

## **Faith of our Founding Fathers – John Adams**

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John Adams, age 20, was confused and worried. Recently graduated from Harvard, the future author of the Massachusetts Constitution, member of the Continental Congress, diplomat to England, France, and the Netherlands during the Revolutionary War, vice president to George Washington and his successor to the presidency of the United States, thought his prospects dim for an exciting and meaningful future.

Inspired by a sermon, he quit teaching, decided not to become a minister and signed a contract with a local attorney to “read law,” as law school was then called, and became a lawyer. Those who knew him said he was brilliant, thin skinned, vain, hardworking, passionate, quick to anger and forgive, witty, caustic and cynical. Adams himself said his best qualities were honesty, candor and decisiveness. Abigail, his wife, said his only character flaw was irritability.

He had a unique talent that was especially important at the beginning of our country. He seemed to intuitively know where history was going and worked to position America accordingly. He grasped what was essential. Today we would say that Adams was a strategic thinker. For instance, Adams was one of the first Founders to discern that reconciliation with England was impossible and war was inevitable. He nominated George Washington for the position of commander of the Continental Army. He asked Thomas Jefferson to compose the Declaration of Independence because Jefferson was a good writer, from Virginia, and Adams himself would be needed to “sell” independence to fence-sitting members of the Continental Congress. He largely wrote the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1779 which still is in effect today and served in 1787 as a model for the United States Constitution. As president he nominated John Marshall to the Supreme Court. Marshall was the longest serving Chief Justice in court history. He also avoided war with France when Alexander Hamilton, and even George Washington in the last months of his life, advocated it. Had this war erupted and Adams not made peace with France, it is doubtful that Thomas Jefferson, three years later, would have been able to make the Louisiana Purchase from France on July 4, 1803, for three cents an acre, doubling the size of America. Jefferson himself said the Louisiana Purchase was one of the top accomplishments of his presidency.

Biographer David McCullough said Adams was both a committed Christian and independent thinker. Both qualities served him well as a lawyer and politician.

However, the combination of his temperament, intellect and independent judgment often got him into religious and political trouble. For instance, he rejected much of the evangelical theology of his church background. He did not believe in original sin or the Trinity and thought salvation by grace was a theological cop-out, discouraging the practice of virtue. When some questioned his beliefs suggesting that perhaps he was not even a Christian, he thundered back, “I say you are no Christian and there, the account is balanced.” Politically he hated slavery and banks. This offended friend and slave-holder Thomas Jefferson, and Secretary of the Treasury under President Washington, Alexander Hamilton.

Adams indeed was a Christian of independent thought. He was a lifelong member of the established Congregational Church of Massachusetts. He attended church weekly. When he was a delegate to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia (1774) he went to church at least twice and often three times on Sunday. He often compared and complained about the preaching in the multiple denominations in Philadelphia. He hated preachers who were indifferent or dull. At the same Congress he objected to

Thomas Jefferson's opposition to instituting a day of prayer and fasting throughout the Colonies. He was particularly attracted to the moral teachings of Jesus and the early church. He was no Deist. He thought the founding of America was divinely orchestrated.

His last act of public service brought together the political and theological strands of his life. At age 85, six years before his death on July 4, 1826, Adams was elected delegate to revise the Massachusetts Constitution, the one he wrote in 1779. As he entered the meeting room the assembled delegates rose, cheered, and doffed their hats in respect.

He offered an amendment, similar to Madison's and Jefferson's 40 years earlier, to disestablish the Congregational Church of Massachusetts and guarantee complete religious freedom to all, especially Jews. The amendment failed; Adams blamed intolerant Christians for its demise.

In his last years, like his best years, he knew where history was going and what was essential. Seven years after he died, Massachusetts disestablished the Congregational Church and enacted legislation guaranteeing religious freedom.