



Revivals And Church History :: The Power of the Pulpit -Crismier

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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!” declared the late Leonard Ravenhill, yet “American is Too Young to Die.” “This is the most critical time in American history,” he warned. A growing chorus of pastors and para-church leaders now agree. The message echoing from coast to coast is “Revival or Perish!” But what is the role of pastor and para-church leader? Is there a secret to national survival? Could the promise be in our pulpits?

The First Great Awakening

Looking back to the mid 1700's, 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 stepped, as a visiting preacher, into the pulpit at Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741. The colonies would never again be the same.

Reading his scripted sermon, the thirty-six 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 destiny... the Revolutionary War.

The Second Great Awakening

Revolutionary War victory led to a religious vacuum. In 1795, 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, the great orator, Daniel Webster, 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 the God “who hath made and preserved us a nation.” 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 for the task.

"When he opened his mouth he was aiming a gun. When he spoke, bombardment began. The effects of his speaking were almost unparalleled in modern history. Half a million people were converted through his ministry.... He spearheaded a revival which literally altered the course of history." Such was the description of impact of lawyer-turned-preacher, Charles Finney. According to Harvard professor, Perry Miller, "Charles Grandison Finney led America out of the eighteenth century."

Humorous...shocking isn't it, that God would "retain" a lawyer to spiritually resuscitate a nation, yet that is precisely the record of history. 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.

"MANY OF THOSE most resistant to true revival have been pastors who fear losing power, perks and position if they rock the boat."

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 plead the cause of a lifetime?

Effects of a Second Great Awakening

Charles Finney was the galvanizing force of the second Great Awakening. His meetings covered cities, small and great, in most of the industrializing states in pre-Civil War America. "No more impressive revival has occurred in American history...."

What happened in Rochester, New York, was the fullest expression of what took place elsewhere, righting that which was wrong among We the People.

The atmosphere...seemed to be affected. You could not go upon the streets, and hear any conversations, except on religion. The entire character of the city was modified because so many of the converts were leaders of the community, who "would remake society and politics...."

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," he 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 found. Ministries to the nation's social concerns were raised up. "The Second Great Awakening brought massive and permanent changes to this country and the world," including fueling the abolitionist movement.

Power in the Pulpit

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. Yet 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.

"The best way to revive the church is to build a fire in the pulpit," declared Dwight L. Moody. 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 "Sacking in the Pulpit," writes Pastor Ken Hutchinson. "We are afraid to upset our congregations or our substantial giver

s. What we excuse as diplomacy has actually become compromise. "There are hot potato issues," he says, that we know will cause difficulty in our ministries, "so we avoid them like the plague." "The greatest problems in the church lie in the fearful hearts of those who stand in the pulpits."

"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," he says, "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," observes Jim Russell. "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. But pulpit power requires pastoral purity.

Power Requires Purity

"Religion is increasing, morality is decreasing," laments George Gallup. We Americans are amazingly religious: 96% believe in God, 85% claim to be "Christian" and 45% 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? James Russell in *Awakening the Giant*, 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...

91% of us lie regularly. Lying is now called "a cultural trait in America."

Only 13% of us believe in all of the Ten Commandments.

33% of all our children are born illegitimate.

80% 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%.

The divorce rate in the Bible Belt of America now exceeds the nation as a whole by 50%.

Since 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 in *Charisma*. 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," says Hayford, should ever be a label used to bandage over our neglect or self-indulgence."

Pornography is also a plague to pastors. Somber statistics reveal that "twenty percent of all ministers are involved in the behavior," one-third confess inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church, and twenty percent "admit to having an affair in the ministry." Truly, like ancient Israel just before God's judgment was poured out, it is now "like people, like priests" in modern America. A spirit of lawlessness prevails from pulpit to pew. The God who "hath made a nation" declared, "Be ye holy" 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!"

Will the God we purport to serve gloss over our gross display of god-less-ness 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.

What Must We Do?

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?

We Must Admit Drift

A dying patient that 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 the White House, while refusing to see the same drift in the Church House. 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 alone exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people," including pastors. Admission of personal and collective spiritual drift will take us across the threshold of truth into a place of hope and healing. But there must also arise a profound and holy fear of divine judgment.

We Must Fear Judgment

"Our nation has become like Sodom and Gomorrah, only worse," wrote Dr. Bill Bright. 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 tend to see ourselves as the exception to every rule...even God's rule. That is true for pastors and people as well. 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 "hath made and preserved us a nation." God is holding us collectively as a people... We the people...to the terms of that covenant. But pastors and teachers will be held to even greater account.

The Scriptures record that "judgment must begin at the house of God." God will order it to "begin at my sanctuary." If God would Renew the Soul of America, His church must turn from her wicked ways. That must begin with her pastors, teachers and para-church leaders.

We Must Weep

"The First Great Awakening largely missed Virginia in the 1740's leaving her one of the most materialistic of all the colonies." When Devereux Jarratt, an Anglican, became rector in Dinwiddie County in 1762, he stood alone, "not knowing of one clergyman in Virginia like-minded." To his hearers, his preaching was both "strange and wonderful." Just before the Revolutionary War, Jarratt's preaching was "attended with such energy, that many were pierced to the heart. Tears fell plentifully from the eyes of the hearers, and some were constrained to cry out."

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

Will America Be Given Another Chance?

"A spiritual revival is not important to the church and to America. It is imperative!" This moment is "the darkest in our nation's history and, for that matter, in world history," warns Leonard Ravenhill. We need a baptism of honesty in the courts of the Lord. Honesty means truth, and truth can be painful." 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," writes Cindy Jacobs. "Our spiritual crisis requires a desperate response." "No matter how fervently w

e pray,Â” warns Chuck Colson, Â”the Lord will not grant renewal to a nation that does not honor Him. First, we must repent.Â”

Chicago Pastor, Erwin Lutzer, asks, Â”Will America be given another chance?Â” His answer...Â”Whether America has another chance is up to God; whether we are faithful is up to us.Â” The apostasy of a nation and her people does not happen over night. 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 Â”a preacher of righteousness.Â” Are you? DonÂ’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 Â”the sword of the SpiritÂ” piercing our hearts, before it becomes a salve promoting our healing. Let those manning the lighthouse blaze again with holy fire that the glory of the Lord may shine forth to the nations. And may those visiting from far and near once again declare, Â”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.Â”