

**Brian Tubbs**

# **WAS GEORGE WASHINGTON A CHRISTIAN?**

**Examining the Faith of  
America's Greatest Founding Father**



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*Brian Tubbs*

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# INTRODUCTION: THE BATTLE FOR GEORGE WASHINGTON'S LEGACY

When confronted with today's controversy over religion and morality in the public square, conservative-minded evangelicals often argue that the Founding Fathers were all God-fearing, Bible-believing Christians who saw the United States as a divinely ordained "shining city" in the New World. Others counter that the most prominent Founders were Deists, and that the Constitution was a purely secular document; which, with the addition of the First Amendment, erected a high wall of separation between church and state.

In the midst of this "Culture War," no Founder's life and legacy is as bitterly contested as our nation's revolutionary leader and first President, George Washington. He is, after all, our greatest Founding Father. In every way, he is the indispensable man in American history. If a side in the "Culture War" (a term I use loosely to describe the contest of worldviews taking place in our society) can claim Washington as their own, they will have scored a major victory indeed.

Washington has been called everything from "indifferent to religion" to a Deist to a "warm Deist" (whatever that means) to a "lukewarm Episcopalian" and finally (most often by evangelicals) a "God-fearing, Bible-believing Christian." These characterizations, which have been part of a now 200-year debate over Washington's religious faith, led biographer Richard Brookhiser to observe: "No aspect of his life has been more distorted than his religion... For two centuries, Washington has been a screen on which Americans have projected their religious wishes and aversions."[\[1\]](#)

What was the *true* nature of George Washington's religious faith? Was he, in actuality, a believer in Jesus Christ?

While no respectable historian has accused Washington of being an atheist, a large number of mainstream scholars (perhaps even most of them) reduce Washington's religious beliefs to be little more than a utilitarian nod to some mystical, abstract conception of "Providence" (a favorite word of Washington's).

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Joseph Ellis exemplifies this tendency, saying Washington was "never a deeply religious man, at least in the traditional Christian sense of the term."[\[2\]](#)

The battle over Washington's legacy has become a sharp one in the overall Culture War taking

place in America today. If the secular Left can successfully claim Washington as a Deist-minded, Enlightenment-driven beacon of tolerance and wisdom, they will have significantly undermined the efforts of politically-minded evangelicals who want to see the United States of America reflect a Judeo-Christian worldview.



## CHAPTER ONE:

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

As we delve into the question of George Washington's faith, it is essential that we understand our terms. For many historians, the question of whether George Washington was a Christian comes down to how one understands the term "Christian." Biographer Joseph Ellis' argument that Washington was not a Christian in the "traditional...sense of the term" raises the question of definition and terminology, as does early biographer Jared Sparks who argues that anyone alleging Washington to not be a Christian "would be to impeach his sincerity and honesty."[\[3\]](#)

In mainstream history, "Christian" is used to categorize all those people and nations that are either founded upon or heavily influenced by traditions, practices, or institutions dating back to Jesus Christ. It is in this very broad sense that Western Europe is often called "Christendom" and much of its history (such as the Crusades) are defined as "Christian."

By this broad definition, one could easily make the claim that virtually all the Founding Fathers were Christians, since most of them attended church, read their Bibles, and carried out their lives within the framework of westernized Christian traditions. Even if many of the Founders, including Washington, weren't Christian in a personal and biblically orthodox sense, the overwhelming majority of them certainly embraced Judeo-Christian tenets. This alone is a powerful argument for those who see the United States as founded in a Judeo-Christian framework.

Many Bible-believing followers of Jesus, however, want more. These folks consider the term "Christian" to be much more substantive and sacred than a social science category. And those who admire Washington want to personally identify with him by counting him confidently as one of their own – as a brother in Jesus Christ.

According to the Bible, one achieves eternal salvation by placing his or her faith and trust in Jesus Christ and calling on the name of the Lord to be saved (Romans 10:9-13; Ephesians 2:8-9). Such a person is then transformed by the Holy Spirit and his life will reflect this new identity – one dependent on the indwelling of the Spirit and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So, while the social scientist or geographer will say that there are 2.3 billion "Christians" in the world today, the number of individuals who have truly placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ is likely much less.

Did George Washington possess a genuine and personal faith in God, and did he embrace Jesus Christ as the Son of God and divine atonement for his sins. We will examine Washington's faith, as best we can, to determine if this was the case.





