

# 1859 Ulster Revival

by Keith Malcomson

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*The 1859 Ulster Revival was a transformative movement that led to the conversion of 100,000 souls in Ireland through fervent prayer and community engagement.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 44:3, Joel 2:28, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 9:37, John 4:35, Acts 1:8, Acts 2:17, Acts 4:31

**Topics:** "Revival History", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

Keith Malcomson preaches about 'The 1859 Ulster Revival,' noting how the work of God in the hearts of four new converts led to 100,000 souls coming to Christ in one year, impacting Ireland greatly. Despite the discouragement and fruitless ministry experienced by many believers and ministers before the Revival, faithful prayers for a mighty work of the Holy Ghost persisted. The revival began with four humble vessels in Kells, Co. Antrim, who fervently prayed and studied the Bible, leading to a powerful outpouring of the Spirit of God across the land. The Revival spread rapidly, transforming families, villages, and towns, with dramatic conversions, united prayer meetings, and societal changes evident throughout Ireland.

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## Transcript

Edwin Orr noted that this Revival made a greater impact on Ireland than anything known since Patrick brought Christianity there. Through the work of God in the hearts of four new converts who were moved to seek God in prayer, 100'000 souls came to Christ in one year. This is the extraordinary story of this stirring, reviving and outpouring of the Spirit of God that came to be known as 'The 1859 Ulster Revival.'

Before this Revival there was little to encourage genuine believers who had prayed and laboured hard for many years with little result or change to the spiritual condition. Many ministers were discouraged with a seeming fruitless ministry. This can well be seen by the experience of three such ministers.

"Hitherto, our condition was deplorable. The congregation seemed dead to God, formal, cold, prayerless, worldly, and stingy in religious things. Twice I tried a prayer-meeting of my elders, but failed; for after the fifth or sixth night I was left alone. All along I believed that the faithful use of the means of grace would be followed by their effects, as certainly as the tillage of a field is followed by a good crop, or as diligence in any profession is attended with success; and great was my disappointment, as year after year passed, yet still no fruit; no outpouring of the Spirit. I wondered and was grieved at what seemed so mysterious. What alarmed me most was the indisposition, almost hostility, of the people to meetings for prayer. They seemed mostly to think that they were well enough, and that I was unnecessarily disturbing them. I had

never been so desponding or distressed as during the weeks immediately preceding the awakening. I had almost ceased to hope. I felt as if I was almost alone, no one mourning or praying with me; and I told my people I was appalled at their determination to have no prayer-meetings, and that we would not have a drop of the shower of grace which was going round, but would be left utterly reprobate."

Another reported

"There seemed, great coldness and deadness...I had preached the gospel faithfully, earnestly, and plainly, for eleven years; yet it was not known to me that a single individual had been converted."

And a third,

"The congregation, was in a most unsatisfactory state; in fact, altogether Laodicean."

This paints a depressing and hopeless picture of the spiritual state of the land. Even amidst such darkness there was still those scattered across the land who prayed faithfully for a mighty work of the Holy Ghost. The famed Methodist preacher William Arthur wrote a book in 1856 called *The Tongue of Fire* about the true power of primitive Christianity. In its first three years it went through 18 re-printings which shows that there was a real hunger for true powerful New Testament Christianity.

Vessels Chosen and Prepared

The beginning of this revival can be traced to the parish of Connor in Co. Antrim. Here not far from Ballymena is a small village called Kells God found Himself four weak, foolish, despised vessels to work through. He bypassed the great religious establishments as well as the ministers of religion and found four sinners that He would save and fill with faith and a spirit of prayer for revival. The first was James McQuilkin who overhearing a Mrs Colville (a Baptist missionary from England) talk to a lady about knowing she was saved, and feeling this lady had a lack of theological learning quizzed her if she was a Calvinist. She responded by saying "I do not care to talk on mere points of doctrine. I would rather speak of the experience of salvation in the soul. If one were to tell me what he knows of the state of his heart towards God, I think I could tell him whether he knows the Lord Jesus savingly."

