

## Project Canterbury

## The New American Prayer Book: Its History and Contents

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Chapter II. Blazing the Trail

Thirteen years elapsed after the Declaration of Independence before the American Church had her own Prayer Book. When the War of the Revolution broke out the Book of Common Prayer of the reformed Church of England was in use in all the parishes of the American colonies. After July 4, 1776, its use was continued, but with certain alterations in what were known as the State prayers. It was no longer possible to pray for the king, the royal family, and the High Court of Parliament. Here and there a few implacable loyalist clergy tried the experiment, but their action was deeply resented. It usually resulted in the closing of their churches.

At the outset the necessary changes were made by individual ministers in the various parishes. There was no concerted action. On July 4, 1776, the Vestry of the United Churches in Philadelphia met and passed the following resolution:

Whereas, the Hon'ble Continental Congress have resolved to declare the Am. Colonies to be free and Independent States, in consequence of wh. it will be proper to omit those Petitions in the Liturgy wherein the King of Great Britain is prayed for as inconsistent with the said Declaration; Therefore, *Resolved*, That it appears to this Vestry to be necessary for the peace and well-being of the Churches to omit the said Petitions, and the Rector and Assistant Ministers of the United Churches are requested, in the name of the Vestry, to omit such Petition as above mentioned.

The day following the convention of Virginia "altered the Book of Common Prayer to accommodate it to the change of affairs." All references to English rule were omitted and the enactment concluded by directing that "every other sentence of the Litany be retained, without any other alteration, except the above sentences recited."

On July 18 the Reverend Samuel Parker, rector of Trinity Church, Boston, reported to his Vestry that on the previous Sunday he had been publicly interrupted when reading the prayers for the king and that he could not with safety continue them. On deliberation the Vestry concluded that "the temper and spirit of the People in this town was such that they would not suffer any prayers for the king to be publicly used in Divine service, and that there was no other alternative but either to shut up the church and have no public worship, or to omit that part of the Liturgy wherein the king is prayed for." Faced with such an alternative, the Vestry requested the rector to omit those prayers "which related to the king." The congregation

concurred and the prayers were omitted with the result that Trinity Church was the only Episcopal church to remain open in Boston during the years of the Revolution.

Between 1776 and 1783 each parish was a liturgical law unto itself. But with the signing of the treaty of Peace a strong desire for concerted agreement and action asserted itself. It found its earliest expression at a convention of the clergy in the State of Maryland where the church had been by law established. A petition to the General Assembly was drawn up praying that the clergy "might have leave to consult, prepare and draft a Bill" which would enable them "to make such alterations in the liturgy and service as might adapt the same to the Revolution, and for other purposes of uniformity, concord and subordination to the State." The petition was granted. At a later meeting there was drawn up "A Declaration of Certain Fundamental Rights and Liberties of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Maryland."

In that Declaration was included:

the right and duty to revise the liturgy and forms of prayer in order to adapt the same to the late Revolution, and other local circumstances of America; which, it is humbly conceived, may and will be done without any other or farther departure from the venerable order and beautiful forms of worship of the Church from whence we sprung, than may be found expedient in the change of our situation from a daughter to a sister church.

On October 6 and 7, 1784, a meeting of clergy and laity from the States of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts was held in New York. Connecticut sent no lay representative, its clergy feeling themselves "fully adequate to the business of representing the Episcopal Church in their State." After drafting the outline of a constitution, a committee was appointed "to frame and propose to the Convention, a proper substitute for the State Prayers in the Liturgy, to be used for the sake of uniformity, till a further review shall be undertaken by general authority and consent of the Church." From this revision Connecticut held aloof until such time as a bishop was obtained.

The recommendations of this committee were not printed in the minutes of the Convention, but there is in possession of the writer a faded paper endorsed:

PART OF MINS. OF GENI. CONVENTION\*  
IN NEW YORK  
October 7, 1784

[\*Technically this was not a "General Convention," but an informal meeting of clergy and laity which agreed to summon a General Convention to meet in 1785.]

It runs as follows:

The Comtee appointed to propose an Alteration in the State Prayers in the Liturgy to be recommended to the Clergy in the Several States for the sake of maintaining Uniformity in that part of divine Worship report the following Alterations--

That in the Responses following the Lords Prayer in the Mornng & Evening Service

the words "O Lord save the King," be thus read: "O Lord save our Rulers." That the Prayer for the Kings Majesty in the Same Services be:

O Lord our heavenly Father, high & mighty, King of Kings & Lord of Lords, who dost from thy throne behold all the Dwellers upon Earth; Most heartily we beseech thee with thy favour to behold the Govnor (or President) of this State (or Commonwealth) & so replenish him with the Grace of thy holy Spirit that he may always incline to thy will & walk in thy way. Endue him plenteously with heavenly Gifts, prosper him with all happiness & finally after this Life grant that he may attain everlasting joy & felicity, thro Jesus Christ our Lord.

That the Prayer for the Royal Family be wholly omitted. That the Petition in the Litany "That it may please thee to bless & keep the Magistrates &c," be thus read: "That it may please thee to bless & keep all Rulers & Magistrates, giving them Grace to execute justice & maintain Truth &c": and that all the Petitions respecting the King, royal Family & Lords of the Council be entirely omitted. That the Prayer for the high Court of Parliament be used mutatis mutandis for the delegates in Congress. That the Prayers for the King in the Communion Service be wholly omitted. That the clause in the Prayer for the church militant respecting the King be thus read: "We beseech thee also to save & defend all christian Kings, Princes, & Civil Rulers, especially the Governor (or President) of this State (or Commonwealth) & grant that they may truly & impartially administer Justice &c.