## CHAPTER TWO:

# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S FAITH IN GOD

According to Ellis, George Washington saw God “as a distant, impersonal force, the presumed well-spring of what he called destiny or providence.”[\[4\]](#)

That Washington saw God as the “well-spring” of “providence” is not contested by this author. The evidence for that is overwhelming.[\[5\]](#) But George Washington himself would have objected to any characterization of God as being “distant” or “impersonal.” In 1789, a reflective Washington wrote:

“When I contemplate the interposition of Providence, as it was visibly manifested, in guiding us through the Revolution, in preparing us for the reception of a general government, and in conciliating the good will of the People of America towards one another after its adoption, I feel myself oppressed and almost overwhelmed with a sense of divine munificence.”[\[6\]](#)

As a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and later of both the First and Second Continental Congress, Washington supported resolutions for days of prayer and fasting. As the Commander-in-Chief during the Revolutionary War, he called for the appointment of Army chaplains and ordered mandatory church attendance for the men under his command.[\[7\]](#) He appealed to God publicly at his inauguration as President and attended a prayer service shortly thereafter. While President, he signed the first official Thanksgiving Day Proclamation in U.S. government history, declaring it the “duty of all nations” to “acknowledge” and “obey” the “Supreme Being.”[\[8\]](#)

An interesting side debate has opened up in the Culture War over Washington’s profession of faith at his presidential inauguration. For years, the tradition of Washington adding the words “so help me God” at the end of his presidential oath was almost universally accepted. Serious questions have been raised in recent years, however, about whether Washington actually said these words.

The presidential oath, as outlined in Article II of the U.S. Constitution, does not specify “so help me God.” Even though the vast majority of Presidents, including most recently Barack Obama, have added those words as custom, the phrase “so help me God” is not, properly speaking, a part of

the legal presidential oath.

It certainly would've been in keeping with Washington's character, humility, and belief in prayer to add the words "so help me God" to the oath, but I will concede that we have no concrete contemporary evidence to confirm his doing so. Nevertheless, it's without question that Washington appealed to God immediately after he took the oath of office. In his First Inaugural Address, he declared:

"No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency." [\[9\]](#)

Washington did not see God as some abstract, detached entity to which we owed little more than symbolic or ceremonial acknowledgment. For Washington, God was real, active, and worthy of our worship and obedience.

Washington also understood humanity's proper posture before God to be one of humility. Washington personalized this ethic at an early age, when he copied out his famous "Rules of Civility," which included the following injunction in Rule #108: "When you speak of God, or His attributes, let it be seriously and with reverence." [\[10\]](#)

For this reason, he never played politics with his faith. As the late Henry Cabot Lodge, a Washington biographer and famous statesman in his own right, explained, the first President "was as far as possible from being sectarian and there is not a word of his which shows anything but the most entire liberality and toleration. He made no parade of his religion, for in this as in other things he was perfectly simple and sincere." [\[11\]](#)

This, however, did not stop Washington from expressing repeatedly his fervent wish that Americans would embrace God, worship God, and obey God. "The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in [the American Revolution]," he wrote Declaration of Independence signer Thomas Nelson, "that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations." [\[12\]](#)

It is beyond dispute that George Washington practiced a sincere faith in God. To argue or imply otherwise flies in the face of established historical facts, not the least of which are the voluminous writings of Washington himself.



## CHAPTER THREE:

### DID GEORGE WASHINGTON BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST?

George Washington knew the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, including the deity of Jesus Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the promise of eternal life with God for those who embrace Jesus as Savior. Washington's awareness of these fundamental Christian tenets is obvious from his lifelong association with the Anglican (later Episcopal) Church, his knowledge of the Bible, the fact that he came of age during the Great Awakening, his friendship with numerous Christian ministers and thinkers, his collection of Christian sermons, and his own writings.

Washington was a voracious reader, and his library contained Bibles, a concordance to the Scriptures, and the Book of Common Prayer. Specific allusions to biblical references in his speeches and letters demonstrate that he was well familiar with the King James Bible.

George Washington Parke Custis records that his grandfather, while President, would “read to Mrs. Washington, in her chamber, a sermon, or some portion of the sacred writings” every Sunday evening.[\[13\]](#)

Washington's choice to incorporate the Bible into his presidential inauguration is further evidence of how sacred he viewed the Scriptures. Washington took the oath on the Bible and kissed it afterward. Then, according to tradition (which, as we discussed, is somewhat in dispute), he added “so help me God” to the words. None of this was called for in the Constitution, nor was there any precedent for swearing in democratic executives that Washington was seeking to follow. Washington later beseeched God in his Inaugural Address (a practice likewise followed by all his successors) and immediately attended worship services after his swearing-in. It is hard to imagine his doing any of that, if his Anglican-oriented faith were not genuine or important to him.

