

Project Canterbury

The New American Prayer Book: Its History and Contents

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Chapter III. The "Proposed Book" of 1785

The first General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America met in Christ Church, in the City of Philadelphia, from September 27 to October 7, 1785.

The Reverend Doctor William White, afterwards first Bishop of Pennsylvania, was chosen as chairman. There were in attendance clerical and lay deputies from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. It was not a convention of the whole church. The absence of Bishop Samuel Seabury, then the only bishop in America, and any clerical and lay deputies from Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, was deliberate and had a marked influence on the fortunes of the Prayer Book recommended by this convention.

On September 28 it was resolved

That a committee be appointed, consisting of one Clerical and one Lay-Deputy from the church in each state, to consider of and report such alterations in the Liturgy, as shall render it consistent with the American revolution and the constitutions of the respective states: And such further alterations in the Liturgy, as it may be advisable for this Convention to recommend to the consideration of the Church here represented.

To this committee was also entrusted the duty of drafting an ecclesiastical constitution and to prepare and report a plan for obtaining the consecration of Bishops for the United States. Dr. White took the leading part in the formation of the constitution and Dr. William Smith of Maryland in the compilation of a Prayer Book.

The first part of the report, presented on the fifth day, comprised the alterations suggested in the prayers for the civil authority. They followed in the main the recommendations agreed upon previously in Boston and Connecticut. The prayer in the English Book for the royal family was omitted; likewise the petitions in the Litany for the King. That for "the King's Majesty" was transformed into one for "all in authority, legislative, executive and judicial in these United States." The prayer for the High Court of Parliament was changed to one for "their delegates in Congress." The special services for "the happy deliverance" from the Gunpowder Treason; the

"Martyrdom of the Blessed King Charles I"; the "Thanksgiving for the End of the Great Rebellion," together with the office of thanksgiving for the beginning of the King's Reign, were eliminated entirely. A service was provided for the Fourth of July to be observed as a day of thanksgiving "for the inestimable blessings of civil and religious liberty vouchsafed to the United States of America." It included this Collect:

Almighty God, who hast in all ages showed forth thy power and mercy in the wonderful preservation of thy church, and in the protection of every nation and people professing thy holy and eternal truth, and putting their trust in thee; we yield thee our unfeigned thanks and praise for all thy public mercies, and more especially for that signal and wonderful manifestation of thy providence which we commemorate this day; wherefore not unto us, but unto thy Name be ascribed all honour and glory, in all churches of the Saints, from generation to generation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The service thus adopted was directed "to be used in this Church for ever." It called forth, however, sharp difference of opinion in the convention and was not retained in the Prayer Book of 1789. After due consideration of this report it was resolved "that the Liturgy shall be used in this Church as accommodated to the revolution, agreeably to the alterations now approved of and ratified by this Convention."

The second part of the Report dealt with the suggested alterations in that part of the Liturgy embracing the administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church. Prior to the convention there had developed a strong conviction that the time had arrived to proceed to a thorough review of the Liturgy. This found expression in a letter addressed to the Reverend Doctor Samuel Parker of Boston by the Reverend Charles Henry Wharton of Delaware, who wrote:

I think the simplyfying of the Liturgy should be among the first objects of the Convention. Whatever was left with a view of reconciling parties at the period of the Reformation, or retained as suitable to Cathedral Service may safely be omitted by the American Church. Perhaps such an opportunity never occurred since the days of the Apostles of settling a rational, unexceptionable mode of worship. God grant we may improve it with unanimity and wisdom.

In drafting the changes in the "Proposed Book," the committee was greatly influenced by the suggestions set forth by the English Commission appointed in 1689 to make such changes in that Book of Common Prayer which would tend to reconcile the Dissenters from the Church of England. Dr. William Smith's Preface to the Book of 1785 indicates this when he writes: "It will appear that most of the amendments or alterations which had the sanction of the *great divines* of 1689, have been adopted, with such others as are thought reasonable and expedient."

It is not possible to set forth in detail all the changes suggested by the committee. The more important ones are as follows: In the "*Te Deum*" the words "thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb" were changed to read "thou didst humble thyself to be born of a Virgin," and the "*Benedicite*" was eliminated from morning prayer. The article in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into Hell," was omitted and the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were eliminated entirely. A special prayer was substituted for the Office of the Churching of Women and a brief

service took the place of the Communion Service for Ash Wednesday. In the Marriage service the words, "I plight thee my troth," and "With my body I thee worship," were left out. Large changes were made in the Baptismal Office. Parents were admitted as sponsors and permission was given to omit the sign of the cross "if particularly desired by the sponsors or parents." For the Apostles' Creed there was substituted the question, "Dost thou believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith as contained in the Apostles' Creed; and wilt thou endeavour to have this child instructed accordingly?" The word "regenerate" was left out; also the words, "the, devil and all his works" and "vulgar tongue." In the office of Confirmation after requiring a profession of the Articles of the Christian Faith, a new question was added: "Do ye now, in your own Persons, promise to live in this Faith, and in obedience to God's holy Will and Commandments?"

