

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S SPEECH AT CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

(June 28, 1787)

After having met for several months, by June 28, 1787, the delegates had come to an impasse at the Constitutional Convention. At that crucial juncture, Benjamin Franklin addressed the Convention:

IN THE BEGINNING OF THE CONTEST WITH BRITAIN, WHEN WE WERE SENSIBLE OF DANGER, WE HAD DAILY PRAYER IN THIS ROOM FOR DIVINE PROTECTION. OUR PRAYERS, SIR, WERE HEARD AND THEY WERE GRACIOUSLY ANSWERED.... AND HAVE WE NOW FORGOTTEN THAT POWERFUL FRIEND? OR, DO WE IMAGINE WE NO LONGER NEED HIS ASSISTANCE? I HAVE LIVED, SIR, A LONG TIME, AND THE LONGER I LIVE, THE MORE CONVINCING PROOFS I SEE OF THIS TRUTH--THAT GOD GOVERNS IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN. AND IF A SPARROW CANNOT FALL TO THE GROUND WITHOUT HIS NOTICE, IS IT PROBABLE THAT AN EMPIRE CAN RISE WITHOUT HIS AID? WE HAVE BEEN ASSURED, SIR, IN THE SACRED WRITINGS, THAT "EXCEPT THE LORD BUILD THE HOUSE, THEY LABOR IN VAIN THAT BUILD IT." I FIRMLY BELIEVE THIS; AND I ALSO BELIEVE THAT WITHOUT HIS CONCURRING AID WE SHALL SUCCEED IN THIS POLITICAL BUILDING NO BETTER THAN THE BUILDERS OF BABEL....

I THEREFORE BEG LEAVE TO MOVE THAT, HENCEFORTH, PRAYERS IMPLOING THE ASSISTANCE OF HEAVEN, AND ITS BLESSINGS ON OUR DELIBERATIONS, BE HELD IN THIS ASSEMBLY EVERY MORNING BEFORE WE PROCEED TO BUSINESS, AND THAT ONE OR MORE OF THE CLERGY OF THIS CITY BE REQUESTED TO OFFICIATE IN THAT SERVICE.

Then, One year and nine months latter, on April 7, 1789, one day after the Senate of the First Congress convened, the Senate appointed a committee "to take under consideration the manner of electing Chaplains." On April 25, 1789, the Senate elected its first chaplain. On May 1, 1789, the House elected its first chaplain. On September 22, 1789, Congress passed a statute providing for payment of chaplains. Three days later, on September 25, 1789, Congress reached final agreement on the language of the Establishment Clause. The First Congress obviously perceived no conflict between the Establishment Clause and vocal, public prayer in a governmentally organized setting on government property.