For much of his life, Washington was a vestryman in his local Anglican parish. While it has been correctly pointed out that holding such a position was common for ambitious southern men of property, records show Washington was quite active in the role and some of his writings reveal a degree of pride in his service. Also, Washington's affiliation with the Anglican (later Episcopal) Church continued well beyond his ambitious youth. In fact, church attendance was an integral part of his entire life.

Washington biographer and 20<sup>th</sup> century American statesman Henry Cabot Lodge wrote that our nation's father was "brought up in the Protestant Episcopal Church, and to that church he always adhered; for its splendid liturgy and stately forms appealed to him and satisfied him."[\[14\]](#) Indeed, his 18<sup>th</sup> century affiliation to the Anglican Church is evidence that he was in accord with its basic creeds, which of course included recognition of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

For devout Christians wanting Washington to be one of their own, the most troubling and mysterious aspect of Washington's faith background is his refusal to take Communion. Prior to the Revolution, the evidence is scant and contradictory as to Washington's Communion practice. However, it is beyond dispute that George Washington, from the time he became a major public figure until his death, rarely (and possibly never) took Communion[\[15\]](#). Washington would retire early from Sunday services on Communion Sunday, and would then send the carriage back for his wife, Martha, who (by all accounts) was a regular communicant. This fueled speculation then, and ever since, that George Washington was not a true believer in Jesus Christ. Indeed, it does raise troubling questions concerning Washington's Anglican faith, since his denomination took (and still takes) Communion very seriously.

The late John E. Remsburg, an author, lecturer, and lifelong member of the American Secular Union, authored an 1899 pamphlet that challenged Washington's Christian faith. Citing correspondence from the early 1800s between Washington's former ministers and various inquirers of information on the first President's faith, Remsburg contended not only that Washington routinely declined Communion, but that he never publicly embraced the full tenets of biblical Christianity.[\[16\]](#)

Washington's refusal to take Communion, when juxtaposed with his reluctance to mention the name of Jesus Christ in his writings (public or private), makes Remsburg's analysis (and, by extension, Ellis and other modern historians) compelling.

Remburg's case, however, isn't a slam dunk. He cites primarily secondhand letters and his choices are selective. For instance, he quotes one of Washington's former ministers as calling Washington a "Deist," but ignores other Washington contemporaries who testified to the Founding Father's strong Christian faith.

One example of testimony ignored or overlooked by Remsburg is a claim made by 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist evangelist John Allen Gano. A famous Restoration movement revivalist, Gano said that his grandfather, Revolutionary War Chaplain John Gano, baptized General Washington by immersion during America's War for Independence.[\[17\]](#) A painting that depicts this alleged event hangs to this day in Gano Chapel at William Jewell College in Missouri. Since there is no direct documentary

evidence to support Gano's contention (and Washington himself never seems to write or speak of it), this baptismal story likely belongs in the same category as Parson Weems' cherry tree legend. However, Gano's service as Washington's personal chaplain is not contested.

If by some chance the baptismal tale is true, it might explain the timing of Washington's Communion habits. According to Nelly Custis-Lewis (Washington's step granddaughter, who he raised as a daughter), her grandfather stopped taking Communion during the Revolutionary War.[\[18\]](#) The Anglican Church saw both of these as sacramental. Baptists do not. An intriguing possibility is that Washington's outlook on Communion may have changed along with his view of baptism. If Washington was influenced by Gano's Baptist leanings, it could explain his discomfort with Anglican/Episcopal liturgy. Washington may not have wished to quit the Episcopal Church out of respect for his wife and sensitivity to his high public station, thus he continued attending. But when it came time for Communion, he was more comfortable retiring from the service – a silent testimony of his new, more Baptist-oriented perspective on the practice. Of course, that's just a theory, and a very thin one at that. There is no way to confirm the Gano legend, although it's not a stretch to say that Washington was familiar with Gano's beliefs. That he may have been influenced by them to the point of refusing Anglican Communion is another matter.

A more likely explanation is that Washington was trying to cast himself in an ecumenical light, given his newfound status as national leader. This may seem like a weak explanation to today's reader, but we must remember that Washington did not operate in the twenty-first century. He was only two and half centuries removed from the start of the Protestant Reformation. He and the other Founders were painfully aware of the sectarian violence that had ripped Europe since Martin Luther nailed the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the wall in Germany. Europe's religious wars had drenched it in blood. They did not want this to happen in America. With this in mind, Washington cultivated relationships with Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Quaker, Anglican, and Catholic men of the cloth. Perhaps he felt that taking Communion in the Anglican Church compromised his credibility as a unifying figure. It's at least possible.

