

What America's Spiritual History Reveals About Our Future

America today seems hopelessly divided along political, cultural, religious and moral fault lines. The hatred and animosity are at a level unseen in my lifetime, and I lived through the 1960s with its assassinations, race riots, and a very unpopular war that provoked widespread protests.

Only two times in history has America been as divided as it is today: 1) At the time of the Civil War and 2) the early 1700s before the Great Awakening in the 13 colonies. The answer for both situations was the same.

In this essay, I will address how the 13 divided colonies became the United States of America.

The Deep Divisions of Colonial America

Most do not realize the deep divisions that existed in colonial America between the Anglicans who settled Virginia, the Puritans who settled New England, the Baptists who settled Rhode Island, the Quakers who settled Pennsylvania and so on.

In the Old World, Anglicans (as the state church) had imprisoned Puritans, even putting some to death. They had also persecuted Baptists and Quakers. In the New World, Puritans had persecuted Quakers and Baptists, banning them from their colony and even putting some to death. Anglicans in Virginia jailed Baptist preachers who came into their colony to preach the gospel. Baptists and Quakers did not get along and considered Puritans and Anglicans to be part of the false, harlot church of Revelation.

It seemed that these groups could never reconcile. Their

history was too long and their pain too deep. God, however, had an answer. His answer was a great, spiritual awakening based on the preaching of the gospel wherein Jesus was presented as the central object of faith.

God's Instrument for Change

God's instrument to ignite this Awakening and carry the revival flame from Georgia to New Hampshire was a 23-year-old Oxford graduate who had just been ordained with the Anglican Church. At Oxford, George Whitefield had been part of the Holy Club (Methodists) and had experienced a radical conversion to Jesus Christ. After his ordination, he ignited great revival in England while John and Charles Wesley were away on a mission to Georgia.

Although ordained with the Anglican Church, Whitefield did not have a denominational bone in his body. He freely fellowshiped with all true believers, including Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and any who honored God and confessed Jesus Christ as the true Lord of the Church.

Whitefield came to America on his first of seven visits in 1738. He came with a burden for the colonists and a prayer that they would not live as 13 scattered colonies, but as "one nation under God." (Hyatt, *George Whitefield*, 27).

His impact on America was astounding. Most of his meetings were in the open air because there were no buildings large enough to accommodate the thousands who came to hear him. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin tells of the incredible change that came over his hometown of Philadelphia when Whitefield came there on his second of seven visits to America. He wrote:

In 1739 there arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitfield who made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of

speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers. 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 without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street (Hyatt, George Whitefield, 32).

Although accounts of his meetings often describe the multitudes as standing and listening in rapt silence, accounts also reveal intense emotional responses at times, as things eternal were made real to their hearts and minds. On one occasion, after preaching to a huge throng gathered outdoors, Whitfield surveyed the crowd and noted the amazing response. He wrote in his *Journal*,

Look where I would, most were drowned in tears. Some were struck pale as death, others wringing their hands, others lying on the ground, others sinking into the arms of their friends and most lifting up their eyes to heaven and crying out to God (Hyatt, George Whitefield, 35).

Whitefield Confronts the Divisions

Whitefield addressed the divisions of the colonists head-on. In one of his sermons, for example, as he was preaching in the open air to several thousand, representing various sects and denominations, he pretended to converse with Father Abraham, whom he pictured as looking over the banister of heaven at the gathered multitude.

Whitefield cried out, "Father Abraham, are there any Anglicans in heaven?"

The answer came back, "No, there are no Anglicans in heaven."

"Father Abraham, are there any Puritans in heaven?"

"No, there are no Puritans in heaven."

"Are there any Methodists in heaven?"

"No, there are no Methodists here either."

"What about Baptists or Quakers?"

"No, there are none of those here either."

"Father Abraham," cried Whitefield, "What kind of people are in heaven?"

The answer came back, "There are only Christians in heaven, only those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb."

Whitefield then cried out, "Oh, is that the case? Then God help me, God help us all, to forget having names and to become Christians in deed and in truth!" (Hyatt, *George Whitefield*, 34).

Sectarian Walls are Broken Down

In Boston, when the population was around 17,000, an estimated crowd of 20,000 gathered on the Boston Common to hear Whitfield preach. Differences were melted, denominational walls were broken down and for the first time, the colonists began to see themselves as a single people with one divine destiny, "One Nation Under God," as Whitfield had prayed.

By his incessant travels, Whitefield made the Great Awakening America's first national event. It was the first time the scattered colonists of various denominational and theological persuasions had participated together as one people in a single event.

Historian, Benjamin Hart, points out that when Whitefield visited America for the final time in 1770, even the Episcopal (Anglican) churches, which had initially rejected him, opened their doors to him. He goes on to say,

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, *George Whitefield*, 59).

The late Harvard professor, Perry Miller, surely had Whitefield in mind when he wrote, "The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was a direct result of the preaching of the evangelists of the Great Awakening." Through Whitefield's ministry, the divided colonies of America became the United States of America.

We Hold the Key

In Ephesians 2:14, Paul says of Jesus, "For He is our peace, who has made both groups one and has broken down the barrier of the dividing wall." For Paul, the greatest gulf in first century humanity was the one between Jew and Gentile. He was convinced, however, that Jesus, and only Him, could span that gulf and bring the two together.

This is what brought the divided 13 colonies together—the Christ-centered preaching of Whitefield and others of the Great Awakening. This happened to such an extent that a British-appointed governor in Connecticut wrote to his superiors in England, "If you ask an American who is his master, he will tell you he has none, nor any governor but Jesus Christ" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 119).

We, as the church, hold the only message that can restore civility and harmony to this nation. We, therefore, must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the anti-Christian rhetoric of the modern world.

Be bold. Preach Jesus. And pray for the rain of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon this nation. {eoa}

*This article is derived from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt's** latest book, George Whitefield, available from Amazon and his website at . Eddie is the creator of the "America's Reawakening," a PowerPoint presentation in which he has documented America's birth out of prayer and spiritual awakening. For information on bringing this informative, inspiring presentation to your city, contact him at dreddiehyatt@.*