

# How the First Great Awakening Shaped Our Nation

Benjamin Franklin, along with Thomas Jefferson, is usually considered the most irreligious of America's Founding Fathers. If Franklin, however, were in Washington, D.C. today he would stand out for his strong religious beliefs and conservative political views. He would be pro-life, pro-traditional marriage and would advocate for prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. So far has our nation moved from its Christian origins that this most liberal, irreligious Founder would today stand out for his conservatism.

## His Early Life & Indiscretions

Franklin was born in Boston in 1706 into a hard working Protestant family that had Puritan influences on both sides of the family. In fact, Franklin's critics have derisively referred to his *Autobiography*, written later in life, as "little else than a Puritan document—a religious tract—for the justification of thrift and other Puritan qualities."

At the age of 17 Franklin ran away from home and settled further south in Philadelphia. In his early life he engaged in inappropriate behavior such as fathering an illegitimate son and his common law marriage to Deborah Read. But in his *Autobiography* he describes himself as being at that time "under no religious restraint," clearly indicating that "religious restraints" later became a governing force in his life.

Being a voracious reader Franklin, as a young man, also entertained the views of Deism. Deists, while not denying the existence of God, insisted that God was not involved in human affairs. They also denied the Deity of Jesus Christ. For the Deist, God was like the clockmaker who made a clock, wound it up and left it to run on its own.

His Deistic views, however, also changed with time. This was attributable, no doubt, to his Puritan upbringing and also to his exposure to the Great Awakening and his friendship with the Awakening's most famous preacher, George Whitefield (1714-1770).

## Franklin Participates in the Great Awakening

When Whitefield arrived in Philadelphia for the first time in 1739, Franklin was already established as a successful printer and one of the city's leading citizens. Philadelphia, as was generally true of colonial America at the time, was spiritually indifferent and vice and immorality was running rampant. Some ministers had issued calls for prayer and fasting, but until now little evidence of answered prayer had been seen. This was all about to change.

Franklin was astounded at what transpired through Whitefield's preaching. No building in Philadelphia was large enough to accommodate the thousands that flocked to hear him preach, and he was forced to preach outdoors. The meetings were nonsectarian and in his *Autobiography* Franklin wrote, "The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous."

The city was transformed and Franklin described the change as "wonderful." From his *Autobiography*, it sounds as if he was in regular attendance at all the meetings. He had never seen anything like it, and wrote;

It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. 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."

### **His Friendship with George Whitefield**

On this, his first visit to Philadelphia, Whitefield reached out and introduced himself to Franklin who was eight years his senior. This proved to be the beginning of a long friendship that lasted until Whitefield's death 31 years later. In later visits, Whitefield would even stay in Franklin's home when visiting Philadelphia.

Whitefield hired Franklin to print and distribute his *Sermons* and *Journals* and Franklin took on the task with enthusiasm. Franklin also advised Whitefield in business matters related to his ministry, such as the advertisement and distribution of his *Sermons* and the establishment of an orphanage in Georgia. He also contributed financially to Whitefield's ministry.

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin refers to Whitefield as "a perfectly honest man" and describes their friendship as being

“sincere on both sides, which lasted till his death.” It is obvious that, in spite of their differences, their friendship ran deep. It is also obvious that the friendship had a deep and lasting impact on Franklin and led to a transformation of his views about God and the Bible.

In his *Autobiography* Franklin says that Whitefield often prayed for his conversion but did not live to see his prayers answered. Even so, there is evidence to suggest that Whitefield’s prayers were eventually answered and that Franklin did come to know in a personal way the Savior that Whitefield so often spoke to him about.

### **Evidence of Change**

It is known, for example, that Franklin became an avid reader of the Bible and would often quote Scripture in his conversations. He became a life-long member of the Presbyterian Church and financially supported that church until his death.

On one occasion, when he learned that his daughter had stopped attending church because of a personal dislike of the minister, Franklin wrote her a letter in which he exhorted her on “the necessity and duty of attending church.” Being ever the philosopher, he then said, “Pure water is often found to have come through very dirty earth.”

Franklin came to believe the teachings of Jesus—whom he sought to emulate—to be a necessary and positive force in society and a restraint on evil in the world. That is why when Thomas Paine sent him a manuscript copy of *The Age of Reason* in which he attacked historic Christianity, Franklin wrote him a letter in which he defended orthodox Christianity and urged Paine not to print his manuscript, saying;

I would advise you, therefore . . . to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of regret and repentance. If men are so wicked with religion [Christianity], what would they be if without it.

After a voyage to England in 1757, during which the ship

almost crashed into a small, rocky island in the Atlantic at midnight, the first thing Franklin did upon reaching shore was to seek out a church and offer up thanksgiving to God. In a letter to his wife, he wrote, "The bell ringing for church, we went thither immediately and with hearts full of gratitude, returned sincere thanks to God for the mercies we had received."

Whether Franklin ever embraced all the tenets of orthodox Christianity is still debated. What is not in question is the fact that Franklin believed Christianity to be a positive force in society, which is why he recommended that it be taught in the public schools of Pennsylvania. Franklin would be appalled at modern attempts to remove expressions of Christianity from the public arena.

### **Franklin Calls the Constitutional Convention to Prayer**

On June 28, 1787, seventeen years after Whitefield's death, Franklin was attending the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia as one of the delegates. Much regional disagreement had surfaced and the convention was about to be suspended because of unresolved strife and dissension. It was at this critical moment that Franklin, now 81 years of age, rose to his feet, and addressed the Convention President, George Washington, with these words:

How has it happened, sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly appealing to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible to danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard and they were graciously answered. I have lived, sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings that *except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it*. I firmly believe this. I therefore beg leave to move that, henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessing on our deliberation be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business.

According to those present, “An atmosphere of reconciliation seemed to settle over the convention hall.” Petty grievances and local interests were laid aside, and the delegates went on to complete their task of formulating the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. I think Whitefield must have smiled, and all of heaven with him!

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The words in his call to prayer show that Franklin had discarded his Deistic views for Deists did not believe that God “governs in the affairs of men” and prayer for them would be meaningless. The impact of his Puritan upbringing, his exposure to the Great Awakening and Whitefield’s personal friendship are all obvious here in Franklin’s words and actions.

If Franklin was America’s most irreligious Founder, what does that say for most politicians in Washington, D.C. today? If Franklin was the most irreligious of our Founders, then it shows how far our nation has fallen and how desperate we are for another Great Awakening in our land.

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