Arguably, the most direct evidence of Washington's personal faith in Jesus Christ seems to come from a prayer journal found at Mount Vernon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is what many conservative evangelicals point to in responding to skeptics like Remsberg and Ellis. The prayers contained in the journal include phrases that echo the most ardent Christian of today. In one, the journal declares: "Increase my faith in the sweet promises of the gospel; give me repentance from dead works; pardon my wanderings, and direct my thoughts unto thyself, the God of my salvation."[\[19\]](#)

In other passage, we find the words: “Unite us all in praising and glorifying thee in all our works begun, continued, and ended, when we shall come to make our last account before thee blessed Savior...” It then closes with the Lord’s Prayer.[\[20\]](#)

If the prayer journal is authentic, it’s “smoking gun” evidence that George Washington embraced Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as his Savior, his apparent refusal to take Communion notwithstanding. However, the prayer journal’s credibility is not very solid.

Ed Lengel, Associate Editor of the Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia, says that the disputed journal “almost certainly is not authentic.” According to Lengel, it either belonged to “another member of his family” or it is a “forgery.”[\[21\]](#)

Of the undisputed writings, the best evidence one can muster for a self-affirmation of Washington’s faith is the circular letter to the state governors following his resignation as Continental Army Commander-in-Chief. Though it is written in the handwriting of one of his aides and the reference to Jesus is mildly oblique, the 1783 letter is worth quoting:

“I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.”[\[22\]](#)

Skeptics argue that Washington was merely highlighting the beneficial nature of Jesus’ teachings and example, as Thomas Jefferson (a self-described Unitarian) routinely did. Others claim that the letter was written by one of Washington’s aides, not by the general himself.

Either way, Washington (or an aide writing for Washington) referred to Jesus as the “Divine Author,” which serves as fairly convincing evidence that Washington either personally embraced Jesus’ divinity or, at least, signed off on a letter that affirmed Jesus’ divinity.

Whatever skeptics of Washington’s Christian faith may allege, Nelly Custis-Lewis made it clear in a February 26, 1833 letter (one that Remsberg and a few others fail to mention) that she was not

among them. She saw her grandfather as a true believer in Jesus Christ:

“I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt [my grandfather’s] firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, ‘that they may be seen of men.’ He communed with his God in secret.”[\[23\]](#)

It’s of course not possible to conclude with absolute certainty the extent of Washington’s personal faith. And it’s certainly worth acknowledging that the absence of more public, overt confessions of his faith are disturbing to those devout Christians who want to count America’s first President as their own. Nevertheless, Washington very publicly associated himself with Christianity. An association that included regular recitations of the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed, as well as regular attendance in services in which the Christian message was clearly proclaimed. That Washington did this openly and comfortably, juxtaposed against his strong sense of honor and integrity, is strong evidence that his Christian faith was genuine and sincere.





## CHAPTER FOUR: DID WASHINGTON’S LIFE AND REPUTATION REFLECT CHRISTIAN FAITH?

What about Washington’s contemporaries? Did they see him as a Christian? And were his actions and attitudes consistent with what might be expected of a professing Christian?

Washington’s self-discipline and high moral character are the stuff of legend. It is not necessary for this short eBook to prove that Washington was a moral man. However, can we see his moral character as a manifestation of his faith?

A clue that Washington’s morality was more than mere Stoicism is that he clearly associated proper conduct with Christian principles of morality. In one of his famous “General Orders” issued at Valley Forge in 1778, Washington wrote: “To the distinguished character of patriot, it should be our highest glory to laud the more distinguished character of Christian.”

It is not a stretch to conclude that Washington’s own moral compass was set according to the Christian teachings he had grown up on.

This is a good point, however, to turn our attention to another influence on Washington’s life and conduct that many Bible-believing evangelicals today find unsettling. George Washington was a Freemason, and a large number of Christians today categorize Freemasonry as, at best, a fraternal occult and, at worst, an insidious satanic force for evil.

