

Methodists and Episcopalians in the American Context: Siblings

Separated From Birth

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It has been often said that Episcopalians and Methodists are “sibling” churches, but I would like to suggest here that the relationship is in fact a subtler one. They are siblings separated at birth (like the sisters in the old Disney movie, “The Parent Trap”). Because of this they show signs both of their family heritage and their differing environments. More importantly, until very recently they have had little if any formal contact, so they can become reacquainted without the years of ecclesiastical bickering and disputations that have characterized our relationships with other churches. This paper hopes to flesh out why this has occurred, some of the ramifications of it, and some implications for future ecumenical discussion.

In order to understand both colonial Anglicanism and the emergence of Methodism one must begin with some broad generalizations about Restoration Anglicanism. The Restoration saw a consolidating of certain positions within the Church of England. The previous century had seen large-scale debate over what Anglicanism was to be and what was to be its relationship with the Reformation of the continent. Beginning with the Reformation a number of principles began to emerge as “normative” within Anglicanism. (I must quickly add that they never gained unanimity, but their influence cannot be ignored.)

The first was the triumph of what may be called “Prayer Book spirituality.” The BCP called for the regular recitation of certain prayers, and set forth a rhythm of piety

that shaped the day, the week, and the year. Undergirding this was an understanding of Christianization that emphasized the accumulation of holy habits brought about by these regular actions. The undegirding idea might be stated “by doing we become.” Religious action helps shape the soul. This stands in contrast to the Puritan emphasis upon a religious life that began with the transformed heart. Puritans had criticized the Elizabethan settlement for not emphasizing the state of the soul. Without the right spirit they argued religious action is a sham. Only by becoming could we do. Restoration Anglicanism, on the whole, rejected such claims. Along with this one might also add that the physical place of worship was likewise emphasized. A solemn location enhanced the dignity of worship, which in turn made it more efficacious.

A second principle was the triumph of the episcopacy. Here we might subdivide the issue of the episcopacy into questions of theory and of fact. The theoretical question was how necessary was the office. Was it part of the essence (esse) of the church, or merely part of its right ordering (bene esse)? On this point Restoration Anglicans differed, and this became one of the dividing points between “High Church” and “Low Church” Anglicans. The “Preface to the Ordinal” merely stated “from the Apostles’ time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ’s Church; Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.” No official position was made about the nature of episcopacy other than this. The practical question, however, was whether it was possible to serve in the Church of England without Episcopal ordination. The earlier Prayer Book of the previous century had been ambivalent about this point, but the BCP of 1662 clearly demanded “Episcopal Consecration or Ordination” as a prerequisite for ministry in the Church of England. We

might add here that much of this new emphasis upon episcopacy flowed from earlier Anglican study of the church fathers.

A third principle was an emphasis upon moderation, and a suspicion of enthusiasm. Anglicans were convinced that the great destructiveness of the English Civil Wars and the Commonwealth period flowed from religious fanaticism. This attitude is reflected in the very first paragraph of Jeremy Taylor’s Holy Living. “I have lived to see religion painted upon banners, and thrust out of churches, and the temple turned into a tabernacle, and God to be worshipped not as He is, the Father of our Lord Jesus, the King of sufferings; nor as the God of peace; but rather as the Lord of hosts, which title he was pleased to lay aside when the kingdom of the gospel was preached by the Prince of peace.”¹ The Commonwealth was the age of Levelers, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, et al, each believing that they were called by God to do their actions. Enthusiasm was the source of religious discord and social disruption.

Such were some key emphases in the Restoration church. We might also note that Restoration Anglicanism saw two of its chief tasks were to inculcate Christian morality and to defend revealed religion against its critics. The first was viewed as important because of a perceived decline in morality as a result of the dislocations of the Commonwealth period. The second became important in the face of the rise of Deism that questioned both biblical revelation and basic Christian doctrines. A work like Joseph Butler’s Analogy of Religion was a masterful defense of revelation, and the life of the church.

¹ Jeremy Taylor, The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living, abridged with a Preface by Anne Lamb (New York, 1970), 3.

This context is important both because it would mark colonial Anglicanism and it would be the rendering of Anglicanism against which John Wesley revolted. Wesley’s emphasis upon the transformed heart is a protest against the piety of the Prayer Book as an end in itself. As he stated in his “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” a religion of church, prayer, sacrament, fasting, holy reading, etc., was of no value without the inner working of the Spirit.² Secondly, Wesley’s own reading of the early church (particularly of the church in Alexandria) led him to question the elevated view of episcopacy, and to instead claim that bishop and presbyter were of the same order. Finally it was precisely on the question of the working of the Spirit that led Wesley to his famous confrontation with Joseph Butler. The tragedy of the conflict between these two great religious geniuses is that they inhabited largely different religious universes. Butler was a man of the Restoration who was keenly aware of opponents to Christianity from the “left” (i.e., Deists, etc.). Wesley’s critique was not even on his theological radar screen.