All this led to him falling under deep conviction of sin. He was cut to the heart and led into long weeks of agony as he wrestled over his spiritual condition before God. Finally he found Christ, salvation, peace and forgiveness. Immediately he began to witness to others around him and the news spread in Kells that this man who was once known for his love of this world now loved Christ and His Word. One of his friends Jeremiah Meneely (or Jerry as he was well known) who was a faithful church goer but lacked a sure knowledge that his sins were forgiven sought out James. After a long conversation Jerry found himself in a state of seeking God. As he read the Bible one day wrestling over these things and confused in mind the Spirit spoke clearly a scripture to his heart. He slapped his knee exclaiming, "I see it now" and arose assured of his sins forgiven and of his name written in heaven. Around the same time McQuilkin led two other young men to Christ, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace. And so here was Gods raw material to work with.

James McQuilkin sent off for a first edition of George Mullers narrative of his life and labours called *Life of Trust*. This had a profound effect upon him in starting the prayer meetings. Also *The Life of McCheyne* and *Finney's Lectures on Revivals* sowed deep seeds of hunger for genuine heaven sent revival. Beginning in September 1857 these four banded together in a bond of fellowship to meet weekly for prayer and Bible

study. Their sole desire was their own edification and the salvation of others around them. The simple place they chose to meet was the Schoolhouse at Kells. "During the long winter of 1857-1858 every Friday evening, these young men gathered an armful of peat each, and taking their Bibles made their way to the old schoolhouse. There they read and meditated upon the Scriptures of truth and with hearts aflame with a pure first love, poured out their prayers to the God of heaven." Everything that they steadfastly held to over the next year centred around three great fundamental truths of scripture, these were "the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, the Sufficiency of the Holy Scripture, and the Secret of Holy Supplication."

This not only marked those small fervent prayer meetings but soon covered the whole land in living manifestation as God stepped down and marched through the land. These prayer meetings continued with no visible results for three months, but on New Years day 1858 the first convert was brought in. After that others were born from above and now joined the prayer meetings. By the end of the year about 50 men were meeting with them to wrestle and prevail in prayer. The one cry and burden of all their prayers was for an outpouring of the Spirit upon themselves and the surrounding area. They were hungry and determined to pray through to God. Many of the local church people ridiculed, mocked and opposed this type of praying. They were happy to rest back and do nothing saying 'the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost and so we don't need to pray for the Holy Ghost.' Such stagnant attitudes never bring Revival.

But the small band prayed on determinedly, unmoved by the theories and theologies of man. The woman did not attend these initial despised meetings because of the reproach. Soon they were holding cottage meetings until no cottage was big enough. Also they held open-air meetings. And so slowly and quietly the work of God was carried on. James McQuilkin came forth in the midst of the revival as a most powerful preacher, later in 1859 he would travel to other towns to preach in churches and the open-air to great crowds and seeing a beautiful harvest.

#### Faithful Minister

Rev. Hamilton Moore who was the minister since 1840 of the local Presbyterian Church in Connor to which most of these men belonged encouraged these prayer meetings. His own preaching was simple, direct, lacking great eloquence but certainly having spiritual power in the conversion of sinners. He preached both the terrors of the Lord against sin as well as the mercy of God towards sinners. He preached hell as well as heaven, his was not half a message as most today. His grasp of Gods truth was full and solid, his voice loud and clear, his heart soft and warm. He never talked about numbers but only the souls of men. He sought not after ministry or fame but to honour God and reach hearts. He was destined to be a leading light in this forward Movement of God in the land. His local efforts to stir his people to prayer over previous years seemed almost futile. Its lowest point was reached when only two could be found attending regular united prayer.

