
Henry VIII Did Not Start The Episcopal Church !!

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
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In times of controversy in the Episcopal Church, and even in times of relative calm, someone inevitably makes the accusation or the slight joke that Henry VIII (and his search for a suitable wife) started the Episcopal Church. Thus, I require all my confirmation classes and any audience who hears my presentations on the history and theology of Anglican Christianity to repeat the same line: Henry VIII did not start the Anglican Church (or the Episcopal Church.)

You pass the class if you can say that simple sentence. You pass with honors if you can state who actually did found the Episcopal Church: 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 missionary 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 (see The Great Schism of 1054).

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 the Anglican Church? 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 (of Canterbury, not of Hippo), 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 Rome at that time.

Thus, the question of authority was settled 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 abbots and invested them with ring and staff; 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 Anglican Church was living through authority issues long before Henry VIII arrived on the scene. And, of course, the Anglican Church continues to live through authority issues. At our best, the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church have learned to live through authority issues with grace.

It might be said that 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. The Episcopal Church seeks to honor the universal claim of the Christian gospel while also honoring local authority and indigenous faith. It is a journey and task entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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