

Why It's Crucial for the Church to Rewrite Our Cultural Narrative

The American church would not need to seek influence and power at the ballot box if it already held influence and power in society. But it seems the American church has lost the influence it once held—a loss, according to Pastor Jon Tyson, that is directly related to its inability to tell culture-shaping stories. The stories people tell drive narratives—in their community, in their city and in their country. So why has the church of Jesus Christ—the greatest storyteller in human history—ceded ground?

Tyson, who pastors Church of the City New York in New York City, says Christians have ignored or bought into cultural stories rather than advancing the kingdom story.

“Narratives are so hard to discern, because in our culture, we only talk about story,” Tyson explains. “But story is a scene of a larger narrative goal. So we often talk about the power of stories, but stories lack context. The people who shape our culture are those who have a dominant narrative that they reinforce with individual stories. We’re often blind to the ways that narratives are being changed, because we’re not paying attention to what the individual stories are reinforcing. Christians are often very sophomoric in their understanding [of narrative], because they put out stories that are generic and random—neither subverting nor changing the larger cultural narratives—whereas our society starts with narrative and reinforces it with good story.”

So what does it mean to tell stories centered on the gospel? In his new book, *Beautiful Resistance*, Tyson says the kingdom narrative must begin with the things that mattered most to

Jesus—love, mercy, justice and faithfulness—rather than cultural hot topics. Otherwise, Christians are no different than the Pharisees of Matthew 23.

“Rather than starting with the Bible and God’s truth and theology, we start with cultural issues, and we get them out of order,” Tyson says. “There’s a way of practicing our faith that is out of order with what Jesus Himself declared to be the more important matters of the law. As a result, we end up getting drawn into debates about things that are not ordered the way Jesus would order them, and we lose tremendous credibility.”

Tyson says, in many ways, the church can be blind to cultural idols like mammon, which makes us disregard the poor, or celebrities and politicians it can functionally worship. But the news is far from all bad. Tyson sees a window for revival. Secularism is failing millions. The old narratives are revealing themselves to be empty and hollow. If the church can return to telling stories from a kingdom narrative, the result could be a full-on national awakening.

So what narrative does the story of Jon Tyson advance? He spoke with *Charisma* about his own testimony, the miracles he’s witnessing in New York City and the true definition of “revival.”

Environment of Expectation

Tyson says the first step to changing the narrative is to center God’s presence and to foster an expectation of encounter with God and pursuit of the gifts of the Spirit.

“It’s the difference between God’s omnipresence and manifest presence,” he says. “We have to create environments that actually facilitate an encounter with the living God. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul says when the prophetic is working well in the church, the unbeliever will come in, the secrets of the heart will be exposed, and they’ll fall on their face and say,

‘Surely God is among them.’ And that is my testimony.”

Tyson, who grew up in Australia, says he remembers having zero desire for the things of God as a teenager. At the time, he would have described himself as “a classic cool romanticist, trying to just live a rich aesthetic life of wonder and meaning.” Today, he describes his younger self as “sort of a junior hedonist.” But that changed when he met a group of young people from what is now called Influencers Church in Adelaide, South Australia.

“[They] were more passionate about God than I was about life, and I was completely intrigued by their passion,” Tyson says. “I met people who loved something more than I did, and I just couldn’t comprehend that it was Jesus. I started attending their youth group, and I remember being both repulsed and drawn at the same time. I remember consciously thinking, I could never feel about God the way these people feel about God, but I’m in awe of how much they feel something.”

He showed up to church early one week and stumbled onto the pre-service prayer meeting. All the attendees were walking around speaking in tongues, and Tyson almost called it quits then and there. “Oh, this is a cult,” he thought.

Six months later, he was leading that prayer meeting.

“I didn’t become a Christian just because I believe theology,” he says. “I became a Christian because I encountered the living God at a youth group. And then I immediately felt, I want to serve God with my whole life. If this is true, I want to give it everything I’ve got.”

He says it’s a lesson the church would do well to heed as we pray for the Holy Spirit to bring awakening and change society. The church needs to focus on personal holiness, creating an openness to the gifts of the Spirit and a hunger for the manifest presence of God—elements that truly differentiate the church from the hollow secular world.

