
Henry VIII Did Not Start The Episcopal Church!

(OR: Anglicanism Is Not The Middle Way;
It Is The Comprehensive Way!)

I present this week a repeat article! There are so many new people now reading The Cathedral Times, that you merit reading a summary of our history and theology again. This is a quick summary of a theology of Anglicanism. Enjoy!

– Sam Candler

You pass my confirmation class if you can say that simple sentence: Henry VIII did not start the Episcopal Church. You pass with honors if you can state who actually did found the Episcopal Church: Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ founded the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church, developed from the Church of England, and an integral member of the Anglican Communion of Churches, is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

That church, started by Jesus Christ, has included inevitable conflict. Even the beautiful first century Christian community involved conflict, which we can read about clearly in The Book of Acts (see Acts 15:2). One of the great apostles, St. Peter, was opposed to his face by the other great missionary apostle, St. Paul (see Galatians 2:11). From then on, every Christian community has lived through conflict. Sometimes that conflict was minor, and sometimes it has been major.

The Anglican tradition of Christianity, evolving as it did far from Rome and the more established centers of western civilization, has always seen its share of conflict and debate. Usually, that conflict has emerged from competing sources of authority. Who, or what, is the final authority in Anglican Christianity? From the fifth century onwards, ecclesiastical authority rotated from the Archbishop of Canterbury, to whomever the reigning monarch might be, to the Roman Pope; after the Reformation, that revolving locus of authority included the common people themselves.

Consider the first Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Augustine, who landed at Canterbury in 597 AD. He was the first official Roman missionary bishop in what we now call England; but a Celtic form of Christianity, centered around local abbots and monasteries, was already present. St. Patrick had already returned to Ireland; St. David had evangelized Wales; and the great St. Columba had already founded Iona in the north country. One of the early English synods, held at Whitby in 664, was convened over a concern for authority; would the established Church follow Roman or Celtic Christian customs?

They chose Roman customs, for a season, but not for all time. Jump forward to the great William the Conqueror in 1066. Long before Henry VIII, William the Conqueror also considered himself the head of the Church of England. He convened church councils (not the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury), he nominated bishops and invested them; and he refused to allow the Pope to interfere in what he considered the king's business.

Later, Thomas a Beckett would lose his life by crossing King Henry II. In those days (11th and 12th Centuries), the King of England would often refuse to allow the Archbishop of Canterbury inside the country (Archbishops Lanfranc, Anselm, and Thomas a Beckett were all exiled at one time or another).

The Church in England was living through authority issues long before Henry VIII arrived on the scene. And, of course, the Anglican Communion of Churches continues to live through authority issues. At our best, churches

in the Anglican tradition, including the Episcopal Church, have learned to live through authority issues with grace.

In the great Protestant Reformation issues of the sixteenth century, Henry VIII actually never abandoned the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, he wrote a treatise against Martin Luther in 1521 which earned the title “Defender of the Faith” for Henry – and thus for all the rest of his successors to this day. When he appealed to the pope for annulment from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Henry was concerned far more for a suitable male heir for the kingdom than for the new Protestant theology. In another era, the Pope might have granted his request easily; but at that time, the weak pope was under the sway of the holy Roman emperor, Charles V – who was the nephew of Catharine of Aragon. There was no way the pope was going to offend Charles V by annulling the marriage of his aunt!

If there is any one person (other than Jesus) who did start—or who best represents—the Anglican tradition of Christianity, it is Elizabeth I. Reigning from 1559-1603, just after England had been swung violently back and forth between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, it was she who found a way for the Church of England to be both Catholic and Protestant. She represented a way to resolve conflict gracefully in the church.

At its best, the Anglican tradition of Christianity resolves conflict gracefully. And it does so, rarely by taking “the middle way,” which has long been another name for the Episcopal Church (the “via media”, or “middle way,” between Catholicism and Protestantism). Rather, I believe the Anglican tradition of Christianity often finds truth on both sides of theological and cultural disputes. The Anglican Communion of Churches finds “the comprehensive way,” affirming truth on both the traditional and the progressive wings of Christian community. The Anglican Communion of Churches might better be called the “via comprehensiva,” the comprehensive way.

I believe this “comprehensive way” was responsible for resolving other conflicts in Episcopal Church history, too. It explains how the early Protestant Church in the United States of America could be related to the Church of England but also separate from it. It was the comprehensive way that held the Episcopal Church together during the tragedy of the American Civil War. The comprehensive character of Anglicanism and the Episcopal Church also enabled us to meet the rise of science and higher literary criticism in the nineteenth century with grace and faith. We found a way to read the Bible with both faith and reason.

The Christian Church inevitably involves conflict. Usually, there are persons of good Christian faith on both sides of the conflict. The particular Anglican tradition of Christianity is a way of dealing with conflict gracefully. Obviously, our history has not always been clearly graceful. Nor is it always graceful right now. But the tradition which guides us is truly a graceful one.

From generation to generation, the Episcopal Church seeks to honor the universal claim of the Christian gospel while also honoring local authority and indigenous faith. That is another inherent challenge – and conflict—in all churches. How can we be obedient to both global tradition and local authority? How can we honor both the gospel and our local culture? It is a journey and task entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

When we remember Jesus, the founder of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion of Churches, let us also remember that our faith declares a comprehensive truth about him, too. Jesus Christ, we say, was both fully divine and fully human. Orthodox Christianity refuses to choose one nature over the other; Jesus is fully both. Jesus Christ is not some middle ground between divinity and humanity; Jesus Christ is comprehensive of all divinity and all humanity. That incarnational faith is the graceful style of Anglican Christianity, too.



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