

Preparing for the Next Great Awakening

“Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”

Those were the words that Martin Luther King Jr. heard as he prayed alone at his kitchen table in 1956. He had arrived in Montgomery, Ala., two years earlier, accepting the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church rather than pursuing the academic career he had originally envisioned.

He soon found himself the head of the pastors’ association that led the famous bus boycotts. Increasing incidents of police harassment had caused Dr. King to ponder whether such activism was worth the risk to himself and his family. For 30 days in a row he had received daily death threats, so he paused to pray for guidance.

The Lord answered him clearly. It is hard to imagine what America would be like had King not answered the Lord’s call at that kitchen table. But because he did, our nation has made significant progress in living up to its own founding ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Despite the power and long-term value of his work, today’s America needs another infusion of that same kind of vision and faith to be demonstrated by the church. The church must make a stand if this nation is to advance during this season of change and upheaval. Like King did, pastors must take responsibility for transforming our culture.

When I was in my 20s, my mentors would often spend hours teaching, preaching and dreaming about the coming revival. It was a time when God would sweep many of our problem people (saved and unsaved) into His kingdom. Many of my mentors lived

and died waiting to see this revival that would change America.

My concept of shifting the culture was radically altered during a 1990 mission trip. In a very needy African nation, I experienced some of the most powerful times of worship in my entire life. The services were packed from morning until night with thousands coming to the Lord. Yet the streets were lined with young men holding automatic weapons and the citizens lived in fear of being murdered.

On one occasion, my team prayed for several minutes as the soldiers pointed a

.45-caliber pistol at the head of someone riding in the vehicle in front of us. This was not a joke. If anything, it was a nightmare. Ironically, the instability of the nation had created an environment in which the gospel made sense to the people of that region.

Just as ironical, the violence and the corrupt government were the greatest hindrances to the movement sweeping through that nation and its neighboring countries. The powerful evidence of God's presence in our meetings obviously did not translate into a free and just society. The question I had was why?

A Divided Focus

A free pulpit has historically stirred church members to political action in the U.S. for more than 300 years. Free pulpits encouraged Christians to evangelize the slaves during the First Great Awakening. The free pulpit leaders fueled the nation's commitment to the American Revolution. Additionally, a free pulpit birthed the abolitionist movement, which led to freeing the slaves during the 1800s.

America's political power brokers were so threatened by the unity of the African-American church in the 1950s during the Civil Rights Movement that President Johnson added an amendment to the IRS tax code in 1954. The law, which in my

opinion violates the First Amendment, prevents pastors from endorsing or repudiating candidates from the pulpit. Despite this law, the church retains the right to engage in advocacy of issues, including pro-marriage and pro-life campaigns.

More recently, church leaders have failed to push back on the political forces that have worked hard to minimize Christian influence in the nation. In fact for three generations, from the removal of prayer in public schools to the redefinition of marriage and legalization of abortion, secularizing forces have sought to divorce Christian morality from American government.

We are now experiencing the “children” of this divorce—skyrocketing out-of-wedlock births, increasing high school dropouts, rising sexually transmitted disease rates and millions of Americans deprived of life in the womb.

Additionally, there appears to be a wide chasm among Christians who focus on issues such as traditional marriage and abortion and those concerned with poverty and education—leaving the body of Christ divided against itself. For the last few years I have crisscrossed the nation, reminding listeners that the black church has often been oriented toward justice, while the white church has steadfastly focused more on righteousness issues such as marriage.

I’ve seen both ethnic branches of the church apply their limited perspectives to their engagement in the political process. In other words, if someone outside their camp did not value the same issues, that person’s faith was minimized and ultimately he became the object of scorn. Yet the Lord Himself reminds us that righteousness AND justice are the foundation of His throne (Ps. 89:14).

Effective Political Engagement

For the church to regain its effective presence in society, we

must focus on four major components of political action. First, we need every Christian to become politically active with the party of their choice. For this engagement to work, local churches must accept their role to equip their people to understand a theological frame of reference, so they may interpret the issues facing their nation and local communities from a biblical perspective.

While there are no specific Bible verses that speak to issues like federal funding for embryonic stem cell research or a local proposal to reroute a sewer line through a particular field, well-informed Christians can effectively reason through such issues if they understand what the Bible teaches about human dignity, private property and the role of civil government in a free society. What the church in America needs is a fifth column of believers. The term “fifth column” originated during the Spanish Civil War.

Emilio Mola used the term during his 1936 radio address as he announced there were four columns advancing on the city of Madrid. But they would be joined by a fifth column of supporters inside the city who would undermine the resistance from within. We need to work inside all spheres of our culture to act in fifth-column style, changing our culture from within.

