

# BENJAMIN RUSH, M.D.

## Signer of the Declaration of Independence

From, *The Truth About The Founding Fathers of the American Republic — Updated*

by Dr. Catherine Millard, © 2018.

- 1745 Born on 24<sup>th</sup> December, at Bayberry, Pennsylvania
- 1760 Graduated from the College of New-Jersey (Princeton)
- 1768 Graduated from the University of Edinburgh, M.D.
- 1768 Recruited (together with Richard Stockton), Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D., for the Presidency of Princeton.
- 1769– Professor of Chemistry, College of Philadelphia
- 1770 Published “A Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on Chemistry”
- 1775 Co-founder with Benjamin Franklin of the first Anti-Slavery Society
- 1776 Member of the Continental Congress  
Signed the Declaration of Independence
- 1777-78 Physician-General of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania
- 1786 Founded the first free Medical Clinic in America
- 1787 Member of the Pennsylvania Ratification Convention
- 1791– Professor of Medicine, College of Philadelphia
- 1797-1813 Treasurer, United States Mint
- 1813 Died on 19<sup>th</sup> April in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



*Benjamin Rush, M.D. Painting of the founding father from life by Charles Willson Peale.*

- 3. That the Bible contains more knowledge necessary to man in his present state than any other book in the world.
- 4. That knowledge is most durable, and religious instruction most useful, when imparted in early life.
- 5. That the Bible, when not read in schools, is seldom read in any subsequent period of life.

### **My arguments in favor of the use of the Bible as a school book are founded in the constitution of the human mind.**

- I. The memory is the first faculty which opens in the minds of children. Of how much consequence, then, must it be to impress it with the great truths of Christianity, before it is preoccupied with less interesting subjects!
- II. There is a peculiar aptitude in the minds of children for religious knowledge. I have constantly found them in the first six or seven years of their lives, more inquisitive upon religious subjects than upon any others: and an ingenious instructor of youth has informed me, that he has found young children more capable of receiving just ideas upon the most difficult tenets of religion than upon the most simple branches of human knowledge. It would be strange if it were otherwise; for God creates all His means to suit His ends. There must of course be a fitness between the human mind and the truths which are essential to its happiness.
- III. The influence of prejudice is derived from the impressions, which are made upon the mind in early life; prejudices are of two kinds, true and false. In a world where false prejudices do so much mischief, it would discover great weakness not to oppose them by such as are true. I grant that many men have rejected the prejudices derived from the Bible: but I believe no man did so, without having been made wiser or better, by the early operation of these prejudices upon the mind. ***Every just principle that is to be found in the writings of Voltaire is borrowed from the Bible: and the morality of the deists, which has been so much admired and praised, is, I believe, in most cases, the effect of habits, produced by early instruction in the principles of Christianity.***
- IV. We are subject, by a general law of our natures, to what is called *habit*. Now, if the study of the Scriptures be necessary to our happiness at any time of our lives, the sooner we begin to read them, the more we shall be attached to them; for it is peculiar to all the acts of habit, to become easy, strong, and agreeable by repetition.
- V. It is a law in our natures that we remember longest the knowledge we acquire by the greatest number of our senses. Now, a knowledge of the contents of the Bible, is acquired in school by the aid of the eyes and the ears; for children, after getting their lessons always say them to their masters in an audible voice; of course, there is a presumption that this knowledge will be retained much longer than if it had been acquired in any other way.
- VI. The interesting events and characters recorded and described in the Old and New Testaments are accommodated, above all others, to seize upon all the faculties of the minds of children. ***The understanding, the memory, the imagination, the passions, and the moral powers are all occasionally addressed by the various incidents which are contained in those Divine books, insomuch that not to be delighted with them is to be devoid of every principle of pleasure that exists in a sound mind.***

### **Frequently asked questions about Benjamin Rush:**

**1. Benjamin Rush, Professor of Chemistry and Medicine at the College of Philadelphia; Founder of the first free Medical Clinic in America; Physician-General of the Continental Army and author of a number of books on Chemistry and Medicine, was a famous scientist of his day. I have studied that Science and Christianity are incompatible. What was this founding father's stand on the Gospel?**

In a letter written to the **Rev. J. Belknap, D.D.** of Boston, dated March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1791, Benjamin Rush gives a ***Defense on the Use of the Bible in Schools***, which establishes this founding father's belief in the authority of the Scriptures, and the Truth of the Gospel, as follows:

“Philadelphia,  
March 10, 1791.

