

A Typical Prayer Meeting

by J. Edwin Orr

The Fulton Street Prayer Meeting was a model of effective prayer and revival, characterized by spontaneity, catholicity, promptness, and a fundamental object of prayer.

Scripture: Psalm 34:17, Matthew 18:20, Acts 1:14, Romans 12:12, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Hebrews 10:24-25, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14-15

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Unity in Christ"

Description

J. Edwin Orr discusses the influential Fulton Street Noon Prayer Meeting, which set a standard for prayer meetings across the country. The meeting emphasized spontaneity, inclusivity, punctuality, and a focus on prayer, allowing participants from various denominations to share their requests and experiences. The structure of the meeting was designed to maintain order while encouraging heartfelt participation, leading to numerous testimonies of answered prayers. Orr highlights the profound impact of collective prayer, showcasing stories of conversions and spiritual awakenings that resulted from the fervent intercession of attendees. The Fulton Street meeting became a model for prayer gatherings, demonstrating the power of united prayer in the revival of faith.

Transcript

It was natural that the rest of the country looked to New York for a pattern in the union meetings, Fulton Street Noon Prayer Meeting having the greatest influence of all in shaping the other meetings. The plan of meeting adopted in Fulton Street was copied throughout the city, and proved as successful in other cities too.

The character of the Fulton Street meeting remained the same in general outline¹. The object of those who had the direction of things was two-fold: to maintain the freedom and latitude of the exercises, and to guard against disorder and disharmony. Each leader was given a bill of directions, and was expected to conform to the outline himself and to command obedience to it from all others taking part. The bill was as follows:

"Please Observe the Following Rules:

Be Prompt,

commencing precisely at twelve o'clock.

The Leader is not expected to exceed ten minutes in opening the meeting.

1st. Open the meeting by reading and singing from three to five verses of a hymn.

2nd. Prayer.

3rd. Read a portion of the Scripture.

4th. Say the meeting is now open for prayers and exhortations, observing particularly the rules overhead, inviting the brethren from abroad to take part in the services.

5th. Read but one or two requests at a time - requiring a prayer to follow-such prayer to have special reference to the same.

6th. In case of any suggestion or proposition by any person, say this is simply a prayer-meeting, and that they are out of order, and call on some brother to pray.

7th. Give out the closing hymn five minutes before one o'clock. Request the Benediction from a clergyman, if one be present."

A placard was hung upon the wall, in a prominent place commanding the attention of the whole meeting.

"BRETHREN ARE EARNESTLY

REQUESTED TO ADHERE

TO THE FIVE-MINUTE RULE.

PRAYERS AND EXHORTATIONS

NOT TO EXCEED FIVE MINUTES

in order to give all an opportunity.

NOT MORE THAN TWO CONSECUTIVE

PRAYERS OR EXHORTATIONS

NO CONTROVERTED POINTS

DISCUSSED"

Throughout the revival, the distinguishing features of the Fulton meetings were fourfold.

First, the most distinguishing characteristic was the spontaneity. In a few instances, the leader, observing in the audience a person with interesting information about the work of grace in some part of the land, would call upon that brother to relate the facts to the assembly. But this was the exception rather than the rule. The general custom was to let the meeting conduct itself. After opening exercises, opportunity was given all and sundry to take part as their feelings might prompt, whether to offer a prayer, or to exhort, or to narrate an interesting incident, or to tell of Divine blessing in other parts, or to make request for a specific person or subject, or even to commence singing a familiar hymn. In this respect, the union was not unlike the meetings of the "Plymouth" Brethren, save that the latter were centered around the Lord's

Table. In the Union Prayer Meeting, it rarely happened that there was any awkward pause or delay, for the difficulty was rather in the opposite direction when two or three would rise together, the younger be urged to give way to the older, the resident to the stranger. The liberty allowed to all to take part led to a more serious difficulty, the presumption of the least qualified attempting to exhort what would never have been missed. Sometimes the prayers offered by individuals were so rhetorical in style that they appeared to be addressed to humanity instead of Deity. But all these cases were exceptional, and weighed little against the advantages of spontaneity. Throwing the meeting open ensured interest and attention, promoted formality, promoted variety, and kept a constant flow of life.

