

**Benjamin Franklin Asks for Prayer**  
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Benjamin Franklin is widely regarded as an atheist, or at most a deist, when the topic of the religion embraced by the founding fathers comes up. Only God knows the true beliefs of any person. Deism, for those not familiar with it, is the concept that God exists and created the universe, but takes no interest in the affairs of mankind; that God is completely impersonal and uninterested in the fate of His creation.

I will relate a short debate in the Continental Congress in which Franklin discusses his beliefs, not because I have any interest in advancing any theory about Franklin, but because it runs so contrary to what is commonly taught about him. The members of the Convention had spent many days arguing about how the states would be represented in Congress; in fine, how the small states could guard themselves against the expected predations of the larger states, and how all the states could guard themselves against the national government. They were not making much headway. By late Jun 1787, they had agreed to two branches of a national legislature, but could not come to terms with how they should be constituted or how representation therein was to be allocated. On 28 Jun 1787, Dr. Franklin gave a short speech in Convention that sparked a debate on the usefulness of daily prayer. No such thing can be tolerated today in our public offices. But here is the incorrigible Benjamin Franklin [1].

"Dr. Franklin. 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 formed with the seeds 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 no 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 the 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 labor 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 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 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 war, conquest, and chance.

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 two or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service."

There followed a short debate, in which the proposition was not brought to a vote, and as far as I know, never adopted. Now, (only God knows) maybe old Ben was as cynical as they come, hoping the religious types would be pacified by prayers every morning that would serve to soften them up and make them

more willing to give up their rights to the sensible atheists. Maybe (only God knows), he was a true Christian, that is, personal belief in the saving work of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Maybe he was somewhere in between. But let's admit, given what we have been told these many years about Franklin's alleged dim view of Christianity, he made a speech that would get him kicked out of most schools, legislatures, and courthouses today.

[1] Jonathan Elliot, *Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution in the Convention held at Philadelphia in 1787; With a Diary of the Debates of the Congress of the Confederation; As Reported by James Madison*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1881, Vol. 5, pp. 253, 254.