

#### ***Part 4 - Church History in 45 Minutes?***

*English Christianity existed as a distinctive branch of the trunk of the apostolic Church from the earliest times of the Christian era. It synthesized Celtic practices and Roman practices into a distinct Ecclesia Anglicana long before the Reformation.*

The first British Christians were Romans, but with the withdrawal of Romans from England in the Fifth century, Christianity survived in the Celtic areas of the west of England, Ireland, and Scotland. In the centuries during which Celtic Christianity was separated from Roman, the Celts developed a distinctive form of monasticism and church polity and a spirituality centered on creation and the cross.

In 597, when Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine of Canterbury to evangelize the English, there was a centuries-old Celtic church flourishing in Ireland and Scotland. In 664 at the Council of Whitby, the King of Northumberland accepted the Roman date for Easter rather than the Celtic, and the two branches began to grow together in Great Britain. During the next centuries, monasteries adopted a characteristic Benedictine spirituality.

From the Norman conquest of 1066 to Henry II's controversies with his Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket a century later, to John's confrontation with Archbishop Stephen Langton that led to the Magna Carta, to Henry VIII's displeasure with his Chancellor Thomas More, the relationship of Crown to Church was never easy, but the distinctively English character of the Church was never in question.

The Sixteenth-Century Reformation in England was different in character from the Continental Reformation— neither Lutheran nor Calvinist, though affected by both. In England, the Reformation was a political event, expressive of an emerging English national feeling. The Parliament in 1534 passed the ***Act of Supremacy*** making the King the Head of the Church in England as the culmination of a series of laws rejecting various claims to entitlement of the Bishop of Rome.

Henry VIII did not favor Continental Protestant ideas, and did not start the Church of England; he considered himself an English Catholic. His Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was affected by Lutheran ideas, but during Henry's reign (1509-47) was able to persuade the King only to authorize the writing of the Great Litany in English and the placement of an English Bible in churches. The mass remained in Latin and priests remained celibate.

Lutheran and Calvinist ideas did have their day during the brief reign of Edward VI, Henry's son, and it was during this period the first English *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) was issued, making worship uniform throughout the realm. The Protestant direction of the Edwardian reform was halted with the accession in 1553 of Mary, who returned England to the Latin mass and allegiance to the Pope.

When Mary died and Elizabeth I inherited in 1558, the distinctively Anglican *via media* or middle way was an expression of her policy. Elizabeth maintained the continuity of apostolic succession through the consecration of her Archbishop Matthew Parker. A national English Church outside the authority of Rome or Geneva survived. The *Elizabethan Settlement* is more important in shaping modern Anglicanism than anything done by Henry VIII.

One important religious and cultural monument of the Reformation that does owe a good deal to Continental Protestant influences was the translation into English of the Bible. From John Wyclif and William Tyndale to the various translators of the Reformation era, and finally to the Authorized Version or King James Bible of 1611, the English Bible emerged as a literary masterpiece and cherished national treasure of the English Church.

In the 1580's Richard Hooker offered the classical defense of the Anglican middle way in his work *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, holding that the English Church, continuous with the apostolic Church, was both Catholic and reformed and rejecting the claims both of Rome and of the increasingly influential Puritans. Hooker offered the English a way of understanding Church authority as based on *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*.

Under the early Stuart kings James I and Charles I, Puritanism grew and increasingly challenged royal authority in ecclesiastical as well as legislative and financial affairs. The influence of Calvinism led the Puritans to understand the Church as a gathering of the elect and to reject episcopacy. These challenges culminated between 1642 and 1649 in a *civil war* between the Puritan-led Parliament and the forces of Charles I. For a time in the 1650s, the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell abolished the episcopate as well as the monarchy, substituting a Presbyterian form of government for the Church and a Commonwealth for the king. However with the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660, the historic episcopate and the Anglican settlement were restored as well.