Second, the meetings were noted for their catholicity. Leaders were chosen from every evangelical faith, from Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Friends, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Reformed and the like, with utter impartiality. All were invited, and all were welcome. No man was asked to what regiment he belonged, or from what country he came; but if he fought under the great Captain of Salvation and spoke the language of Canaan, there was room for him. The harmony of believers was secured by the enforcement of the rule " No Controverted Points Discussed ". Sometimes an Arminian would drop a sentiment regarding human agency, and sometimes a Calvinist would emphasize the sovereignty of God; but this was usually unpremeditated and involuntary, and no discussion followed, thus leaving the concord of the assembly unbroken. Generally, Christians present were more disposed to consider things held in common than things in disagreement. The interdenominational harmony was splendid, and contributed in no small way to the success of the movement. Partisan views were forgotten in the urge to rescue perishing souls.

Third, a peculiarity of the meetings was the invariable promptness as to time. The meeting began promptly at twelve, and closed promptly at one. Without irreverence, there was brevity, directness, earnestness, and purpose. No exceptions were ever made to the rule, save to permit a brother to finish his remarks. The leader was inexorable in this matter.

Fourth, the overall peculiarity of the meeting was its fundamental object, prayer. Everything else was subordinated to this object. The happiest meetings were those that produced the most praying, and the few meetings which had too many preliminaries were always described as wet-blankets. In order to avoid diverting interest from prayer, the leaders even avoided simple business, such as taking a vote on a day-of-prayer proposition.

The best way to convey an impression of a meeting is to describe it. An observer took his seat in the room at ten minutes before twelve. A few ladies were seated in one corner, and a few business-men were scattered here and there. At five minutes before twelve, the room began to fill up rapidly, and at two minutes to twelve the leader took his place at the desk. At the first stroke of twelve noon, the leader arose and read the opening verses of a familiar hymn:

Salvation, oh! The joyful sound

'Tis pleasure to our ears;

A sovereign balm for every wound,

A cordial for our fears.

The people found their hymn-books, and sang heartily. The leader offered a prayer, short and pointed, and then read a brief portion of scripture. Ten minutes were thus occupied in these preliminaries. Meanwhile, requests for prayer had been sent desk. Every nook and cranny was filled, and an overflow meeting was under way upstairs. A deep hush settled upon the meeting. The leader stood up, with slips of paper in his hands, and said:

"This meeting is now open for prayer. Brethren from a distance cordially invited to take part. All will observe the rules."

Amidst breathless attention, the leader read the request:

"A son in North Carolina desires the fervent, effectual prayers of the righteous of this congregation for the immediate conversion of his mother in Connecticut."

Instantly, a father arose and requested the prayers of the meeting for two sons and a daughter. He then sat down, and burst into tears, laying his head on the railing of the seat before him, sobbing like a child.

A Christian man rose to his feet, and poured out his heart in intercession for the mother, the two sons and daughter. The next request, for the conversion of two brothers of the lady making request was similarly sustained at the throne of Grace. Request after request, prayer after prayer followed in quick yet tender succession. Then all the congregation sang:

There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Immanuel's veins,

And sinners plunged beneath that flood

Lose all their guilty stains.

Forty-five minutes had passed. The Chairman, still reading requests, added a very affecting one of his own:

"May I, without presumption, prefer a request for myself, though only a private individual, and for a feeble church among whom my lot is cast, that we may be melted and humbled, and endued with power from on high, and made instruments of salvation. . . . I would beg leave to prefer the same request for all the churches, some thirty in number, connected with this Presbytery, being among the few at the late General Assembly wholly unvisited with the showers of grace."

This heart-touching request, made with reference to a Presbytery in Virginia, filled many eyes with tears. Other requests followed, and the meeting closed promptly at one p.m., with a benediction until the next day's meeting for prayer.

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That Fulton Street's influence was felt in other great meetings is seen by the order of service in the well-known John Street meetings in New York City. One conspicuous card stated:3

YOUNG MEN AND YOUTH

ARE AT HOME HERE

AND MUST NOT

HESITATE TO TAKE PART!

Demonstrating the workings of the John Street Meetings, we give the report of an actual service, beginning with the address of Henry Ward Beecher. Said Mr. Beecher that day:

"I am ashamed of myself, positively, to be an object of more faith than my Saviour; yet I have persons coming to me every day of my life, with their wants and troubles, and when I think of the injustice of coming to me thus, instead of going to Christ, I feel just like pushing them away. How eagerly they believe every statement I make; how they hang upon my sympathy, and hope I will let them come again tomorrow. I say to myself, 'if you would only come to Christ with half the faith that you come to me, you might be rejoicing in half an hour'.

