

Back to Basics — Class 2

A Brief History of The Episcopal Church

Purpose. To understand how the English Reformation, colonial Anglicanism, the American Revolution, and later developments shaped The Episcopal Church we know today.

The Story in One Sentence

The Episcopal Church is the American expression of the Anglican tradition: rooted in the ancient Church, reshaped by the English Reformation, reorganized after the American Revolution, and continually adapting its worship and mission.

1. Before the English Reformation

Early-sixteenth-century England was overwhelmingly Catholic. Traditional devotion included the Mass, saints, pilgrimages, monasteries, parish churches, and a sacramental understanding of Christian life. At the same time, reforming ideas from continental Europe began to circulate.

- 1517 — Martin Luther's 95 Theses became a catalyst for the wider Protestant Reformation.
- 1521 — Henry VIII defended traditional Catholic teaching against Luther and received the title “Defender of the Faith.”
- 1526 — William Tyndale published an English translation of the New Testament. His translation choices helped introduce Reformation ideas to English readers.

Key idea: Reformation ideas were already entering England before Henry VIII's break with Rome.

2. Henry VIII and the Break with Rome

Henry VIII's immediate crisis concerned his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and the need for a secure royal succession. When an annulment was not granted, the dispute became entangled with older questions about royal authority, papal jurisdiction, and reform within the English Church.

- 1533 — Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury and declared Henry's marriage to Catherine invalid.
- 1534 — The Act of Supremacy declared Henry the Supreme Head of the Church of England.
- 1530s — The monasteries were dissolved and their property transferred or sold.
- 1539 — The Great Bible made an authorized English Bible available in parish churches.
- 1539 — The Six Articles reaffirmed several traditional Catholic doctrines and practices.

Henry's break with Rome did not immediately make England thoroughly Protestant. Royal supremacy changed first; doctrine and worship changed more gradually.

3. Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation

After Henry's death in 1547, the government of the young Edward VI moved the Church of England much more decisively in a Protestant direction.

- Traditional images and ceremonies were restricted or removed.
- English Scripture and preaching were emphasized.
- Clerical marriage was recognized.
- 1549 — The first Book of Common Prayer provided a common English liturgy.
- 1552 — A revised Prayer Book expressed a more strongly Reformed understanding of worship and the Eucharist.

Why the Prayer Book matters: Anglican theology is expressed not only in doctrinal statements but also in the words Christians pray together.

4. Mary I and Elizabeth I

The direction of the English Church changed dramatically with successive monarchs.

- 1553–1558 — Mary I restored communion with Rome and Roman Catholic worship. Protestant leaders including Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley were executed.
- 1558 — Elizabeth I became queen.
- 1559 — The Act of Supremacy restored royal authority over the Church, using the title Supreme Governor.
- 1559 — The Act of Uniformity restored the Book of Common Prayer.
- 1563 — The Thirty-Nine Articles became an important doctrinal statement of the Church of England.

The Elizabethan church was Protestant and Reformed, but it retained bishops, cathedrals, liturgical prayer, and elements of continuity with the historic Church. Disagreement continued over how far reform should go.

5. Richard Hooker and an Emerging Anglican Approach

Richard Hooker (1554–1600) argued that Scripture has first authority, while reason and the received wisdom of the Church help Christians interpret Scripture and address questions Scripture does not explicitly settle.

- Scripture is primary.
- Reason helps the Church think faithfully about changing circumstances.
- Tradition gives the Church the accumulated wisdom of Christians who came before us.
- Sacraments and common worship remain central to Christian life.

Connection to Class 1: This is an important historical root of the Anglican habit of speaking about Scripture, tradition, and reason.

6. The Church of England in the American Colonies

English settlers brought the Church of England to North America. Anglican parishes became especially important in colonies such as Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, while other colonies had different established churches or greater religious diversity.

- 1607 — Anglican worship accompanied the Jamestown settlement in Virginia.
- Colonial parishes were organized around clergy, vestries, and local congregational life.
- American Anglicans had no resident bishop. Candidates for ordination had to travel to England.
- The lack of bishops made confirmation and the development of a complete episcopal structure difficult.

The central colonial problem: How can an episcopal church fully function when its bishops are an ocean away?

7. The American Revolution: An Anglican Crisis

Independence created a serious problem for American Anglicans. The Church of England was tied to the British Crown, and clergy had prayed publicly for the monarch. After independence, American Anglicans had to preserve their Anglican identity while creating a church appropriate to a republic.