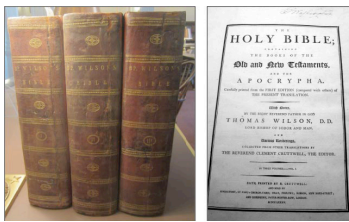
Dear Sir,

It is now several months since I promised to give you ***my reasons for preferring the Bible as a school book*** to all other compositions. I shall not trouble you with an apology for my delaying so long to comply with my promise, but shall proceed immediately to the subject of my letter. Before I state my arguments in favor of teaching children to read by means of the Bible, I shall assume the five following propositions:

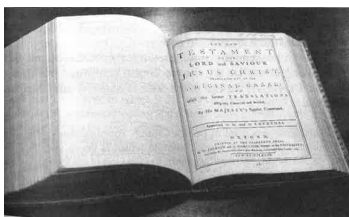
- 1. That Christianity is the only true and perfect religion; and that in proportion as mankind adopt its principles and obey its precepts, they will be wise and happy.
- 2. That a better knowledge of this religion is to be acquired by reading the Bible than in any other way.

VII. There is a native love of truth in the human mind. Lord Shaftesbury says, that “truth is so congenial to our minds, that we love even the shadow of it;” And Horace, in his rules for composing an epic poem, establishes the same law in our natures, by advising the “fictions in poetry to resemble truth.” **Now the Bible contains more truths than any other book in the world:** so true is the testimony that it bears of God in His works of creation, providence, and redemption that it is called Truth itself, by way of pre-eminence above things that are only simply true. How forcibly are we struck with the evidences of truth, in the history of the Jews, above what we discover in the history of other nations? Where do we find a hero, or an historian, record his own faults or vices except in the Old Testament? Indeed, my friend, from some accounts which I have read of the American Revolution, I begin to grow skeptical to all history except to that which is contained in the Bible. Now, if this book be known to contain nothing but what is materially true, the mind will naturally acquire a love for it from this circumstance; and **from this affection for the truths of the Bible, it will acquire a discernment of truth in other books, and a preference of it in all the transactions of life.**

VIII. There is wonderful property in the memory, which enables it in old age, to recover the knowledge acquired in early life after it had been apparently forgotten for forty or fifty years. Of how much consequence, then, must it be, to fill the mind with that species of knowledge, in childhood and youth, which, when recalled in the decline of life, will support the soul under the infirmities of age, and smooth the avenues of approaching death? The Bible is the only book which is capable of affording this support to old age; and it is for this reason that we find it resorted to with so much diligence and pleasure by such old people as have read it in early life. I can recollect many instances of this kind in persons who discovered no attachment to the Bible, in the meridian of their lives, who have, notwithstanding, spent the evening of them in reading no other book. The late Sir John Pringle, Physician to the Queen of Great Britain, after passing a long life in camps and at court, closed it by studying the Scriptures. So anxious was he to increase his knowledge in them, that he wrote to **Dr. Michaelis, a learned professor of Divinity in Germany**, for an explanation of a difficult text of Scripture, a short time before his death.



George Washington's three-volume, hand-autographed Bible. Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection. Photograph: © Christian Heritage Ministries.



Martha Washington's hand-autographed family Bible, on exhibition in museum on grounds of Mount Vernon, home of George and Martha Washington. Permanently removed to archives, Winter 1987. Photograph: © John W. Wrigley.