"Suppose now, that, instead of a man, sinful and erring like yourselves, you should put in my place the august form of the Lord Jesus Christ, full of benignity, glorious with goodness, and with a sweetness that is more than any mother ever knew for her darling child, waiting patiently, bending over you and saying, 'Come unto me and take my yoke upon you; learn of me and ye shall find rest to your souls, . . . for he that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.' Suppose you should hear Jesus Christ saying, 'I have been out to seek and search for lost men, and I have found you, and I am persuading you to come to me, believe me I love you, that I love you now.'

"If there is a man that has one thought toward God, it is because the love of God is drawing him sympathetically to himself. It is a blessed thought that Jesus Christ is longing for you, and I would that you might turn still more earnestly to Jesus Christ and say, 'Lord, I believe thee, I believe thou lovest me ; I believe thou desirest to make me thine, and from this hour it shall be the object of my life to please thee, and the one firm object of my life to serve thee.' Won't you try the effect of that, some of you, today? Try it at once, even now, while I am speaking."

A gentleman who stood in the doorway told how, some weeks before, a merchant from Albany had called on a New York merchant to buy some goods. At 12. o'clock, the New York merchant looked at his watch, and asked to be excused for an hour. The other objected, as he was in haste to get through with his business. He replied that he must go to prayer meeting; it was of more importance than to sell his whole stock of goods. The gentleman from Albany inquired if he could not pray enough at morning and night, without leaving his business at noon? The merchant said he could not; and by persuasion and gentle force he induced his friend to go to the prayer meeting with him. That man went into that meeting, became interested, and came out a converted man, went home to Albany, and immediately started those prayer meetings there which became so blessed of God.

Next a young man rose to say that he had been walking up West Street, a day or two before, when he saw sitting upon the steps of a store a sailor who sprang up and grasped his hand. He found it was an old schoolfellow from Connecticut. After some conversation, he asked his new-found sailor friend if he were a Christian, and the answer had struck him as very forcible; it was, "By God's grace, I am." That young man was the only Christian on board the ship, and he was now on the sea, the only servant of Christ among so many who were, perhaps, sending up blasphemies instead of prayers, and he hoped the brethren would remember him in their prayers, that he might be kept, and enabled to preach Christ wherever he went.

The Rev. J. P. Thompson, colored Pastor of the Zion Church, in Leonard Street, next wanted to say a word. He had been engaged in this work since he was a boy, and he was now nearly 40 years of age. "I have striven since I was 14 years of age to live right and to love God; I believe I-love Him, I know I do. I have been to this house before, and my heart has been so full of love to God - especially the first time I came here - that I had to return to my own place and bless God." He was happy to say that there had been a continuous outpouring of the Spirit of God in his Church since New Year's eve. Both white and colored had been converted there; and out of some three hundred, sixty or seventy had been saved.

Mr. Beecher related an instance of the conversion of a sea captain a few days before, from a word " fitly spoken " by a man who had business relations with him. The word led him to go to prayer meeting where he was so much affected that he went home, locked his door, got down on his knees, and did not rise until he had evidence that God had pardoned his sins. That single word saved that man, and who could tell where the end would be when that Christian captain should have preached the Gospel of Christ around the globe.

A man on the parquette, who had spoken before, next prayed. His prayers, like his exhortations, were principally composed of Scripture quotations. Mr. Beecher rebuked him and told him gently but firmly: "My Christian brother, you forget to pray for the only thing we ask prayers for. Let some other brother pray for the subject of these requests." A clergyman on the stage prayed for the subjects mentioned, whereupon the fearless Henry Ward Beecher, referring to the earlier speaker, commented:

"When persons have an old hope that does not keep them warm, they should always do as men do with their garments - go and get a suit that does. An old hope that keeps a man talking and talking, is not worth anything. Jesus Christ is worth a great deal. Gather manna every morning; never gather enough for two."

Following this, a woman in the gallery told of how God had heard her prayers for the conversion of her only son, and reminded young men present of the anxiety of their praying mothers. The next speaker said:

"The message with which I am charged comes from the United Christians at Elmira, in this State. I had the pleasure of meeting with them yesterday. They have discarded their ordinary place of worship, and now meet in the large Presbyterian church. The meeting is characterized by quietness and power, and the work seems like a rising tide, insensibly but powerfully rising higher and higher, reaching all classes of persons."

