

THE 1860 REVIVAL IN JAMAICA

By: Tony Cauchi



The phenomenal worldwide revival of 1858-1859 was one of the greatest movements of all time and is correctly called 'The Prayer Meeting Revival.'

It initially spread like wild-fire across America reaping a million souls then leapt across the Atlantic to sweep another million into the Kingdom of God throughout the British Isles. The results of this revival were filled churches, transformed lives, missionary expansion, evangelistic passion, philanthropic growth and a massive re-vitalization of the universal church. It was extraordinary - even in Jamaica!

This article, drawn mainly from J. Edwin Orr's monumental work entitled 'The Event of the Century,' illustrates the world-wide effect of the revival which invaded the island of Jamaica in 1860 and transformed the religious landscape for decades to come.

We have included the entire article here.



Cartoon courtesy Las May and Jamaica Gleaner.

The 1860 Revival in Jamaica

A phenomenal revival occurred in Jamaica in 1860, which was initially ignited by the great prayer-initiated revival of 1857-58, which began in the United States and went on to affect a great portion of the Western World.

The Worldwide revival of 1857-8

This worldwide revival won a million souls to Christ in America and a similar number across the British Isles. The universal church was re-vitalised; there was an explosion of lay workers in home churches as well as missionaries commissioned for work overseas. Theological seminaries became crowded with ministry candidates. Veteran revivalists like Charles Finney, James Caughey, Walter and Phoebe Palmer rode on this wave of revival reaping masses of converts. D .L. Moody converted in 1855, caught fire in the revival and soon became the foremost advocate of mass evangelism, his own ministry shaking two continents. Others like R. A. Torrey and J. Wilbur Chapman followed and took on the burden for evangelism. William and Catherine Booth, converted under the ministry of James Caughey, launched the Salvation Army and attracted great crowds to Christ. Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached to capacity crowds each week, filling the largest halls in London. The largest church in the world was on the island of Hawaii with over 5,000 regular attendees and up to 11,000 in meetings. Hudson Taylor began the China Inland Mission. Lord Shaftsbury championed for the cause of the young, the poor and the oppressed. The 17 year old Thomas Barnardo was converted in 1862 and founded his famous orphanages. David Livingstone and Mary Slessor propagated missionary work in Africa. In 1865, William Booth and his wife Catherine opened The Christian Revival Society, (later changed its name The Salvation Army), and offered repentance, salvation and a new life with Christ to the poorest and most needy, including alcoholics, criminals and prostitutes. Pastoral work, evangelistic activity, missionary outreach, social enterprise – the entire Church of Jesus Christ was powerfully and universally renewed. Such was the impact of this great awakening and the church in Jamaica was no exception.

Revival comes to Jamaica

When news of the 1857-58 Awakening reached Jamaica the faithful saints began to pray for spiritual revival on the island. The 'noon-day prayer meeting' model that God had employed elsewhere could not be replicated among a population occupied in plantation work. Nevertheless the church was determined to go before God on its knees. By early 1860 there had developed a confident expectation that God would soon visit the Jamaican church, but no one anticipated the 'copious showers' that were soon to fall, for two glorious years. Soon the pattern of earnest prayer, followed by the conviction of sins and painful penitence, and then outright conversions, commenced. What began with small revival prayer meetings became an awakening of the masses.

Almost every place of worship was crowded to capacity, for it seemed the whole population wanted to hear the good news of Christ. Backsliders returned. Thousands were converted and baptized. Great numbers sought admission to church membership, including more young people than one missionary had seen in 30 years. Reading of the Bible, praise, prayer, and preaching became the norm during the first phase of revival.

There was widespread conviction of sin, crime lessened, ethical standards were raised, old superstitions lost their power, broken marriages were healed, many left their lovers and returned to their families, and thousands of co-habiting couples were united in Christian marriage. Drunkards became abstainers, former blasphemers invoked the name of God with respect and holy fear, rum shops and gambling houses were closed and prodigal children were reclaimed. The moral landscape of the nation was dramatically transformed during these months of the revival.

Revival beginnings

It was during September 1860, that this unprecedented evangelical awakening began among the Moravians in St. Elizabeth Parish, in the southwest. It soon spread like wild fire, first to the three parishes of St. James, Hanover, and Westmoreland, causing a sensation in local congregations, regardless of denomination. Eastwards the movement quickened Mandeville and spread along the coast to villages and hamlets, eventually affecting the entire island - from Montego Bay to St. Thomas, from St. Ann's Bay to Savanna-la-Mar.

The most notable feature of this awakening was prayer. People whose lips seemed solely accustomed to curse and to swear now prayed as fluently as if such petition had been the daily employment of their lives. The prayer meetings seemed to generate a supernatural force which carried the multitudes along on a wave of irresistible power which, in turn, produced passionate repentance, astonishing moral reformation and fervent longing to know and love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is one very exciting private journal of the period, penned by a Moravian missionary, the Rev. Theodor Sonderman, which gives us a glimpse into the beginnings of the revival movement. When he visited Clifton he was told that a strange meeting was going on, so he rode on until he met a crowd of people, some weeping for joy, others under deep conviction, and others bewildered by the events. He tried to allay excitement, but while himself engaged in prayer, his own feelings overpowered him, so he felt it wise 'to leave them to the direction of the Holy Spirit.'

