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The Power of the Pulpit

by Charles Crismier

History proves that anointed preaching can result in spiritual revival and societal transformation like that seen in the First and Second Awakenings. But are we preaching with that same power today?

America is in danger," the late Leonard Ravenhill once warned. " America is too young to die. This is the most critical time in American history." A growing chorus of pastors and parachurch leaders now agree. The message echoing from coast to coast is revival or perish.

But what is the role of pastor and parachurch leader? Is there a secret to national survival? Could the promise be in our pulpits? A brief examination of revivals throughout modern history might provide us with the answers.

Looking back to the mid-1700s, a dark cloud could be seen rising over the American horizon. The colonists were increasingly antagonized by the British king and parliament. Conditions were explosive, but developments among the colonists themselves also threatened their survival.

Trouble brewed in the cities. Slaves were transported in droves. Prostitution proliferated. Drinking, gambling and brawling were common pastimes. Colonial churches and their pastors were losing power to affect an increasingly worldly society. Church membership was in decline, and the Christian faith's impact on society was decreasing radically.

It had been 134 years since the men of the Virginia Company landed at Cape Henry, Jamestown and Richmond, when Jonathan Edwards--a visiting preacher--stepped into the pulpit at Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741. The colonies would never again be the same.

Reading his scripted sermon, the 36-year-old preacher told the parishioners: "The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present. They increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given, and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty its course, when once it is let loose."

One eyewitness observed, "Before the sermon was done, there was a great groaning and crying out through the whole house." Edwards warned, "Let everyone that is out of Christ now awake and fly from the wrath to come."

Awake they did. That sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," became the most noted sermon in American history, causing a tidal wave throughout the colonies known as the First Great Awakening. Tens of thousands fell on their faces in repentance. Christians were revived. Pagans were converted. The hearts of the people were being prepared for the conflict just ahead that would determine the country's destiny: the Revolutionary War.

Unfortunately, the Revolutionary War victory led to a religious vacuum. In 1795, George Washington warned the people from his presidential pulpit of their proclivity to wander in pride under the blessings of prosperity. He called upon the "kind author of these blessings graciously to prolong them to us; to preserve us from the arrogance of prosperity, and from... delusive pursuits."

Celebrating in 1820--the bicentennial of the Pilgrims' landing--Daniel Webster, the great orator, warned: "If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering...but if we and our posterity neglect its instructions and authority, no man can tell how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury all our glory in profound obscurity."

As with ancient Israel, the nation refused to heed early warnings. The Industrial Revolution shifted into full gear. America was moving to heights undreamed of by previous generations.

But the people forgot God. There was a wilderness to conquer. Money to be made. Empires to be built. The nation was losing her men to Mammon. How would God get America's attention? He retained Charles Finney--a lawyer-turned-preacher--for the task.

Half a million people were converted through Finney's ministry. And according to Harvard professor Perry Miller, "Charles Grandison Finney led America out of the eighteenth century." So astounding to saint and sinner alike were the results of Finney's pleading God's ultimate cause among a nationwide jury of American citizens that it bears a closer look for its implications in our time.

How does such a thing happen? How could city after city be turned right-side up, radically changing both powerful business moguls and busy housewives--and all that seemingly by mere words from the pulpit of a converted lawyer who forsook his practice to plea the cause of a lifetime?

Finney was the galvanizing force of the Second Great Awakening. His meetings covered cities small and great in most of the industrialized states in pre-Civil War America. Lyman Beecher of Boston, who inherited the evangelical mantle of the awakening, had many a dispute with Finney over methods and message, yet he concluded that the Rochester revival was the greatest work of God and the greatest revival of religion that the world has ever seen in such a short time.

"One hundred thousand," Beecher said, "were connected with churches as a result of that great revival...unparalleled in the history of the church." Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist congregations exploded. Baptists multiplied 800-fold in 50 years. Bible societies were founded. Ministries to the nation's social concerns were raised up. The Second Great Awakening brought about huge changes, including fueling the abolitionist movement.

POWER AND PURITY

Just as Finney was pounding Rochester with scathing pulpit power, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to study what had made America great. Since de Tocqueville came to these shores 170 years have passed. His perspective, recorded in *Democracy in America*, is worth our prayerful observation today:

"I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power."

Dwight L. Moody once said, "The best way to revive the church is to build a fire in the pulpit." Yet many of those most resistant to true revival have been pastors who fear losing power, perks and position if they rock the boat.

We need a "shaking in the pulpit," says pastor Ken Hutchinson. "We are afraid to upset our congregations or our substantial givers. What we excuse as diplomacy has actually become compromise." He says, "There are hot potato issues" that we know will cause difficulty in our ministries, "so we avoid them like the plague."

"Fearless preaching is all the more necessary in dangerous times," exhorts John MacArthur. "When people will not tolerate the truth, that's when courageous, outspoken preachers are most desperately needed to speak it. Sound preaching confronts and rebukes sin, and people in love with sinful lifestyles will not tolerate such teaching. They want to have their ears tickled. Churches are so engrossed in trying to please non-Christians that many have forgotten their first duty is to please God."

"The church suffers not so much from the sins of the world as the world is suffering from the sins of the church," Jim Russell observes. "Individual blatant and subtle sin," he states, must be "defined, identified and dealt with according to biblical truth."

Our national destiny will be determined by rekindled fire in America's preachers, whose flame will ignite the people. Pulpit power, however, requires pastoral purity.

"Religion is increasing; morality is decreasing," George Gallup laments. We Americans are amazingly religious: 96 percent believe in God, 85 percent claim to be "Christian" and 45 percent claim to be "born again." With such widespread belief in Jesus, how can we as a nation be in the advanced steps of moral decline?

