

Faith of our Founding Fathers – Benjamin Franklin

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New York Times columnist David Brooks calls Benjamin Franklin “our founding yuppie.” He had it all: success, money, and world-wide fame.

His Puritan father and Baptist mother wanted him to attend Harvard and become a minister. With only today’s equivalent of a middle school education, he became a printing apprentice to his brother. By the time he reached middle age he owned a printing business, conducted pioneering experiments in electricity, and was an inventor, postmaster, newspaper publisher and “lobbyist” to Parliament for the colonies of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. At the age of 43 he retired from the printing business.

It was his friendship with a popular Church of England minister, the Rev. George Whitefield, which integrated religion, politics, financial gain and several new career opportunities for Franklin.

Whitefield was the Billy Graham of his day; some call him America’s first celebrity. Whitefield was the leader of a trans-Atlantic religious movement called the Great Awakening. This was a specific period of intense spiritual interest stimulating individuals, churches and communities throughout America, England and northern Europe. Historians generally date this awakening from 1730 to 1745.

Thousands listened to Whitefield preach in the open air. Churches were not spacious enough to hold the crowds. Franklin in his “Autobiography” estimated that as many as 30,000 could hear him speak without the benefit of amplification. Ever the entrepreneur, Franklin sensed opportunity. He became Whitefield’s publisher and publicist. He filled his Pennsylvania Gazette with Whitefield’s sermons and news about him. He also published his journal. Throughout the colonies the public could not get enough information about Whitefield. Franklin biographer Walter Isaacson said that Franklin made Whitefield famous. Whitefield made Franklin rich.

This unlikely relationship helped upset the political and religious apple cart in the American Colonies. The religious surge of the Awakening, publicized by Franklin, led to the demise of the state Congregational Church in New England and the Anglican Church in Virginia. This “separation of church and state” happened long before the First Amendment to the Constitution was ratified (1791), or Thomas Jefferson was in the White House (1801-09). And, the spiritual fervor of the 1730s and 1740s fueled the political independence movement from England in the 1760s and 1770s, long before Tom Paine published “Common Sense” (1776). Since the colonial governments often sided with their state churches in opposition to the Awakening and the dissenters it created, most of the “spiritual” converts of the Great

Awakening were early “political” converts to overthrowing the state church and British political tyranny.

The Great Awakening was no small matter. Some estimate that as many as 80 percent of the churches in the Colonies were affected. What began as spiritual led to the political. The Revolution was a secular culmination of spiritual ideals. E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one) was first spiritual which led to a national identity and the dawning realization that America was unique and should be separate from England.

They may have worked together but Franklin, himself, was unaffected spiritually by the dramatic oratory of Whitefield. He remained unchurched. But his political and occupational life was profoundly shaped by the surprising and unexpected twists and turns of this religious upheaval. Only Franklin among the founders signed the four documents of American independence: The Articles of Confederation, 1775, which unified the Colonies in order to fight the War of Independence; the Declaration of Independence, 1776; the Treaty of Paris ending the War with England, 1783; and the federal Constitution, 1787.

If Jefferson and Madison were one of the great political combinations, Franklin and Whitefield were one of the most unlikely. Although not persuaded by Whitefield’s emotional religion, Franklin was no Deist or skeptic. Five weeks before his death he wrote a letter to President Ezra Stiles of Yale College articulating his religious beliefs. He believed in God as creator of the universe who ought to be worshipped. Jesus’ system of morals was the best in the world. He believed both in prayer and the afterlife.

The essence of Franklin’s religion was not speculation or dogma, but good deeds. His faith emphasized ethics over doctrine. Franklin’s primary concern was whether religion made people or society better. If so, Franklin would support that church regardless of creed or denomination.

More than 20,000 mourners crowded the streets of Philadelphia for Franklin’s funeral a month after writing to President Stiles. Clergy of every faith in the city marched at the head of the procession. This demonstration of ecumenism would have encouraged Franklin.