

# Dr. Benjamin Rush: Christian Patriot, Scientist, and Physician

Kenneth Lawson\*

## Abstract

**D**r. Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) was a leading founding father of the United States of America. He received the best medical education available in his day. Dr. Rush patriotically served his new nation both in peacetime and war. As a pioneer in physical and mental health, he was respected on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout his long and useful life, Rush was a devout Christian who treasured the Holy Scriptures as God's Word. Much of the foundation for his medical and benevolent activities he learned from the first chapters of the book of Genesis, which he believed were composed of actual, historical people and events. This article examines the scientific and medical genius of Dr. Benjamin Rush and his Christian faith that guided his research and life.

**Key Words:** Medical science and the Bible, mental health and the Bible, Christianity and science, science and the Bible, Christianity and U.S. history

## Introduction

In the history of the United States there were heroic men who helped form their new nation, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. One man who worked closely with these founding fathers was Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia. He was a signer of the July 4, 1776, Declaration of Independence,

and he advised the founding fathers on numerous cultural and political matters. For many of them he was their personal physician. When the American Colonies fought for their independence against Great Britain, Rush served as a physician for troops in the field. After the war, Dr. Rush was a member of the Pennsylvania State Convention that ratified the Constitution of the United

States. As important as Rush was to the founding of the United States, he also made lasting contributions as a scientist and a physician. Guiding his honorable life were his firm Christian convictions. He believed the whole Bible and asserted that all people were made in the image of God. He saw the early chapters of Genesis as factual history.

## Early Influences

Benjamin Rush was born in Pennsylvania on December 24, 1745. He was educated by his uncle, Rev. Samuel Finley, an evangelical Presbyterian minister who was a firm advocate of the Great Awakening which was spreading through parts of the American Colonies. As a youth, Rush was a student at Princeton College, graduating in 1760

\* Kenneth E. Lawson, Highland Park, NJ, kvaamm@yahoo.com  
Kenneth Lawson earned a Ph.D. in United States History, and serves as the historian for the Associated Gospel Churches, Greenville, SC.  
Accepted for publication July 19, 2021

at age fifteen. He then studied medicine in Philadelphia, then in Scotland at the prestigious University of Edinburgh. He also attended medical lectures in Paris. Rush returned to Philadelphia in 1769, where he developed a reputation as a medical researcher and as the most influential physician and mental health scientist of his generation.

Dr. Benjamin Rush held a lifelong belief in the God of the Bible. In his *Autobiography*, he wrote about his admiration for two revival preachers of the Great Awakening who he heard preach frequently, the American Rev. Gilbert Tennent and the Englishman Rev. George Whitefield (Corner, 1948, pp. 55–57, 163). Rush had a personal conversion experience, and developed a lifelong practice of faithful church attendance and of personal devotions in his home. With his wife and children, he met twice daily for scripture reading and the reciting of the *Shorter Catechism of the Church of Scotland* (Corner, 1948, p. 31). One of Rush's biographers wrote that his life was centered on the religion he learned from his parents (Brodsky, 2004, p. 12). Rush himself wrote of his parent's faith, stating, "I have acquired and received nothing from the world which I prize so highly as the religious principles I inherited from them; and I possess nothing that I value so much as the innocence and purity of their characters" (Barton, 1999, p. 15).

### **First Accomplishments**

Dr. Rush was one of the most respected medical professionals in the English-speaking world and beyond. Some of his medical practices are outdated, but in his day, his accomplishments in science and medicine were remarkable and respected by the intelligentsia of his time (*History of Pennsylvania Hospital*, accessed 2021, p. 1).

In the early 1770s, Rush gained a national audience in teaching on the evils of slavery, the folly of alcohol abuse,

and the promotion of public health through improved community sanitation and personal hygiene. His teachings were first published in Philadelphia newspapers and then republished throughout the American colonies and Great Britain. During the early years of the Revolutionary War, Rush served as a medical officer for the soldiers, treating the sick and wounded. He observed the soldiers living in filth, experiencing sleep deprivation, wearing poor clothing in cold weather, and suffering with an inconsistent and unhealthy diet. He recognized these factors directly contributed to the poor physical and mental health of the soldiers. Rush eventually resigned his military medical responsibilities in protest of the poor treatment of the troops (*Penn University Archives & Records Center*, accessed 2018, p. 1). The experiences of Dr. Rush with the Continental Army of the colonies would motivate him to research, write, experiment, and teach on medical and scientific issues for the rest of his life.