A gentleman in the center of the house reported that, on the previous Saturday, he had resolved to confess his sins and come to the Saviour. On Sunday, he did go to God, but could find no rest. His brethren talked and prayed with him. He had often thought that prayer was humbug, but then he saw right into his brother's heart. He went to the altar, but could get no relief. When his friends asked him if he felt better, he almost answered "Yes ", but some- thing within told him to tell the truth. On Monday, he read his Bible, and prayed all day, yet went to bed without relief. However, on Tuesday morning, all seemed clear to him. He wanted to tell his friends that religion was a fact to him.

A young man in the gallery said a few words, a gentleman on the west side of the building expounded the words "Quench not the Spirit", and another near the door offered a short prayer; then the closing hymn was given out, followed by the benediction pronounced by a New Jersey visitor; and the meeting dismissed.

Commenting on this order of service, a contemporary writer gave expression to the following views, here quoted in full:

"It is among the benefits of the present revival which can hardly fail to endure, that we have been taught how to conduct prayer meetings. There is something in the primitive 'assembling of ourselves together' which is adapted to act powerfully upon our religious life through the principles of our social nature, if we but know how to seize upon it."

It has been said that the Awakening of 1858 was a revival of prayer. It was more than that - it was a demonstration of the fascinating working of Providence in the answering of believing prayer.

For instance, there was a backslider in New York City, to whom we shall give the name William Miller. Upon his restoration to grace, Miller was so impressed by the need of conversion of his still impenitent relatives and friends that he decided to return post haste to his native Massachusetts to plead with them about the all-important matter of their soul's salvation. He went home by steamer, and spent the night on board ship wrestling in prayer for the salvation of his father, who was aged and infirm.

At last, Miller arrived home. Judge his wonderment when his mother informed him that on the very night of his wrestling in prayer, his aged father began to show concern about his spiritual condition and found the peace that passeth all understanding the same night

One prayer answered, Miller became concerned about his sister, and traveled east through Massachusetts to see her. Once there, he was successful in leading her to Christ also. At her home, he wrote to his uncle and informed him that the believing members of the family were praying for his conversion together. A letter came back announcing that (while the family members were praying for him at eighty miles' distance) the uncle began to pray for himself, and was born again. The exultant Miller led two other friends to Christ before he left Massachusetts for New York City.

Upon his return to New York, the now-rejoicing restored backslider sought out his cousin in that city and informed him of the united prayers of the newly converted family for his spiritual condition. The cousin smiled broadly, only to say that meanwhile he, too, had become a disciple of the Master. Miller's cousin made the great decision in time, for a few months later, he passed away. Even in bereavement, at the cousin's funeral, Miller spoke seriously and long to his cousin's sorrowing friend and urged him to follow their mutual friend's example in accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour. Some weeks later, the fruits of the conversation was manifest, for a letter arrived for William Miller saying that the writer had followed his urging and had not only become converted, but had entered a seminary to prepare for the ministry.⁴

On another occasion, a prayer request was read at the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting:

"The prayers of the meeting are respectfully asked for George Brown, who has lived all his life in wickedness and only a few days ago contemplated murder and suicide in hopes of ending his misery."⁵

The would-be suicide attended the evening prayer meeting next day, obviously in great distress, for he interrupted the speaker with a cry of "Oh, what must I do to be saved?" At the same time, another convicted sinner rose in the meeting to ask brokenly that the congregation should sing "Rock of Ages " for him. Both men were converted in the meeting.

In yet another meeting at Fulton Street, a young man rose to say that his mother, who had brought him up a Roman Catholic, had become so incensed at his conversion that she refused to live under the same roof

with him, and had consequently left for Baltimore. The congregation united in prayer for the misguided mother. Some time later, she was converted in the revival at Baltimore, and returned to share her joy with her son.⁶

A lady asked prayer for her husband in Wisconsin.⁷ Fulton Street intercessors joined with her. After a few weeks' traveling from New York, the lady returned to Wisconsin, praying and hoping that her husband might be influenced. To her joy and surprise, she found that, in her absence, he had set up daily family worship. He had been converted on the day upon which she had asked prayer for his salvation.

More striking still was the case of a father who had three sons in different parts of the country. As they were all three unconverted, he brought them as subjects of prayer before the meeting. They were prayed for as only those who believe can pray. What was the consequence? Although communication with and between the sons had lapsed, each son in turn wrote to his father to give an account of his conversion in answer to prayer.⁸ The intercessors of Fulton Street were delighted beyond measure.

