

America's Pentecost

By Robert Bakke



Hopeless? Is our nation's current situation beyond fixing? Hardly. We've been here before.

Among the first and greatest national experiences of the United States was a massive spiritual awakening in the face of overwhelming problems. Consider these dire challenges that faced our nation preceding perhaps the greatest movement of God in our nation's history

Economic Disaster and Plagues

The tragic after-effects of eight years of the War of Independence with England were profound. The 1790s were years of grave national doubts. We faced the enormous pressures of two superpowers on our borders (France and England) and the constant threat of war.

We teetered on the edge of national bankruptcy, exacerbated by a banking crisis and a real estate speculation bubble that burst. Without the English navy, the U.S. had terrible trouble with pirates interrupting our trade. Twenty percent of our annual national budget went to pay off Muslim pirates in North Africa, and the French and English were taking our ships in the North Atlantic.

Plagues were killing thousands of our citizens. The Capitol

was moved from Philadelphia to Trenton, NJ, each spring to escape the banks of the Delaware River, thought to be the source of illness there. The nation also teetered on the verge of famine because of diseases in crops.

Political Unrest and Empty Churches

The editorial pages and cartoons were among the most vicious in American history. Political rancor was fed by newspapers essentially owned by the political parties—rancor highlighted by a duel between two prominent political figures, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. The famous duel left Hamilton dead.

The nastiest presidential election in U.S. history between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson was thought by many to be a political struggle for the soul and future of America. Many Christians were convinced that Jefferson was the antichrist.

An anti-Christian French Enlightenment was sweeping through the intelligentsia (affecting publishing, schools, and government). Worries about the “Reign of Terror” caused fear of French terror cells. There was political unrest and riots in our cities. Federal troops were called on to quell anarchy.

Universalism was sweeping away established churches, and most churches were empty. Pastors wrote that these were the worst times they ever could have imagined. Others wrote of a “coarse sensuality” and intense partisanship in the land. Irreligion was rampant on college campuses. In fact, on certain campuses, Bibles were publicly burned. At major schools only a handful of students confessed being Christian.

A Spiritual Explosion

What happened? The pastors began a movement of prayer. It was small at first, but it grew. After years of seeking God, in 1801 a spiritual explosion took place that swept our nation like a wildfire. Vanderbilt University historian Paul Conkin calls it “America’s Pentecost.” Mark Noll, a historian

specializing in the history of Christianity in the U.S., insists it was our nation's most important religious moment that changed the course of history.

Hundreds of denominations were born and thousands of churches were founded. Modern missions exploded on the scene, as well as tract and Bible societies. Abolition was launched. Hospitals, schools, and colleges were founded. The awakening infiltrated every area of life and it spun out for nearly 50 years. The impact on our nation and around the world was astounding.

In the midst of similar problems today, we pray with hope and confidence. We have seen the glory of Christ before.

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