After leaving the army, Rush soon resumed his medical practice in Philadelphia and his teaching at the City Medical College. He became involved in many scientific activities and associations that propelled him to international significance. He served for twenty-nine years as surgeon at the Pennsylvania Hospital; helped found Dickinson College in Pennsylvania as a science-oriented school in 1783; was a founder of the College of Physicians; and he served as chair of the chemistry department of the Philadelphia Medical College. In 1787 he joined the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society for the eradication of slavery. All the while he maintained a private medical practice through which he assisted both the wealthy and the poor in Philadelphia.

### **A Man of Christian Character**

The Christian character of Dr. Rush was on full display during the various

epidemics that set upon Philadelphia. Numerous diseases swept through the city during the Revolutionary War and afterwards, such as scarlet fever, croup, influenza, measles, typhoid, and smallpox. Rush was relentless not only in skillfully treating patients, but also in displaying compassion, praying for the sick, and conducting experiments as to the nature of the diseases and potential remedies. He read the Bible with his patients and was persistent in seeking their spiritual and physical good. Rush made some enemies from his innovations, as he ignored racial separation practices by treating blacks alongside slave-owning whites, and as he pioneered new treatments for the ill while some older, tradition-bound physicians objected (Brodsky, 2004, p. 89).

Amid the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, Rush wrote to his wife Julia, who had departed the city with their children. First, he quoted a text spoken by Jesus in John 13:34, *A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you*. Then Rush stated to his wife, "Had I not believed in the full import of that divine and sublime text of Scripture, I could not have exposed myself with so little concern, nay with so much pleasure, for five weeks past to the contagion of the prevailing fever. I did not dare to desert my post, and I believed even fear for a moment to be an act of disobedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Butterfield, 1951, p. 688).

Rush pioneered the idea that good health, cleanliness, and public hygiene could hinder the spread of diseases. Through numerous experimentations, he believed that stagnant water, public waste, and other filth contributed to the urban health problem. His world class research laboratory in Philadelphia kept meticulous records tracking when certain diseases came, the weather at the time, the prevalence of bugs and mosquitoes, the ships in port and where they came from, the aggressiveness

of the disease, how the disease was transmitted, how the disease affected various ages, and the effectiveness of his medicinal experiments at seeking cures. All of this was pioneering science which required great patience and diligence. Rush also developed new treatments related to quarantines, diet, exercise, sanitation, and testing food and water that comforted thousands and saved numerous lives (Brodsky, 2004, pp. 83, 251–255). These approaches were innovative. His attention to detail and his skill in science and medicine provided increased knowledge that gave him and his staff the ability to develop better medical aids and cures. He saw all people as made in the image of God and, therefore, sought to heal both the body and the soul.

While writing about his medical practice and science experiments during an epidemic in Philadelphia, Rush wrote, “Heaven alone bore witness to the anguish of my soul in this awful situation. But I did not abandon a hope that the disease might yet be cured. I had long believed that...there does not exist a disease for which the goodness of Providence has not provided a remedy” (Rush, 1805, p. 226). Considered a worldwide expert on epidemiology, Rush published his medical findings related to the spread and treatments of various diseases. In addition to his many accolades for his scientific research and medical practice, in 1805 the King of Prussia issued Dr. Rush a medal for his expertise in science and medicine.

### Guiding Influences

The guideline for Benjamin Rush’s life was the Bible. Beginning with Genesis, he believed a literal Garden of Eden existed before sin that had “original equality,” and was free from the defects of the “tyranny” of the fall (Brodsky, 2004, p. 255). He believed in the great ages of humans before the Genesis Flood, what he called the “prolonging [of] life to

the antediluvian age” (Brodsky, 2004, p. 359). Rush also believed in “the deluge which overwhelmed the world,” in the days of Noah (Brodsky, 2004, p. 231). He rejected the extreme rationalism of secular philosophers and agnostic scientists with his personal faith in Jesus Christ. After winning a prolonged legal battle which included a mean-spirited rivalry with a jealous Philadelphia journalist, Rush wrote in 1801, “Thrones and kings and secular priests and usurpers must fall and perish. Their doom is fixed in the scriptures of truth. The Messiah alone will rule as King of Saints and Lord of the whole earth. All will end, not only well, but gloriously for those who believe and trust in his name” (Butterfield, 1951, p. 837).