On Friday, September 28th, a typical meeting there commenced at nine o'clock. One verse of a hymn was sung and an opening prayer was offered. (Diary, 28th Sept., 1860) There was no need to call on anyone to pray for no sooner had one finished than another began. Even the little children took part in the intercession. When one little boy began to pour out his soul before the Lord,

trembling seized upon the company. Tears were shed and cries for mercy heard, while groans were torn from the hearts of hardened sinners. One little girl lifted up her voice in prayer in earnestness, fervency, and fluency. And then the Spirit came 'like a rushing mighty wind,' to quote the German missionary. Strong men trembled upon their knees as though shaken by some invisible power. Weeping was so general and so incessant the missionary feared it would get out of order. The meeting ended at twelve, but many reassembled at the school house to continue while the missionary talked to those distressed.

One day later, Sonderman reflected, he might as well have attempted to stop the river in its course as to stem the streams of the outpouring of hearts, yet on that day quiet order and utter decorum prevailed in the church.

The revival spreads
In a prayer meeting held in one notoriously wicked place, two younger women were struck down as though by lightning, whereupon one confessed her life of sin. Then two younger men were struck dumb, one of them writhing in agony. (Diary, 4th Oct., 1860) The work in St. Elizabeth had awakened very many from their sleep of religious formality, and also prostrated many ungodly persons. In four weeks, the Moravian pastor had conversed with 315 inquirers.

In early November another minister travelled to Montego Bay to preach a Sunday sermon. To his great surprise, from five o'clock on Saturday evening onwards, there came a stream of inquirers. God was visiting the town and a God-consciousness seemed to settle upon the people. God was the topic of conversation everywhere - in the market-place and shops, amongst merchant planters and field-hands alike. The whole town was in a state of excitement, although as in usual in during authentic revivals, some were mocking and some praising God. (Letter, 20th Nov., 1860)

After delivering his messages in Bethel Town, the missionary proposed a prayer gathering at dawn to be held on Monday morning. Five hundred people attended. Another meeting was then announced for Monday evening, presided over by a local preacher. At the conclusion of the service, and just as the final petition was presented, "the Spirit was poured out, and the mighty revival movement had commenced in real earnest," it was said. The people would not leave the chapel. The missionary was notified and he hastened back on Wednesday evening to witness unforgettable scenes, with as many as one hundred hardened sinners prostrated at once. A dozen couples "living in sin" published "the banns" for legal marriage in a Christian ceremony.

At Mount Carey chapel a crowd of twelve hundred people gathered by 11 a.m. the gathering of with many standing outside. A sensation was caused when about seven hearers were prostrated, much to the alarm of the local leadership. In these three places, 3,000 sinners were spiritually "awakened." They were typical of scenes throughout the island.

Great crowds were awe-struck. The few scoffers were besieged by the prayers of their friends until they saw the light of the Gospel. Conversions of the most depraved characters were followed by their untiring ministry on behalf of others. New converts by hundreds went from house to house all day and often at night, entreating sinners to repent. Private homes became holy meeting places for public prayer and Bible reading, with fifty or a hundred crammed together in each place. Sales of Scriptures from the Kingston depot had averaged 4,700 a year but 20,700 copies were issued during the extraordinary awakening of the years 1860 and 1861.

Convicted sinners were sometimes smitten "deaf and dumb" or gnashed their teeth, or screamed, or tore their clothes. Some were unconscious for a day or more, others speechless for a week or so. It was not "the fear of hell, but a sense of sin" which brought about distress, they said. Often people told of seeing special visions. "Unaccountable" prostrations were sometimes followed by terrific bodily contortions or by jumping, by shouting, and by wild actions.

Numerical results of the revival
The Baptists announced more than 6,000 baptized or restored to membership with another 6,000 applying for baptism and fellowship.

So great was the Congregationalist growth that the London Missionary Society, by 1867 considered the field sufficiently evangelized, that it withdrew its missionaries completely.

The United Presbyterian Church of Scotland announced "the most remarkable and encouraging (news) that have ever come from Jamaica." Their church membership grew by almost 25% and by the close of 1860 there were 1,928 candidates awaiting admission to membership, and one year later another 1,703.

The Wesleyan Methodist Circuit at Montego Bay experienced an exceptional reviving, marked by "strong crying with tears," with sinners wailing aloud for mercy and many of these people prostrated by conviction. Some 800 in regular membership welcomed

547 professed converts. There were vigorous movements in Lucea and Brown's Town circuit. Around St. Ann's Bay Wesleyan congregation had 150 on trial in a regular membership of 500 or so. This was typical of the north coast circuits.

On the south coast, Clarendon circuit churches were crowded to excess, with 400 on trial and a membership of 800. Daily meetings for prayer were conducted also in Spanish Town, with 120 converts "on trial," the regular membership being 650. Several people were prostrated for days on end. By early 1862 Methodists in Kingston had added 708 to membership, with another eighty-two still "on trial;" Montego Bay (807) had added 708, with 220 "on trial;" Spanish Town (655) had admitted 210 with 126 "on trial.'

It was acknowledged that the larger number of people awakened continued quietly in their earnest Christian profession, but a few lapsed into a state of backsliding. One sample taken Brown's Town indicated that two-thirds of the converts remained faithful.

J. Edwin Orr states, "The awakenings in Jamaica and in the other Caribbean islands resembled the much greater movement in the United States, in their emphasis on prayer, conviction of sin, repentance, and on outreach, but differed very significantly in their stranger manifestations, the prostrations, trembling, and displays of emotion, and the resurgence of paganism and counterfeit Christianity among a minority."

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Mostly adapted from J. Edwin Orr's 'Event of the Century