

The Christianity of George Washington

Laurence A. Justice

The single most famous American who ever lived is George Washington. Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, President of the Constitutional Convention, unanimously chosen first President of the United States by the electoral college, unanimously chosen by them to a second term and, even after refusing to run for a third term, he received two votes in the electoral college. The United States' capital city is named for him. There is a state named for him as well as large numbers of schools. Washington's face is sculpted into the hills of South Dakota. His likeness is found on our postage stamps, our quarters, and our dollar bills. Richard Henry Lee said that Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen" and when Washington died Congress officially endorsed this statement.

Washington's fame is not limited to his own country but was and is recognized around the world. Statues of him stand in London, Paris, Rio, Caracas Buenos Aires, Budapest, and Tokyo. Lord Byron the English poet called Washington, "the first, the last, the Cincinnatus of the west." Cincinnatus was a patriot who led Rome in a time of great crisis and then retired to his farm. Simon Bolivar, one of Latin America's greatest heroes so revered Washington that he wore a gold medallion of Washington around his neck and said when he became leader of his own country that he wanted to be the kind of president that George Washington was.

A very important dimension of Washington's greatness was his personal religion that for some reason most historians today have chosen to almost totally ignore. Let us consider briefly this essential aspect of the life and character of George Washington. Let us consider the Christianity of George Washington.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S PERSONAL RELIGION

In looking at both the personal papers and public remarks of George Washington it is obvious that this man was a deeply religious, Bible believing Christian who tried to live his life by the teachings of the Word of God. An early reference by Washington to his own religion was in a letter to his brother following a battle in the French and Indian War. He was just twenty-three years old at the time and he stated that he recognized that not luck nor blind fate but the providence of God had brought him safely through this terrible battle. "By the all powerful dispensations of Providence I have been protected...for I had four bullets through my coat and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, though death was leveling my companions all around me."

Washington was a man who resorted to prayer to God in times of distress and crisis. The picture of Washington kneeling in prayer in the snows of Valley Forge is indelibly fixed in the minds of most Americans of the older generation today.

George Washington was a member of the Anglican Church, which after the revolution was called the Episcopal Church. The particular church of which he was a member was located in Alexandria, Virginia. His pastor, Lee Marsy, said that even when company came to Washington's house on Sunday mornings, he never let this keep him from attending church. One of Mr. Washington's best friends in the Continental Army was John Gano the Baptist Chaplain who was also pastor of the First Baptist Church of New York City.

George Washington's life exemplified the Christian virtues of courage, honesty, hard work, patriotism, self-sacrifice, purity and faith in God. At the point of his moral character some modern revisionist historians are, for whatever reasons, seeking to slander this great American hero, implying that Washington had an immoral love affair with one Sally Fairfax. The fact is that there is not one shred of evidence to support any immoral affair in Washington's life.

George Washington believed in a personal God who holds men accountable for their sins and who sent His Son Jesus Christ to atone for those sins by His substitutionary death on the cross. In his will Washington said,, "Being truly sorry from the bottom of my heart for my past sins, most humbly desiring forgiveness of the same from the Almighty, my Savior and Redeemer in whom and by the merits of Jesus Christ, I trust and believe assuredly to be saved and to have full remission and forgiveness of all my sins."

Washington left instructions that the epitaph over his tomb should be the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life...". This wish of Washington was carried out and if today you visit his tomb at Mt. Vernon, which I had the privilege of doing twice, you will see these words of the Lord Jesus inscribed on the crypt.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S PRAYER BOOK

Washington's Christianity can be plainly seen by looking at the pages of his private prayer dairy. This prayer book has come down to us in Washington's own handwriting and in it we are given some very personal glimpses of the Christianity of George Washington. The first entry in Washington's prayer diary begins, "Sunday Morning" and then he proceeds, "Almighty God and most merciful Father, who didst command the children of Israel to offer a daily sacrifice to Thee that thereby they might glorify and praise Thee for thy protection both by night and day...I beseech Thee, my sins, remove them from Thy presence, as far as the east is from the west, and accept me for the merits of Thy Son Jesus Christ...Let my heart therefore gracious God, be so affected with the glory and majesty of (Thine honor) that I may not do mine own works, but wait on Thee in my prayers. So give me grace to hear Thee calling me in thy word, that it may be wisdom, righteousness, reconciliation, and peace to the saving of my soul in the day of the Lord Jesus."