This eBook cannot hope to examine the controversies surrounding Masonic membership and rituals. The basic facts are these: George Washington joined the Masonic order in 1752 (the same century that Freemasonry came to the New World in the first place) and soon advanced to “Master Mason.” According to the George Washington Memorial Masonic Temple in Virginia, Washington visited various Masonic lodges and participated in Masonic events throughout the remainder of his life. In 1788, he was named “charter Worshipful Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22” and served as “Acting Grand Master” in 1793 when he laid the cornerstone for the new nation’s capital. His funeral included Masonic rites along with those of the Episcopal Church.[\[24\]](#)

There is no evidence that Washington willingly or knowingly subscribed to any satanic ritual or conspired to supplant American government with a “secret society” of some kind. In fact, he routinely warned against factions and “secret societies” throughout his life. Washington’s own words explain

his affiliation with Freemasonry:

“Being persuaded that a just application of the principles on which the Masonic Fraternity is founded must be promotive of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interest of the Society and to be considered by them as a Brother.”[\[25\]](#)

Probably the most troubling aspect of Washington’s Christian testimony is that he owned slaves. Yet Washington’s own writings bear witness to the struggles of his conscience on this issue. As a colonial Virginia legislator, Washington worked to restrict slavery. By the time of the Revolution, he vowed never again to buy or sell a slave. In private correspondence, Washington condemned slavery repeatedly.[\[26\]](#)

In the 1780s and 90s, he explored ways to free his slaves while keeping Mount Vernon solvent. His frustration in not being able to do so is seen in a 1794 letter to his secretary, in which he refers to his slaves as “a certain species of property I possess, very repugnant to my own feelings, but which imperious necessity compels.” Finally, in his last will and testament, Washington ordered freedom for all his slaves upon the death of his wife (Martha would free them before she died) and directed that his estate should help provide for them after their liberation.[\[27\]](#) Interestingly enough, his conscientious struggles with slavery began about the time of the Revolutionary War. Could this have been a reason for declining Communion? After all, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul encourages Christians to approach the Lord’s Table in a worthy manner. Perhaps the sin of slavery stained Washington’s conscience to the point that he felt very unworthy of receiving Communion. It’s certainly plausible, but we can only speculate.

How a person faces their prospective death is another indicator of where one stands in relationship to his or her faith. And while there were only a few people attending Washington at the time of his passing, his death was a very public event, drawing the attention of virtually the entire nation.

According to Lodge, Washington “regarded death with entire calmness and even indifference” and was helped in this “by his religious faith.”[\[28\]](#) According to family and friends, when death came in 1799, Washington made sure his final affairs were in order and that his wishes for funeral arrangements were to be honored. Once those assurances were given, he met his end with utter peace.

Joseph Ellis argues that, based on the lack of clergy present and/or any recorded overt

declarations of faith in Jesus, George Washington "died as a Roman Stoic rather than a Christian saint." [\[29\]](#) Of course, as Michael and Jana Novak point out in *Washington's God*, there is "not really a contradiction between being a Stoic and a Christian...regarding key virtues of daily living." What's more, the absence of clergy does not reflect ambivalence toward eternity. It may just as well reflect complete confidence. Washington undoubtedly knew where he was headed.

Washington's family was certainly quite convinced of his eternal destination. One month after her husband's passing, Martha Washington wrote Jonathan Trumbull: "When the mind is deeply afflicted by those irreparable losses which are incident to humanity, the good Christian will submit without repining to the dispensations of divine Providence, and look for consolation to that Being who alone can pour balm into the bleeding heart, and who has promised to be the widow's God." [\[30\]](#)

Martha's note reflects a biblical knowledge of God's promises regarding grief, widows, and sovereignty. She clearly casts herself as a Christian, striving to be a "good" one. Given Martha's use of the word "Providence" (her husband's favorite word for God) and the closeness of their marriage, is it too much to conclude that George and Martha Washington had more in common in their understanding of God and Christianity than not? After all, Nelly Custis-Lewis wrote that George and Martha Washington "were so perfectly united and happy that he must have been a Christian" and that Martha "had no doubts, no fears for him" as she "resigned him without a murmur into the arms of his Savior and his God, with the assured hope of his eternal felicity." Ms. Custis-Lewis should know. She was Martha's granddaughter and adoptive daughter to both George and Martha, upon her father's untimely death. It should also be noted that Nelly was the wife of Lawrence Lewis, the Washington nephew who oversaw construction of the Washington family tomb.

When George Washington died in 1799, his remains were placed temporarily in a family burial vault that was in a state of disrepair. In his will, Washington had directed that a new tomb be constructed "at the foot of what is commonly called the Vineyard Inclosure." The project was delayed for several years, but in 1831, the remains of George and Martha Washington were finally moved to their new resting place. Work on the tomb, particularly its majestic brick enclosure, was concluded in 1835. Today, twenty-five Washington family members are at rest in the tomb, which is a rather public affirmation of the Washington family faith. Visitors to Mount Vernon have the opportunity to look into this tomb, which contains the remains of George and Martha Washington, along with those of several other members of the Washington family.

