

The Nineteenth Century

From 1861 to 1865, during the great war between the states, the Episcopal Church met in two separate bodies, (1) the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (the north) and (2) the General Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America. In the north, they had simply marked the southern dioceses as “absent” during the war, so reuniting was easier and quicker for us than for some others (the Baptists, for instance, never did reunite, and that’s why we have “Southern Baptists” and “American Baptists” to this day).

During this century, there was also a strong resurgence of the catholic spirit within Anglicanism, emanating from the Oxford Movement and Cambridge Camden Society in England. The rise of the Gothic style of architecture is but one aspect of this. “One consequence of the continuing



Lambeth Palace
in London

discussion about the Episcopal Church and its faith was that Episcopalians increasingly came to see their church as in a category by itself.”¹ The question as to whether the Episcopal Church was more like reformed churches or catholic churches was answered in part by a council of bishops summoned to Lambeth Palace in London. Lambeth is the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1867 seventy-six of the 144 bishops in the fledgling Anglican Communion attended a conference there at his invitation.

The emergence of the “Anglican Communion” was slow and informally organized. From 1867, the term referred to those churches whose bishops were invited to what became known as the Lambeth Conference. Such conferences have been held about once a decade ever since. The bishops invited come from the Church of England, plus other autonomous churches descended from it, including the Episcopal Church. More on the Anglican Communion later.

Once Anglicanism started to look like an international grouping of Christians, it was perceived as a rival to Roman Catholicism, and the pope issued a “bull”² in 1896 called *Apostolicae curiae*. This declared all Anglican ordinations “absolutely null and utterly void.” Up to that point, you see, the Roman Catholic Church had simply excommunicated the English monarch; clergy were seen as validly ordained bishops, priests, and deacons—perhaps hoping that they would one day return to Roman allegiance. From that bull, however, the Vatican declared us as heretics—and then has sought to entice us back ever since.

In the late nineteenth century, there was a movement to establish a central national church for the United States, and

Episcopalians believed that their church could play a leading role in the formation of a national church for several reasons. It was a national denomination, not divided into geographical areas (as were the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians) or ethnic segments (as were the Lutherans). Its traditional strength was in the cities, which were increasingly replacing the

¹ Robert Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church* (1991), 155-56.

² Yes, that’s what they call it!

farming areas as the hub of American life. It recognized and attempted to address serious American social problems. With a representative form of government and a commitment to a traditional Christian faith, it already provided a model of ... 'democracy organized in Christ.' Lay members were, moreover, providing national leadership in the political realm. This was particularly evident to the deputies at the General Convention of 1880, whose members included an all-time high of fifteen former, current, or future members of U.S. Congresses."³

As part of establishing the core elements of the faith, the General Convention adopted what would become the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral in 1886. In the quadrilateral, the Episcopal Church declared there were "inherent parts of [a] sacred deposit" of the Christian faith. And these were four in number:

1. The holy Scripture as the revealed Word of God,
2. The Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith,
3. The two Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist), and
4. The historic episcopate, or succession of bishops from the apostles' time.

You can find the full text in the prayer book, starting on page 876. Points 1 and 3 had a more protestant leading, affirming the centrality of Scripture and the primacy of the two great Sacraments. Points 2 and 4 drifted in a more catholic direction, affirming the creeds and the role of bishops.

More than three centuries later, Anglicans were still affirming that *via media*, or middle way, between the extremes of protestantism and catholicism. The Protestant Episcopal Church held to the tension of a reformed catholic theology, rejecting the worst and embracing the best of each polarity.

³ Pritchard, *A History*, 188.