An evening entry in this prayer diary reads, "O most glorious in Jesus Christ...I acknowledge and confess my faults, in the weak and imperfect performance of the duties

of this day, I have called on Thee for pardon and forgiveness of sins, but so coldly and carelessly that my prayers are become my sin and stand in need of pardon. I have heard thy holy word but with such deadness of spirit that I have been an unprofitable and forgetful hearer...Let me live according to those holy rules which Thou hast this day prescribed in thy holy word...Direct me to the true object, Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life.”

Other excerpts from this prayer diary include such statements as, “Direct my thoughts, words and work, wash away my sins in the immaculate Blood of the Lamb.” “Daily frame me more and more in the likeness of Thy Son Jesus Christ.” “Bless all my friends, forgive my enemies and accept my thanksgiving...for all the mercies and favors afforded me...”

One other prayer to God penned by Washington in his prayer diary reads like this, “Thou gavest Thy Son to die for me; and Thou hast given me assurance of salvation, upon my repentance and sincerely endeavoring to conform my life to His holy precepts and example.”

GEORGE WASHINGTON’S VIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Washington did not believe in the modern humanist view that religion must be absolutely separate from government and politics. He believed that civil government cannot succeed without recognition of God and obedience to the Bible.

When he was asked to take command of the Continental Army, Washington would only accept the job on the condition that congress appoint and finance chaplains for his troops. He knew that his army could not succeed without divine guidance. While Commander-In-Chief of the Continental Army, Washington issued this order, “The General requires and expects of all officers and soldiers...a punctual attendance on divine service, to implore the blessings of Heaven on the means used for our safety and defence.” Washington sometimes even conducted religious services in the army himself.

Washington’s statement that, “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible” is just as true today as it was in his day. In the nation’s first Thanksgiving Day proclamation, Washington said in 1789, “It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly implore his protection and favor.” On March 11, 1792, President Washington said, “I am sure that never was there a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that agency which was so often manifested in the revolution.”

Someone has well said that “...Washington both embodied and knew the direct connection between Christianity and morality and morality and the preservation of liberty.” In his “Farewell Address”, Washington said that “Of all the dispositions and

habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” On April 30, 1789, Washington said “...the propitious smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.”

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” says the first amendment to the United States Constitution. George Washington would, no doubt, be aghast at the way this sentence in the Bill of Rights has been perverted today to teach, not the separation of church and state but the separation of religion from the state and even the separation of God from the state.

CONCLUSION

What an incalculable blessing George Washington has been to the life and the government of our America! Without George Washington’s Christianity America would never have been what it is. Washington’s Christianity molded his character and conduct and Washington’s character and conduct molded America into the great and noble nation that she still is. I would close by reading a verse from a poem by Walter E. Isenhour entitled “A Mighty Washington.”

We need a mighty Washington as President today
Who’s not ashamed of Christ the Lord
And meek enough to pray;
Who loves religious freedom more
Than power, name, or gold
Who has convictions for the right
And grace to make him bold.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bailey, Olive. *Christmas With the Washingtons*. Richmond, Virginia: Dietz Press, 1948.

Graves, Bill. "A Tribute to George Washington" *The Oklahoma Constitution*, Winter, 1990.

Hart, Ben. *Faith and Freedom*. Dallas, Texas: Lewis & Stanley Publishers, 1990.

Human Events. "George Washington's Quiet Devotion" December 31, 1988.

The Last Will and Testament Of George Washington. Mt. Vernon Ladies Association, 1939.

Marshall, John. *The Life of George Washington*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: James Criss, 1836.

Schroeder, John Frederick. *Maxims of Washington*. Mt. Vernon Ladies Association, 1974.

Time. "Washington's Baptism" *Religious Section*, September 5, 1932.

Val Till, John. "Washington's Life Needed No Myths" *Human Events*, February 24, 1979.

Washington's Farewell Address. Edited by Robert Gaston. Boston, Mass.: Ginn and Co., 1906.

Washington, John. "George Washington: A Religious Man" *Human Events*, February 14 1987.