

The Church Must Recover This Message to Save America

In his address to the nation after the horrible massacres in El Paso and Dayton, President Trump called for a cultural change in America. For him and many others, those horrific crimes were the most recent reminders that something is disturbingly amiss with our culture.

Who Will Bring Cultural Change?

This then leads to the pressing question, “Who will bring the needed cultural change? Will it come from the stars and starlets in Hollywood? What about the mainstream media or the educational system? Maybe from politicians? Perhaps from the music industry?

The answer is “none of the above.” All these have miserably failed in this regard and have all contributed to what is wrong in the culture. No, the only hope for positive cultural change lies with the church—the followers of Jesus Christ—whom He called “the light of the world” and “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13-14)).

How Will it Occur?

For this to occur, however, the church must recover the message that was entrusted to her by the Lord. The message is the key. It was the gospel message, in fact, preached without compromise, that gave birth of the United States of America.

This was confirmed by the late Harvard professor, Perry Miller, who said, “The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was a direct result of the preaching of the evangelists of the Great Awakening.” This was not a reference to the “style” of preaching, for there were varied styles, but to the message itself that was preached.

Since George Whitefield was the most noted preacher of the Awakening, I will here seek to delineate the message he preached. There is no question that Whitefield's preaching brought cultural change to colonial America. Concerning his visit to Philadelphia in 1739, Benjamin Franklin wrote,

It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious so that one could not walk through the town in an evening with hearing psalms sung in different families of every street (Hyatt, The Faith and Vision of Benjamin Franklin, 32-33).

The Power of the Message Itself

While many in the church are looking for a bigger and better program or a more appealing style, the answer for cultural change lies in the message itself. This understanding is critical, for in Romans 1:16a, Paul speaks of the inherent power of the gospel message, saying, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."

Paul makes clear that the gospel is not a conduit or channel for God's saving power. The power is in the message itself. Then, in 1 Corinthians 1:17 (NIV), he warns that if we go too far in attempting to make the message cool, hip and acceptable to contemporary culture, we run the risk of preaching a message that has been "emptied of its power."

Whitefield's Message

Whitefield was absorbed with the Message. He lived and breathed God's Word. Concerning the early days of His ministry after graduating from Oxford, he wrote,

"My mind now being more open and enlarged, I began to read the

Holy Scriptures on my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and every word" (Hyatt, *George Whitefield*, 12).

For his sermons, he did not rely on testimonies or feel-good anecdotal stories. His preaching was biblical and Christ-centered. He would take a passage of Scripture, such as the healing of blind Bartimaeus, the faith of Abraham in offering up Isaac or the Parable of the 10 Virgins, and expound on it.

No matter which passage he used, he always made application to mankind's lost condition and Jesus Christ as the only remedy for sin and the only way to be reconciled to God.

Recognizing the risk of oversimplifying the matter, Whitefield's message can, I believe, be divided into three distinct categories.

1. The dire condition of fallen, sinful humanity, separated from God and deserving of eternal damnation.
2. The wondrous mercy and grace of God shown toward sinful humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
3. The necessity of a new birth, and the inadequacy of baptism, church membership and all religious externals in which people have placed their hope.

Humanity's Fallen Condition

Whitefield emphasized the truth of humanity's sinfulness and lostness outside of Christ. Benjamin Franklin mentioned this in his *Autobiography*, telling how he was surprised that the people so admired and respected Whitefield despite the fact that "he commonly abused them, assuring them they were no more than half-devils and half-beasts" (Hyatt, *George Whitefield*, 51).

When this author first read this statement of Franklin, I assumed he was using hyperbole in speaking of Whitefield's preaching on the sinful condition of fallen humanity. However,

in a later reading of Whitefield's sermons, I discovered that Franklin was accurately describing Whitefield's message.

Preaching from the steps of the Philadelphia courthouse to a massive crowd that included Franklin and the leading citizens of that city. Whitfield did not hold back, but in stark terms, and a bit of hyperbole, painted a very unflattering picture of the fallen state of humanity. As the huge crowd stood and listened in rapt silence, Whitefield's passionate and melodious voice pierced the atmosphere:

But let these modern, polite gentlemen, and my letter-learned brethren, paint man [humanity] in as lovely colors as they please; I will not do it; I dare not make him less than the word of God does. If I was to paint man in his proper colors, I must go to the kingdom of hell for a copy; for man is by nature full of pride, subtlety, malice, envy, revenge and all un-charitableness; and what are these but the temper of the devil? And lust, sensuality, pleasure, these are the tempers of the beast. Thus, my brethren, man is half a beast and half a devil (Hyatt, George Whitefield, 51-52).

Modern ears, use to being tickled with "feel-good" anecdotal soundbites, will react to such preaching. Nonetheless, in light of the cultural corruption we are seeing all around, mankind's fallen state is a biblical truth that must be reconsidered.

