

How Prayer Played a Prominent Role in the Birthing of America

As he was preparing to leave home as a young soldier, George Washington's mother, Mary Ball Washington, exhorted him, "Remember that God is our only sure trust." She also urged him, "My son, neglect not the duty of secret prayer" (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 131).

The evidence is overwhelming that Washington remembered and carried out his mother's exhortations. It is obvious that prayer played a prominent role in his life and in the birthing of the United States of America.

Prayer as a Young Man

In April of 1891, several of Washington's descendants, including Lawrence Washington, Bushrod Washington and Thomas B. Washington, sold a collection of his personal items at auction in Philadelphia. Among the items was a little book filled with daily prayers in Washington's own handwriting, written when he was in his twenties.

Entitled "Daily Sacrifice," these prayers are deeply devotional and evangelical in nature. For example, the first entry reads, in part:

"Let my heart, therefore, gracious God, be so affected with the glory and majesty of Thine honor that I may not do my own works, but wait on Thee, and discharge those duties which Thou requirest of me."

His prayer from the following Monday morning reads:

"Direct my thoughts, words and work, wash away my sins in the immaculate blood of the Lamb, and purge my heart by Thy Holy

Spirit ... daily frame me more and more in the likeness of Thy Son Jesus Christ."

Also of note is his prayer:

"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).

Prayer in Time of War

It is obvious that Washington continued to be a person of prayer. For example, after accepting the call of the Continental Congress to serve as commander-in-chief of the colonial army, one of his first actions was to issue an order that each day was to begin with prayer led by the officers of each unit. He also ordered that each soldier, unless their duties required them to be elsewhere, was to observe "a punctual attendance of Divine services, to implore the blessing of heaven upon the means used for our safety and public defense."

That Washington himself was a person of prayer in his private life was confirmed by Isaac Potts, who lived near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where the American army was quartering under much duress during the winter of 1774-75. Potts was a Quaker and a pacifist who opposed the war until he had a life-changing experience while riding through the woods one day during perhaps the bleakest period of the war. He said:

"I heard a plaintive sound as of a man at prayer. I tied my horse to a sapling and went quietly into the woods and to my astonishment I saw the great George Washington on his knees alone, with his sword on one side and his cocked hat on the other. He was at Prayer to the God of the Armies, beseeching to interpose with his Divine aid, as it was ye Crisis, and the cause of the country, of humanity and of the world. Such a prayer I never heard from the lips of man. I left him alone praying. I went home and told my wife I saw a sight and heard

today what I never saw or heard before, and just related to her what I had seen and heard and observed. We never thought a man could be a soldier and a Christian, but if there is one in the world, it is Washington” (Hyatt, 1726: The Year that Defined America, 115-116).

Washington’s Earnest Prayer for the New Nation

Washington prevailed in prayer. Against overwhelming odds, the ragtag colonial army defeated the mighty British war machine. The British general Cornwallis surrendered his entire army to Washington on October 19, 1781.

Having completed his mission, Washington issued a letter of resignation as commander-in-chief to the Continental Congress. He then wrote what could be described as a pastoral letter, dated June 14, 1783, to the governors of the various states. This letter included his “earnest prayer” that is here quoted in part. He wrote:

“I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection; that he would incline the hearts of the citizens ... to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another ... and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of His example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation” (Hyatt, 1726: The Year that Defined America, 120).

President Washington Prays

After being sworn in as the nation’s first president with his hand on a Bible, Washington presented his first inaugural address, which was filled with references to God. After the ceremony, held in New York City, Washington and Congress proceeded to St. Paul’s chapel, where they participated in a prayer and worship service.

Shortly after assuming the presidency, Washington proclaimed a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving. In the proclamation, he gave the reason for the Day of Prayer, saying:

“That we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the Great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national sins and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all people, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed” (Hyatt, 1726:*The Year that Defined America*, 134).

Praying to the Very End

That Washington continued to be devout in his latter years was confirmed by his nephew Robert Lewis, who lived with Washington and served as his private secretary during the first part of his presidency. Lewis said he had accidentally witnessed Washington’s private devotions in his library both morning and evening. On those occasions he saw Washington kneeling with a Bible open before him. Lewis understood this to be Washington’s daily practice.

Mason Locke Weems (1759-1825), who wrote the first biography of Washington after his death, says that he died with a prayer on his lips. Describing Washington’s passing, Weems says, “He closes his eyes with his own hands, folds his arms decently on his breast, and then breathing out, ‘Father of mercies, take me to Thyself,’ he falls asleep.”

An Example to Follow

Yes, our first president was unashamedly a devout person of prayer. There is no question that his prayer life played a primary role in the birthing of America. Modern presidents and politicians would be wise to follow his example. {eoa}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book 1726: The Year that Defined America, available from Amazon and his website at .