The question became: How can we remain Anglican without remaining British?

8. Formation of The Episcopal Church

Samuel Seabury

- 1784 — Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was consecrated a bishop by Scottish Episcopal bishops.
- English bishops initially could not consecrate him because the law required an oath of allegiance to the Crown.
- Seabury's consecration secured the historic episcopate for the emerging American church and strengthened Scottish liturgical influence on American Eucharistic worship.

William White and Representative Government

William White of Pennsylvania helped shape a church that retained bishops while also giving clergy and lay people a constitutional role in governance.

- 1785 — American Anglicans began meeting nationally to organize the new church.
- 1789 — The Constitution and an American Book of Common Prayer were adopted.
- General Convention developed as a bicameral governing body: the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies.
- The House of Deputies includes both clergy and lay representatives.

A distinctive American Episcopal principle: bishops, clergy, and laity share responsibility for the governance and mission of the Church.

9. The Nineteenth Century

- The Episcopal Church expanded westward as the United States grew.
- Seminaries, missionary organizations, schools, and new dioceses were established.
- 1804 — Absalom Jones became the first Black priest ordained in The Episcopal Church.
- The Oxford Movement, beginning in England in the 1830s, renewed attention to the catholic heritage of Anglicanism, including sacraments, liturgy, apostolic continuity, and the historic Church.
- The Civil War divided Episcopal dioceses geographically. Southern dioceses organized separately during the war and were reunited with The Episcopal Church afterward.
- 1886/1888 — The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral identified Scripture, the Creeds, Baptism and Eucharist, and the historic episcopate as a basis for Christian unity.

10. The Early Twentieth Century into the Modern Church

During the twentieth century The Episcopal Church became more nationally organized while also experiencing major liturgical, theological, and social changes.

- 1919 — The National Council was established, strengthening national coordination of mission and ministry.
- 1928 — A revised American Book of Common Prayer was adopted.
- The Liturgical Movement encouraged renewed emphasis on the Eucharist, Baptism, congregational participation, and ancient Christian patterns of worship.
- The Church increasingly confronted questions of race, civil rights, the role of women, ecumenism, and changing social expectations.
- 1970 — Women were first seated as deputies in General Convention.
- 1974 — The Philadelphia Eleven were ordained priests before the Church had formally authorized the ordination of women to the priesthood.
- 1976 — General Convention formally authorized women to be ordained to the priesthood and episcopate.
- 1979 — A substantially revised Book of Common Prayer was adopted, emphasizing Baptism as the foundation of Christian ministry and the Eucharist as the principal act of Sunday worship.
- 1989 — Barbara Harris became the first woman consecrated a bishop in the Anglican Communion.
- 2003 — Gene Robinson became the first openly gay bishop. New Hampshire. (Tim Rich Canon to Ordinary)

Later decades brought continuing debates and developments concerning human sexuality, marriage, inclusion, church membership, and the Church's public witness. These debates are part of the continuing Anglican pattern of wrestling with Scripture, tradition, reason, worship, and life in changing contexts.

11. What Has This History Given Us?

Historical inheritance	What we recognize today
Ancient Church	Creeds, bishops, priests and deacons, sacraments, Eucharist, church year
English Reformation	Vernacular Scripture, preaching, reformed theology,

Historical inheritance	What we recognize today
	common prayer
Anglican tradition	Book of Common Prayer; Scripture, tradition and reason; catholic and Protestant inheritances
American experience	Constitutional government, General Convention, strong lay participation
Modern Episcopal Church	Baptismal identity, Eucharistic worship, wider participation in ministry, continuing discernment

12. Timeline to Remember

Date	Event
1517	Luther's 95 Theses
1526	Tyndale's English New Testament
1534	Act of Supremacy
1549	First Book of Common Prayer
1552	Second Book of Common Prayer
1553–58	Mary I and restoration of Roman Catholicism
1559	Elizabethan Settlement and Prayer Book
1563	Thirty-Nine Articles
1607	Jamestown and colonial Anglican worship
1784	Samuel Seabury consecrated bishop
1789	American Episcopal Church constitution and Prayer Book
1804	Absalom Jones ordained priest
1886/1888	Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral
1919	National Council established
1928	Revised Book of Common Prayer
1976	Ordination of women formally authorized
1979	Current Book of Common Prayer adopted
1989	Barbara Harris consecrated bishop