Second, we need to support the “watchmen on the walls” who keep an eye on the government itself. Most citizens do not have the time to keep tabs on every judicial decision or piece of legislation that affects them, let alone which lobbying groups are influencing these processes. Specialists such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, Concerned Women of America, American Family Association and other groups must continue to help Christians hold their government accountable on the national, state and local levels.

Third, we need men and women of God who are willing to serve the Lord as elected officials—while courageously maintaining

allegiance to Him alone. Such Christian leaders would see politics as more than a personal career. They would view political office as a missionary endeavor, an opportunity to bring the light of the gospel to one of the darkest areas of society.

Fourth, we must be willing to commit financial resources to the cause. In every political battle our High Impact Leadership Coalition has undertaken, we have been outspent 10 to one or even 100 to one. The reason the advocates for issues such as gay marriage have so much influence beyond their numbers is that they have millions of dollars at their disposal to pay lobbyists, buy airtime and donate to campaigns.

If 1,000 churches in a state gave a minimum of \$1,000 to support pro-marriage, anti-pornography or other clear morality-driven campaigns—which are perfectly legal to fund from church coffers—we could rapidly turn the tide of darkness in the U.S. We may be David facing Goliath, but we must come to the battle with something to put in our slingshots.

Taking a Stand

The fact that “all politics are local” means every local church has a different battle to fight. My church has locations in both Maryland and Washington, D.C., where traditional marriage has been under serious assault in recent years. Two years ago, the District of Columbia city government passed a same-sex marriage bill. In early 2011, a bill was introduced in the Maryland State Legislature to redefine marriage to include same-sex couples. Many political observers assumed that the bill would pass easily, since Maryland is contiguous to Washington, D.C.

We began with prayer, asking the Lord to guide our steps and give us wisdom to know what to say and how to proceed. We then began the very delicate process of coalition building in our community. There were many churches in more politically

conservative areas that were opposed to redefining marriage, but we knew we would never be able to sway legislators unless we could rally support from the more liberal districts.

After months of meeting with various pastors, we were grateful to see God open eyes and hearts to see how vital it was to prevent this bill from passing. With this growing coalition of Christians across political lines, we began speaking to legislators. We let them know their constituents would not stand for the dismantling of traditional marriage. Slowly and often painfully, we were able to convince enough of them to change their votes. The Maryland bill went down in defeat to the shock of many.

Yet the battle is far from over. Already Maryland's current governor has pledged to take a more active role and sponsor another bill to legalize same-sex marriage. He has appeared personally at fundraising events for the cause, vowing to start earlier, raise more money and deliver this legislative abomination to his supporters. At times it is exhausting to think we will have to repeat this process over and over into the foreseeable future. But we are committed to stay in the fight as long as it takes.

From Revival to Reformation

It is important to remember that even if we win every political battle, it would still never replace the overwhelming need for revival in our churches and the restoration of our families and communities. Christian political action must be undergirded by spiritual revival, which must have a prepared vessel to take it outside the four walls of the church.

Local churches across the country must constantly cast vision to remind Americans what their nation can be. In an awakened America, people would walk in love toward their fellow man, diminishing the darkness of racism, sexism and classicism. Children would be welcomed into families, as unplanned

pregnancies would result in adoption rather than abortion. The markets for illegal drugs, cigarettes and pornography would diminish as more and more people found their joy in the Lord.

These may sound like idealistic predictions, but they are the very real fruit of an authentic spiritual awakening. Like my mentors, I live with a sense of expectancy. I also follow the admonition of Jesus to occupy until He comes.

Counting the Cost

We will always be hated by certain segments of society for who we are. Yet to effectively engage our culture, we must become more aware of public opinion and become media savvy. Christians must consider the perception of our actions as well as our intentions. Romans 14:16 offers extremely wise advice: "Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil" (NIV 1984). While we must never cave in to media pressure, we must also become wise in the way we conduct ourselves in the public square.

We are not saying that a Christian should never offend. Any Christian engaged in the reformation of our culture is bound to offend someone, perhaps more often than not. But the defining question is: Is it the truth we speak that offends or it is the attitude with which we speak it? Do we show our love for people as we speak the truth?

Since I have become more actively engaged in the political process, I have received death threats at my home and office. I have had to hire security guards to ensure people do not carry out these threats against my family or me. Less seriously, activists and journalists on both the political right and left have called me countless names. Most of us will not have to pay the price that King paid for answering the call to address injustice in his generation. But there is, nonetheless, a price to pay.

We can change the direction of the U.S. government in less

than 20 years. We must start with preaching reformation to our middle school children. Next, we must scholarship and fund the training of our brightest youth and make sure that mature Christians personally mentor them throughout their university studies.

Simultaneously, we should encourage Christians to run for every available office from school board, city council, state legislature and beyond. Although everyone will be looking at the presidential race in 2012, we must get people with a Christian worldview into every available political arena. While no change occurs overnight, we will make a radical impact on our nation in our lifetimes—beginning with the 2012 elections.

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