Through these troubled times, the English Church moved back and forth in response to the political changes, but its continuity was never broken and the Elizabethan *via media* endured. Stemming from its multivalent past, a national Church of England held together faithful believers with many

convictions ranging from *Anglo-Catholic* (“High Church”) to *Evangelical* (“Low Church”), but an English national Church continued to govern itself through bishops and worship together according to the Book of Common Prayer.

The Church of England came to the English colonies in North America with the first settlers at *Jamestown, Virginia*, in 1607. Since the New England colonies were the creation of Puritans dissatisfied with the established Church at home, they were never Anglican, but the southern colonies gave a privileged position to the established Church of England.

During the two and a half centuries from 1607 to 1776, the English never consecrated a bishop for America, and even in the southern colonies there were many Anglicans who were not eager to see them appointed, since they were regarded as unwelcome extensions of royal authority. Laymen on *vestries* acquired much greater control over their clergy and parish affairs than in England.

The American Revolution was at first a disaster for the Church. Identified as it was with the mother country, having a clergy dependent upon episcopal oversight from London, worshipping according to a form that required prayers for the King at every service, it was the target of laws disestablishing it where it had been established and limiting it where it was not. Many clergy fled to England or Canada and left their congregations without pastors and without the sacraments.

At the end of the war, with British recognition of American independence, it was not clear how a Church of England could continue to exist in an American Republic. *Samuel Seabury* of Connecticut went to England to seek consecration as a bishop, but the English bishops were not legally able to lay hands upon anyone who could not pledge loyalty to the King of England. The answer was to turn to the Episcopal Church in Scotland, whose bishops consecrated Seabury in 1787.

Now that the historic episcopate had been brought to the United States, however, it was still not clear how the American Church would govern itself. *William White* of Philadelphia, soon consecrated a bishop himself, led the effort to design an American church suited to the new republic, and in 1789 *the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.* was created, with a governing structure based on the model of the Federal Constitution, combining lay and clerical leadership, with a *Presiding Bishop* and a *General Convention* made up of a *House of Bishops* and a *House of Delegates*.

Briefly divided by the *Civil War*, the Episcopal Church found it easier to reunite afterwards than many other denominations, because its unity came through common worship and prayer and the episcopacy. Even as Protestantism continued to give rise to new religious groups in America, the

Episcopal Church remained largely intact. There were, however, multiple influences acting on the Episcopal Church from the *Oxford movement* to *Liberal theology*, the *Broad Church* movement, and the *Social Gospel*.

As America industrialized and large numbers of immigrants arrived from central and eastern European lands, and as slavery disappeared, to be replaced by racial segregation, the religious makeup of the nation changed quickly. At the same time, industrialism and racism presented new problems and opportunities for the American Church. Episcopalians were prominent in the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and they struggled with the question of race relations and mission to African-Americans and Native Americans. In the late 19th century, American Episcopalians also began to play a significant role in foreign mission work in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and China.

Having pioneered in the development of a non-English Anglicanism, American Episcopalians also played a role in the evolution of the Anglican Communion as other former colonies of Great Britain acquired self-government and looked to the American Church as a model of how to retain an Anglican identity outside a colonial relationship with England. Similarly, from the 1850s on, Episcopalians led in the emerging Ecumenical Movement, offering the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral* of 1888 as a basis for church union.

In the twentieth century, the Church avoided the internal schisms that Protestant denominations often faced in the battle over a literal understanding of scripture and the issue of evolution. In the first half of the century, the Church was generally conservative, and its membership was largely middle and upper-class, but it promoted the social gospel and the ecumenical movement.

After World War II the Church experienced tremendous growth, reaching 3.4 million members by 1960. The controversies since that time have included the turbulence over racial and gender equality: the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the issue of Prayer Book revision. Typically for Anglicans, many of these issues have found expression as questions of liturgy and ordination. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer attempted both to modernize the language of the 1928 BCP and to return to many ancient practices of the Church. At present the Episcopal Church is struggling with issues of sexuality and sexual orientation which continue to find expression in typically Anglican form as questions of liturgy and ordination.