

# Why Prayer Is as American as Baseball and Apple Pie

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The Continental Congress, out of which came our Declaration of Independence, began each day with prayer, led by their chaplain, Rev Jacob Duche. The completion and publication of the Declaration was crowned with an impassioned prayer by Rev. Duche that was recorded in the official proceedings of the Congress. Rev. Duche ended his prayer, "in the name and through the merits of Jesus Christ Thy Son and our Savior."

This is not surprising, for belief in the power of prayer was already an American tradition going back to the very first immigrants to this land. The Pilgrims and their descendants in New England were people of prayer and had a habit of setting aside special days for prayer and thanksgiving to God. The Quakers, who founded Philadelphia, where the Congress assembled, were also people who believed in the power of prayer.

## **The Declaration Birthed in Prayer**

It is therefore no great surprise that when the First Continental Congress convened on Sept. 5, 1774, it opened with Bible reading and prayer. With British troops occupying Boston and having closed the Boston port, this was no formal prayer ritual, but a sincere lifting of their hearts to God, asking for His assistance and intervention in their fight for liberty. It was at this time that Duche was first invited to lead them in prayer.

John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, of the impact of the Bible reading and prayer on the delegates. He wrote,

"Who can realize the emotions with which they turned

imploringly to heaven for divine interposition and aid. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. I never saw a greater effect upon an audience. It seems as if heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that day. I saw tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave, pacific Quakers of Philadelphia. I must beg you to read that Psalm" (Hyatt, *1726: The Year that Defined America*, 108).

Prayer continued to be a daily part of the proceedings of the Continental Congresses. When, years later, Benjamin Franklin called the delegates of the Constitutional Convention to prayer, he reminded them, "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" (Hyatt, *1726: The Year that Defined America*, 141).

It was in this atmosphere of prayer that Thomas Jefferson was chosen to draft a document declaring the independence of the 13 American colonies. A select committee of five, including Benjamin Franklin, was chosen to assist him in its creation. The completed document was read publicly for the first time on July 4, 1776.

The Declaration of Independence anchors individual rights, not in any human institution or government, but in God.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men [people] are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Jefferson, Franklin and the other founding fathers understood human rights to have a transcendent source, that being, God Himself. They and their forebears knew what it was like to have their rights given and taken at the whim of a monarch, pope or bishop. In this new nation, therefore, they were determined to put the rights of the individual in a place legally beyond human reach. Government, they insisted, did not

exist to give or take rights, but instead, to protect those rights already given by God.

## **References to God in the Declaration**

Three names for God drawn directly from the Judeo-Christian tradition were used in the Declaration. They are “Creator,” “Supreme Judge” and “Divine Providence.” They did not use Christian, redemptive words in the document, such as “Savior” or “Redeemer,” for they were aware that they were formulating, not a statement of faith for a church, but the founding document for a nation.

The appeal to “the laws of nature and Nature’s God” has been commonly considered an ambiguous reference to deity rooted in the Enlightenment (1715–1789). That is not necessarily so. The “laws of nature” referred to those rational, self-evident truths that can be ascertained by observing God’s creation, including human nature. “Nature’s God” is the Creator of all nature and natural laws.

Even a fiery, evangelical revivalist like Whitefield was known to use the term, “Nature’s God.” He did so, for example, in a sermon describing the earthquake and the darkening of the sun at the time of Christ’s death, declaring, “See how all nature is in agony ... as it were to see the God of nature suffer” (Hyatt, *1726: The Year that Defined America*, 110).

The use of the word “Providence” is especially interesting, for it was commonly used as a synonym for the God of the Bible in the 18th century, even by ministers. It was not, as some have suggested, a generic, impersonal reference to deity. Even a fiery revivalist such as Whitefield often used it in referring to God.

“Providence” is a word that expresses faith in God as the one who is superintending the course of history and who is overruling even the actions of evil men to bring about His plan and purpose. John Witherspoon (1723–1794), a member of

the Continental Congress, preached a sermon entitled *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men*, less than two months before signing the Declaration.

Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister was president of the College of New Jersey, which is now Princeton University. In this 1776 sermon on Providence, he emphasized the necessity of believing that God would bring good out of the evil situation of the day; that is, that the ambition of mistaken princes and the cruelty of oppressive rulers would finally promote the glory of God. This is Providence.

The final paragraph of the Declaration shows that this was the faith of the founders, for in it, they express their trust in God for His providential protection and support in their momentous act. It reads,

“And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”  
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This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, *1776: The Year that Defined America*, available from Amazon and his website at .