**My second argument in favor of the use of the Bible in schools is founded upon an implied command of God, and upon the practice of several of the wisest nations of the world.**

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy, we find the following words, which are directly to my purpose: “**And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.**”

It appears, moreover, from the history of the Jews, that they flourished as a nation, in proportion as they honored and read the books of Moses, which contained the only revelation that God had made to the world. The law was not only neglected, but lost during the general profligacy of manners which accompanied the long and wicked reign of Manasseh. But the discovery of it, amid the rubbish of the temple by Josiah and its subsequent general use, were followed by a return of national virtue and prosperity. We read further, of the wonderful effects which the reading of the law by Ezra, after his return from his captivity in Babylon, had upon the Jews. They hung upon his lips with tears, and showed the sincerity of their repentance by their general reformation.

**The learning of the Jews, for many years, consisted in nothing**

**but a knowledge of the Scriptures.** These were the text books of all the instruction that was given in the schools of their prophets. It was by means of this general knowledge of their law, that those Jews, who wandered from Judea into other countries, carried with them, and propagated certain ideas of the true God among all the civilized nations upon the face of the earth. **And it was from the attachment they retained to the Old Testament, that they procured a translation of it into the Greek language, after they had lost the Hebrew tongue,** by their long absence from their native country. The utility of this translation, commonly called the Septuagint, in facilitating the progress of the Gospel is well known to all who are acquainted with the history of the first age of the Christian church.

But the benefits of an early and general acquaintance with the Bible were not confined only to the Jewish nations. They have appeared in many countries in Europe, since the Reformation. The industry, and habits of order, which distinguish many of the German nations, are derived from their early instructions in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible. **The Bible is still used as a school book in Scotland and in the New England states.** However opposed the inhabitants of these two distant countries have lately been, in political sentiments and conduct, they agree in being the most enlightened in religion and science – the most strict in morals – and the most intelligent in human affairs, of any people whose history has come to my knowledge, upon the surface of the globe.

If we descend from the nations to sects, we shall find them wise and prosperous in proportion as they became early acquainted with the Scriptures. **The Bible is still used as a school book among the Quakers. The morality of this sect of Christians is universally acknowledged. Nor is this all – the prudence in the management of their private affairs, is as much a mark of the society as their sober manners.**

I wish to be excused for repeating here, that if the Bible did not convey a single direction for the attainment of future happiness, it should be read in our schools in preference to all other books, from its containing the greatest portion of that kind of knowledge which is calculated to produce private and public temporal happiness.

**We err not only in human affairs, but in religion likewise, only because we “do not know the Scriptures.”** Immense truths, I believe, are concealed in them. The time, I have no doubt, will come when posterity will view and pity our ignorance of these truths, as much as we do the ignorance of the disciples of our Saviour, who knew nothing of the meaning of those plain passages in the Old Testament, which were daily fulfilling before their eyes.

Whenever that time shall arrive, those truths which have escaped our notice, or, if discovered, have been thought to be opposed to each other, or to be inconsistent with themselves, will then, like the stones of Solomon's temple, be found so exactly to accord with each other, that they shall be cemented without noise or force, into one simple and sublime system of religion.

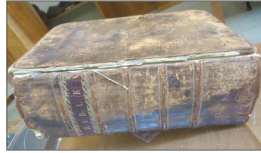
But further, we err, not only in religion but in philosophy likewise, because we “do not know or believe the Scriptures.” **The sciences have been compared to a circle of which religion composes a part. To understand any one of them perfectly, it is necessary to have some knowledge of them all. Bacon, Boyle, and Newton, included the Scriptures in the inquiries to which their universal geniuses disposed them, and their philosophy was aided by their knowledge in them. A striking agreement has been lately discovered between the history of certain events recorded in the Bible and some of the operations and productions of nature, particularly those which are related in Whitehurst's observations on the deluge – in Smith's account of the origin of the variety of color in the human species – and in Bruce's travels. It remains yet to be shown how many other events related in the Bible accord with some late important discoveries in the principles of medicine. The events and the principles alluded to, mutually establish the truth of each other.**

From the discoveries of the Christian philosophers, whose names have been last mentioned, I have been led to question whether most

harm has been done to Revelation, by those divines who have unduly multiplied the objects of reason in explaining the Scriptures.