Standing just a few feet away from the actual remains of our nation's First Couple is something that's quite impressive to any true history buff. And those who carefully study the back wall of the open vault will find an inscription that quotes some of Jesus' most famous words: "I am the

resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." This quote is taken from John 11:25-26, where Jesus tries to assure Lazarus' family that his earthly death is not the end. The inclusion of John 11:25-26 unmistakably associates the Washington family with the promise of the resurrection of the dead, the central claim of Christianity.

# CONCLUSION:

## WAS WASHINGTON A CHRISTIAN?

We cannot know for certain anyone's heart other than our own, and sometimes even that is problematic. However, based on overwhelming evidence (of which this eBook merely scratches the surface), it is beyond question that George Washington believed in God and was a man of reverential worship and prayer. The assessment of many historians that Washington was a Deist, no matter how often it is repeated, is demonstrably false.

There isn't as much direct evidence concerning his faith in Jesus Christ, and for a true Christian, this is certainly disappointing. Nevertheless, Washington's public reputation as a man of faith was fairly solid. Michael and Jana Novak, authors of *Washington's God*, write: "For what it's worth, the people of Washington's day almost universally took him to be at least a friend to Christianity, and to some significant degree a Christian," even a "model Christian."[\[31\]](#)

Washington's granddaughter, Nelly Custis-Lewis, certainly was among them. She likened questioning Washington's Christianity to doubting "his patriotism" or "his heroic, disinterested devotion to his country."[\[32\]](#)

In spite of the debate over Washington's personal Christianity, there is little doubt that he was a public friend to Christianity and that he strongly supported the United States embracing a Judeo-Christian worldview. Those who wish to completely separate religion from the public square or who renounce faith in God as an antiquated belief of ignorant masses do not have a friend in George Washington. For the father of the United States, God was indispensable to the American experiment.

While the depths and specifics of George Washington's personal faith will continue to be a matter of debate for some time, it is clear he was prepared to meet his Maker. And it's worth noting that he knew what the Bible and the Christian faith said was necessary to do so on good terms. It's not unreasonable to see George Washington's last words ("Tis well!") in that light. They indeed reflect a confident, peaceful sentiment, something that all people hope for when they exit this mortal life and pass into the next.

# APPENDIX A: GEORGE WASHINGTON SPEAKS — SELECTED QUOTES FROM THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY ON RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY

"The Hon. Continental Congress having been pleased to allow a Chaplain to each Regiment, with the pay of Thirty-three Dollars and one third pr month--The Colonels or commanding officers of each regiment are directed to procure Chaplains accordingly; persons of good Characters and exemplary lives--To see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises. The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger--The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavour so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country."

*--General Orders, July 9, 1776*

"I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without a happy imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation."

*--Circular Letter to the States, June 8, 1783*

"Such being the impressions under which I have, in obedience to the public summons, repaired to the present station, it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes, and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success the functions allotted to his charge. In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own, nor those of my fellow-citizens at large less than either. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent

nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency; and in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their united government the tranquil deliberations and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities from which the event has resulted can not be compared with the means by which most governments have been established without some return of pious gratitude, along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the past seem to presage."

*--First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789*

"The man must be bad indeed who can look upon the events of the American Revolution without feeling the warmest gratitude towards the great Author of the Universe whose divine interposition was so frequently manifested in our behalf."

*--Letter to the Rev. Samuel Langdon, September 28, 1789*

"Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor..."

*--Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1789*

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice ? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

*--Farewell Address, 1796*



## APPENDIX B: TESTIMONY OF NELLY CUSTIS-LEWIS

*Nelly Custis-Lewis was the adopted daughter of George and Martha Washington (and biological granddaughter of Martha). When Jared Sparks consulted her on information concerning George Washington's faith, she responded with this letter:*

Woodlawn, 26 February, 1833

Sir,

I received your favor of the 20th instant last evening, and hasten to give you the information, which you desire.

Truro Parish [Episcopal] is the one in which Mount Vernon, Pohick Church [the church where George Washington served as a vestryman], and Woodlawn [the home of Nelly and Lawrence Lewis] are situated. Fairfax Parish is now Alexandria. Before the Federal District was ceded to Congress, Alexandria was in Fairfax County. General Washington had a pew in Pohick Church, and one in Christ Church at Alexandria. He was very instrumental in establishing Pohick Church, and I believe subscribed [supported and contributed to] largely. His pew was near the pulpit. I have a perfect recollection of being there, before his election to the presidency, with him and my grandmother...

