

Were The Signers Of The Declaration Of Independence Just A Bunch Of Deists?

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FIRST-PERSON: Were the signers just a bunch of deists?
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Note from Pastor Kevin: Although the Christian hope is for "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven" it has been an unparalleled blessing to millions who have lived in America since its founding. It was the God fearing wisdom given to us by our founding fathers that has allowed this special time in human history. The very thing they were most concerned about, the inherent evil in the heart of man, has been slowly working to destroy the foundation the founders established. But we can be thankful to these men who pledged to each other their Lives, their Fortunes and their sacred Honor in order to give us a country where we could love and worship the Lord Jesus Christ in freedom.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--If you listen to the historical revisionists, the signers of the Declaration of Independence were mostly agnostics and atheists, but if they had any religious inclinations, it was toward deism. Deism is the belief that God is a detached deity; He created the world, but He no longer intervenes in the affairs of men. So there's no need to pray or rely on "divine Providence." But wait a minute, isn't that what they said in the Declaration -- "with a firm reliance upon divine Providence"?

In fact, if you carefully read the document the signers drafted and approved, you will find that they pointed to God no less than four times:

-- "[T]he Laws of Nature and of Nature's God...."

-- "[A]ll Men are created equal ... they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...."

-- "[A]ppealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions...."

-- "[W]ith a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Our nation's founding document was more than a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain; it was a Declaration of Dependence upon Almighty God.

Some secular fundamentalists might protest: "What about the men themselves? Weren't they mostly deists, agnostics or atheists?" Let's examine some of their words and deeds, and then be your own judge.

Why not start with the committee charged with drafting the Declaration? These five men were Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston. Let me admit up front that two of the most unorthodox Founding Fathers from a Christian perspective were Jefferson and Franklin. If we had to put a religious designation on them, it wouldn't be deist, but probably Unitarian. In other words, both believed in a God who was providentially active in human affairs, but they didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus. Yet both promoted biblical Christianity for the new nation.

Thomas Jefferson was 33 years old when he wrote the first draft of the Declaration. He was raised as an Episcopalian, but came to disbelieve the divinity of Christ and the miracles of the Bible. He even produced his own New Testament with those miracle sections edited out. However, when he was appointed as a member of a committee to draft a seal for the newly formed United States that would capture the spirit of this new nation, Jefferson proposed a rendering of the children of Israel being led by God in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. When Jefferson became president, he authored the plan of education for the District of Columbia's public schools, which included these two textbooks: The Bible and Isaac Watts' "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs" (1707). Jefferson also closed his presidential documents with the phrase, "In the year of our Lord Christ; by the President; Thomas Jefferson."

Furthermore, he faithfully attended church services in the U. S. Capitol building, and even provided the worship service with a government paid orchestra. When the services grew too large, he began similar Christian services in his own Executive Branch, both at the Treasury building and at the War office. The ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State would be particularly troubled by President Jefferson's statement: "No nation has ever existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man and I, as chief magistrate of this nation, am bound to give it the sanction of my example."

What about Benjamin Franklin? Well, Ben Franklin was raised as a Presbyterian, but never became a Christian and experienced several moral failures. Yet he was supportive of biblical Christianity. In fact, Franklin

regularly attended worship at Christ Church in Philadelphia along with many of the Founding Fathers. In July of 1776, Franklin was also appointed to the same committee along with Jefferson to draft a national seal. He proposed a rendering of "Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters," and having this motto: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

Franklin loved George Whitefield, the Great Awakening preacher. In the last letter Franklin wrote to Whitefield, he expressed a desire to join up with him: "I sometimes wish, that you and I were jointly employ'd by the Crown to settle a colony on the Ohio.... Might it not greatly facilitate the introduction of pure religion among the heathen, if we could, by such a colony, show them a better sample of Christians than they commonly see in our Indian traders?" He dreamed of working with George Whitefield to demonstrate authentic Christianity!

It was Ben Franklin, the eldest member of the committee drafting our Constitution, who chided the delegates because they had not submitted their plans for a new government to God: "In the beginning of the contest with G. Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for Divine protection – our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor.

"To that kind Providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance? 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'* [Psalm 127:1a]. I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and bye word down to future ages....

"I therefore beg leave to move -- that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven, and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service."

Here was probably the least religious of the Founding Fathers calling for

prayer and quoting Scripture. Some said it was the turning point of the Constitutional Convention. Well, so much for the least religious members of the Declaration committee. What about the other members?

You have heard of John Adams, the nation's second president. Yet he is also referred to as a deist or an agnostic or an atheist. However, consider his words as he reflected on the foundations of our nation in a letter to Thomas Jefferson some 40 years after helping him draft and then sign the Declaration. John Adams stated in that letter: "The general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were ... the general principles of Christianity.... Now I will avow that I then believed, and now believe, that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God." The general principles upon which our nation was founded, said John Adams, were the general principles of Christianity. He doesn't sound much like a deist, agnostic, or atheist to me.

What about Roger Sherman? He was distinguished as the only Founding Father to sign all four major founding documents: The Articles of Association, 1774; The Declaration of Independence, 1776; The Articles of Confederation, 1777; and The Constitution of the United States, 1787. He also was there for the debate on the Bill of Rights guaranteeing among other things our religious freedom. He seconded Franklin's motion that Congress have a chaplain lead prayer, and supported Elias Boudinot's motion to have a national day of Thanksgiving to God when the amendments to the Constitution passed.

As a member of the White Haven Congregational Church, Roger Sherman was asked to use his expertise in revising the wording of the congregation's statement of faith, which states in part: "I believe that God ... did send his own Son to become man, die in the room and stead of sinners and thus to lay a foundation for the offer of pardon and salvation to all mankind, so as all may be saved who are willing to accept the gospel offer." Sherman even preached on occasion. One of his sermons was titled: "A Short Sermon on the Duty of Self-Examination Preparatory to Receiving the Lord's Supper." Sherman also faithfully served as a deacon as well as church clerk and treasurer. The epitaph on his tombstone reads: "He ever adorned the profession of Christianity which he made in youth; and, distinguished through life for public usefulness, died in the prospect of a blessed immortality."

Robert Livingston was the final member of the Declaration committee. A graduate of King's College (Columbia University), Livingston helped draft, but for some unknown reason, did not sign the Declaration. Yet he is also described as a "sincere and devoted Christian."

In fact, of the 56 signers of the Declaration, about half were educated in

schools established for the purpose of training ministers for the Gospel, and thus received degrees from what many today would consider seminaries. Several of the Founders also served as ministers, chaplains or were active in Christian service.

After our Founding Fathers approved the Declaration of Independence on July 2, John Hancock and Charles Thomson signed it to make it legal on July 4th. John Adams proposed that when America's future citizens celebrated the Declaration of Independence, it ought to be done by recognizing God. He wrote his wife, Abigail, that the day should be "celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever."

This week we celebrate the 230th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When you celebrate, remember the words of John Adams and thank God for the blessings of liberty we enjoy in America, and for those 56 men who not only declared their independence from Great Britain, but their dependence upon Almighty God. Not bad for a bunch of "deists, agnostics and atheists," huh?