As I have said the Restoration themes became manifested in colonial Anglicanism, but with regional variations. The Anglicanism of the southern colonies emphasized reason and morality, and did not have a particularly high ecclesiology. Anglicans in the north (many of whom were converts) emphasized a high view of episcopacy. But both were critical of the experienced based religion of the heart that took root in the American colonies in the 1740s. The Great Awakening can be broadly seen as the American equivalent of the Wesley revival of England. Both movements emphasized this new religious understanding known as Evangelicalism. Wesley’s associate George

² “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in John Wesley, Albert C. Outler, ed. (New York, 1964), 400.

Whitefield, was the great proponent of it on both sides of the Atlantic. Evangelical, or conversion oriented, piety became increasingly popular throughout the 18th century, but colonial Anglicans, with one exception, rejected it. That exception, however, was a major one. Large segments of the southern Anglican lay population seemed to be attracted to it, but had few clergy to support them. They seemed to find the established southern churches lacking in warmth and vigor. This lay response became the seedbed for the growth of Methodism.

The period of the American Revolution was a very difficult period for American Anglicanism. Loyalties were tested, and in some areas conflict occurred between colonial Anglicans and their non-Anglican neighbors. Anglicanism became tarred with Toryism (not always fairly). During the war the southern religious establishments were terminated, and at the end of the war Anglican missionaries (SPG clergy) were forced to retire. Furthermore, many loyalist laity left the new nation for parts of the British empire where they could remain loyal to the crown. The decade of the 1780s saw the remains of colonial Anglicanism buffeted and bloodied, and some questioned whether it would survive. The 1780s witnessed the organization of the Protestant Episcopal Church. The organization was a tricky one and necessitated compromises between the high church northern church, and the low church southern churches, reflected in both the constitution and in the BCP of 1789.

Now let us note what Methodists were doing at this time. Throughout the 1770s and 1780s Methodism was quickly growing, and in 1784 John Wesley had sent Thomas Coke to America to help organize this new church. The Christmas Conference of 1784 outlined the order and structure of American Methodism. We should note the difference

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in tenor in the organizational thrust of these two bodies. The response of the Episcopal Church was careful, institutional, and with a strong concern for continuity. Great concern was taken in crafting both a constitution and a Prayer Book. As the Preface to the BCP stated, “this Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship.” This care bespoke a general attitude among Episcopalians at the time. Having been transformed as a result of the Revolution from an established (or at the very least imperial) church, into a small minority status community, the first concern was to make sure order, identity, and continuity were maintained. In contrast Methodism’s response (at least to this non-Methodist) was vigorous, innovative, and outward looking, and this followed in decisions made in the years following the Christmas conference. These attitudes in turn perhaps shaped the early histories of these communities. Methodism quickly took on distinctly American vernacular elements and became the largest religious community in America.

Episcopalians maintained the liturgical and ecclesiastical connection with the Church of England and remained a small religious community.

Episcopal historians speak of the events of the 1780s as the “great compromise” bringing together the low church South and the high church north into one united church, but they often ignore that what was lost from colonial Anglicanism was the Methodist community (we might also note that what was also lost was the for African Methodist churches). Episcopalians were too preoccupied with their internal concerns to reach out to the fledgling Methodist community. Not that there were no attempts. In 1791 Thomas Coke wrote to William White about the possibility of union. He noted, however, two concerns that stood in the way, and both reflect diverging views of the role of the church

in the new society. The first concerned the ministers ordained of Coke and Asbury who would not give up the right to administer sacraments. The second concerned Methodist preachers, who would not surrender their right to preach even though they did not know biblical languages.³ Both regular ordination and a learned clergy were considered normative for Anglican clergy at the time, but Coke called for latitude in the name of mission. Nothing came of the request, and Methodists and Episcopalians went on in their separate ways.

Nineteenth century developments within the Episcopal Church did not aid in bringing the two communions together. They still largely occupied different intellectual, social, and cultural spheres. This was true even for the evangelical revival that swept up a significant part of the Episcopal Church in the early nineteenth century. Anglican Evangelicalism had its roots in England in the second half of the 18th century. But on both key theological and cultural points it did not lead to a closer rapprochement with Methodism. On the theological level Anglican Evangelicalism was Calvinistic rather than Arminian. It tended therefore to see itself associated more with Presbyterianism than with Methodism. Many of its leaders were trained at places like Princeton and adopted key element of the Princeton theology. This closeness to Presbyterianism was not merely because of theology. Episcopalians and Presbyterians occupied the same social location. They both advocated a learned ministry, and favored a refined culture. They both ministered (albeit not exclusively) to educated and professional laity. Methodism (at least in antebellum America) was largely outside of their orbit. It was usually grouped as one of the “popular” churches.