Christian compassion guided Rush to help the outcasts of society. In addition to his expertise in physical health, Benjamin Rush spent much of his later adult years studying mental health. He believed that Christ came to redeem the soul, but also to heal the body and the mind. Rush observed mental disease with exhausted Revolutionary War soldiers who saw the horror of war and simultaneously fought malnutrition and exhaustion. He also witnessed mental disorders resulting from the anxieties and panics created from various epidemics. Those with mental illness in his day were institutionalized or imprisoned, but Rush created advanced medical treatments for them. He treated hundreds of patients with mental disorders, maintaining detailed clinical records. For his unique research and experiments in mental health he has rightly been labeled, “The founder of American Psychiatry” (Starr, 1982, p. 42; Brodsky, 2004, pp. 5, 291; Rutkow, 2012, p. 33).

Throughout his extraordinarily successful life, Benjamin Rush never lost his personal faith in the God of the Bible. During his lifetime existed the rising influence of deism and humanism, but Rush maintained his Biblio-centric

view of the world. In his *Autobiography*, Rush noted he was friends with Thomas Jefferson but critical of his (Jefferson’s) deism (Corner, 1948, p. 334). In later life, Rush still supported traditional or orthodox Christianity, although this was not popular with many intellectuals of that time. For example, as an older man he still believed in the Biblical God as creator, and he supported the idea of a literal first human named Adam (Corner, 1948, p. 337). Rush understood the entire human family as descended from a historic Adam and Eve, and supported the historicity of Biblical persons such as the ancient man named Job (Corner, 1948, p. 338). As a scientist, Rush was critical of the natural theology of his day which negated the Biblical account of creation. Rush realized that such teachings led people from God, and he believed in “the truth of the Mosaic account of the creation” (Corner, 1948, p. 339).

Benjamin Rush conversed with the most brilliant minds in America, Great Britain, and elsewhere. His scientific and academic writings were studied in America, Great Britain, and continental Europe (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 2021; North, 2000, pp. 45–49). He saw no conflict with academic excellence and scientific query with the Bible. Rush did not diminish his confidence in the accuracy and historicity of the Bible for the acceptance or approval of the intelligentsia of his day. While many humanistic scientists believed in the impossibility of bodily resurrection, Rush asserted that Jesus was “raised from the grave by His Father,” as the key to “the salvation of human souls” (Corner, 1948, p. 340). Rush accepted the early chapters of Genesis as accurate history. Not only did he accept the idea of a historic Adam, but he also endorsed the idea of a global flood in the days of Noah, writing of that event, “Every living substance [was] destroyed by the flood (Corner, 1948, p. 341).”

## Conclusions

Dr. Benjamin Rush was a pioneer and a reformer. He sought diligently to improve the medical, educational, and social practices of his day. As a forward-looking scientist and physician, he was limited by the time in which he lived. Medicine is always developing, and some of Rush's techniques seem crude or simplistic by today's technological standards. But the timeless foundation of his life was his faith. He believed the Bible from cover to cover. Benjamin Rush is an example of a brilliant scientific and analytical mind with a benevolent Christian heart. His life illustrates that a person can be both scientifically distinguished and believe the whole Bible as the Word of God. After decades of prominent medical and scientific labors with international accolades, Rush wrote, "My only hope of salvation is in the infinite transcendent love of God manifested to the world by the death

of His Son upon the cross. Nothing but His blood will wash away my sins. I rely exclusively upon it. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!" (Corner, 1948, p. 166).

## References

- Barton, D. 1999. *Benjamin Rush: Signer of the Declaration of Independence*. Wall-Builders Books, Aledo, TX.
- "Benjamin Rush," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benjamin-Rush>. (accessed May 28, 2021).
- "Benjamin Rush," *Penn University Archives & Records Center*, <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/benjamin-rush>. (accessed March 20, 2018).
- Brodsky, A. 2004. *Benjamin Rush: Patriot and Physician*. St. Martin's Press, New York, NY.
- Butterfield, L. 1951. *Letters of Benjamin Rush: Volume II: 1793–1813*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Corner, G.W., compiler. 1948. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His Travels Throughout Life Together with His Common-Place Book for 1789–1813*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, CT.
- "Dr. Benjamin Rush," *History of Pennsylvania Hospital*, <https://www.uphs.upenn.edu/paharc/timeline/1751/tline7.html>. (accessed May 30, 2021).
- North, R.L. 2000. "Benjamin Rush, MD: Assassin or Beloved Healer?" *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings*.
- Rush, B. 1805. *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, vol. III. J. Conrad & Company Publishers, Philadelphia, PA.
- Rutkow, I. 2012. *Seeking the Cure: A History of Medicine in America*. Scribner Books, New York, NY.
- Starr, P. 1982. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*. Perseus Books, New York, NY.