**I shall now proceed to answer some of the objections which have been made to the use of the Bible as a school book:**

I. We are told that the familiar use of the Bible in our schools has a tendency to lessen a due reverence for it. This objection, by proving too much, proves nothing at all. If familiarity lessens respect for divine things, then all those precepts of our religion, which enjoin the daily or weekly worship of the Deity are improper. The Bible was not intended to represent a Jewish art; and it is an anti-Christian idea to suppose that it can be profaned by being carried into a schoolhouse, or by being handled by children. **But where will the Bible be read by young people with more reverence than in a school?** Not in most private families; for I believe there are few parents, who preserve so much order in their houses, as is kept up in our common English schools.



Left: Thomas Jefferson's large family Bible, (King James 1611 Authorized), which, according to Captain Edmond Bacon, Monticello's overseer for 20 years, Jefferson constantly read. University of Virginia Archives, Charlottesville, Virginia. Right: Thomas Jefferson's personal family Bible, (King James 1611 Authorized), opened to Genesis, the First Book of the Bible. Photograph: © Christian Heritage Ministries.

II. We are told, that there are many passages in the Old Testament, that are improper to be read by children, and that the greatest part of it, is no way interesting to mankind under the present dispensation of the Gospel. There are, I grant, several chapters, and many verses in the Old Testament which, in their present unfortunate translation, should be passed over by children. But I deny that any of the books of the Old Testament are not interesting to mankind, under the Gospel dispensation. **Most of the characters, events, and ceremonies, mentioned in them, are personal, providential, or instituted types of the Messiah: All of which have been, or remain yet to be fulfilled by Him.** It is from an ignorance or neglect of these types, that we have so many deists in Christendom, for so irrefragably do they prove the truth of Christianity that I am sure a young man who had been regularly instructed in their meaning, could never doubt afterwards of the truth of any of its principles. If any obscurity appears in these principles, it is only (to use the words of the poet) because they are dark, with excessive bright.

I know there is an objection among many people to teaching children doctrines of any kind, because they are liable to be controverted. But where will the objection lead us? The being of a God, and the obligations of morality, have been controverted; and yet who has objected to our teaching these doctrines to our children?

The curiosity and capacities of young people for the mysteries of religion, awaken much sooner than is generally supposed. Of this we have two remarkable proofs in the Old Testament. The first is mentioned in the twelfth chapter of Exodus. **"And it shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, What mean you by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses."** A second proof of the



Thomas Jefferson's Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments (4 vols.), translated from the Greek by Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress. Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection. Photograph: © Christian Heritage Ministries.

desire of the children to be instructed in the mysteries of religion, is to be found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. "And when thy son asketh thee in the time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies – and the statutes – and the judgments which the Lord our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." These enquiries, from the mouths of children are perfectly natural; for where is the parent who has not had similar questions proposed to him by his children upon their being first conducted to a place of worship, or upon their beholding, for the first time, either of the sacraments of religion? Let us not be wiser than our Maker. If moral precepts alone could have reformed mankind, the mission of the Son of

God into our world, would have been unnecessary. He came to promulgate a system of doctrines, as well as a system of morals. **The perfect morality of the Gospel rests upon a doctrine, which, though often controverted, has never been refuted; I mean the vicarious life and death of the Son of God.** This sublime and ineffable doctrine delivers us from the absurd hypothesis of modern philosophers concerning the foundation of moral obligation, and fixes it upon the eternal and self-moving principle of LOVE. It concentrates a whole system of ethics in a single text of Scripture, "A New commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you." By withholding the knowledge of this doctrine from children, we deprive ourselves of the best means of awakening moral sensibility in their minds.

