



45: Scotsmen, Americans and Methodists

The Scots, as has frequently been pointed out, are not at all the same as the English, and the history of Scotland is very different from that of England. The same goes for the Church of Scotland. In Scotland, the Established Church is Presbyterian. It is not part of the Anglican Communion.

In Scotland, that Communion is represented by the Episcopalian Church of Scotland, who use a liturgy derived in part from that which Archbishop Laud and Charles I tried unsuccessfully to force on the Scots. The Episcopalian Church is not Established. Indeed, it was for a time proscribed and persecuted by the authorities, being suspected of support for the exiled Jacobites (supporters of the House of Stuart).

The fact that Episcopalianism is an 'unofficial' church in Scotland became very significant after the American War of Independence.

The Church of England was at the time in a somewhat torpid state. Following the upheavals of the seventeenth century, any sort of fervent religious belief (known as 'enthusiasm') was decried. This is not to deny that there were many clergy who were assiduous in visiting the poor, sick and dying, and bishops who were prepared to travel huge distances to carry out their duties.

But the Church was bound hand and foot to Parliament; Bishops were often appointed for the sake of their votes in the House of Lords. The Church was organised to serve a rural England that was passing away, and there was no mechanism, short of an Act of Parliament, for reorganising parishes or creating new ones. All too many of the clergy saw it as their duty simply to support the existing social order.

Two priests of the Church of England stood out as activists. George Whitefield (1714 - 1770) and John Wesley (1703 - 1797) were leaders of what became known as the 'Evangelical Revival'.

Whitefield, who came from the Calvinist tradition in the Church of England, was the first to begin preaching in the open air. He was a moving spirit in what became known as 'the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion' - theoretically the Countess's private chapels, and therefore outside the parochial system. These eventually formed the English Presbyterian Church, now part of the United Reformed Church.

Whitefield and Wesley were at first loosely allied in the new Methodist movement, but parted company over Whitefield's Calvinist theology, which Wesley did not share. He wished to remain within the Established Church, but refused to be bound by parish boundaries or the terms of a local licence to preach. He was memorably reprimanded by the Bishop of Bristol: 'To pretend to special gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing, sir, a very horrid thing.'

Anglican clergy in the then American Colonies came under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London. There were no bishops in America. Given the hazards of the journey, there was always a shortage of clergy, and after the American Revolution, the Bishop of London refused to ordain any more.

A priest in the established Church of England had to swear allegiance to the Crown, so could not serve in the new Republic. John Wesley was deeply unhappy with this situation. Study of the Scriptures convinced him that there was no absolute distinction between the status of a priest and that of a bishop, beyond the fact that the latter has a supervisory role.

In 1784 he, though a priest, ordained a deacon and a presbyter for service in America. He also ordained a Church of England priest, Thomas Coke, as 'Superintendent', with instructions to ordain Francis Asbury to the same status on arrival in the New World.

This was the beginning of the split between Methodism and Anglicanism, which became absolute after Wesley's death, though that was never his intention. Further tensions within Methodism led to divisions that were not resolved until 1932. Meanwhile Methodism and Anglican went their separate ways, divided as much by social and political factions as by differing emphases in doctrine.

But while John Wesley was trying to resolve the problems of the American Anglicans in his own way, the New Englanders were not waiting for him to solve their problems. Samuel Seabury (1729 - 1796), born at Groton, Connecticut, initially came to Britain to study medicine at Edinburgh. He was ordained in 1753 and served as a parish priest in New York. During the American War of Independence he served as a British Army Chaplain, and was held prisoner by the rebels.

Despite this, in 1783 he was elected to serve as Bishop of Connecticut. He made the journey to London to seek consecration by the Bishop of London, who refused, as we have seen. Seabury then made his way to Scotland, where, in 1784, at Aberdeen, he was consecrated by three bishops of the Episcopalian Church. So was born the Episcopalian Church of the USA, which has retained historic and liturgical links with the Scottish Episcopalians. It is very much a minority church, organised and run 'from the bottom up' on democratic lines by local congregations, and this can sometimes lead to difficulties, as recent events have shown.

(To be continued)