But then came the stirring. The prayer meeting was full, other new ones were started, the people realised a hunger for prayer and the power of prayer as lives were changed. Reports of a stirring in this area began to spread and so that same year at the General Assembly he was asked to bring a report to the other ministers of this work of the Spirit of God. At the same time reports were being received from America that a great stirring was taking place their. The Assembly appointed two ministers, Dr. William Gibson and Rev. William McClure to go to America and to report back. Amazingly it had also started there in September 1857 with one man then a few then many praying for revival. This did not begin with preachers but the normal rank and file of believers most of whom were business men. By this time there were 12'000 men praying in New York City for a move of God. Reports came about ministers who had laboured long and

hard without results now having packed congregations and prayer meetings. Believers in Ulster did not flood to America for a blessing but turned to God in prayer.

Over into 1859 saw the church in Connor leading the way as a testimony to Gods Mighty Reviving work. Now there were some 100 separate prayer meetings a week, these were held in homes, barns, schoolrooms and work places. These were mostly run by normal church members, one being a butcher who was only saved two years before and was now on fire for God. Another prayer meeting was held in a mill made up of about 500 people with the preachers at it being local farmers. The church was never empty and the 1000 families that made up the church were seeking God, and souls were being saved on every side. The meetings were solemn, the people earnest with many being moved to tears. This was Revival.

### National Revival

The revival spread out across the whole land family by family, village by village, and town by town. Within weeks 10'000 were converted. When this Revival hit Ballymena it was dramatic and sudden. One minister who was away for only two days from the town returned to find a great stir. Many families had not gone to bed for two or three days. Everything seemed at a standstill and the noise of people crying for mercy or the singing of praise came from many homes night and day. One Minister said that "The difficulty used to be to get the people into the church, but the difficulty now is to get them out." Large open air meetings were held everywhere. God was raising up a humble army of new converts ablaze with His Spirit to witness again to Christ's resurrection.

In Londonderry a daily prayer meeting of 5'000 was held and at least several meetings daily. In Coleraine united meetings of Churchmen, Presbyterians, Methodists, Independents and Baptists were held, working together with one heart and soul. One said of this place "For the last three weeks it has been one continual Pentecost." Almost every street in Belfast brought forth repentant sinners. The most notorious sinners, drunkards and prostitutes in the city were saved. Large open air meetings of about 25'000 were held.

A couple of the great Evangelists used at this time were H.G. Guinness and Brownlow North of Scotland. One unusual physical manifestation was the prostrations, when men and women, sometimes as great multitudes, would be struck down under the conviction and power of God crying out in agony of soul and would rise up again born of the Spirit, redeemed and forgiven. As well some fell into trances and others had visions. The testimonies of the reaper overtaking the sower in the towns of Ulster would need a great volume but this is a partial witness of Gods great visitation in that year of grace to just a few places.

The life changing and society changing results were very evident. A great blow came to the drinking houses of the land as drunkards were convicted and saved. Even whole distilleries were closed. Crime dropped by half within months as the land came under the influences of Gods workings. The Catholic Church sold Holy Water to protect their people from this strange work or as they called it a "revival devil...new work of the devil...an alarming contagious disease." But they did warn their people that even this holy water could not protect them if they dared to venture into any of these meetings.

One Catholic writer in a Dublin Newspaper said he would accept the movement as from God if the Boyne Celebration passed without trouble in Durham Street, Belfast. This Protestant street each year would indulge in drink and a party spirit which culminated in riots and bloodshed. But this year under the influence of the revival such things gave way to prayer and praise and no trouble came forth. A minister in

Dramara, Co.Down reporting the effects of the revival said "There is no party spirit; no Orange parade; no beating of drums; no exclamations, 'to hell with the pope' no wickedness towards the Roman Catholics." Reliable eyewitnesses testified that more Catholics were converted in 1859 than in the previous 50 years.

The Revival of 1859 brought 100'000 converts into the churches across the land. One minister said "It were worth living ten thousand ages in obscurity and reproach to be permitted to engage in the glorious work of the last six months of 1859." Opposers of the Revival called it "The Year of Delusion" and "a corrupt revival." Wales also saw 100'000 converts added to the church (one tenth of the total population). In Scotland a harvest of 300'000 souls came in. Then in England a greater harvest still. Across Britain God raised up out of this harvest soul winners, evangelists and missionaries to carry forth the Gospel both at home and abroad.

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