

The Episcopal Church in the United States

(Taken from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches in America*)

Prior to the mid-1780s, the religious community called the Episcopal Church in the United States or the Protestant Episcopal Church was known as the Church of England. Following the war for independence, however, Anglican leaders in the new nation reorganized this religious body, and the Protestant Episcopal Church became the self-governing American branch of the Anglican communion. The preface to the Episcopalian Book of Common Prayer clearly identifies the relationship of the two religious communities: "This Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship; or further than local circumstances require."

In some respects there are many beginnings in the history of this denomination, including the emergence of Christianity in England, the English Reformation, the transplanting of Anglicanism to colonial America, and the reorganization following the American Revolution. One of the major problems encountered by historians in regard to this church is that of determining the precise role of King Henry VIII in the rise of the Church of England. Some authors describe this reformation without mentioning the actions of this controversial ruler. Many reputable writers concentrate on the English rather than the Roman nature of the Medieval Church in that land and emphasize the role of the English clergy in refashioning this church during the sixteenth century. The traditional approach, however, of describing the underlying forces of the English Reformation and then explaining the annulment issue has remained popular; and in light of the almost absolute power exercised by the Tudor monarchs, it seems appropriate to mention Henry VIII's participation in England's religious revolt.

As on the Continent, there were many forces underlying the English Reformation, and in many respects the factors precipitating the religious upheaval in England resembled the political, economic, and social factors which led to the religious reorientation in continental Europe. Nationalism and a belief in mercantilism were especially strong in England, and an anticlerical attitude was visible among many inhabitants of that land. But while the earliest leaders of the Reformation on the continent were Catholic clergy or students of theology, the ecclesiastical reform in England was launched by a political leader.

What is frequently referred to as the occasion rather than the cause of the English Reformation was Henry VIII's desire to secure an annulment of his marriage to Catherine and to marry his mistress Anne Boleyn. Torn by love and fearing a possible future revolt in England if he failed to provide his people with a male heir, Henry sought a special dispensation from Pope Clement, permitting him to sever his marital relations with his wife. After seeking an annulment for six years, Henry began living with Anne Boleyn. In January, 1533, Anne was with child; and toward the end of that month Henry and Anne were secretly married. The ensuing May, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, declared Henry's marriage to Catherine null and void, and acknowledged the marriage with his former mistress.

Meanwhile, Henry had prepared the ground for nationalizing the universal church. In 1532 the clergy were forced to accept Henry as their supreme legislator, and bills were introduced in Parliament providing for the ordination of clergy to the office of bishop solely by English authorities. One year later, Henry responded to his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church by instructing the English clergy to teach that papal claims of power were human usurpations offensive to God. According to these decrees, the pope had no more authority in England than any other foreign bishop.

During the Parliamentary sessions of 1534 the momentous break with Rome was secured. This body, which was controlled by the monarch, recognized the English sovereign as head of the church in England and made provisions to transfer into the treasury of the state ecclesiastical revenue which previously crossed the English Channel. The government also officially repudiated all papal claims of rights and powers.

The reign of Henry VIII saw not only change in the hierarchy of the church but other significant innovations as well. Under the direction of Henry's leading advisor, Thomas Cromwell, the monasteries and all religious orders were suppressed. After the confiscated property reverted to the state, portions were sold to English nobles. Consequently, many aristocrats were tied economically to the reform movement. Meanwhile, the Old and New Testament were published in the vernacular and the clergy were instructed to encourage parishioners to read the English Bible.

The religious life of most people in England was not immediately altered by the inauguration of this reformation. Most Christians, recognizing few changes in the established faith, continued to worship in the traditional pattern. Parliament, in issuing official pronouncements concerning the doctrines and ritual of the English church, defended many traditional beliefs, such as transubstantiation, veneration of images and saints, prayers for the dead, and the seven sacraments. Although some statements were ambiguous, the pro-Catholic element was the dominant characteristic of the national church. The Church of England appeared similar to the Roman Catholic faith, but was headed by a popular king rather than a pope. Moreover, most priests accepted the reorganization without major opposition; and the clergy in Parliament, acting in harmony with the desires of the king, continued to direct the reform movement in England.

