

THE TOP TEN PRAYER EVENTS IN U.S. HISTORY

Introduction

Not too long ago I read a book by James P. Moore, Jr. entitled *One Nation under God: The History of Prayer in America*. I found this a fascinating book, that got both my historical and theological juices flowing. It got me thinking that I would like to write a series of articles offering my votes for the "Top ten prayer events in US History." Some of these will have been inspired by Mr. Moore, although some he mentions just in passing and one or two he neglects altogether. In any case, I have had to do my own research on each. I have chosen these ten prayer events because each was not only famous and influential in its own time, but each also seems to represent an important trend in the spiritual development of the United States. I have chosen not to attempt to classify them in order of importance (How would one do that, anyway?), but in chronological order. I hope you enjoy each of these chapters and that they will serve to enrich your own appreciation of the place of prayer in the life of a nation.

In Christ, David Huegel.

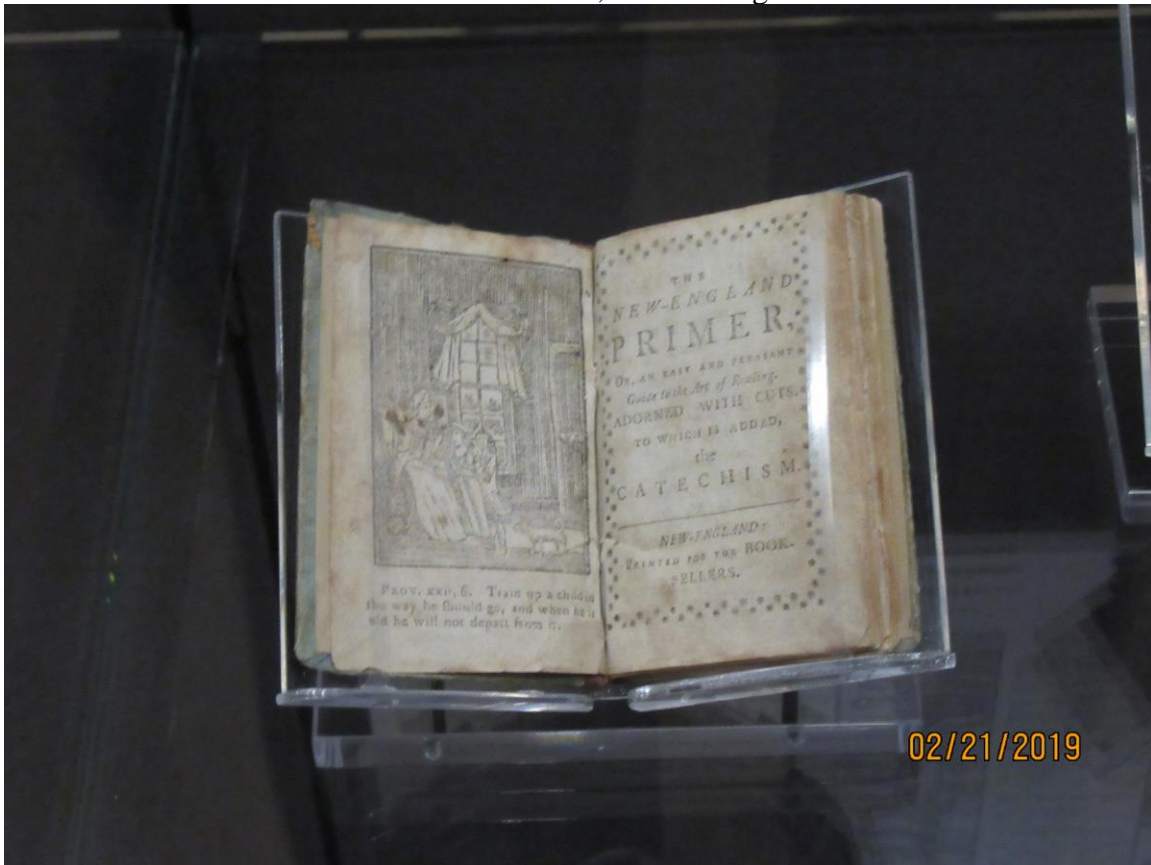


Figure 1--From The Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC

Prayer Event #1: The New England Primer

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my Soul to keep
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my Soul to take.*

I daresay that, along with Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes this prayer may be the best-known bit of children's poetry in the English language. Strangely enough, it is now difficult to find the poem in its original version in any contemporary published book for children. My

expedition to the Library and to Barnes and Noble to look at several collections of prayers for children unearthed only the following adaptation, which is itself more than 100 years old:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my Soul to keep
Thy love guard me through the night
And wake me by the morning light.*

The original prayer first appeared in a Puritan pamphlet with a selection of literature for children first published in 1690 in Boston and entitled *The New England Primer*. This book was a runaway bestseller in Colonial and pre-Civil War America, and for several generations was the most widely used primary textbook for reading instruction. It put into action the 1642 Massachusetts law that all children should be taught to read.

