

Window on the World

Window on the World is our weekly opportunity to examine our culture from the vantage point of biblical Christianity. Here you will find the text from Dr. Ryken's "Window on the World" talks from Tenth Presbyterian Church's evening service. If you missed one or wanted to send a copy to a friend, you will be able to find them here. Please note: there is no "Window on the World" on third Sundays, selected other Sundays, or in July and August.

Windows on the World before September 2005 are available in an older format. [Click here](#). Many of these are now published in [My Father's World: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2002) and in [He Speaks to Me Everywhere: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2004) by Philip Graham Ryken.



Franklinity

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Last week marked the 300th anniversary of the quintessential Philadelphian, Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was born in Boston, of course, but virtually since the day he walked into this town with two loaves of bread under his arm and one in his mouth, Philadelphia has belonged to old Ben.

He was by all accounts an extraordinary man, famous for his common sense, thriftiness, ingenuity, and wit. As the newspaper articles and television specials have been reminding us, Benjamin Franklin was a practical genius, with a seemingly endless supply of new ideas in the public interest and an apparently boundless capacity for making them come to pass.

In case there is any need for reminder, Benjamin Franklin was the printer of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, the founder of the Pennsylvania Hospital, the establisher of the Free Library, the creator of the country's first fire department, and a notable experimenter with electricity. Later in life he served as the first U.S. ambassador to France. He also helped start the American Philosophical Society and the University of Pennsylvania. Along the way he invented the voluntary association, the lending library, the matching fund, the town watch, the lightning rod, and the Franklin stove. In his seventies he served as one of the leading members of the Continental Congress and helped to frame the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America.

As Christians, as Americans, and as citizens of the fair city of Philadelphia, we can praise God for the life and work of Benjamin Franklin. He is without question Philadelphia's finest citizen and in many ways the most fully American of our Founding Fathers.

Benjamin Franklin also had a keen interest in religion. A self-acknowledged deist, Franklin had faith that the world was made by an all-powerful God. However, he was doubtful about the person and work of Jesus Christ and it is not clear that he ever came to saving faith. Indeed, it seems unlikely that he ever did. But this was not for lack of hearing the gospel. Franklin made a special point of going to hear the famous evangelist George Whitefield when he came to Philadelphia in 1739, preaching to thousands and transforming the spiritual climate of the city. Fascinated by Whitefield's remarkable ability to project his voice, Franklin spent one outdoor sermon measuring the

preacher's range and estimating the number of people who could hear him at roughly 30,000. This fact is noteworthy for what it tells us about George Whitefield, but as much for what it tells us about Benjamin Franklin. Ever the practical man, Franklin was more interested in the projection of sound than in the proclamation of the gospel. When he listened to Whitefield's voice, did he hear what the evangelist was saying about the cross and the empty tomb?

The two men remained affectionate friends and frequent correspondents. On one of Whitefield's visits to Philadelphia, Franklin invited the famous evangelist to stay in his family home. When Whitefield remarked that he hoped the offer was made "for Christ's sake," Franklin replied, "Don't let me be mistaken, it was not for Christ's sake, but for yours" [quoted in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1990), 180]. George Whitefield never stopped praying for Benjamin Franklin, or hoping that one day he would come to Christ. In one letter he wrote, "As you have made a pretty considerable progress in the mysteries of electricity, I would now humbly recommend to your diligent unprejudiced pursuit and study the mystery of the new birth" [quoted in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), 2:446]. Like Jesus with Nicodemus (see John 3:1-8), Whitefield was challenging Franklin to see his need for the supernatural transforming work of God the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, as far as we know, Franklin never did see his need for a Savior. Many years later, after Whitefield was dead, Philadelphia's leading citizen wrote, "Mr. Whitefield used to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of feeling that his prayers were heard" [quoted in Dallimore, 181].

Franklin's spiritual self-sufficiency is perhaps most clearly illustrated by his thinking on humility and pride. As a young man he decided to pursue a life of virtue and developed his own moral code. He properly recognized that pride was a vice and sought to eliminate proud thoughts. The trouble was that he couldn't help but proudly admire his personal accomplishments. In the end, Franklin had to conclude that humility was beyond his reach. "I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue," he wryly observed, "but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it."

If only Franklin could have seen what this was telling him about his need for Jesus. Pride is the mother of all sins—the boldest declaration of our defiance against the lordship of God. Franklin's inability to conquer pride through self-effort should have shown him that he could only be set free from his sin by the superior power of God. While his famous dictum that "God helps those who help themselves" may be true in a limited sense, it is not true in salvation, where God helps those who *cannot* save themselves: "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:4-5).

Franklin's religion is still alive and well today, not just in Philadelphia, but across America. This religion is not Christianity—a religion of saving grace through the Son of God—but Franklinité—a religion of moral virtue through self-discipline [see Bill McKibben, "The Christian Paradox," *Harper's* (July 27, 2005)]. The trouble with Franklinité is that it cannot save. Like any religion based on personal moral achievement, it does not have the power to create the virtue that it demands. That transforming power only comes from God—the electricity of the Spirit, if you will.