

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

February 2010

www.excelsiorclassical.org

"I Believe George Washington Was a Christian" by Peter Lillback

Paul Boller wrote, "Broadly speaking, of course, Washington can be classified as a Deist."1 Most recent scholars have followed this perspective: "A luke-warm Episcopalian,"2 a "warm Deist,"3 "not a deeply religious man,"4 "not particularly ardent in his faith,"5 "one who avoided as was the Deist custom, the word 'God.'"6

Nevertheless, Washington's description of his faith is different, repeatedly using words like "ardent," "fervent," "pious," and "devout." In fact, he described himself as one of the deepest men of faith of his day when he confessed to a clergyman, "No Man has a more perfect Reliance on the alwise, and powerful dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid more necessary."7

Rather than avoid the word "God," on the first national Thanksgiving under the U.S. Constitution, he wrote, "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 to implore his protection and favor."8 Although he never claimed to be a "Deist" in his voluminous writings, he often mentioned religion, Christianity, and the Gospel. He spoke of Christ as "the divine Author of our blessed religion." He encouraged missionaries who were seeking to "Christianize" the "aboriginals." He wrote in a private letter, "on my honor and the faith of a Christian." He publically wrote of "the blessed religion revealed in the Word of God." He encouraged seekers to learn "the religion of Jesus Christ." He even said to his soldiers, "To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian." Not bad for a "luke-warm" Episcopalian!

Arguments for Washington's Unbelief

Clearly, Washington's faith has been denied by recent scholars. The scholarly consensus since the Washington bicentennial in 1932 is that he was a Deist,

Returning Applications

Returning applications will be send out in the next few weeks, so you can start thinking about what classes you would like to teach next year. The deadline will be March 15 as this is when we started accepting new student applications.

TeenPact Mississippi

February 22-25

TeenPact Mississippi is designed for homeschoolers ages 13-18. If you are interested in having your children learn civics hands-on instead of from a textbook, you must attend this meeting. TeenPact teaches the foundations of government with the legislative branch, beginning with a four-day session at the capitol.

The civics course offer an incredible platform for rhetoric, interpersonal communication, and current events, and is sufficient for a 1/3 high school Carnegie credit.

Spiritually, TeenPact teaches Biblical principles of government and family, going hand-in-hand with the values of families who participate.

The cost for the week is \$220 for first-time students, \$180 for returning students. Housing will be provided free of charge for the first 47 registrants at Camp Garaywa in Clinton, MS. We hope to defray the expense with our fundraisers. Anyone interested in these funds should contact Shelley Crampton.

For more information see www.teenpact.com or contact Shelley Crampton at 840-1923; scrampton@afo.net.

a non-religious person who believes in a remote and impersonal God. But when the evidence is considered, is it clear that Washington was a Deist? Typically, the evidence employed to substantiate Washington's deism includes: he avoided the name of Jesus Christ; he used Deist titles for the name of God; he never seriously referred to the Bible; he was a Mason; he was a slave owner; he had an alleged tryst with Sally Fairfax, a married woman. A careful study, however, shows these arguments fail to remove the legitimacy of Washington's faith.

Washington venerated the name of Jesus Christ, using it thousands of times in worship, although rarely doing so in his commonplace writings. Yet this practice is consistent with Christians to this day. Washington's titles for deity are not those of Deists as claimed. Instead, they are the terms of the orthodox clergy of his day—some 95 different ones in all—and names that Deists did not use.

Moreover, Washington was Biblically literate, referring to the Bible from Genesis to Revelation hundreds of times. He even publically endorsed an evangelical study Bible.

The bylaws of the Masonic Order of Washington's day prohibited "stupid atheists and deists" from being members! For Washington to have been a Mason then was actually an evidence of being a Christian, not of being an unbeliever!

Tragically, Washington was a slave-owner. Yet he alone of all of our Founders who held slaves had the courage to advocate the abolition of slavery and to provide for their manumission and support in his will.

Washington's relationship with Sally Fairfax reveals his emotions were moved at a vulnerable point in his young military life, but their honor remained unsullied, and his friendship with the Fairfax family was never tarnished.

In sum, to prove a vital faith does not require perfection, a standard needed only for a hagiography. Instead, a vital faith

demands an authenticity of faith and character over the course of a life. So while Washington was not perfect, he was a man consistently concerned about faith, character and honor, referring to them hundreds of times.

Kindly - The Crane

Field Trip: American Village
3727 Highway 119 S Montevallo, AL 35115
(205) 665-9995

Monday, April 19th 9:00am-12:15pm - They requested that we please arrive promptly. It will take approximately 3 1/2 hours to get to the Village from Tupelo. If anyone is interested in carpooling, send a group-wide e-mail letting everyone know.

Lunch will follow the program. Each family may choose to bring a packed lunch, or order a boxed lunch from Subway, which will be delivered to the American Village. The cost of the Subway lunch is \$5.00 and includes your choice of sandwich (ham, turkey or veggie), a bag of chips and a cookie. A drink is not included with the Subway lunch. You may bring your own from home, or purchase a drink for \$0.75 at the Village.

