



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on October 30, 2017

Virginia Church Removes Plaques to Washington and Lee

Church leaders at Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia (shown), wrote a letter to their congregation last week explaining why plaques honoring two prominent former parishioners, George Washington and Robert E. Lee, are being taken down. “The plaques in our sanctuary make some in our presence feel unsafe or unwelcome. Some visitors and guests who worship with us choose not to return because they receive an unintended message from the prominent presence of the plaques,” the letter said.



A plaque in honor of the father of our country makes visitors feel unsafe?

As difficult as that is to believe, the church’s leadership decided the plaques must be removed.

One person who posted a comment on the church’s Facebook page summed up the curious decision quite well: “The logical conclusion to your proposal is that you need to tear down your building and return any moneys given you by the Washington and Lee families, with interest. And we both know you’re not going to do that. This revisionism is stupid and counterproductive to society. That you are even considering this, let alone intending to do it, should be a cause for you all to be very ashamed.”

Other comments compared the decision to the Taliban’s efforts to rub out history that they do not like.

Both the Washington and Lee families were major contributors to the historic church. Washington was a founding member in 1773, even buying a pew, and attending for more than two decades. (Washington usually attended Pohick Church near his Mount Vernon home, but would often be present at Christ Church services when he had business to attend to in Alexandria.) Washington contributed money to the church throughout his life, and his family gave the church one of Washington’s Bibles after his death in 1799.

Lee attended the church regularly from the time his family moved to Alexandria when he was only three years old. His daughter Mary Custis Lee left the church \$10,000 in her will after her death in 1918 — money that was used to begin the church’s endowment.

The decision to remove plaques honoring the two men, both of whom were devout Christians, was not made by a vote of the congregation. In the Episcopal church, church leaders makes major decisions for the congregation, although the church’s rector (pastor) Noelle York-Simmons noted that her parishioners “responded beautifully ... listening in a lot of ways.”

York-Simmons added that the plaques were a “distraction” and an “impediment to our growth.”

In the letter to parishioners, the church’s leadership (the vestry) were much kinder in their comments about Washington than about Lee. They called Washington a “visionary who not only refused to be king but also gave up power after eight years, and a symbol of our democracy.” This comment is interesting in that it demonstrates that the present leadership of the church does not know that the United States is *not* a democracy, but rather a *republic*. While the church leadership is free to simply dictate the decision to dishonor two great Americans, this appears to be more of a situation in which a small group



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in the church have opted to use their positions to advance their liberal views.

Lee was described in less flattering terms than Washington, dismissed him as someone who “symbolizes the attempt to overthrow the Union and to preserve slavery.”

But rather than being an advocate of the preservation of slavery, Lee was in fact an opponent of slavery, telling his wife in a letter, “I believe in this enlightened age, there are few who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil.” Soon after this letter, Lee freed slaves that he had inherited from his father-in-law.

Lee was a devout Christian. The universal witness is that he never drank, never used tobacco, and never used profanity.

Following the Civil War, Lee displayed kindness not only to Confederate veterans, but also to Union veterans. And he took a leadership role in respecting the dignity of the newly-freed slaves.

Writing in the *Confederate Veteran* of August 1905, Colonel T.L. Broun recalled having been present at St. Paul’s (Episcopal) Church in Richmond, Virginia, in June 1865. “It was communion day; and when the minister was ready to administer the holy communion, a negro in the church arose and advanced to the communion table.... This was a great surprise and shock to the communicants and others present.”

Broun recalled how several retained their seats, apparently refusing to have communion served to them with a newly-freed black man. Yet, General Lee “arose in his usual dignified and self-possessed manner, walked up the aisle to the chancel rail, and reverently knelt down to partake of the communion” close to the former slave. Broun said that this action had a “magical effect upon the other communicants who went forward to the communion table [and down through time, those who would read of this story, including this writer].”

Despite this historical incident, the letter by leadership of the church where Washington and Lee once worshipped attempted to explain the decision to remove plaques honoring the two men. It stated, “Today our country is trying to once again come to grips with the history of slavery.” Perhaps if the church’s leaders actually knew some history — that both Lee and Washington *freed* their slaves, for example — this would lead them to take pride in having two famous and devout Christian gentlemen among the church’s historical roster of parishioners, rather than trashing their memory.

Steve Byas is the author of History’s Greatest Libels, in which he defends many historical figures from what he considers unfair attacks. One chapter argues against the assertion that George Washington was not a Christian, but a deist.



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