

416 Years Later, Is the Next Great Awakening Near?

It was April 29, 1607. Around 100 weary Englishmen disembarked at Cape Henry, Virginia after a four-month voyage across the Atlantic.

Their first act was to gather around a seven-foot oak cross they had brought from England to pray and dedicate the land of their new home to God. During the dedicatory prayer, their chaplain, Rev. Robert Hunt, suddenly declared, "From these very shores the gospel will go forth, not only to this New World, but to all the world" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 37).

Thirteen years later in 1620, the Pilgrims arrived in New England also with a missionary vision. The common belief that they were fleeing persecution is only one side of the coin. There was also a proactive vision that was pulling them forward. In the Mayflower Compact they clearly stated that they had come to the New World for two reasons: (1) the glory of God and (2) the advancement of the Christian faith.

Twenty-three years later, in 1643, with thousands of new immigrants having settled in New England and new towns having sprung up, the United Colonies of New England was formed. They too had a missionary vision. In the opening of their constitution, they clearly stated why they had all come to this land. They said:

"Whereas we all came into these parts of America with one and the same end and aim, namely, to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and enjoy the Liberties of the Gospel in purity and peace" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 31).

This missionary vision deepened as a result of the Great

Awakening (1726-70) and became a part of the American psyche, profoundly impacting America's founding generation. America's founders, even the most nonreligious ones, envisioned this being a land of religious liberty from which the gospel would go forth to the ends of the earth, just as Hunt had declared.

In 1756, for example, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to George Whitefield, the most famous preacher of the Great Awakening, proposing that they partner together in founding a new colony on the American frontier in the area of present day Ohio. Franklin included a missionary reason for founding the new colony, saying:

"Might it not greatly facilitate the introduction of pure religion among the heathen, if we could, by such a colony, show them a better sample of Christians than they commonly see" (Hyatt, "1726:The Year that Defined America," 137).

George Washington also had a missionary vision. This is made clear in a prayer journal he kept in his 20s. One entry reads, "Bless, O Lord, the whole race of mankind, and let the world be filled with the knowledge of Thee and Thy Son, Jesus Christ" (Hyatt, "1726:The Year that Defined America," 132).

His missionary vision was also obvious in a 1779 meeting with chiefs from the Delaware American Indian tribe. The chiefs were seeking greater cooperation with the new American government and had brought some of their youth to be trained in American schools. Washington cordially greeted them, calling them "brothers," and then said, "You do well to wish to learn our arts and our ways of life and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ." (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 172).

Thomas Jefferson closed all official documents with the caption, "In the Year of Our Lord, Christ." As president, he negotiated a federal treaty with the Kaskaskia Native American tribe, which made federal funds available to pay for a

Christian missionary to work with the tribe and for the building of a Christian church in which they would worship. Jefferson also said:

"Of all the systems of morality that have come under my observation, none appear so pure to me as that of Jesus" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 150).

John Hancock served as president of the Continental Congress and his signature on the Declaration of Independence is the largest and most prominent. He too had a passion for missions. While serving as governor of Massachusetts, he proclaimed a Day of Prayer in which he exhorted the people to pray for:

"The spreading of the true religion of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, in its purity and power, among all the people of the earth" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 173).

In the 19th century, the passion for evangelism and missions mushroomed and America became the greatest missionary-sending nation in the history of Christendom. Many missionary societies were formed for the sole purpose of sending out both home and foreign missionaries. In his *Autobiography*, the famous evangelist, Charles G. Finney, tells how he was initially sent forth to labor for souls by a "Female Missionary Society."

The French sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited America in 1831 and was astounded by the passion for missions he saw everywhere. He wrote:

"I have known of societies formed by the Americans to send out ministers of the Gospel in the new Western states, to found schools and churches there, lest religion should be suffered to die away in those remote settlements, and the rising states be less fitted to enjoy free institutions than the people from whom they came" (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 167).

The 19th century became known as “The Great Century of Protestant Missions” as many thousands of missionaries went forth into all the world. This passion for missions was so prevalent that it caught the attention of the nation’s highest court.

In the 1892 ruling, *Church of the Holy Trinity vs The United States*, the nation’s highest court declared America to be a “Christian nation.” Among the reasons listed for their conclusion, was the missionary vision that permeated the nation’s churches and the nation itself. They wrote:

“The gigantic missionary associations, with general support, and aiming to establish Christian missions in every quarter of the globe. These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation” (Hyatt, “1726: The Year that Defined America,” 170).

It seems clear that God raised up America to be a place from which His word would flow forth to the ends of the earth. I wonder, however, if we have lost our *raison d’être*. Has a me-centered gospel diverted us from our calling to take the gospel to all creation? Has the Great Commission become the Great Omission of the American Church?

Yes, 416 years ago, on the windswept shores of Cape Henry, a small group of immigrants birthed a great missionary vision for a new nation. My prayer is that God will send another Great Awakening across this land that will revive the sleeping churches and reawaken the missionary vision that has been such a vital part of this nation’s history. {eo}

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birth out of a great, spiritual awakening.