization.

Another group were the Rappites. These were followers of a self-professed father confessor by the name of George Rapp, a farmer who came from Germany. He immigrated into America with 300 followers, settled in Western Pennsylvania for a while and eventually in New Harmony, Indiana. Their aim was to amass wealth and give it to Christ at His return. Father Rapp was confessor for the group. Goods were held in common. Celibacy was practiced with the belief of Christ's imminent return. Self-denial and hard toil, as well as religious practices, were common for the group.

John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida society is somewhat tragic because Noyes believed that he had arrived at a state of perfection. He was a follower of Nathaniel Taylor more than he was Charles Finney, but his logic went something like this: that since he had reached this state of perfection, he must have also arrived at heaven. And since we are told in Galatians that in heaven there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, he believed that all marriage ties were then to be renounced for what he called Complex Marriages. He believed that sex was a sacrament, an outward sign of inward spiritual grace.

In his commune founded in Oneida, New York and called the Oneida Society, Noyes developed a careful system of Planned Parenthood, only allowing fifty-eight children a year. Women, all the women, belonged to God first, to Noyes second, and then were carefully allotted out to the male participants within the commune. Pressures from the Presbyterians in 1876 caused Noyes to take residence in Canada, and by 1878 the Oneida Community dropped Complex Marriages and by 1881 dropped communalism for free enterprise. But it was the longest extant economic communal effort in American history. It lasted for about thirty years.

So we had Shakers erecting communal living, we had George Rapp's Rappites, and we had John Humphrey Noyes whose religious ideas were obviously pathetic. The other two listed were not so much religious utopia experiments in the nineteenth

century as they were social and political. Robert Owen was an English industrialist and reformer who tried to introduce a new system of society. He and his Owenites purchased New Harmony, Indiana from the Rappites to establish his experiment. It was more of a political system than it was a religious system, but they were known as Owenites.

Charles Fourier, the son of a wealthy Frenchman, established what is called Fourierism, which again was a political society and social organization. Fourier felt a period of harmony was destined for the world in 35,000 years. He felt that in that period the world would be organized in self-contained, cooperative units called phalanxes, each having around 1700 people. He projected that in order to embrace the world, he needed to have 2.9 million of these phalanxes. What Owen and the Fourierites agreed upon was that harmony in the world was a function of correct social organization. In America, Albert Brisbane, who studied social philosophy in Europe, embraced Fourierism, propounded it in America, and enlisted Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune who published a column.

Early in the nineteenth century a fruit of the optimism, of the excitement and experimentation of the era, brought about the emergence of utopian, sometimes communal societies, some religious, some not. But all of them while they lasted, though short-lived, seemed to argue that the free enterprise capitalist system was not the best form of social organization.

This brings us to the rise of the religious cults in America. And again, much of the material about the religious cults—the four major classical cults in America—has been written for you to economize our time. First, let me define a cult. Instead of a standard definition of a cult, I would rather speak of factors that seem to be present within each of the major cults. As you can see in the notes, there are four of them—Mormonism, there is some legitimate question about Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. Those are commonly denominated as the four major classic American cults. They seem to share these things in common: There's a time factor, which means that they are recent. They all find their origin within the last century and a half, and they are distinctly each one American.

Second, there's a doctrinal factor in which each one denies some essential or essentials of Christian Orthodoxy, whether it be the deity of Christ, which most would deny, or hell or some other

doctrine of that nature. There's a leadership factor in which each one has either a founder or an esteemed prophet whose writings are looked upon as either Scripture themselves or divine keys to the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Fourth, there's a biblical factor or authority factor in which each of the cults seems to take a low view of the Bible, while they take an elevated view of their sacred writings.

In some cases, cults will use the Scriptures (say the Jehovah's Witnesses) but they will bring about what they call their tools to interpret the Bible— their missals, which are supposed to render the true meaning of the text— so they may not have a Bible of their own. Jehovah's Witnesses certainly do not, Seventh Day Adventists do not, but they oft have the sacred insights of an Ellen White or a Charles Taze Russell. And then there's an organization factor, finally, by which I mean they view themselves as the only ones who possess the real truth and that there is no salvation, at least no deep salvation, outside of their own group.

Now what I would like to do in the few moments that we have is to rather quickly summarize the teachings of the four major cults. I'm relying here upon better sources than I can provide in a very limited span of time, but I'll try to summarize it with the available time that we have.

First, Mormonism—the founder of Mormonism is obviously Joseph Smith, a young man, if the books are correct, who seemed to have a penchant for the mysterious, the supernatural, the spiritually-oriented from youth and from a series of visions. Eventually in 1823, he was visited by the angel Moroni who revealed to him the location of some sacred plates in western New York around Palmyra. Later, gaining access to those plates, he was able to translate the language of the plates through the instrument called an Urim and a Thummim, a glass-like prism. He called it Reformed Egyptian Hieroglyphics, what eventually became the Book of Mormon. And with the publication of the Book of Mormon came the Church of Jesus Christ to the Latter Day Saints, founded in Fayette, New York in 1830.