He attended the church at Alexandria when the weather and roads permitted a ride of ten miles [a one-way journey of 2-3 hours by horse or carriage]. In New York and Philadelphia he never omitted attendance at church in the morning, unless detained by indisposition [sickness]. The afternoon was spent in his own room at home; the evening with his family, and without company. Sometimes an old and intimate friend called to see us for an hour or two; but visiting and visitors were prohibited for that day [Sunday]. No one in church attended to the services with more reverential respect. My grandmother, who was eminently pious, never deviated from her early habits. She always knelt. The General, as was then the custom, stood during the devotional parts of the service. On communion Sundays, he left the church with me, after the blessing, and returned home, and we sent the carriage back for my grandmother.

It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o'clock where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, "that they may be seen of men" [Matthew 6:5]. He communed with his God in secret [Matthew 6:6].

My mother [Eleanor Calvert-Lewis] resided two years at Mount Vernon after her marriage [in 1774] with John Parke Custis, the only son of Mrs. Washington. I have heard her say that General

Washington always received the sacrament with my grandmother before the revolution. (The king of England was the head of the church and apparently Washington would not recognize him as such after the war). When my aunt, Miss Custis [Martha's daughter] died suddenly at Mount Vernon, before they could realize the event [before they understood she was dead], he [General Washington] knelt by her and prayed most fervently, most affectingly, for her recovery. Of this I was assured by Judge [Bushrod] Washington's mother and other witnesses.

He was a silent, thoughtful man. He spoke little generally; never of himself. I never heard him relate a single act of his life during the war. I have often seen him perfectly abstracted, his lips moving, but no sound was perceptible. I have sometimes made him laugh most heartily from sympathy with my joyous and extravagant spirits. I was, probably, one of the last persons on earth to whom he would have addressed serious conversation, particularly when he knew that I had the most perfect model of female excellence [Martha Washington] ever with me as my mistress, who acted the part of a tender and devoted parent, loving me as only a mother can love, and never extenuating [tolerating] or approving in me what she disapproved of others. She never omitted her private devotions, or her public duties; and she and her husband were so perfectly united and happy that he must have been a Christian. She had no doubts, no fears for him. After forty years of devoted affection and uninterrupted happiness, she resigned him without a murmur into the arms of his Savior and his God, with the assured hope of his eternal felicity [happiness in Heaven].

Is it necessary that any one should certify, "General Washington avowed himself to me a believer in Christianity?" As well may we question his patriotism, his heroic, disinterested devotion to his country. His mottos were, "Deeds, not Words"; and, "For God and my Country."

With sentiments of esteem,

I am, Nelly Custis-Lewis

# APPENDIX C: RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* by Mark A. Noll. Oxford University Press, 2002
- The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* by James H. Hutson. Princeton University Press, 2005
- Washington's God* by Michael Novak and Jana Novak
- George Washington's Sacred Fire* by Peter A. Lillback
- Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* by Richard Brookhiser. Simon & Schuster, 1996
- George Washington* by Henry Cabot Lodge. Cumberland House, original published 1898 (new edition 2004)
- George Washington's War: The Forging of a Revolutionary Leader and the American Presidency* by Bruce Chadwick, PhD. Sourcebooks, Inc., 2004
- God and the Oval Office: The Religious Faith of our 43 Presidents* by John C. McCollister, Ph.D, W Publishing Group, 2005
- His Excellency: George Washington* by Joseph Ellis. Knopf, 2004
- Martha Washington: An American Life* by Patricia Brady. Viking, 2005
- Prayers of our Presidents* by Jerry MacGregor and Marie Prys. Baker Books, 2004
- Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington by his Adopted Son, George Washington Parke Custis* by George Washington Parke Custis. Originally published by Derby & Jackson in 1860. Republished by American Foundation Publications, 1999.

## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

- Letter from Nelly Parke-Custis discussing Washington's faith, found at Wallbuilders website.  
<http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=13>
- George Washington Masonic National Memorial. <http://www.gwmemorial.org/>
- The Papers of George Washington. <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/>
- Mount Vernon. <http://www.mountvernon.org>
- John Remsburg's analysis of Washington's Christianity.  
[http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/john\\_remsburg/six\\_historic\\_americans/chapter\\_3.htm](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/john_remsburg/six_historic_americans/chapter_3.htm)
- John Gano biography. [http://www.therestorationmovement.com/gano\\_john.htm](http://www.therestorationmovement.com/gano_john.htm)

## BLOGS OF INTEREST

- American Creation  
<http://americancreation.blogspot.com>
- American Revolution & Founding Era  
<http://americancreation.blogspot.com>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brian writes extensively on American history, Christianity, and personal development. His articles have appeared online as well as in print outlets, including *Insight* and *The Washington Times*.

