

# The Year of Grace, the 1859 Revival in Ulster

Like a lot of revivals, the 1859 Revival came amidst a backdrop of luke-warmness and apostasy in the church. The island of Ireland had just suffered the great hunger that occurred in the early 1850's with many of her youth migrating to America to escape the poverty. Throughout the 1850's there was a cloud of depression which brooded over Ulster, just as it did over the rest of Ireland.

However, no matter what the spiritual temperature of the land is, the Lord always has a remnant of over-comers who dare to believe God. This was certainly the case in Ulster during the years 1857 – 1859. Two of these over-comers were faithful men called Dr. William Gibson and Rev. William McClure who had just returned from North America and had witnessed first-hand the awakening that was taking place in the church there. It was their report and the zeal in which they delivered it that sparked a deep desire among the hearers that the Spirit of God would move in like manner here in their beloved Ulster.

It was with this deep desire for God to move that a prayer meeting sprang up in the old National School house in Kells.

Among the instigators of this prayer meeting (which is now part of our glorious Ulster history) were James McQuilkin and Jeremiah Meneely along with Robert Carlisle and John Wallace. They began meeting weekly. However,



National School house in Kells



Jeremiah Meneely



James McQuilkin

soon the burden for the land became so great with more and more people attending the prayer meetings that it was necessary to meet on a daily basis with many prayer sessions lasting all night.

A key figure at this time who was

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a great supporter of those who attended these times of intercession was Rev. J.H. Moore who was the minister of Connor Presbyterian church. It was this church and its faithful congregation who played a pivotal role in the revival. In the months leading up to revival there were approximately 100 prayer meetings a week that were linked to the church. In one night there could have many of the

*Connor Presbyterian Church*



sixteen homes opened for prayer to accommodate the church members and their believing neighbours.

From this fervent intercession grew a great hunger for God and before long the most of Connor congregation were spiritually awakened with a Godly fear gripping their hearts.

Church services became even more alive than had been witnessed in the past: in some cases church members would rise after a service and confess their faults and shortcomings one to another. This in itself led to a great liberty and the prayers flowed freely as His presence was made manifest. If you were to explain revival in a sentence “it is His presence”, because in His presence is fullness of joy. The awakening comes from people being ‘in His presence’.

During those days in Connor Presbyterian church they enjoyed His presence, for the heavens came down! Within a very short time the revival spirit had spread to nearby Ahoghill. On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1859 at a meeting in the 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian church addressed by James McQuilkin, there were that many people who had arrived that the meeting in the church had to be dismissed. The crowd that had amassed then gathered in the town’s main square where they were addressed by James Bankhead, a convert of the Connor awakening. It is reported that hundreds of people that night fell on their knees in the mud, calling on God to save them. Revival had arrived in Ulster, Heaven came down and the ‘year of grace’ began.

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In his report to the Presbytery the Rev. Frederick Buick made the following statement concerning Ahoghill 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian church:- “ The open field and the public roadside, even in the cold evenings were there scenes over which angels hovered with joy: for when the buildings were too small to hold people, the meetings were held everywhere. They assembled anywhere they could to hear their brethren talk plainly about the things of God. These meetings were characterized by the burning prayers that were lifted up to God; a deep sense of conviction of sin that was felt by all who attended and by the sobs and crying that only got louder as the meetings progressed”.

The Rev. Buick was later to say of the awakening itself “What can we say but that the work is of the Lord, a truly solemn time in answer to prayer. Blessed be His glorious name for the drops of the showers that have fallen. May the Lord send more plenteous rain still”. The Lord granted his request and the showers of blessing kept falling as the revival continued.

By May 1859 the Revival was being talked about everywhere; in Belfast special meetings were being held. One such meeting was in Great George Street Presbyterian church which saw such large numbers that over a thousand people could not get in and had to be addressed on the street by another minister. Both the inside and outside meetings saw hundreds of people repenting and seeking Christ as their Saviour. Revival had come to Belfast.



The Belfast Telegraph in June of 1859 reported that “In almost every street in the City there are converts. In every family some soul has found salvation, even the outcast on the street has repented”. Sinners all over the City were getting saved; and whole families were rejoicing in seeing household salvation. Belfast was tasting the pardoning love of the Saviour and the Gospel was in the air.