The compiler of the *New England Primer* and author of many of its selections, including the famous “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayer was a colorful character named Benjamin Harris. Harris, born in obscurity in England, was a Baptist who made a living in the newspaper business. A radical, who was both anti-catholic and anti-high church Anglican and who wrote sensationalist stories on both local and international topics, Harris was forced to flee from England to Boston in 1786 after he was imprisoned and fined. He then published the very first newspaper in the British Americas, a publication that reported gossip as news and was so critical of the colonial government that it was immediately shut down, on the grounds that Harris was printing without a license. Benjamin Harris seems the unlikely author of the greatest children’s book of early American History.

Even more surprising, perhaps, are the selections themselves as representative of what was considered appropriate material for the education of children. Today’s critics who describe *The Primer* take it to task for being a proselytizing work, intent on imparting not only a knowledge of letters but a Puritan worldview. Not a single selection in the *Primer* is what we would recognize as “secular;” all have a religious bent. These selections include “The Lord’s Prayer,” “The Apostle’s Creed,” and “The Westminster Shorter Catechism.” Today’s critics do not only object to the religious material, they also find the frequent mention of death and sin as inappropriate for children. Near where Harris included the “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayer is the following selection.

*In the burying place may see,
Graves shorter there than I,
From death's arrest no age is free,
Young children too must die.
My God may such an awful sight,
Awakening be to me !
Oh ! that by early grace I might
For death prepared be.*

The alphabet toward the beginning of the *Primer* begins “*In ADAM’s fall, we sinned all*”—a direct reference to the doctrine of Original Sin prominently featured in the Calvinism of the time.

At the time of its publication, however, *The New England Primer*, was not perceived as a sectarian or narrow publication. Although it is true that some people later sought to come out with a more “secular” version of the *Primer* (notably Benjamin Franklin), none of those attempts even remotely approached the *Primer’s* success. Indeed, in colonial New England, the *Primer* might almost be perceived as an interfaith project, since different selections of the Bible were interspersed with writings from Isaac Watts (an Anglican), John Cotton (a Congregationalist), the Westminster Assembly

(Presbyterian), and Benjamin Harris himself (a Baptist). Far from being a tract to win children to a specific church, the *Primer* was a compilation of what was deemed to be the best spiritual knowledge from all the main religious bodies of the time.

Another easily-overlooked aspect of the *Primer*, is that it was a book for children that had to be accessible to adults. Many adults, both native born and especially immigrants in colonial America were illiterate. *The New England Primer*, using as it did texts which had already been memorized by most of the native born as well as the immigrant population, was well-adapted to assisting those who wanted to teach themselves to read, even when there were no schools available. In one section of the *Primer*, great lists of (biblical) names of Men and then of Women were arranged in alphabetical order, something that came in very handy in learning to write one's own name (you could have someone underline it for you and then learn to write your name from that) or in helping parents to choose names for their children.

Many of the selections of the *Primer* were meant to be memorized. The memorization on the way to literacy of pieces of simple and yet profound spirituality and moral instruction that would serve one well into adulthood is the basic building block of the education that the *Primer* offers. That there is some merit to this conception of education is proved by the enduring quality of the "Now I lay me down to sleep" prayer, set alongside similar biblical passages (such as the 23rd Psalm) and nuggets of wisdom such as this one:

*HAVE communion with few,
Be intimate with ONE,
Deal justly with all,
Speak evil of none*

The "Now I lay me down to sleep" prayer is one that people facing danger, illness, and suffering have called up from memory for comfort and renewal of faith in prison camps, hospital wards, and battlefields throughout US history. It endures best in the original, for the lines *if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take* seem somehow more real in the face of suffering than their more politically acceptable alternatives.

It is also a prayer that has provided inspiration for many spinoffs, parodies, and adaptations. One recent use of the prayer seems to me particularly appropriate. On February 4, 2005, Cheryl Haggard, her husband Mike, and their three children welcomed baby Maddux into the world. The baby was born with a rare genetic condition and was whisked directly from the delivery room to Neo-Natal Intensive Care. Maddux lived only six days.

After Cheryl and Mike had made the wrenching decision to have Maddux taken off the respirator, Mike decided to call a professional photographer in the Denver area, Sandy Puc, to come and take pictures of their family and of Maddux. The experience was such a meaningful one that Cheryl and Sandy set up a non-profit organization called Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (NILMDTS). NILMDTS offers professional photographers free of charge to families whose infants have died soon after birth or who have been stillborn. By photographing these babies, they are acknowledged as persons, as members of families, as ones worthy of being grieved. In a society that has tended to regard the unborn as non-persons, this is gently radical. They write, "We believe these

images serve as an important step in the family's healing process by honoring the child's legacy.

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