The fame of the Fulton Street meeting as a place where prayers obtained answers spread far and wide. For months, the mail brought scores of written requests daily, from the eastern seaboard, from the great West, from the Southern States to the faraway borders of Texas, from the Canadian Provinces, from the British Isles, Germany and Switzerland. It became such a commonplace thing to address mail to the Fulton Street Meeting that the following letter was typical:⁹

To the

Officiating Minister

at the Union Prayer Meeting.

Fulton Street.

Dear Sir:

The Mayor has directed me to enclose to you the within requests received at his office, with the wish expressed to forward them as above directed.

I am,

Respectfully,

J. B. AULD

Mayor's Clerk.

In other meetings, the same sort of faith in believing prayer was evidenced by the flow of direct requests. At a New York meeting presided over by Henry Ward Beecher, the following requests were read:¹⁰

"A Christian merchant earnestly desires the prayers of God's people for his co-partners in business, and for all the young men in their employment unconverted to God."

"An anxious wife is praying earnestly at this hour for her husband, who once made a profession of religion, but is now fearful that he was never born of the Spirit and is in darkness. She asks an interest in your prayers for him."

"The prayers of those accustomed to intercede with God, are requested by a San Franciscan, that the Almighty would visit the city of San Francisco with a gracious outpouring."

"The prayers of Christians are requested for a young man, the son of a clergyman, who is an idle jester on the subject of religion, and who has been heard within the last hour to ridicule these meetings and jest on these subjects."

"I wish to state that I feel myself a great sinner, and that there is no hope for me. I feel lost forever. Although I am young in years, I feel old in sins, and know not what to do to be saved. I feel that the Spirit of God has left me altogether, and if I remain in this state what will become of my soul? Hell stands staring me in the face. Would to God that I may become converted."

"A widow asks for the prayers of the brethren and sisters for a son, brought up under careful religious instruction, who last night cursed his mother, that he this day may be brought to the feet of Jesus."

"Pray for me. I was touched with the prayer of Mr. Beecher in this place on Monday. I am one of those who have not a father or mother, no Christian friends. Hated and despised by my own sex, I have felt abandoned. I am yet in a hopeless condition in life, but I have prayed that He who conversed with the woman of Samaria may reveal Himself to my soul. And when you pray for me, remember all abandoned young women, made so by the heartlessness of unprincipled men, and kept so by the pitiless prejudice of our own sex."

The request immediately above was written in a neat and legible hand, and was signed "Martha ". Very many writers' requests were deeply touching. One came from a poor outcast who had been brought into a Magdalen Asylum for fallen women. She was regarded as one of their hardest cases. Yet, entirely of her own accord, she wrote:11

To the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting.

"I desire the prayers of the church. I feel that I have been a very wicked girl and that I have led a very bad life, and I feel my need of Christ. I want to be a Christian."

She found Christ as her Saviour.

The effect of these remarkable answers to prayer was immediate. A contemporary writer stated:12

"Christians were very much humbled. . . even impenitent men saw and felt that this was holy ground. They felt that it was awful to trifle with the place of prayer; sacrilegious to doubt the spirit, the sincerity, the efficiency, or the power of prayer. It began to be felt that Christians obtained answers to prayer. . . that if they united to pray for any particular man's conversion, that man was sure to be converted. . . because he had become the subject of prayer."

The impact of believing prayer seemed irresistible. The instances given regarding the efficacy of prayer at Fulton Street were multiplied throughout the country, and the people wondered.

Notes

1. Chambers, Noon Prayer Meeting, chapter v.

2. It is of interest to quote a report written on the occasion of the writer's only visit to the Fulton Street Noon Prayer Meeting in 1936: "The historic Fulton Street Noon Prayer Meeting had the largest attendance for a similar meeting in several years, and instead of closing at one o'clock, fully one-half the congregation stayed until 3:15 p.m." This after-meeting was led by Dr. George Dowkontt after the writer had left for another engagement.
3. Conant, Narratives of Remarkable Conversions, p. 380
4. Chambers, The Noon Prayer Meeting, pp. 173-6.
5. Chambers, The Noon Prayer Meeting, p. 194.
6. Ibid., p. 125.
7. Ibid., p. 162.
8. Ibid., p. 162.
9. Ibid., p. 12~.
10. Conant, Narratives of Remarkable Conversions, pp. 391-4.
11. Chambers, The Noon Prayer Meeting, p. 124.
12. Prime, The Power of Prayer, p. 29.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/j-edwin-orr/a-typical-prayer-meeting/>

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