It must be said that the major sources of Mormon doctrine is not the Book of Mormon, which is their history book, but it's the Pearl of Great Price and the doctrines and the covenants that you will find most of their unique teachings. Joseph Smith moved his group to Kirkland, Ohio and eventually Independence, Missouri where he had a series of revelations, as well as wives. From there

to Illinois, he ran for the presidency of the United States under the old Liberty Party, was incarcerated by outraged farmers, and eventually murdered (hung).

Whereupon there was a debate among the Mormons as to their leader, some favoring one of the sons of Joseph Smith, others finding the mantle of leadership to fall upon an Englishman by the name of Brigham Young. This eventuated in a split among the Mormons, which created the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints. This separated into Michigan, following one of the sons of Joseph Smith. But the bulk of the Mormons followed the Englishman Brigham Young, who moved them westward eventually into the Great Salt Lake, where they have obviously emerged as a very large movement whose influences literally spread around the world. We know them perhaps not only by their doctrinal teachings, but by their aggressive missionary posture of sending young men out in twos to work as missionary interns.

Their doctrine seems to go something like this; they are polytheists. They would say that God was once what we are and that we will become at once what God is. So they believe in the pre-existence of the soul. They believe that that soul was plunged into a physical body and the goal of man is to re-emerge back into his spiritness again. They believe (or at least historically have believed) that polygamy is right, that one's reward in heaven is a result of having spirit children who are born in proportion to fleshly children upon the earth. They believe that there's a variety of heavens, depending upon one's morality upon the earth. There's a celestial heaven as well as a terrestrial and celestial heaven for baser sorts. But salvation within the Mormon system is ultimately a salvation by one's moral activities upon the earth.

Seventh Day Adventism is a unique movement, and there is really some discussion of considerable amount as to whether Adventism is to be classified as a classic American cult. The reason for the confusion is that Seventh Day Adventism really has two beginnings. It has a beginning as a movement called The Adventist Movement, which was founded by William Miller, and then a redefinition of that movement after what is called the Great Delusion of 1844. Let me tell you the story.

The Adventist Movement was founded by William Miller, a convert from Deism who became deeply interested in the study of prophecy. After a fourteen year study of the Scriptures, he came to the conclusion in the early 1830s that the Lord was definitely

coming back to earth in 1843. He started a movement of those anxious followers awaiting His coming called the Adventists. Obviously, the appointed time in 1843 came and passed, and the Lord did not come. He then reset the date for the following year, thinking that his minute premillennial calculations were wrong. But after the appointed time of 1844 passed, the Lord did not come and that failure of the Lord to come is what is called in Seventh Day Adventist history, or the Great Delusion.

Now at that point, William Miller, the disappointed apocalyptic, told his people that he was mistaken and asked them to go back to their churches. Some perhaps did; many were so disillusioned that they didn't know what to do, and as a result of that great disillusion, one former Adventist in particular, Ellen White, had a series of visions. In those visions, she was permitted, she thought, to have insight into the interpretation of the Lord's coming. She concluded that the Lord did indeed come, but He came into an inner-sanctuary of heaven in 1843, not to the earth; so William Miller was correct really, he was simply wrong in his geography. In fact, she later had a vision in which she entered into heaven and saw Christ in the Holy of Holies. This was later confirmed by a vision by Hiram Edson that Christ did come, but He did not come to the location that was expected.

And so it's in Ellen White and Hiram Edson, these later figures, that the theology of the early apocalyptic movement evolved into what I would call the more cultic-oriented Seventh Day Adventists. Not all Adventists follow Ellen White. Many do, but some do not, so that's why I'm a little careful. Ellen White indicated soul sleep after death and the annihilation of the wicked. Perhaps the essence of the difficulty with Adventism is not so much the doctrine that we should worship on Saturday and not to do so is to bear the mark of the beast, but it is in their doctrine of the atonement.

Following Ellen White, some Adventists believe that Christ's atonement is really three fold: He died on the cross to make salvation possible. Then in 1844, He began what is called investigative judgment, in which He is investigating or checking the records of the actions of men, especially as they have to do with the fourth commandment (Sabbath keeping). It's sort of a cosmic scale in the heavens. And at the end of time, if our good works outweigh our bad works, our bad works will be laid upon that great scapegoat Satan, who will bear the sin of the world. If

the Adventists follow Ellen White, they seem to fit the definition of a classic cult, but if they simply follow William Miller, a disillusioned Baptist, I do not think they are a cult.