



*John Witherspoon*

Late one August night in 1768, a crowd of people, many of whom were dignitaries, assembled at Princeton, New Jersey, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the acclaimed reverend John Witherspoon. The attendees had traveled from as far away as Philadelphia and New York City, each one hoping to meet the man who many believed would galvanize the fragmented American colonies. Nassau Hall was lit with candles in his honor, and when John Witherspoon finally graced them with his presence, the elated crowd broke into a chorus of cheers.

True to his reputation, Witherspoon became one of the most influential figures in the founding of America and has been called the Father of the Founding Fathers. At Princeton University, under his direct instruction, he helped train America's first generation of leaders, including one president, one vice president, twelve governors, three Supreme Court justices, twenty-one senators, thirty-nine congressmen, and ten cabinet members—eighty-seven Founding Fathers in total. He taught two basic components of American patriotism and identified its primary enemy:

That he is the best friend to American liberty [first] who is the most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion, and [second] who sets himself with the greatest firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind. Whoever is an avowed enemy of God, I scruple not to call him an enemy to his country.<sup>23</sup>

John Witherspoon was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1723. He was the son of a Gospel minister and a direct descendant of the great Reformer, John Knox. With that godly heritage, it is not surprising that young John was destined for the ministry. In 1736, at fourteen, having completed his preparatory education, he was enrolled in the University of Edinburgh. He especially excelled in sacred literature and graduated with his theology degree. His education continued at the University of St. Andrews, where he earned his doctorate of divinity. At twenty-one, he became a licensed preacher.

In 1744, Reverend Witherspoon accepted the parsonage of Beith in the west of Scotland. He unselfishly ministered there for twenty-two years, despite being offered at least three different, more prominent parishes. At the time of his appointment, he had just married Elizabeth Montgomery, a woman whose piety, benevolence, and graciousness endeared her to all who knew her. He and Mrs. Witherspoon had ten children.

By the mid-1760s, Reverend Witherspoon had published three doctrinal sermons in which he lashed out against religious decadence and taught defiance to ecclesiastic authorities in the paganized church hierarchy. His writings gained him international stature and employment offers from churches in Ireland, Holland, and America. The American offer came from Princeton University, which had been founded in 1746 and was renowned for its spiritual heritage—student requirements included daily worship, attendance at church on the Sabbath, and religious instruction.

In 1766, the board of governors of Princeton University offered Dr. Witherspoon the presidency. The opportunity would give him a new and enlarged platform for his ministry, his political philosophy, and his powers of persuasion. He would be able to influence American religious circles, education, and the political system. He first graciously refused the invitation, but after personal visits from Richard Stockton and Dr. Benjamin Rush—both Princeton graduates—he accepted the position.

Princeton University graduated about twenty students per year, so Reverend Witherspoon was able to personally tutor every pupil. He changed the curriculum to include subjects such as political science, debate, and oratory, insisting that all graduates be prepared for holding public office. He taught that rebellion against despots is obedience to God. He also taught that God is supreme, and therefore His law transcends any earthly political order (His laws are inalienable). His teachings were not meant to hurt Great Britain, but instead to defend American privileges. However, the English labeled Princeton the “seminary of sedition,” as it was the scene of many anti Great Britain student demonstrations. Under the leadership of Witherspoon, Princeton University grew in both intellectual and financial stature and quickly became eminent among American higher learning institutions.

As British aggression escalated, Witherspoon’s influence expanded to the political arena. In 1774, he published a prophetic essay in which he predicted the path that Congress ultimately took in the American Revolution. He believed that America would remain loyal to the Crown unless it was forced into disloyalty by self-defense. In 1775, he became a member of the Committee of Correspondence and, in 1776, a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress, as well as a delegate to the Continental Congress. During the debate for independence, one delegate<sup>o</sup> remarked that “the people are not ripe for a Declaration of Independence.” Witherspoon replied, “In my judgment, Sir, the country is not only ripe for independence, but we are in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it, if we delay any longer.”<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, he gladly voted for and signed that glorious document. He remained active in Congress throughout the revolutionary period and served on over one hundred different committees.

When the war with Great Britain broke out, Witherspoon admonished the Continental troops to set themselves apart from cursing and drunkenness and all other immoral behavior, and instead to reverence the name of the Lord and walk in his precepts. His reasoning for these admonitions was that “there is no soldier so undaunted as the pious man, no army so formidable as those who are superior to the fear of death.”<sup>25</sup> The Reverend lost two of his sons on the battlefield of the American Revolution.

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<sup>o</sup> John Dickenson was that dissenting delegate.

When peace was reached, he retired from Congress and concentrated on the rebuilding of Princeton. He also remained involved with state politics as a member of the New Jersey Assembly until 1787. In 1789, he served as a member of the State Ratification Convention for the federal Constitution.

From 1790 until his death in 1794, he was completely dedicated to his ministerial duties. He was undaunted in his ministry, regularly delivering his message from the pulpit, notwithstanding the loss of his eyesight two years before his death. After his death, John Adams said of him, “A true son of liberty. So he was. But first, he was a son of the Cross.”<sup>26</sup> He declared in his Last Will and Testament,

I shall now conclude my discourse by preaching this Savior to all who hear me, and entreating you in the most earnest manner to believe in Jesus Christ, for “there is no salvation in any other” [Acts 4:12] . . . If you are not reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, if you are not clothed with the spotless robe of His righteousness, you must forever perish.<sup>27</sup>

A reverend and a statesman, John Witherspoon had many strong views that were relevant at our nation’s founding, and some that are still relevant today, as these found among his many writings prove. On slavery:

It is certainly unlawful to make inroads upon others . . . and take away their liberty by no other better means than superior power.<sup>28</sup>

On moral character of our elected officials:

The people in general ought to have regard to the moral character of those whom they invest with authority either in the legislature, executive, or judicial branches.<sup>29</sup>

A democratic versus republican form of government:

Pure democracy cannot subsist long nor be carried far into the departments of state—it is very subject to caprice [impulse] and the madness of popular rage.<sup>30</sup>

On Christianity versus other religions:

The Christian religion is superior to every other . . . But there is not only an excellence in the Christian morals, but a manifest superiority in them to those which are derived from any other source.<sup>31</sup>

On separation of church and state:

To promote true religion is the best and most effective way of making a virtuous and regular people. Love to God and love to man is the substance of religion; when these prevail, civil laws will have little to do . . . Those who are vested with civil authority ought to promote religion and good morals among all under their government.<sup>32</sup>