

How You Can Help Heal a Deeply Divided America

The young 25-year-old Methodist preacher and revivalist George Whitefield arrived in America in 1738 with a prayer on his heart that the inhabitants of this land would “No longer live as 13 divided Colonies but as One Nation under God.” He was very aware of the deep lines of division and hatred that ran between the various groups, but he was hopeful that he would see those lines erased as he preached the message God had given him for 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.

Back in England, the Anglican Church, as the official state church, had harassed and imprisoned Puritans, Baptists and Quakers, even putting some to death. In Virginia, the Anglicans made their church the “official” church of the colony and jailed Baptist preachers who ventured there to preach. Puritans detested Anglicans because of how they had been treated, but they persecuted both Quakers and Baptists: evicting them from their colony, jailing them and even putting some to death. Baptists and Quakers did not get along and considered Puritans and Anglicans to be apostate Christians and part of the false, harlot church of Revelation.

It seemed these groups could never reconcile. Their history was too long and their pain too deep. God, however, had an answer: a great spiritual awakening based on the preaching of the gospel wherein Jesus was presented as the central object of faith.

Whitefield Confronts the Divisions

Whitefield had an oratorical gift that attracted thousands to his open-air meetings. In Philadelphia, he preached from the steps of the courthouse to crowds estimated at 10,000-12,000 at a time when the population of Philadelphia was around 13,000. According to Benjamin Franklin, the impact on the city was transformative. He wrote:

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, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 79).

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 thousands 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.

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

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

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"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, what kind of people are in heaven?" Whitefield cried.

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 labels and to become Christians in deed and in truth" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 80-81)!

Sectarian Walls Are Broken Down

Under the preaching of the gospel and a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, differences were melted and denominational walls were broken down. For the first time, the divided 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, 87-88).

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

If we are to see a deeply divided modern America saved, it must begin with those who name the name of Christ. The promise of a national healing in 2 Chronicles 7:14 puts the responsibility squarely on our shoulders by listing certain conditions that are to be carried out by God's people. The passage begins by saying, "If My people, who are called by My name."

In John 17:21, Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers, "'that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in us, so *that the world may believe that You sent Me.*'" (author's emphasis). If there is to be any healing of the political, cultural and ideological divisions in America, there must first be a healing of the deep divisions that exist in Christendom.

This does not mean we will all form one institution or organization. That has never been God's plan. His plan is diversity but within a unity that is centered in Him. We will keep our distinctive labels as Baptist or Presbyterian or Assembly of God, but our primary label will be that of Christian-followers of Christ.

This happened in Colonial America through the preaching of Whitefield and others 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, 81).

What You Can Do

Be bold in your Christ-centered faith as you reach across denominational, racial and cultural lines. Without compromising truth, show love to those who hold different doctrines and attend different churches than you. Don't waste your time with those who merely want to argue, but be willing to have a dialogue with those who are teachable and willing to listen. And in the midst of it all, ask God to pour out His Spirit, as promised in Acts 2:17, that another Great Awakening may roll across the land like a giant tsunami wave.

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This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book, "1726: The Year that Defined America," available from Amazon and his website at . For information on bringing his informative, inspiring "Save America" presentation to your city, contact him at dreddiehyatt@.