On the reverse side of this manuscript there appears--without comment--the following which is evidently an alternative prayer for the Civil authority:

Almighty & Everlasting God, we are taught in thy holy Word that the hearts of all in Authority are in thy Rule & Governance & that thou dost dispose & turn them as seemeth best to thy godly Wisdom, We humbly beseech thee so to dispose & govern the hearts of the Rulers & Magistrates of this State (or Commonwealth) that in all their thoughts, words & works they may ever seek thy honour & glory & study to preserve the People committed to their Charge in Peace & Godliness. Grant this, O merciful Father, for thy dear Son's Sake, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
*Amen.*

The committee of the New York Convention confined itself strictly to alterations in the State prayers. Although there was a growing desire in the American church to make other changes in the offices of the English Prayer Book, Bishop White records the fact that "it was thought in New York that such an enterprise could not be undertaken until the Church should be consolidated and organized."

Both these difficulties were gradually overcome. The church in the States of Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and others organized themselves into dioceses in 1783, 1784 and 1785. Five weeks after the adjournment of the gathering in New York, Samuel Seabury was consecrated in Scotland as Bishop of Connecticut and the first bishop of the Church in the United States of America. Connecticut therefore was free to embark on a revision of the English Book so far as her own clergy and parishes were concerned.

On August 2, 1785, Bishop Seabury met his clergy for the first time in convention assembled. Before the close of the proceedings the Reverends Abraham Jar- [(sic)] and John Bowden of Connecticut, the Reverend Samuel Parker, rector of Trinity Church, Boston, together with Bishop Seabury, were formed into a committee to suggest changes in the Prayer Book. The action of that committee is set forth in an unpublished document endorsed:

ALTERATIONS PROPOSED BY THE BISHOP AND COMTEE  
OF CLERGY IN CONNECTICUT.  
August 5th, 1785

Mr. Parker carried this report back to Boston and about one month later a convention of delegates from the States of Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire met in Boston. The revision in Connecticut was the work of the clergy; laymen were not consulted. They were, however, admitted to the Boston convention. In the three New England States there were but four clergymen and eighteen or twenty parishes. It was deemed absolutely necessary that the vacant parishes should be represented by the church wardens or other lay delegates. Thus constituted, the convention proceeded to "take into consideration the revisal of the Liturgy and offices of the Church as contained in the Book of Common Prayer, and make such alterations as may be necessary." Inasmuch as the conclusions arrived at in Connecticut were taken as a basis, the threads of the two gatherings may be woven together here.

Both began with the State prayers. The suffrage "O Lord save the King" was changed to "O Lord save the Church." The petitions for the king and royal family were adapted to a prayer for the "governor or ruler of this State or Commonwealth." The answer in the Catechism "to honor and obey the king" was made to read "to honor and obey my civil authority."

The Boston convention provided the following collect to be used during every session of the General Court:

Most Gracious God, we humbly beseech thee, as for this Commonwealth in general, so especially for the General Court at this time assembled, that thou would'st be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations to the advancement of thy glory, the good of thy Church, the safety, honor and welfare of thy people, that all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavors, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations. These, and all other necessities, for them, for us and thy whole Church, we humbly beg in the name and mediation, O Jesus Christ, our most blessed Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

After thus revising the State prayers, the committee in Connecticut and the convention in Boston went on to make important changes in the principal offices of the Prayer Book of the Church of England. Both agreed to modify some of the medieval phraseology which abounded in that Book. "Condemnation" was substituted for "damnation," and the words in the Exhortation in the Communion office "we eat and drink our own damnation" were eliminated entirely; also the sentence "lest after the taking of that holy Sacrament, the devil enter into you, as he entered into Judas, and fill you full of all iniquities, and bring you to destruction both of body and soul." The curses in the Communion service were also omitted. The Creeds did not escape revision. The Article "he descended into hell" was changed to "he went into the place of

departed Spirits," and Connecticut suggested as an alternative "he went into the invisible world." Seabury's committee left open the question as to whether the Creed of St. Athanasius "be read only on Trinity Sunday, or entirely omitted." Boston recommended that "it be wholly disused"; also that it be left "discretionary with the minister, wardens and vestry of each particular church or congregation, to omit or use the Nicene Creed as they shall severally chuse."

It was agreed to omit the words "all men are conceived and born in sin" from the office of Baptism, and Massachusetts provided that the sign of the cross in Baptism might be dispensed with "if particularly desired by the sponsors." From that source came also the omission of the reasons for matrimony in the Marriage service of the English Book, and also of the words at the giving of the ring "with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow." Many other minor changes were suggested.

The Boston convention concluded its labors by directing that the several churches in the three States should immediately adopt the alterations and omissions in the State prayers. Notice of the other changes were sent to the parishes with a request for an expression of their opinion to be considered at an adjourned meeting. Some of the replies have recently come to light. With one exception, the changes were approved. The exception was Christ Church, Braintree. The congregation of that parish 'pronounced the proceedings at Boston unconstitutional and intrenching "upon the Episcopal authority in matters ecclesiastical, which in the purest ages of the Church was ever adjudged an high misdemeanor," and it voted to reject the proposals "as not only subversive of the constitution and peace, but injurious to the faith and devotion of our excellent church."

Bishop Seabury disapproved some of the changes made at Boston, especially the omission of the sign of the cross in Baptism and the elimination of the Nicene Creed. Others in the church at large were taking fright at the idea of tampering with the Prayer Book. It is on record that "the church people in Connecticut were much alarmed at the thought of any considerable alteration being made." This appears to have had its influence on the adjourned Boston convention which met July 20, 1785. It was there determined that in view of the fact that there were no bishops and the church was not yet organized, the adoption of the changes--save in the State prayers--be left to the discretion of the individual clergy pending proper organization of the Church.