I am thinking we should be ready to leave the Village between 1:00 and 1:30, allowing most of us to be home around 5:00. If your family has Monday afternoon/night activities and needs to get home earlier, you will be free to leave following the program, which ends around 12:15. The cost is \$9.00 for everyone over 4 years of age - students and adults. Children 4 and under are free. One adult is admitted free with every twenty students. We will prorate this and spread the savings to each family. It won't be much, but every little bit helps.

If you have not done so, please RSVP to Connie Ramsey - 489-5120 (H) 419-8467 (C).

Here is the link to the American Village website. It contains lots of information about the Village, photos, directions and some educational materials:
<http://www.americavillage.org/>

Arguments for Washington's Christian Faith

The evidence of Washington's religious life reveals a vast array of data that substantiates Washington's vital life of faith.

1. Washington's family was explicitly Christian and actively Anglican. His childhood education was conducted under Anglican tutors.
2. His military career was framed by morning and evening prayers following the Christian "divine service" of the Book of Common Prayer. Washington's military vocabulary manifested Christian theological terms: pardon, redemption, atonement, grace, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, justification, imputation of guilt, appeal to heaven.
3. He married a devout Christian and trained their adopted children under Anglican clergy, buying them Christian text books, prayer books, and Bibles. Martha and their adopted grandchildren affirmed that Washington was a Christian.
4. He governed in the Anglican Church, taking vows to its Christian worship and doctrines. His attendance, contributions, and involvement in issues concerning church government and religion in the House of Burgesses were exemplary. His ecclesiastical vocabulary was extensive.
5. He sponsored eight children for Christian baptism, something that Thomas Jefferson would not do. Jefferson's Unitarianism prevented him from taking the required vows to the Christian faith. Washington did not hesitate to take these Christian vows.
6. He encouraged the clergy and chaplains as a military, ecclesiastical, and civil leader. When such were not available, he performed their functions, leading in prayers. He conducted the Christian funeral for General Braddock in 1755. His granddaughter wrote, "His mottoes were, 'Deeds Not Words'; and 'For God and My Country.'"
7. As a reader, listener and collector of Christian sermons, his vocabulary was replete with theology. He writes of God some 140 times, the divine 95 times, heaven 133 times, Providence 270 times, and uses various other honorific titles for God some 95 times. He alludes to approximately 200 different biblical texts, some of them scores of times, and does so in ways that show he was remarkably biblically literate.
8. He was a praying man, evidenced by a prayer book he ordered to fit in his pocket. More than 100 prayers in his own hand are found throughout his private and public letters. Even his enemies acknowledged his prayer life.
9. Washington was aware of human spirituality, referring to the human spirit, and acknowledging the Holy Spirit and His work. Accordingly, he manifests concern for prayer, dependence on Providence, and trust in God.
10. Washington identified himself as a Christian when he freely wrote, "On my honor and the faith of a Christian . . ."9 He called on his army to be Christian soldiers: ". . . The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country."10
11. Washington never claimed to be a Deist and criticized Deistic thought and ethics. Thomas Paine, the patriotic writer of *Common Sense*, was Washington's friend. But Paine, the critic of revealed religion in the Age of Reason, received Washington's silence. Instead, Washington's letters manifest a commitment to revelation joined with a "rational ground for belief." He described himself as "no sceptic on normal occasions."
12. Contemporaries such as Major-General Henry Lee, Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College, Reverend Jonathan Boucher, President James Madison and historians like Aaron Bancroft, Henry

Cabot Lodge, Jared Sparks, and James K. Paulding considered Washington to be a Christian.

To conclude, Christian faith must be an integral part of our description of our Founding Father, for Christianity was an integral part of Washington's life.

Peter Lillback

Dr. Peter A. Lillback is President and Professor of Historical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary located in Philadelphia. Dr. Lillback also serves as the President of The Providence Forum, the non-profit organization that is committed to preserving and promoting America's spiritual roots of religious and civil liberties. He just completed his service at Proclamation Presbyterian Church PCA after nearly twenty years. He is married and has two grown daughters.

1 The reader is invited to refer to my George Washington's Sacred Fire (Bryn Mawr: The Providence Forum Press, 2006), pp. 25ff for scholarly references.

2 Joseph J. Ellis, His Excellency (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2004).

3 Franklin Steiner, The Religious Beliefs Of Our Presidents From Washington to FDR (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995).

4 Willard Sterne Randall, George Washington: A Life (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).

5 Douglas Southall Freeman, George Washington A Biography. 7 Vols (New York:, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).

6 James T. Flexner, Washington: The Indispensable Man (New York: Signet, 1984).

7 Fitzpatrick, The Writings of George Washington. Vol. 37, 5-13-1776.

8 Fitzpatrick, The Writings of George Washington. Vol. 30, 10-3-1789.

9 George Washington, 1763, George Washington letter to Robert Stewart , April 27, 1763, John Rhodehamel, ed., George Washington Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 108.

10 Fitzpatrick, The Writings of George Washington, vol. V, pp. 244-245

Preparing for February...

February Headmasters

February 5th - Matt Mackey

February 12th - OPEN

February 19th - OPEN

February 26th - *No Classes*

Lunch:

February 5th - **Little Caesar**

February 12th - **Chinese**

February 19th - **Taco Bell**

February 26th - **No Classes**