In *Awakening the Giant*, Jim Russell says, "This is the most persistent, perplexing, demanding question of all." And what does it say of our preaching and teaching? What happens when an undisciplined people do not possess what they profess? Hypocrisy devolves into decadence.

Consider the following statistics compiled from various sources: 91 percent of us lie regularly, only 13 percent of us believe in all of the Ten Commandments, 33 percent of all our children are born illegitimate, and 80 percent of our children in our larger cities are illegitimate.

Those of us who claim to believe the Scriptures from cover to cover have literally taken the lead in tearing down the American family. All protestations to the contrary, the facts speak for themselves: The divorce rate among "born-again" Christians exceeds the nation as a whole by 4 percent; the divorce rate in the Bible Belt now exceeds the nation as a whole by 50 percent.

Because the Scriptures we purport to believe clearly declare that God hates divorce, considering it treachery, the dramatic extent of spiritual drift for those who claim to be the nation's lighthouse reveals how unbelievers justify their unrighteousness. Clearly the true battle in our midst is not a culture war but a spiritual war.

Pastors now have joined their flocks in the moral and spiritual slide. A Hartford Seminary study confirmed pastors now divorce their covenant partners as often as their parishioners--the second-highest divorce rate of all professions. It is "cause for alarm," warned an editorial by J. Lee Grady in the February 2001 issue of Charisma magazine. In that same issue, Jack Hayford declared: "There simply is no way to describe the present situation in lesser terms: We are at a point of crisis. Neither grace nor love should ever be a label used to bandage over our neglect or self-indulgence."

Pornography also is a plague to pastors. Sober statistics reveal that 20 percent of all ministers are involved in the behavior, one-third confess inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church, and 20 percent admit to having an affair while in the ministry. Truly, as ancient Israel just before God's judgment was poured out, it is now "like people, like priest" in modern America. A spirit of lawlessness prevails from pulpit to pew.

The God who has made and preserved us a nation declared, "Be ye holy" in Leviticus 19:2, which we have redefined as, "Be ye happy"--and now we are neither happy nor holy. Indeed, "If the light that is in us be darkness, how great is that darkness" (see Matt. 6:23).

Will the God we purport to serve gloss over our gross display of godlessness with a glib grace? To whom will He extend mercy and on what terms? The psalmist makes it clear that the Lord is merciful and gracious: toward them that fear Him, to such as keep His covenant, and to those that do His commandments (see Ps. 103).

REPENTANCE AND REVIVAL

What should we do? Pastors, could it really be that we have become a decadent people on the verge of destruction, not withstanding a good and godly heritage? What can bring us back to our senses?

1. We must admit drift. A dying patient who denies the disease that consumes him will not seek a physician to heal him. We must individually and collectively, as pastors, confess the prevailing absence of God's purity in our own lives.

Such admission has been soundly resisted for an entire generation. We have decried the moral drift in society while refusing to see the same drift in the church. And the light in America's lighthouse now flickers faintly, barely visible through the soot and sin that shrouds the windows of our own souls.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (NKJV)--this includes pastors. Admission of personal and collective spiritual drift will take us across the threshold of truth into a place of hope and healing.

2. We must fear judgment. "Our nation has become like Sodom and Gomorrah, only worse," Bill Bright wrote. "We are not only destroying ourselves but are playing a major role in helping to destroy the moral and spiritual values of the rest of the world as well."

We Americans--including pastors--tend to see ourselves as the exception to every rule--even God's rule. In our power and prosperity, we have proudly convinced ourselves that we are not to be concerned about divine judgment from a holy God for our unholy ways because, after all, we are Americans. Yet we stand in awesome danger of God's judgment even as we revel in the hope of a godly heritage.

We are in massive breach of covenant with the God who has made and preserved us a nation. God is holding us collecti

vely as a people to the terms of that covenant. But pastors and teachers will be held to even greater account.

The Scriptures record that "the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). God will order it to begin in His sanctuary. If God would renew the soul of America, His church must turn from her wicked ways. That must begin with pastors, teachers and parachurch leaders.

3. We must weep. "It is time to weep," Stephen Hill writes. Spiritual turning in the land will follow tears of pastoral repentance. Mission America President Paul Cedar declares, "It's time to sit down in the presence of God and each other, to repent and weep over our sins."

The painful truth is that the nation's survival depends upon the church's revival, and the church's revival depends upon you and me. Without God we can do nothing, but without us, God will do nothing. We must repent. And repentance demands preaching righteousness.

For a generation we have exhorted sinners to repent while the saints persisted in their sins. Do we now see that if light is to shine in national darkness, the saints must first turn from their own wicked ways?

"Our nation is standing at the brink of judgment," Cindy Jacobs writes. "Our spiritual crisis requires a desperate response." And Chuck Colson warns: "No matter how fervently we pray, the Lord will not grant renewal to a nation that does not honor Him. First, we must repent."

Chicago pastor Erwin Lutzer asks, "Will America be given another chance?" His answer: "Whether America has another chance is up to God; whether we are faithful is up to us."

The apostasy of a nation and her people does not happen overnight. It happens with each compromise, with every pastoral accommodation to the lure of popular culture, with the inexorable shift from pleasing God to pleasing the people.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it is today. Noah was a preacher of righteousness. Are you?

Don't answer too quickly. It takes risk to preach righteousness. Revival of the people demands risk in the pulpit. The Word of God must again become the sword of the Spirit piercing our hearts before it becomes a salve promoting our healing.

Let those manning the lighthouse blaze again with holy fire, so that the glory of the Lord may shine forth to the nations. And may those visiting from far and near once again declare, as did Alexis de Tocqueville, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power."