

Call for Prayers at the Convention

Benjamin Franklin

June 28, 1787

Franklin's call for prayers at the Constitutional Convention reflects his conviction that God intervenes in the affairs of men. The proposal makes no mention of particular creeds, but invites any available member of the clergy to officiate before the start of each morning's deliberations. Though the appeal went unheeded, the practice has since been taken up by the U.S. Congress.

Mr. President,

The small progress we have made after four or five weeks close attendance and continual reasonings with each other—our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many *noes* as *ayes*, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to *feel* our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Government, and examined the different forms of those Republics which having been formed with the seeds

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of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have viewed Modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our circumstances.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the 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 that 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 labour in vain that build it.” 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

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of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and by word down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest.

I therefore beg leave to move: that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings 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.

Letter to Ezra Stiles

Benjamin Franklin
Philadelphia March 9, 1790

In addition to his description of the core philosophical principles of every sound religion, Franklin takes special note of the moral and theological teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. These, he says, are likely to be the best the world will ever see. He expresses doubts as to the divinity of Christ, but does not press the point. Whether true or not, the widespread belief probably makes the teachings of Jesus more respected and better observed.

Reverend and Dear Sir,

I received your kind Letter of Jany 28, and am glad you have at length received the Portraits of Govr Yale from his Family, and deposited it in the College Library. He was a great and good Man, and has the Merit of doing infinite Service to your Country by his Munificence to that Institution. The Honour you propose doing me by placing in the same Room with his, is much too great for my Deserts; but you always had a Partiality for me, and to that it must be ascribed. I am however too much obliged to Yale College, the first

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learned Society that took Notice of me, and adorned me with its Honours, to refuse a Request that comes from it thro' so esteemed a Friend. But I do not think any one of the Portraits you mention as in my Possession worthy of the Place and Company you propose to place it in. You have an excellent Artist lately arrived. If he will undertake to make one for you, I shall chearfully pay the Expence: But he must not long delay setting about it, or I may slip thro' his Fingers, for I am now in my 85th Year's and very infirm.

I send with this a very learned Work, (as it seems to me) on the antient Samaritan Coins, lately printed in Spain, and at least curious for the Beauty of the Impression. Please to accept it for your College Library. I have subscribed for the Encyclopedia now printing here, with the Intention of presenting it to the College; I shall probably depart before the Work is finished, but shall leave Directions for its Continuance to the End. With this you will receive some of the first Numbers.

You desire to know something of my Religion. It is the first time I have been questioned upon it: But I do not take your Curiosity amiss, and shall endeavour in a few Words to gratify it. Here is my Creed: I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of

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all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them.

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity: tho' it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm however in its being believed, if that Belief has the good Consequence as probably it has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed, especially as I do not perceive that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Believers, in his Government of the World, with any particular Marks of his Displeasure.

I shall only add respecting myself, that having experienced the Goodness of that Being, in conducting me prosperously thro' a long Life, I have no doubt of its Continuance in the next, tho' without the smallest Conceit of meriting such Goodness. My Sentiments in this Head you will see in the Copy of an old Letter enclosed, which I wrote in answer to one from a zealous Religionist whom I had relieved in a paralytic Case by Electricity, and who being afraid I should grow proud upon it, sent me his serious, tho' rather impertinent, Cautions. I send you also the Copy of another Letter, which will shew something of my Dis-

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position relating to Religion. With great and sincere Esteem and Affection, I am, Dear Sir, Your obliged old Friend and most obedient humble Servant

P.S. Had not your College some Present of Books from the King of France? Please to let me know if you had an Expectation given you of more, and the Nature of that Expectation. I have a Reason for the Enquiry. (I confide, that you will not expose me to Criticism and Censure by publishing any part of this Communication to you. I have ever let others enjoy their religious Sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me insupportable and even absurd. All Sects here, and we have a great Variety, have experienced my Good will in assisting them with Subscriptions for building their new Places of Worship, and as I have never opposed any of their Doctrines I hope to go out of the World in Peace with them all.)