

Dear Ones,

Last week I told you that I had been inspired by a book authored by James P. Moore, Jr. entitled One Nation under God: The History of Prayer in America. I set out to write a series of articles on the "Top Ten Prayer Events in US History." For the second event, I reiterate my debt to Mr. Moore, for previous to reading his book, I did not even know that this event had occurred. I therefore acknowledge my debt to Mr. Moore and to Kevin J. Dallape's article "Jacob Duché: Whig-Loyalist? I hope that you enjoy

In Christ, Pastor David

Second Significant Prayer Event at the 1ST CONTINENTAL CONGRESS, Sept. 7, 1774

"Be Thou present O God of Wisdom, and direct the counsel of this Honorable Assembly; enable them to settle all things on the best and surest foundations; that the scene of blood may be speedily closed; that Order, Harmony and Peace may be effectually restored, and that Truth and Justice, Religion and Piety, prevail and flourish among the people. Preserve the health of their bodies, and the vigor of their minds, shower down on them, and the millions they here represent, such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this world, and crown them with everlasting Glory in the world to come. All this we ask in the Name and through the merits of Jesus Christ, Thy Son and our Savior, Amen.

Rev. Jacob Duché, Jr.

From the very beginning there have been debates in the United States about the proper place of prayer in public life. On the one hand, our respect for the freedom of conscience of the individual keeps us from wanting to express any prayer that might reasonably exclude members of any religious group. Our very American resistance to superstition also prevents us from using prayer as a public talisman or amulet to get God to do our bidding. On the other hand, however, there is also a very American desire to transcend our religious differences to achieve a corporate spiritual expression—especially in moments of national crisis where we want to be united as well as *feel* united.

This debate was part of the very first deliberations of the very first Continental Congress as it met in September of 1774. As the Congress met, there was a motion that its deliberations be opened with prayer. This motion was vigorously opposed by a minority of the delegates on the grounds that there was such a religious diversity among the delegates that joint prayer was impossible. Today a gathering of Quakers, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Anglicans would not seem any barrier to corporate prayer, but at the time these denominations were viewed as virtually different religions and the prayer represented essentially an interfaith exercise. For many of us Protestant preachers today it might not be easy to share a platform where Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, Bahais and Wiccans were all going to pray on an equal basis—we would be fearful of being found praying to another god.

John Adams described the conclusion to the debate in a letter to his wife Abigail as follows: *Mr Samuel Adams arose and said that he was no bigot, and could hear a Prayer from any gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same time a friend to his Country. He was a stranger in Philadelphia, but had heard that Mr. Duché deserved that character, and therefore he moved that Mr. Duché, an Episcopal clergyman, might be desired, to read Prayers to Congress, tomorrow morning. The Motion was seconded and passed in the affirmative. Mr. Randolph, our President, waited on Mr. Duché, and received for answer, that if his health would permit, he certainly would. Accordingly, the next morning he appeared with his clerk and in his pontificals, and read several Prayers in the established form; and then read the Collect for the seventh day of September, which was the Thirty-Fifth Psalm. You must remember this was the next morning after we heard the horrible rumor (news) of the cannonade of Boston.*

I never saw a greater effect upon an audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that morning.

The 35th Psalm, which was assigned by the Book of Common Prayer to be read that day begins: *Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me.* It has been called “The prayer for defense against my enemies.” No wonder the delegates felt spoken to by God. The Rev. Duché sealed this sense of Divine communication by breaking with the text afforded him by the Anglican Book of Common Prayer by following the reading of the Psalm with the spontaneous prayer I have cited at the beginning of the article. This was a historic spiritual and political moment in which the Congress as a group felt itself guided by Providence.

Duché himself is a fascinating character. The son of a former mayor of Philadelphia of the same name, Duché was part of the first graduating class of the University of Pennsylvania. Having completed his education at Cambridge he served in Philadelphia both as an Anglican (Episcopalian) rector and as a lecturer in oratory at the University. He became the de facto chaplain of the first Continental Congress, and immediately after the Declaration of Independence, on July 8, 1776 he accepted formal and salaried appointment as the first chaplain to the Legislature of the United States of America.

In the summer of 1775, the Congress issued a decree setting aside a day of fasting and prayer for the colonies. The Congress gathered at Duché’s church and heard him deliver a sermon justifying the war, a message that was foundational for the way in which the United States views itself spiritually whenever it faces war. Kevin Dellape summarizes this sermon in four points.

1. God is sovereign over human history, and He guides events towards their ultimate just and glorious conclusion.
2. Liberty and Justice are God-given gifts that the Deity is committed to defend.
3. Because England (or any other foe the nation faces) has violated liberty, it has placed itself against God.
4. To secure God’s favor, Americans have the obligation not only to fight but, more importantly, to seek God and purify themselves spiritually.

In a real way, Duché became a spiritual Founding Father of our country. Although he was an Episcopalian, he had leant his support and had opened his church to the revivalist preacher George Whitfield back in the 1750’s during the First Great Awakening. The ecumenical commitment made at that time, since Whitfield’s meetings were attended by Christians of nearly every stripe, served him well in setting the model for a chaplain to the national legislature.

But Duché was destined to hold a place nearer to Benedict Arnold than to the Founding Fathers in the pages of US history. In October of 1776, as Independence became irreversible and Congress become more radical, Duché submitted his resignation and refunded his salary, asking that it be used to relieve the widows of those fallen in battle. He continued to pastor Christ Church in Philadelphia, a church with whom on July 4, 1776, he had taken the radical step of omitting the weekly prayers for the king and substituting prayers for Congress (an act of religious treason against the Church of England). Duché now ceased from speaking on political matters and became increasingly despairing of the colonists’ situation.

In September of 1777 the British army was able to occupy Philadelphia. Courageously, Duché did not flee the city, and was taken prisoner and put in jail. In despair, he caved. He wrote a private letter to General Washington in which he as much as said that it had all been a mistake, that he personally had always wanted to remain loyal to the crown, and that he implored General Washington to approach Congress to

seek peace with England. General Washington was highly displeased, sent the letter on to Congress, who in turn published it.

Disgraced, Duché resigned his parish and left to England without his family, sure that the British would soon bring the war to a close and he would be able to return. Instead, he was convicted of High Treason, had his estate confiscated and auctioned, and had to seek employment in England as the chaplain to a Women's institution.

That is not quite the end of his story. Already in 1783, at the war's end, Jacob Duché Jr was petitioning his old friend Benjamin Franklin and George Washington himself to allow him to return home. The Pennsylvania legislature did not allow it for another ten years. During that time, Duché became enamored of a new religious movement known as Swedenborgianism—kind of the original New Age expression of Christianity. When he did return finally to live out the last six years of his life in Philadelphia, he became part of the effort to establish that teaching in the US.

If the people do well to mistrust politicians, it seems that politicians do well to mistrust preachers. But the greater lesson from Duché's life, it seems to me, is a lesson of grace. The story of the heroes of the Bible is a story of how God brought about great works while using flawed vessels.

The letter that Duché wrote to Franklin asking for help in returning home, is heartwrenching. It is the recognition of a horrible public mistake that can never be undone, of words written ill-advisedly that can never be unwritten, of a man who had faced a historical dilemma and had made a catastrophic choice. It is a plea for mercy from a man who had once been a part of the American elite. And yet, this is a man who at a crucial time in our history was used by God to communicate His Word in a way that was not only powerful but has continued to mark the spiritual life of our country to this very day.

Stained glass and lead from the Liberty Window, Christ Church, Philadelphia, after a painting by Harrison Tompkins Matteson, c. 1848

Congress on Sept 7, 1774