The Reformation which had erupted during the reign of Henry VIII was turned in a new direction after his death. In compliance with Henry's will, the young son of Jane Seymour (Henry's third wife, who died in childbirth) ascended to the throne. Since this delicate youth, Edward VI, was nine years old when he began his short reign, he permitted his Protestant friends to rule the land. Between 1547 and 1553, the beliefs of the Church of England were defined in favor of the Protestant theological position then being popularized on the Continent. The Mass was replaced

by a communion service, transforming what had been a literal sacrifice of Christ into a commemorative act. Transubstantiation, purgatory, indulgences, and veneration of images and relics were declared innovations repugnant to the word of God. Numerous ceremonies and practices employing the use of holy water, ashes, and alms were eliminated, and the veneration of the cross was ordered to be discontinued. Pilgrimages were forbidden. English replaced Latin in church services. Extreme unction and all other rites employing oil were eliminated, and confession to priests was no longer deemed necessary.

The impact of Continental Protestantism on the Church of England is best summarized in the Forty-two Articles of Religion. This creed, prepared by Thomas Cranmer, was the first comprehensive statement of faith for the church and bears a striking resemblance to the creeds and doctrines proclaimed by reformers in Germany and Switzerland. Although it is impossible to determine the extent of the conversion of the English people to Protestant theology at this time, still the Church of England was protestantized before the death of the boy king.

Even though there was a reestablishment of Roman Catholicism in England during the reign of Mary, the counter-reformation was not enduring. When Elizabeth, daughter of Anne Boleyn, was crowned in 1558, England saw the inauguration of another dispensation. This talented leader skillfully undertook to settle the religious issue and direct the church along a road which neither led back to Rome nor to the Protestantism that had emerged on the Continent.

Twenty-three years after Elizabeth had become queen, she endorsed an Articles of Religion for the national church. The Thirty-nine Articles were similar to the Forty-two Articles which had been enacted during Edward's reign and were approved by the religious leaders of the church, by Parliament, and by the "supreme governor." These articles provided the people with a norm of faith which was Lutheran and Calvinistic in tone. There was, however, an apparent ambiguity in some statements that was possibly designed to allow diversity on controversial theological issues. The creed was explicit on most issues endorsed by Lutherans and Calvinists but was generally vague when describing doctrines that divided these two wings of Protestantism. Although Elizabeth would not permit dissenting groups to organize, throughout her reign this influential queen permitted a wide latitude of belief in the established church--a distinguishing characteristic of the Church of England which has continued to this day.

The Anglican communion has not only been known for its theological pluralism, but has often been referred to as the compromise church. As observers have witnessed Anglican services, they have recognized Catholic elements in the patterns of worship. But on closer examination Anglican beliefs appear as popular Protestant tenets, with these major exceptions: the Anglican (and Episcopalian) endorsement of the Catholic view of apostolic succession, and emphasis on the sacraments. Consequently, this communion has been called a halfway house, a church which stands between Catholicism and Protestantism, Catholic in worship and Protestant in belief.

Since the first permanent English settlers in the New World were faithful members of the Church of England, the Anglican settlers of Jamestown organized America's first enduring Protestant church. This religious community was the only legal religion in Virginia for approximately seventy years. It was not until after the passage of the English Toleration Act of 1689 (which provided toleration for all Trinitarian Christians) that there was any significant growth of dissent in the Old Dominion: and religious pluralism did not become a noticeable characteristic of this colony until after 1740.

Although the majority of early immigrants to the English colonies founded before 1640 were members of the Anglican communion, the Church of England was not constituted in most of these early settlements. Upon arriving in the new world, Puritans established their Zion in the wilderness and many other settlers neglected to unite under the banner of the Anglican church. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Church of England was an organized body in only two American colonies, Virginia and Maryland. Although a variety of faiths had been transplanted to America, there was only one major body of Christians in each settlement located along the eastern seacoast. Congregationalists were established in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire; Baptists had organized in Rhode Island; members of reformed churches (Dutch and English) were worshipping in New York; and Swedish Lutherans had gathered in New Sweden. Meanwhile, Roman Catholic solidarity prevailed throughout New Spain and New France. Only in Maryland was there diversification of organized religion, with Anglicans and Roman Catholics worshipping independently.

A significant change occurred, however, in the American religious mosaic following the mid-seventeenth century. Since toleration was planted at the inception of all the mainland colonies founded or occupied by the English after 1660 (which included New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, the Carolinas, and Georgia), Anglicans joined other Protestants in developing the wilderness, and members of this communion erected many churches near edifices built by other Christians. By 1750 the Church of England was represented in all thirteen colonies and had become the tax-supported religion in all the South and in New York City. In the mid-eighteenth century, Anglicans had erected more churches in the English mainland colonies than had any other religious body (except the Congregational faith). Half of these churches were located in Virginia and Maryland and the other half were about evenly distributed in the other provinces, with the principal exceptions being the few Anglican congregations in Georgia and New Hampshire.

