

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND
PRESIDENT GEORGE WASHINGTON

1789-1790



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On Thursday, May 21st, 1789, some three weeks after George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States of America under the newly approved Constitution, the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States met in the Second Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon opened the Assembly with a sermon from I Corinthians 3:7, “So then, neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth: but God that giveth the increase.”

One of the first actions of the Assembly, after the election of Dr. John Rodgers to the office of Moderator, was a unanimous resolution “that an address be presented from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to the President of the United States; and that Drs. Witherspoon, [Patrick] Alison, and S[amuel] S[tanhope] Smith, be a committee to

draught said address.”¹ This committee would not have been strangers to President Washington. John Witherspoon, the President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), was the only minister and the only college president to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and, as a member of the Continental Congress, the Articles of Confederation in 1777. Patrick Alison, a minister in Baltimore, Maryland, had been a Chaplain to the Continental Congress and was a personal friend of the President. Samuel Smith was a professor of moral philosophy at the College of New Jersey, and was to succeed Witherspoon as its president in 1794.

By Saturday afternoon, the committee had composed an address to President George Washington, and on Tuesday morning, May 26th, it was amended and adopted. At some point before May of 1790, the committee presented the address to the President, and received from him an answer in response.²

1. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, From Its Organization A. D. 1789 to A. D. 1820* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 6.

2. *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 24.

To the President of the United States,

SIR—The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, embrace the earliest opportunity in their power, to testify the lively and unfeigned pleasure which they, with the rest of their fellow-citizens, feel, on your appointment to the first office in the nation.

We adore Almighty God, the author of every perfect gift, who hath endued you with such a rare and happy assemblage of talents, as hath rendered you equally necessary to your country in war and in peace. Your military achievements insured safety and glory to America, in the late arduous conflict for freedom; while your disinterested conduct, and uniformly just discernment of the public interest, gained you the entire confidence of the people: And in the present interesting period of public affairs, the influence of your personal character moderates the divisions of political parties, and promises a permanent establishment of the civil government.

From a retirement more glorious than thrones and scepters, you have been called to your present elevated station, by the advice of a great and a free people; and with an unanimity of suffrage that has few, if any, examples in history. A man more ambitious of fame, or less devoted to his country,

would have refused an office in which his honors could not be augmented, and where they might possibly be subject to a reverse. We are happy that God has inclined your heart to give yourself once more to the public. And we derive a favourable presage of the event, from the zeal of all classes of the people, and their confidence in your virtues; as well as from the knowledge and dignity with which the federal councils are filled. But we derive a presage, even more flattering, from the piety of your character. Public virtue is the most certain means of public felicity; and religion is the surest basis of virtue. We therefore esteem it a peculiar happiness to behold in our chief magistrate, a steady, uniform, avowed friend of the Christian religion; who has commenced his administration in rational and exalted sentiments of piety; and who, in his private conduct, adorns the doctrines of the gospel of Christ; and on the most public and solemn occasions, devoutly acknowledges the government of Divine Providence.

The example of distinguished characters will ever possess a powerful and extensive influence on the public mind; and when we see in such a conspicuous station, the amiable example of piety to God, of benevolence to men, and of a pure and virtuous patriotism, we naturally hope that it will diffuse its influence; and that, eventually, the most happy consequences will result from it. To the force of imitation, we

will endeavor to add the wholesome instructions of religion. We shall consider ourselves as doing an acceptable service to God, in our profession, when we contribute to render men sober, honest, and industrious citizens, and the obedient subjects of a lawful government. In these pious labors, we hope to imitate the most worthy of our brethren of other Christian denominations, and to be imitated by them; assured that if we can, by mutual and generous emulation, promote truth and virtue, we shall render a great and important service to the republic; shall receive encouragement from every wise and good citizen; and, above all, meet the approbation of our Divine Master.

We pray Almighty God to have you always in his holy keeping. May he prolong your valuable life, an ornament and a blessing to your country, and at last bestow on you the glorious reward of a faithful servant.

Signed by order of the General Assembly,
John Rodgers, *Moderator*

Philadelphia, May 26th, 1789.

To the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

GENTLEMEN, I received with great sensibility the testimonial given by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, of the lively and unfeigned pleasure experienced by them on my appointment to the first office in the nation.

Although it will be my endeavor to avoid being elated by the too favorable opinion which your kindness for me may have induced you to express of the importance of my former conduct, and the effect of my future services; yet, conscious of the disinterestedness of my motives, it is not necessary for me to conceal the satisfaction I have felt upon finding that my compliance with the call of my country, and my dependence on the assistance of heaven to support me in my arduous undertaking, have, so far as I can learn, met the universal approbation of my countrymen. While I reiterate the professions of my dependence upon heaven as the source of all public and private blessings, I will observe, that the general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry, and economy, seems in the ordinary course of human affairs, particularly necessary for advancing and confirming the

happiness of our country. While all men within our territories are protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of their consciences, it is rationally to be expected from them in return, that they will all be emulous of evincing the sincerity of their professions by the innocence of their lives and the benevolence of their actions. For no man who is profligate in his morals, or a bad member of the civil community, can possibly be a true Christian, or a credit to his own religious society.

I desire you to accept my acknowledgements for your laudable endeavors to render men sober, honest, and good citizens, and the obedient subjects of a lawful government; as well as your prayers to Almighty God for his blessings on our common country, and the humble instrument which he has been pleased to make use of in the administration of its government.

George Washington