We do more; we furnish an argument, for withholding from them a knowledge of the morality of the Gospel likewise; for this in many instances, is as supernatural, and therefore as liable to be controverted, as any of the doctrines or miracles which are mentioned in the New Testament. **The miraculous conception of the Saviour of the world by a virgin is not more opposed to the ordinary course of natural events, nor is the doctrine of the atonement more above human reason,** than those moral precepts, which command us to love our enemies or to die for our friends.

III. It has been said, that the division of the Bible into chapters and verses, renders it more difficult to be read by children, than many other books. By a little care in the matter, this difficulty may be obviated, and even an advantage derived from it. It may serve to transfer the attention of the scholar to the sense of the subject; and no person will ever read well, who is guided by anything else, in his stops, emphases, or accents. The division of the Bible into chapters and verses, is not a greater obstacle to its being read with ease, than the bad punctuation of most other books. I deliver this stricture upon other books, from the authority of Mr. Rice, the celebrated author of the art of speaking, whom I heard declare in a large company, in London, that he had never seen a book properly pointed in the English language. He exemplified, notwithstanding, by reading to the same company a passage from Milton, his perfect knowledge of the art of reading.

Some people, I know, have proposed to introduce extracts from the Bible itself. Many excellent works of this kind are in print, but if we admit any one of them, we shall have the same inundation of them that we have had of grammars, spelling-books, and lessons for children, many of which are published for the benefit of the authors only, and all of them have tended greatly to increase the expense of education. Besides, these extracts or abridgements of the Bible, often contain the tenets of particular sects or persons, and therefore, may be improper for schools composed of the children of different sects of Christians. **The Bible is a cheap book, and is to be had in every bookstore. It is, moreover, esteemed and preferred by all sects; because each finds peculiar doctrines in it. It should therefore be used in preference to any abridgements of it, or histories extracted from it.**

I have heard it proposed, that a portion of the Bible should be read every day by the master, as a means of instructing children in it: But this is a poor substitute for obliging children to read it as a school book; for by this means we insensibly engrave, as it were, its contents upon their minds: and it has been remarked that **children, instructed in this way in the Scriptures, seldom forget any part of them.** They have the same advantage over those persons, who have only heard the Scriptures read by a master, that a man who has worked with tools of a mechanical employment for several years, has over that man who has only stood a few hours in a work shop, and seen the same business carried on by other people.

In this defense of the use of the Bible as a school book, I beg you would not think that I suppose the Bible to contain the only Revelation which God has made to man. I believe in an eternal Revelation, or a moral principle, which God has implanted in

the heart of every man, as the precursor of His final dominion over the whole human race. How much this internal revelation accords with the external, remains yet to be explored by philosophers. I am disposed to believe, that most of the doctrines of Christianity revealed in the Bible, might be discovered by a close examination of all the powers and principles of action in man: But who is equal to such an inquiry? It certainly does not suit the natural indolence, or laborious employments of a great majority of mankind. The internal revelation of the Gospel may be compared to the straight line which is made through a wilderness by the assistance of a compass, to a distant country, which few are able to discover, while *the Bible resembles a public road to the same country, which is wide, plain and easily found*. "And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called a way of holiness. The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."<sup>\*</sup>

**To the arguments I have mentioned in favor of the use of the Bible as a school book, I shall add a few reflections.**

*The present fashionable practice of rejecting the Bible from our schools, I suspect, has originated with deists. They discover great ingenuity in this new mode of attacking Christianity.* If they proceed in it, they will do more in half a century, in extirpating our religion, than Bolingbroke or Voltaire could have effected in a thousand years.