Brian holds a M.A. in Theological Studies from Liberty Theological Seminary and a B.A. in Government and Politics from George Mason University.

He and his wife, along with their two children, make their home in Northern Virginia.

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## Other eBooks by Brian Tubbs

Be sure to search Amazon for these other Kindle eBooks...

*Speak With Confidence*

*Why Does God Allow Suffering?*

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Don't forget to leave a review on [the Amazon sales page for this eBook](#).  
Thank you!

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[1] Brookhiser, Richard. *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 144

[2] Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 151

[3] Sparks, Jared. *The Life of George Washington*. Appendix: "Religious Opinions and Habits of Washington."

[4] Ellis, Joseph. Cited previously

[5] Since Washington sometimes referred to Providence as "She" and "It" (in addition to "He"), it would be a mistake to always associate his use of that term with God directly. For Washington, "Providence" was apparently sometimes a manifestation of God's superintending will as opposed to God Himself.

[6] Hutson, James, ed. *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 180. The quote is from a letter George Washington sent the Philadelphia Council, April 20, 1789.

[7] Chadwick, Bruce. *George Washington's War* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc. 2004), p. 111

[8] Washington, George. Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1789. Papers of George Washington (online resource maintained and edited by University of Virginia and found at <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/>)

[9] Hutson, James ed. *The Founders on Religion*, previously cited, p. 182

[10] Washington, George, ed. *Rules of Civility*. These can be found in many books and on many sites on the Internet. There is an

entire section dedicated to them at the University of Virginia Papers of George Washington, previously cited.

[11] Lodge, Henry Cabot. *George Washington: The American Statesman Series* (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, Inc., 2004). Original published in Boston by Houghton Mifflin, ca. 1898.

[12] Hutson, James, ed. *The Founders on Religion*. Previously cited. This quote is from a letter Washington sent Thomas Nelson, August 20, 1778.

[13] Custis, George Washington Parke. *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington, by his Adopted Son, George Washington Parke Custis* (Bridgewater: American Foundation Publications, 1999), p. 508. This memoir was first published in 1860 by Derby & Jackson in New York.

[14] Lodge, Henry Cabot. *George Washington*. Previously cited.

[15] Ellis, Joseph. *His Excellency*, previously cited, p. 45. The evidence for this is overwhelming, with some historians (such as Ellis) going so far as to say he “never” took Communion (even in his youth).

[16] Remsburg, John E. *Six Historic Americans*. The portion dealing with George Washington is excerpted and published online by [www.infidels.org](http://www.infidels.org). The excerpt can be found at [www.infidels.org/library/historical/john\\_remsburg/six\\_historic\\_americans/chapter\\_3.html#2](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/john_remsburg/six_historic_americans/chapter_3.html#2)

[17] The baptismal claim is contained in this online biography of Chaplain Gano. <http://www.therestorationmovement.com/gano,john.htm>

[18] Custis-Lee, Nelly. Letter to Jared Sparks. February 26, 1833. This letter is published online by Wallbuilders at <http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=13>

[19] Excerpts from the prayer journal are provided by Tim LaHaye in *Faith of our Founding Fathers*, previously cited, pp. 110-113.

[20] *Ibid*

[21] This quote is from an email exchange with Mr. Lengel. Those wishing confirmation may contact the University of Virginia project office directly at [gwpapers@cms.mail.virginia.edu](mailto:gwpapers@cms.mail.virginia.edu).

[22] Washington, George. Circular Letter to the States, 1783. Papers of George Washington, previously cited.

[23] Custis-Lewis, Nelly. Letter to Jared Sparks. Previously cited.

[24] These facts, confirmed by varied sources, are all reported by the George Washington Masonic National Memorial at its website: <http://www.gwmemorial.org/>

[25] This quote is published online by the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. Previously cited.

[26] Evidence for this is overwhelming. Both Mount Vernon ([www.mountvernon.org](http://www.mountvernon.org)) and the University of Virginia Papers of George Washington (<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/>) provide articles and selected correspondence from Washington himself on this subject.

[27] You can read the full text of Washington’s last will and testament at the University of Virginia Papers of George Washington. Previously cited.

[28] Lodge, Henry Cabot. *George Washington*. Previously cited, p. 490

[29] Ellis, Joseph. *His Excellency*. Previously cited.

[30] *The Writings of George Washington: 1798-99*

[31] Novak, Michael and Jana Novak. *Washington’s God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

[32] Custis-Lewis, Nelly. Letter to Jared Sparks, Previously cited.