“In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is quoting a passage in Zechariah 8 that Jonathan Edwards says is the closest descriptor of what it’s like to experience revival,” Tyson says. “It says at that time, 10 Gentiles will grab the hem of the robe of one Jew and say, ‘Let us go up to Jerusalem with you, for we have heard that God is surely among you.’ So Paul, in referencing the fulfillment of that prophecy, is saying that creating space for the prophetic and the supernatural in church is part of the fulfillment that nonbelievers will find.”

Call to America

Shortly after his conversion, Tyson moved to the U.S. to study theology at Toccoa Falls College in Toccoa, Georgia. He had been working as a butcher in a meat factory, but he felt God calling him to go into ministry instead.

“I just prayed and prayed, ‘God open a door for me to serve you in the United States,’” he says. “I just felt a supernatural call to come to America. I felt in many ways that the future of the Western church was going to be hashed out in the U.S.”

Tyson first came to New York City following 9/11 to visit Brooklyn Tabernacle after reading Jim Cymbala’s *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. He came to see the church’s prayer culture up close, but when he saw the city, he fell in love. Four years later, he paid off his debts, sold his house and moved to New York to found the Church of the City New York.

In the years since, he says his original feeling as a teenager—that the U.S. would be central to the future of the Western world—has been validated.

“Think about the way that right now we are seeing protests around the world [against racial injustice] about an event that happened on a street in Minnesota,” Tyson says. “The world is still rallying around an American event. I felt that sense of importance then.”

But for all its importance, the U.S. church has fallen short in a few key aspects. And Tyson says the charismatic church in America is not immune to the failings of America as a whole.

“A great exercise for any congregation would be, if Jesus wrote a letter to our church, what would He affirm?” Tyson asks. “What would He rebuke? And then how do we, out of that place of repentance and integrity, move into the world on mission? ... It’s a lot easier to deal with the demons out there than the ones in here.”

Tyson could think of three areas where Jesus would likely rebuke the American church. He says the most important challenge facing today’s church is to restore credibility. Public failings and hypocrisy have weakened belief in the church’s moral authority.

“In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul basically says, ‘It’s not my job to condemn the world,’” Tyson says. “He said, ‘It is my job to make sure that the church is holy.’ The reason the church has so little authority in culture is because we are not the alternative community Jesus has in mind. ... The reason the church is seen as a tool of oppression and hypocrisy is because so many of our leaders rage against cultural trends and forces while secretly practicing the very things they are condemning. Whether this is abusive power dynamics, financial scandals or sexual scandals, we must start by being people of integrity. ... But we often started with cultural causes rather than integrity within the body of Christ.”

Second, Tyson believes the charismatic church needs to embrace both Word and Spirit streams, rather than parroting phrases such as “Theology robs you of anointing.” He understands it’s a response to many mainline denominations that have ignored the gifts of the Spirit, but for too many churches, the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction.

“We’re always creating false dichotomies ... but I think that

the charismatic church has the opportunity to bridge those two things,” Tyson says. “It’s holding the both-and in tension. It’s Word and Spirit. The apostle Paul could preach to Greek culture at a sophisticated, scholarly level. He could refute any heresy and build Christological theology. And he could also raise people from the dead! That level of cultural engagement, theological depth and supernatural power—that’s the history of the charismatic church, and that’s what it should be.”

Third, Tyson believes the charismatic church in the U.S. often honors anointing and gifting more than personal character. But personal failings cannot be swept under the rug because of a leader’s prophetic ability or rousing sermons. After all, Tyson notes, “We know that did not work out well for David in the end.”

“Often we give people a pass because they’re gifted or God’s hand is on them,” he says. “[We need to see] deep, deep repentance like Josiah, who burned the bones of the false priests so that they couldn’t even go back generationally and rediscover sinful patterns. We need generational sin-breaking repentance.”

Invitation to Revival

But for all its weaknesses, Tyson says he is encouraged by how the Holy Spirit is moving in his church and in other American churches. He describes a “radical culture of intercession and seeking God” that has developed within his congregation, where atheists and “the least likely people” are accepting salvation in Christ.

“People have traditionally thought of New York as a dark and secular place,” he says. “But there’s a lot of churches growing very, very quickly. We’re getting more and more encounters of God’s manifest presence, like the actual presence of God showing up in meetings. It’s sort of hard to

articulate. I would describe it as like a wave of the presence of God coming into the room. I actually feel these physical manifestations. It feels like I'm in the sea being lifted up, or I feel like a wave of God's presence going through my body. And then you'd read these accounts of revivals, and that was language they would use, like 'a wave of God's love would fill the meeting.'"

