

Ben Franklin (1706-1799)



Key Designation: Patriarch of the Revolution and Constitution

Key Background Information:

- ◆ Born and raised in Boston
- ◆ Baptized as a Congregationalist at an early age
- ◆ Parents hoped he would become a minister
- ◆ Forced to leave school at age 10 due to financial reasons
- ◆ Learned the printing business from his brother
- ◆ Very inquisitive mind that led him to become the colonies foremost inventors
- ◆ Typified the “Renaissance Man” in that he excelled at varied interest
- ◆ Highly respected by everyone in Philadelphia and all the colonies
- ◆ Eventually will serve as an Ambassador and Congressman

Key Events:

- ◆ Became a Deist at an early age, rejecting the Calvinism of the Puritans and Congregationalist preachers, like Cotton Mather
- ◆ During the Great Awakening, begins to change his views and rejects Deism in favor of a more Unitarian viewpoint after a visit to hear Whitefield preach
- ◆ Greatly respected George Whitefield, believing that the Awakening was changing the country for the better. After Whitefield left a crusade in Philadelphia, Franklin said, “It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world was growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”

Key Ideas:

- ◆ The colonies need to be unified against England, and Whitefield was bringing a spiritual unity to them by his South to North preaching of the gospel. As a result he freely printed his sermons for mass distribution (though none were of a

- political nature) and took up a collection to build a Philadelphia city auditorium so that all who desired could hear him preach. In a letter to Whitefield: “Your frequently repeated Wishes and Prayers for my Eternal as well as temporal Happiness are very obliging. I can only thank you for them, and offer your name in return.” Clearly, Franklin was praying for his friend as well!
- ◆ The change of his view from a Deist to a Unitarian is no more clearly revealed than when he boldly stood up and called the Constitutional Convention to prayer, asking for the aid and blessing of God’s direction and hand
 - ◆ Never a consistent church-goer
 - ◆ Called Christianity “our Faith.” Believed that Faith and the Bible should be prominent in the public and private domain, including education. Thus he followed an accommodationist view point of church and state. “A Bible and a newspaper in every house, a good school in every district--- all studied and appreciated as they are merit---are the principal support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty.”
 - ◆ In 1790, just about a month before he died: “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 corrupt 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 dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble....”

Key Works

- ◆ The material that forms his Autobiography as well as letters and journals comprise an enormous volume.
- ◆ *Information to Those who Would Remove to America* (a pamphlet he wrote to the Europeans about America), he says... “Hence bad examples to youth are more rare in America, which must be a comfortable consideration to parents. To this may be truly added, that serious religion, under its various denominations, is not only tolerated, but respected and practiced. Atheism is unknown there; Infidelity rare and secret; so that persons may live to a great age in that country without having their piety shocked by meeting with either an Atheist or an Infidel. And the Divine Being seems to have manifested his approbation of the mutual forbearance and kindness with which the different sects treat each other; by the remarkable prosperity with which he has been pleased to favor the whole country.”