Like many other religious groups, most Anglicans who colonized North America became unchurched. In Virginia, for example, a high percentage of the immigrants settled on isolated farmsteads, and during most of the colonial era there was a dire shortage of ministers and meetinghouses in the Old Dominion. Moreover, most Virginian parishes were so large that the ministers could not effectively care for the spiritual needs of the farmers who were under their jurisdiction. Problems created by the frontier environment plagued this denomination throughout the colonial period, so that even though many inhabitants of Virginia and other

provinces were of Anglican heritage, most immigrants of this faith loosened their ties with that church in England.

During the American Revolution the Church of England in the New World was almost destroyed. Although most Anglican clergy and laity did not actively support the loyalist cause, this religious society was branded as the "Tory Church." Half of the clergy of this denomination lived in Virginia and Maryland and few ministers in these two colonies were active Tories, but most of the one-third of Anglican clergy living in the North remained loyal to England. Consequently, Anglican ministers and churches became marked targets for patriot attacks, and many clergy of this faith fled to Canada or England. After the war, the Anglican community was directed by only half as many clergymen as presided over parishes in 1776.

Another ecclesiastical consequence of the American Revolution was the disestablishment of the Church of England in the South and in New York City. Since the postwar society was no longer aided by public taxation and because this church lost much valuable property, an economic crisis gripped this religious community. The Confederation era was truly a critical period for the American Anglican communion.

In the midst of an apparent tragedy, Reverend William White directed a reorganization of the Church of England in this land. At a general convention held in Philadelphia in 1784, the name of this denomination was changed to the Protestant Episcopal Church, thereby eliminating one objectionable feature of the religion, the word England. Other conventions followed, the most important being the General Convention of 1789. In Philadelphia, the same community where Americans drafted a new national constitution, Episcopalians framed a constitution, a set of canons, and a Book of Common Prayer. A triennial general convention consisting of representatives of the churches, clergy, and laymen became the supreme governing body of the church. In 1808, the bishops became an upper house of the legislative convention while other clergy and laymen united to form a lower house, thereby establishing an ecclesiastical polity paralleling American state and national governments. Meanwhile, in 1801, the Episcopalians adopted a confession of faith which was almost identical with the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England.

During the era of reorganization, Reverend Samuel Seabury from Connecticut and Reverend William White traveled to the British Isles where they received episcopal consecration, after which White became the recognized leader of most Episcopalians. Although major transformations later occurred to make this religion more compatible with the American way of life, this faith had suffered from such a devastating stroke that for many years Episcopalians labored to recover from the decline precipitated by the American frontier environment and the war for independence. One evidence of the nature of the crises which had plagued this church is that in 1800 there were only 12,000 members.

Since Anglicans continued to migrate to America, many immigrants of English ancestry united with the Episcopalian Church. Throughout the past century and a half the Protestant Episcopal Church has remained about the seventh or eighth largest religious community in the United States

(based on an enumeration of all bodies of Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians under four general groupings). In recent years, however, leaders of this church have witnessed an increase in theological liberalism, a relatively slow growth in membership, and a financial crisis based on the lack of contributions.

The Episcopal church has retained the pluralism which has characterized the Church of England. In contemporary America there are three theological emphases in the Protestant Episcopal Church. One movement resembles the High Church of England and is characterized by an emphasis on sacramental worship. Another wing tends to concentrate on preaching the word, and like the Low Church of England has the sermon as a focus during the Sunday service. Whereas the architectural features of a high church will emphasize the altar, in a low church the pulpit will be the center of attention. The third major wing of this religious community is what is sometimes referred to as a broad church approach to the gospel of Christ. Liberals within this movement emphasize ethics and strongly support social action programs. A focal point of these Episcopalians is the lectern.

Although there are different emphases in the Episcopal churches in America, members of this denomination have not separated into distinct communions such as the High and Low church, as occurred in England. In some sections of the country, however, this church takes on an appearance different from that emphasized in other parts; and in some communities the character of a congregation seems to change as new ministers commence serving the people. Such pluralism is not perplexing to members of this communion; Episcopalians have learned to live with diversity, for it has long been one of the distinguishing characteristics of their religious heritage.

