

John Witherspoon: Presbyterian Patriot

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“Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.”—Isa 51:1

As we celebrate our nation’s independence, it is fitting that American Presbyterians become reacquainted with one of our spiritual forefathers. John Witherspoon (1723-1794) often is remembered as the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, but as an educator, pastor, and tireless member of the Continental Congress, his influence upon the founders and founding documents of America are much more far-sweeping.

Princeton

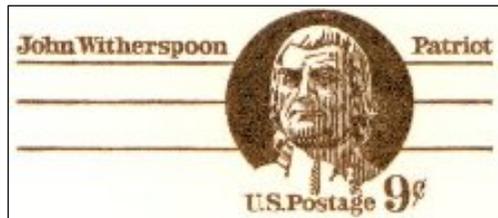
John Witherspoon was recruited from a successful pastorate in Scotland to lead the College of New Jersey at Princeton. He followed in a line of luminaries that included Aaron Burr (the Elder), Jonathan Edwards, and Samuel Davies. Witherspoon would have the longest tenure and would leave the most enduring imprint as president of Princeton College.

Witherspoon arrived from Scotland in 1766, just in time to become involved in the growing political contest between the colonies and mother England. Despite his grandparents’ stories of the heroic Scottish covenanters being persecuted by the king of England, he was slow to call for American independence. But when attempts to restore the colonists’ rights as Englishmen were rebuffed and greater sanctions were imposed on America, Witherspoon began to call for independence. He insisted that there could never be political and economic liberty, both issues of great importance to Americans, without freedom of conscience and religious liberty brought by the gospel.

War of Independence

Witherspoon became one of New Jersey’s representatives to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, where in early July 1776, a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain was introduced. Delegates debated the resolution for two steamy days. Knowing that a failure of the revolt would bring death and loss to the members of Congress who signed the Declaration, one member urged hesitation, saying the time for open revolt was not yet ripe. Witherspoon rose in reply, saying that the time was past ripe, to the point of rottenness. He went on:

There is a tide in the affairs of men, a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument upon your table, which ensures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house. He that will not respond to its accents and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions is unworthy the name



of freeman. For my own part, of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged, on the issue of this contest; and although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.

His speech helped carry the day for independence as he and 55 others pledged their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor.”

During the War for Independence, Witherspoon poured his full energy into sustaining the war effort. He preached regularly to the Congress. He served on over 100 congressional committees, and his most important work was on the War Committee that raised funds to keep troops in the field. This position brought him into a close working relationship with General Washington with whom he would serve as a friend and close confidant.

Church and Nation Building

Dr. Witherspoon was not ready to retire after national independence was won. In 1789, the year that the U.S. Constitution was approved in Philadelphia, Witherspoon was elected as moderator of the first assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The text of his opening address at the assembly captured his sense of faithful obedience in civic and religious duties, while recognizing that the Lord is the Author of all our works: “So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (1Cor 3:7).

Witherspoon’s lasting legacy is preserved in many key elements of the U.S. Constitution that was framed by his student, James Madison. Unlike Jefferson’s rosy view of man in the Declaration of Independence, Madison imbibed his teacher’s view of depraved human nature and he wrote into the Constitution the checks and balances that make it the guiding archetype for successful government.

Conclusion

Witherspoon walked among giants in an era of revolution. His faith in God and grasp of divine truth made him God’s champion for guiding the giants who would earn America’s freedom and go on to establish a free republic instead of allowing the new nation to fall into anarchy as in the French Revolution.

Pastor, patriot, college president, first Presbyterian moderator of the PCUSA: John Witherspoon is a model for freedom-loving Americans, but especially for his Presbyterian progeny who enjoy the fruit of liberty that he helped plant.

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