³ The correspondence is found in William White, Memoirs of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America... (New York, 1836), 343-8.

Other developments pushed the churches even further away from each other. The antebellum American high church movement, and the later growth of the influence of the Oxford Movement tended to reinforce those emphases on apostolic order, priestly ministry, and sacramentalism (not to mention Catholicism) that Methodists had rejected. Just as was the case in England, the Oxford revival increased the separation between Episcopalians and Methodists. Likewise (though by no means with intention), the Muhlenberg Memorial of the 1850s had something of the same effect. Proponents of the Muhlenberg Memorial advocated an opening up of Episcopal ministry to non-Episcopalians and a new flexibility to worship. The former proposal was rejected at the time but the latter did find favor. This liturgical flexibility, along with the enrichments in worship that Muhlenberg also advocated made the Episcopal Church’s role in the growing cities extremely important. By the latter part of the nineteenth century the Episcopal Church was largely an urban church. Although Methodists did have an important role in urban America, in many ways its soul was still tied to rural America.

The twentieth century saw the beginnings of some important reverses in this sense of separation. The rise of Methodists in the socio-economic order beginning in the second half of the 19th century began to lessen the social division between them and Episcopalians. This in turn made Methodists more open to certain cultural trappings (gothic architecture, formal choirs, etc.) that they had earlier scorned. Indeed throughout the twentieth century liturgical practices became less and less points of heated division that they once were. This was not merely on the level of praxis. The liturgical revival of the 20th century believed that in the teachings of the early church there might be a foundation for Christian unity. New liturgies began to take on this common “apostolic”

form. And from this liturgical work came new openings for theological unity. Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry is perhaps the best-known example. Much of this took place because of the rise in prominence of the university based divinity school. These institutions, emphasized a broad ecumenical curriculum in contrast to narrowly denominational ones. Many Methodists and Episcopalians studied together in these institutions. And indeed Methodists did not merely study in them but governed many of the most important of them (Duke, Drew, Emory, etc.) and in these Methodist ecumenical institutions Episcopal students studied. Hence the siblings finally had a chance to meet.

But we must note that in meeting at his late date, Methodists and Episcopalians are meeting in a religious world that is different from earlier ecumenical moments. I will only mention two aspects of this new world. The first is the new divide within Christianity. For almost 450 years the fundamental divide within western Christianity was a Protestant/Catholic one. The Protestant/Catholic divide we should emphasize was not merely theological—it was cultural as well, and entailed differing understandings of human nature and the good society in addition to formal theological differences. If one looked at ecumenical discussion during the earlier period, the Protestant/Catholic divide was the large (if sometimes unspoken) factor driving the discussions. In the last thirty years the Protestant/Catholic divide has been less present. This is one of the great accomplishments of the mid 20th century ecumenical movement (albeit there were social forces acting here as well). But in the intervening years a new fracture has emerged, or a liberal/conservative tension. This is not the liberal/conservative fission of the early twentieth century that fought over biblical inspiration, the virgin birth, and the creeds. Rather this division is over a series of interlocking cultural/moral questions on how (or

whether) the church should appropriate the cultural issues emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. Here too the divisions are both theological and cultural. What will the ecumenical endeavor look like when it is played out over this new fission?

The second new factor is what may be called the new particularism. Mid century ecumenism spoke confidently of moving beyond narrow ecclesial traditions. They offered a vision of a new unity that would transcend older traditions. In this sense the education of the ecumenical university based divinity schools was a theological analogue to the great modernist belief that bigness and unity are better. In recent decades, however, ecclesiastical communities have increasingly discovered the value of their particular traditions. Without a solid grounding in the specificity of their individual life and story, these bodies cannot keep the loyalty of their people. But how is this to be achieved? At one point the churches could presuppose a knowledge of the specific, but now they cannot. Denominational identity is crucial for denominational well being, and clergy must be trained in an understanding of this. Formation is now a buzz word, and it implies formation into a specific tradition. What does the ecumenical endeavor mean in a world shaped by this new particularism? How can one envision the ecumenical process to make us both more united and more linked with our local stories?

That is the challenge of beginning an ecumenical journey at this point in time. It is the challenge that we as Methodists and Episcopalians have taken up.