
Epilogue

Benjamin Franklin was the oldest delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1788. He came as a short, fat, strunched old man in plain Quaker dress, bald pate — short white socks — an eighty-two-year-old body and brilliant mental energies of a twenty-five-year-old youth.

During these dark days following the war, the threat of anarchy was a constant reality, and the formation of a constitution had, therefore, become a national imperative. During seventeen days of heated debate Mr. Franklin maintained a virtual silence, but on June 28th he arose to suggest that each session be initiated with prayer. He deemed their lack of progress to that point as “proof of the imperfection of human understanding.” He then reviewed their fruitless search through history and their frustration with the constitutions of contemporary Europe; then turning to Washington he stated, “How has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understanding? I 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? . . . I . . . believe that without His concurring

aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our little partial local interest; our projects will be confounded; and we ourselves shall become a reproach and byword down to future ages. And, what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance despair of establishing governments by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest. ¹

Three political theories were particularly dear to Franklin. The first involved the danger of paying high salaries to government officials. The second advocated a plural executive body with little power. His philosophy was "The least government possible is the greatest possible good." The third dealt with the justice of state representation which Franklin felt needed improvement. He was beaten on all three points.

Monday, September 17, was the final day of the convention. Here are a few of Franklin's words which stand as a classic example of conciliatory love.

I confess that there are several parts of this Constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them; for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration to change opinions even on important subjects which I once thought right but found to be otherwise. It is, therefore, that the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment and to pay attention to the judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion think themselves in possession of all truth. But though many private persons think almost as highly of their infallibility as that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady who in a dispute with her sister said: 'I don't know how it happens, sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that's always in the right.'

In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults if they are such; because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered; and believe farther that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years and can only end in despotism as other forms have done before it when the people shall become so corrupt as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other. I doubt too whether any other convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution. For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views, from such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It, therefore,

astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does. Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the convention who may still have objections to it would with me on this occasion doubt a little of his infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument. ²

The hour has come in the history of the Christian cause for each of us to doubt a little of his own infallibility. After nineteen long centuries the doctrinal disputes are not resolved and never will be. The solution to our division is not to be discovered in renewed rounds of debate but in the awesome power of love. There is no argument against love.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).

Notes

1. Adapted from *Benjamin Franklin* by Carl Van Doren, N.Y., The Viking Press, 1938.
2. Ibid.