Whitefield understood that humanity had been created a noble creature in the image and likeness of God. He also understood that the image had been marred by the fall and sin as described in Genesis 3. He is here describing, with some hyperbole, the awful condition of mankind in his fallen state, separated from God.

It has been said that the gospel is not really "good news" until we hear and understand the "bad news." Whitefield was a master at painting the bad news for his audiences, but he was

just as adept at presenting the good news of God's love and grace for humanity. The contrast had a powerful effect on his audiences.

God's Wondrous Love Revealed in Jesus Christ

After showing their lost, natural state, Whitefield always proceeded to point his audience to Jesus Christ alone as God's answer for mankind's dilemma. He made much of the wondrous grace and mercy shown to mankind through Jesus Christ. The contrast with mankind's rebellious and sinful state provided a stunning comparison, and Whitefield often wept as he talked of the stupendous love and grace of God in coming to this world in the person of Jesus Christ.

In preaching to one large outdoor audience on Abraham's offering up of Isaac, Whitefield had the crowd in tears as he described the love of Abraham for his son, and the emotions he must have experienced in binding his son and laying him on the altar. He then exhorted,

I see your hearts affected; I see your eyes weep. But behold I show you a mystery, hid under the sacrifice of Abraham's only son, which, unless your hearts are hardened, must cause you to weep tears of love. How much more ought you to extol, magnify, and adore the love of God, who so loved the world, as to give His only begotten Son, Christ Jesus our Lord. May we not well cry out, "Now know we, O Lord, that you have loved us, since you have not withheld your Son, your only Son from us."

Oh, stupendous love! While we were His enemies, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that He might become a curse for us. Oh, the freeness, as well as the infinity, of the love of God our Father! It is unsearchable: I am lost in contemplating it; it is past finding out! (Hyatt, George Whitefield, 53)

The Necessity of a New Birth

Whitefield emphasized that many professing Christians had built their faith on faulty foundations, such as church membership, good deeds, family pedigree, social status and cultural refinement. He emphasized that these old foundations must be overturned and faith in Jesus Christ alone must be laid as the only foundation for acceptance with God.

He brought this vividly to the minds of a large audience as he preached on the Parable of the 10 Virgins from Matthew 25:1-13. He pointed out that all 10 were virgins, and all had lamps, which he said symbolized their outward profession. Only the five wise virgins, however, had oil in their lamps, which Whitefield said symbolized a new heart brought about by a living faith in Christ alone. He told of the five foolish virgins knocking at the door of the wedding but being turned away by the Lord.

“Lord, Lord,” say they, as though they were intimately acquainted with the holy Jesus. Like numbers among us who, because they go to church, repeat their creeds, and receive the blessed sacrament, think they have a right to call Jesus their Savior and dare call God their Father, when they put up the Lord’s Prayer. But Jesus is not your Savior. The devil, not God, is your father, unless your hearts are purified by faith and you are born again from above. It is not merely being baptized with water, but being born again of the Holy Ghost that must qualify you for salvation; and it will do you no service at that great day, to say unto Christ, “Lord, my name is in the register of such and such parish.” I am persuaded the foolish virgins could say this and more (Hyatt, *George Whitefield*, 54-55).

The Message Impacted America’s Founding

The Message of Whitefield and the Great Awakening transformed the culture of colonial America because it was the Gospel

message infused with God's power. No less a figure than Benjamin Franklin testified to this transformation. Profanity, immorality and drunkenness almost completely disappeared in some areas, and entire towns and villages were transformed.

New England alone saw 30,000 to 40,000 new converts and 150 new congregations. People lived to do good and missionary and humanitarian enterprises were spawned. Colleges such as Princeton, Columbia and Hampden-Sydney were established to equip ministers for the new congregations.

All of America's founders, to one degree or another, were impacted by the First Great Awakening. Concerning Whitefield's final visit to America in 1770, historian Benjamin Hart, wrote:

The true Spirit of Christ had dissolved sectarian differences. America considered itself to be a nation of Christians, pure and simple, as Whitefield noted with satisfaction. "Pulpits, hearts and affections," he said, were opened to him and any preacher of whatever denomination who had a true Christian message to share (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 109).

The Message Will Bring Cultural Change

It has been the gospel message that has changed American culture again and again and saved her from ruin. This was confirmed by a visitor whom I believe was Alexis de Tocqueville. Although the quote below is not found in his writings, it has been historically attributed to him and has the Tocqueville feel and sound. It most likely originated in one of the many speeches he gave.

Tocqueville, a young French sociologist, came to America in 1831 to study her institutions to see if he could discover how America had attained such greatness in such a short period of time. He came on the heels of the Second Great Awakening that

had just transformed American culture and saved her from the negative influences of deism and the French Revolution.

After describing his search for America's greatness in her great commercial centers, her political institutions, and her educational systems, he said, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 178).

May the pulpits of America once again flame with righteousness by recovering the message of Jesus, the New Testament and the Great Awakening.