Distinguishing Beliefs

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Episcopal Church is their emphasis on and their belief concerning the sacraments. According to members of this communion, sacraments are visible signs and effectual means by which God's grace works in man and by which man's faith is strengthened. Although some consider these channels of grace necessary to salvation, they do not hold that unbaptized infants will be damned. Members of this church also affirm that Christ ordained two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Other important Episcopal rites of sacramental character (involving an outward sign and an inward grace) are confirmation, penance, ordination, matrimony, and unction of the sick.

Episcopalians teach that baptism is a sign of profession of Christ and a renunciation of evil. Through baptism by pouring or immersion in the name of the triune God, candidates are incorporated into the church which is the mystical body of Christ, a fellowship of Christians guided, taught and strengthened by the Spirit of God. Through baptism faith is confirmed and grace increased. God is invoked to convey to the recipient a remission of sins by spiritual regeneration.

During this sacrament, a candidate is given a Christian name, and following his cleansing by water, the ceremony of

signing the candidate's forehead with the cross occurs. This rite symbolizes a Christian's campaign against "sin, the world, and the devil," and his dedication to Christ.

In cases of infant baptism, the promises of faith and obedience are taken in the child's name by sponsors or godparents. Sponsors promise that the infant will receive a proper Christian education and will be encouraged to live a Christian life and eventually be confirmed. In one sense, the entire church is a sponsor.

Episcopalians also teach that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial. Worthy communicants receive the bread and wine in remembrance of Christ and are nourished and strengthened by the spiritual body and blood of Christ. Although the substance of the bread and wine are not changed, the real and spiritual presence of the living Christ is at every Holy Communion. While Episcopalians disagree on the precise meaning of this mystery, they insist that Christ is really present at the Eucharist celebration.

Members of this faith further believe that baptism is a necessary qualification for receiving the Eucharist and that one must normally be confirmed or ready for confirmation before partaking of the Lord's Supper.

According to Episcopalians, confirmation is the gift of the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit, administered by bishops through the laying on of hands. Worthy members are promised increased gifts of grace, wisdom, understanding, and true godliness. In confirmation, a person baptized in infancy takes upon himself the vows made on his behalf by sponsors.

Another Episcopal rite is called the sacrament of penance or absolution. Episcopalians teach that confessions are properly made in private or in public services. They say that the penitent receive absolution from God through the priest's declarations. Members, therefore, receive assurances from the minister that they are absolved from sin and restored by God to membership in the body of Christ. In private confession, the penitent kneels before a priest at an appointed place, prays, confesses, receives counsel and then the priest, without assigning elaborate penances, declares that by the authority of Christ committed to him, "I absolve thee from thy sins."

According to Episcopalians, holy orders is ordination of the clergy through the laying on of hands by bishops; and there are three orders of ministers in this church: bishops, priests (elders or presbyters) and deacons. One of the most distinctive beliefs of this Protestant church is that only bishops possess the power of ordination and that their authority has come down in an unbroken line from the apostles. They further assert that only properly ordained ministers may preach publicly and administer the sacraments (except for baptism which nonordained Christians may administer).

It is also the belief of Episcopalians that through marriage men and women are joined together to live in faithfulness, to remain in perfect love and peace together, and to live according to God's commands. The ministers in holy matrimony are the contracting persons, for the bride and groom marry themselves by their covenants. The church solemnizes the marriage by pronouncing the blessing upon

it.

In this religious community, divorces are not granted, but annulments of marriages are granted when circumstances warrant, and these "divorced" individuals may remarry.

Another Episcopal sacrament is called unction of the sick or the anointing or laying on of hands of the sick. Episcopal bishops and priests have the authority to anoint the sick with oil blessed for that purpose by a bishop, beseeching God to eradicate the pain and sickness of the body. Coupled with the prayer to restore to health is a prayer to release the afflicted from sin.

There are a variety of "religious" orders of monks and nuns in this communion who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Some primarily engage in spiritual contemplation, praying, and works of mercy. Living in communal societies, they participate in some manual activities.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

Episcopalians worship the Holy Trinity and believe in the incarnation, asserting that God became man. Jesus, they say, is truly divine and truly human, one person who is God and man. Many further teach that God is not only the creator of the heavens and earth but by his actions continually sustains the world.

Episcopalians also subscribe to a number of historical creeds, including the Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed and Athanasian Creed. Some, however, profess that these documents have been framed in a symbolic language and, consequently, many have adopted contemporary interpretations of classical expressions of faith.