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One of the hubs for the Revival in Belfast was Berry Street Presbyterian church. At one point the doors of the church never closed as there were meetings almost twenty-four hours a day. Religious worship continued without interruption; as soon as someone left their seat someone else came and took their place. In the pulpit too, as soon as one preacher stopped another started. Laymen from every Protestant denomination and from all walks of life were pressed into action and it was not uncommon for these laymen to be so busy attending to those slain by the Spirit that they even had little time for sleep.

By May of 1859, open-air preaching was occurring all over Belfast. At one such meeting in Sandy Row conducted by Rev. W.C. Campbell and other ministers, there were dozens moved to tears and they knelt down in the street as they repented, accepting Christ as their Saviour.

Along with the great blessing associated the results of the 1859 Revival there was also was great persecution. In Ballymena on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> July it was reported “That after a Roman Catholic heard the preaching of Rev. Hugh Hanna, which was the first time she had heard the Lord Jesus Christ preached of as the sinners’ friend”. She got saved. What happened next deserves the sympathy of every God fearing Protestant. This lady was persecuted by a Roman Catholic priest to the point that her Roman Catholic neighbours along with even her own family refused to speak to her and within hours her windows were broken. However, amidst this relentless and heartless persecution she remained steadfast in her faith in the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ.



*C. H. Spurgeon*

Among the famous preachers to visit Ulster at this glorious time in our history was C.H. Spurgeon. He arrived in Belfast in August 1858 in the early stages of the Revival and spoke to a crowd of thousands in Botanic Gardens and at that time he praised God that the work was only beginning. He returned

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the following year, the year of the Revival and spoke to a crowd that was five times the size of the previous meeting that he had spoken at. It was estimated that the crowd who had gathered to hear the Word of God was numbered at forty thousand people.

It is also worth noting that the hymn that characterized the Revival was this:-

Just as I am without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

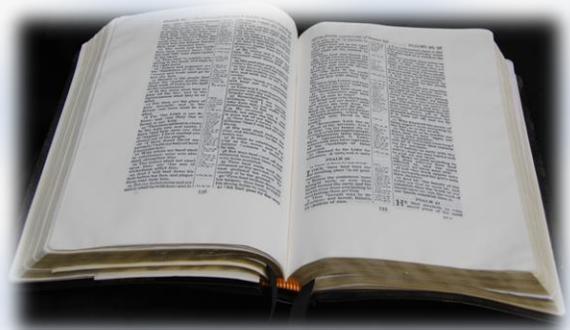
Just as I am and waiting not,  
To rid my soul of one dark blot,  
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

During the first six months of 1859 the Revival spread from Kells and Connor to Belfast and beyond. It was in August that County Armagh began to experience these wonderful showers of blessing. When it came, it came first to Moy, Markethill and Richhill where many were converted. One of the tools in His hands in County Armagh in 1859 was Rev Jackson Smyth, who along with other faithful ministers worked tirelessly as thousands from all over the country flocked to the Saviour and Shepherd of their souls. Dr. John Carson speaking about those days in Armagh said that children as young as twelve gave as sound a proof of being converted to God as you would expect from an older scholar. What came out of the Revival was that the Sunday Schools were once again filled with children and no shortage of revived believers coming forward to teach them. Children's work flourished in Ulster in 1859. The old saying is that 'a rising tide lifts all ships' and at the time of the Revival every aspect of the work enjoyed blessing.

What was also taking place at the time was the unity of the church; all Protestant denominations worked together. It was this unity that made such an impression

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on the unsaved. The Revival was the main topic of conversation. Everywhere in Ulster people were talking about the things of God, who had got saved or how the Revival was progressing. Evenings were passed reading the Scriptures and those who were unable to read would have the pages of God's Word read to them.



When the winds of revival blew through Ulster in 1859, they blew too in the work place. The Newsletter in June 1859 ran an article explaining how the Revival had entered the factory floor. It went on to say that many had experienced such conviction of sin that they were unable to work until they had made their peace with God. This they did with the assistance of the many laymen who had made themselves available to the factories and mills that were Belfast's biggest employers. Scenes like this were repeated not only in other places in Belfast, but throughout Ulster, with the ripples going in some cases through the whole of Ireland.

In reviewing the course of the 1859 Revival it is clear today over one hundred and fifty years later, that the Revival of the 'old time religion' and the return to the 'old paths' left a lasting legacy for the Ulster Protestant. For the hundred years that followed the 1859 Revival all the Protestant churches benefited from this rich legacy. It generated a spirit of unity that in turn created a spiritual environment that was able to make Ulster the spiritual heart of the British Empire. From her six counties was to flow rivers of living water as she carried the Word of God and her Protestant faith all over the world.