Tyson hopes it's a precursor for revival. He describes himself as very passionate about revival, so much so that he took his family on a tour around the world to visit sites of some of the greatest outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

"Revival is the deepest cry of my heart," he says.

So deep, in fact, that Tyson points out that many Christians misuse the term "revival," which has a specific meaning.

"I think 'awakening' and 'revival' are sometimes used synonymously, [but] they're different terms," Tyson says. "Often what we call revival is actually renewal. Renewal, like the charismatic renewal of the '70s, brought back to the church something that was missing. Renewals often have an emphasis on restoration of a missing doctrine, practice or theology. So the charismatic renewal basically said to the church, 'The Holy Spirit wants to be back in the midst of His people, and He wants His gifts to manifest.' I basically think that most of what we call revival is actually the equivalent of blessing or renewal. ... We often talk about revival, but what we mean by that is a series of meetings where miracles happen. That's more of a renewal than necessarily a revival. Now, you won't see a historic revival without manifestations, signs and wonders. I'm not separating them whatsoever. But revivals are not just marked by signs and wonders."

Instead, he says, revival refers to an internal movement within the church, during which the Holy Spirit moves and accomplishes things much faster than usual.

“Revival is marked by radical repentance and the quickening of the church,” Tyson says. “It’s primarily an internal reality that happens inside the church. It is a dead or declining church coming back to radical life. ... Jonathan Edwards said revival’s an acceleration of the normal work of the Holy Spirit. That means what happens in two years happens in two days. Think about how many people normally come to Christ over two years, and then that happens in two days. Think about how slowly change happens in society, and then think of 10 years happening in 10 weeks. That feels so dramatic because we get drips and drops of it now. But when the tap comes on, that’s when it causes an outpouring.”

The third important term, Tyson says, is “awakening.” This word refers to a spiritual movement that results in massive societal change: “Awakening to me is what happens when an awakened church facilitates the presence of God coming into a region that transforms the society. ... I think Duncan Campbell said that if the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a believer being filled with the Holy Spirit, awakening is a community being filled with the Holy Spirit.”

To that end, a spiritual awakening in America—which would likely be preceded by renewal and revival—would lead to such a radical transformation and reorientation of society that even the most hardened atheist could not deny God’s power at work. God’s manifest presence would be felt not only in churches but everywhere.

“If revival came to America, the church would look fundamentally different in terms of its repentance, its holiness and its power,” Tyson says. “If a spiritual awakening came to America, I believe we would see what happened in the cities of Ephesus and Antioch: multitudes turning to the Lord, radical racial reconciliation and healing, a decrease in crime. There would be a tangible zone of the manifest presence of God. I don’t know how to say it besides like a ‘glory portal,’ where you would just say, ‘God is here.’ ... We would

see the person of Jesus being a topic of fascination in every part of society. You would see self-help sections and New Age sections disappear and bookstores filled with books about Jesus and God's Word. You would see a different emphasis in public education. Media would be transformed. It would basically catalyze a different kind of society. That's certainly what happened historically, particularly in genuine outpourings like what Finney experienced in Rochester, New York. They said you could feel the effects in the morality of the city 40 years later."

So does Tyson believe the U.S. is on the verge of a revival, one that could spread into a national and even international awakening? The answer is complicated. He says God has extended the invitation, but it's up to the church to receive it.

"Are we on the cusp of [revival]?" Tyson says. "I don't know. Are we being invited into one? Yes, definitely. There's an invitation for a move of God. I believe there's an open window for the church to press in like never before. The question is whether we will press in and take it. I believe the door and window are open with a divine invitation."

Tyson describes this season as a Hosea 10 moment for the church. In that passage, the prophet calls Israel to repent of idolatry and "break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until He comes and rains righteousness upon you" (v. 12b).

"Will we do the hard work?" Tyson says. "Will we seek Him until He comes and showers rain on us? I don't know. The invitation is there. In Hosea, this is a moment where Israel is going to go one of two ways. They're either going to repent and return to God, or they're going to be basically removed from redemptive history. They chose not to, in that case. But in our case, I believe there's a great invitation to the American church to enter into a window of repentance and the radical pursuit of God that could possibly usher awakening

in.”

Tyson pauses to consider his next words. How will this chapter in the story of the American church end?

After a few seconds, he concludes: “Here’s what it is: We’re in a moment of destiny. We’re in a valley of decision. And how we respond to that is to be determined.”

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