I am not writing to this class of people. I despair of changing the opinions of any of them. *I wish only to alter the opinions and conduct of those lukewarm, or superstitious Christians, who have been misled by the deists upon this subject. On the ground of the good old custom, of using the Bible as a school book, it becomes us to entrench our religion. It is the last bulwark the deists have left it; for they have rendered instruction in the principles of Christianity by the pulpit and the press, so unfashionable, that little good for many years seems to have been done by either of them.*

The effects of the disuse of the Bible, as a school book, have appeared of late in the neglect and even contempt with which Scripture names are treated by many people. It is because parents have not been early taught to know or respect the characters and exploits of the Old and New Testament worthies, that their names are exchanged for those of the modern kings of Europe, or of the principal characters in novels and romances.

I conceive there may be some advantage in bearing Scripture names. It may lead to the persons who bear them, to study that part of the Scriptures, in which the names are mentioned, with uncommon attention, and perhaps it may excite a desire in them to possess the talents or virtues of the ancient name-sakes.

It is a singular fact, that while the names of the kings and emperors of Rome are now given chiefly to horses and dogs, Scripture names have hitherto been confined only to the human species. Let the enemies and condemners of those names take care, lest the names of more modern kings be given hereafter only to the same animals of an inferior species.

*It is with great pleasure, that I have observed the Bible to be the only book read in the Sunday Schools in England. We have adopted the same practice in the Sunday Schools lately established in this city.* This will give our religion (humanly speaking) the chance of a longer life in our country. We hear much of the persons educated in free schools in England, turning out well in the various walks of life. I have inquired into the cause of it, and have satisfied myself that it is wholly to be ascribed to the general use of the Bible in those schools, for it seems the children of poor people are of too little consequence to be guarded from the supposed evils of reading the Scriptures in early life, or in an unconsecrated school house.

However great the benefits of reading the Scriptures in schools have been, I cannot help remarking, that these benefits might be much greater, did school-masters take more pains to explain them to their scholars. **Did they demonstrate the Divine original of the Bible, from the purity, consistency and benevolence of its doctrines and precepts** – did they explain the meaning of the levitical institutions, and show their application to the numerous and successive Gospel dispensations – did they inform their pupils, that the gross and abominable vices of the Jews were recorded only as proofs of the depravity of human nature, and of the insufficiency of the law, to produce moral virtues, and thereby to establish the necessity and perfection of the Gospel System – *and above all, did they often*

*enforce the discourse of our Saviour, as the best rule of life, and the surest guide to happiness* – how great would be the influence of our schools upon the order and prosperity of our country! *Such a mode of instructing children in the Christian religion, would convey knowledge into their understanding and would therefore be preferable to teaching them creeds, and catechisms, which too often convey, not knowledge, but words only, into their memories. I think I am not too sanguine in believing, that education, conducted in this manner, would, in the course of two generations, eradicate infidelity from among us, and render civil government scarcely necessary in our country.*

But contemplating the political institutions of the United States, I lament, that we waste so much time and money in punishing crimes, and take so little pains to prevent them. *We profess to be Republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our Republican forms of government, that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible;* for this Divine book, above all others, favors that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues which constitute the soul of Republicanism.

I have now only to apologize for having addressed this letter to you, after having been assured by you, that your opinion, respecting the use of the Bible as a school book, coincided with mine. My excuse for what I have done is, that I knew you were qualified by your knowledge, and disposed by your zeal in the cause of Truth, to correct all the errors you would discover in my letter.

Perhaps a further apology may be necessary for my having presumed to write upon a subject so much above my ordinary studies. *My excuse for it is that I thought a single mite from a member of a profession, which has been frequently charged with skepticism in religion, might attract the notice of persons who had often overlooked the more ample contributions, upon this subject, of gentlemen of our profession.*

With great respect, I am, dear Sir,  
Your sincere friend,  
BENJAMIN RUSH.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>From, *The Truth About The Founding Fathers of The American Republic - Updated*  
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