Considerable liberties were taken with the Psalter. What are known as the "imprecatory" verses were omitted in their entirety and new Psalms were made up out of selected verses from different Psalms. This, said Bishop Seabury, was without precedent in the history of the Christian Church, and he described it as "an unwarrantable liberty." In the Communion Office the word "damnation" was changed to "condemnation," and such sentences as "the devil enter into you, as he entered into Judas, and fill you full of all iniquities, and bring you to destruction of body and soul" were omitted as was also the sentence, "that by the ministry of God's holy Word, he may receive the benefit of absolution." The sentences in the longer Exhortation speaking of "eating and drinking our own damnation"; the kindling of the wrath of God and provoking him to "plague us with divers diseases, and sundry kinds of death" were eliminated. The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion as contained in the English Book were ruthlessly edited. Their number was reduced to twenty, partly by bodily omissions and partly by combination. All references to the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were eliminated. Among those rejected entirely were the Articles entitled "Of Purgatory", "Of the Marriage of Priests" and "Of Excommunicate Persons."

Notable additions were made to the offices of the Church in the "Proposed Book." Some additional Prayers and Thanksgiving were added, all taken from Jeremy Taylor. Also an Office for "The Visitation of Prisoners" which was first adopted at a Synod held at Dublin in 1711 and commonly found in Prayer Books printed in Ireland. Then followed "A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the Fruits of the Earth" which was appointed to be used on the first Thursday in November, or on another day appointed by the Civil Authority. Finally there came "Forms of Prayer to be used in Families" adapted from a compilation by Gibson, a former Bishop of London.

On October 5 the Book was approved and Doctors White, Smith, and Wharton were appointed a committee to publish the same together with "a proper Preface or Address" and with power to make "verbal and grammatical corrections." Dr. Smith wrote the Preface and the Table of Lessons was prepared by Dr. William White. These details completed, the convention resolved: "that the said alterations be *proposed* and *recommended* to the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the states from which there are deputies to this Convention." The words "proposed" and "recommended" are vital. The changes adopted in the State Prayers were compulsory. The alterations in the Offices of the Liturgy were simply proposed. There was no compulsion to use them. Hence the name, "The Proposed Book." On the closing day of the Convention a sermon was preached by the Reverend Doctor Smith and the new Prayer Book as amended was used for the first time at this service.

After many delays the Book was published in April, 1786, with the following title-page:

THE
BOOK
OF
COMMON PRAYER
And Administration of the
SACRAMENTS
and Other
RITES AND CEREMONIES
As revised and proposed to the Use
of
THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH
At a Convention of the said Church
in the States of

NEW YORK MARYLAND

NEW JERSEY VIRGINIA

PENNSYLVANIA AND

DELAWARE SOUTH CAROLINA

*Held in Philadelphia from September 27th
to October 7th, 1785.*

PHILADELPHIA,
PRINTED BY HALL AND SELLERS;

And sold for the Benefit of Sundry Corporations and
Societies, instituted for the Support of the Widows and
Children of deceased Clergymen. MDCCLXXXVI.

As soon as the "Proposed Book" was circulated it encountered a storm of opposition from every part of the church. It quickly became evident, in the words of Doctor White, that "the labours of the Convention had not reached their object." There arose an uneasy feeling that many of the changes in the Offices indicated a weakening of faith in such doctrines as baptismal regeneration and the power of priestly absolution. Even so warm a friend of the Book as Dr. Samuel Provoost writing from New York shortly after its publication said:

Such a strong party has been raised against the alterations that I am afraid we should not be able to adopt the book at present without danger of a schism--the ostensible object(ion) is that they were made without the sanction of a Bishop, but the Thanksgiving for the Fourth of July in all probability is one principal cause of the opposition. The sale of the books has been very dull--only thirteen have been disposed of.

When the Book was brought before the various diocesan conventions they would have none of it. Maryland desired to restore the Nicene Creed as an alternative to the Apostles' Creed and to enrich the prayer of consecration in Holy Communion by an invocation of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the elements of bread and wine. Pennsylvania agreed with Maryland. The convention of Delaware did not take the trouble to meet. Virginia strongly objected to the power bestowed upon the ministry to repel notorious evil livers from the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. New Jersey, while it did not disapprove of some of the changes, yet had "to recognize the unseasonableness and irregularity of them." The convention of the diocese of New York resolved "that (out of respect to the English Bishops and because the minds of the people are not yet sufficiently informed), the consideration of the Book of Common Prayer, with the proposed alterations, be deferred to another day."

Connecticut, indeed New England generally, was up in arms against the Book. The bishop of that diocese had not been consulted in its compilation, and it is on record that the church in Connecticut "took alarm at the proceedings of the Philadelphia Convention," and refused to accede to any changes save in the State Prayers. Writing at a later period Bishop Seabury said, "I never thought there was any heterodoxy in the Southern Prayer Book; but I do think the true doctrine is left too unguarded, and that the offices are, some of them lowered to such a degree, that they will in great measure, lose their influence." In a convention of his clergy held at Derby, Connecticut, September 22, 1786, he said:

A number of the Clergy and Laity in the southern States, have undertaken to revise and alter the Liturgy, and Offices, and Government of the Church; and have exhibited a Prayer Book to the public. The time will not permit me to say anything of the merit of the alterations in the Liturgy: But, I am persuaded, by an unprejudiced mind, some of them will be thought for the worse, most of them not for the better.

He impugned the authority of the convention to make any changes in the Prayer Book as contrary to the tradition of the Church which was government by bishops, and added, "This government they have degraded, by lodging the chief authority in a Convention of clerical and lay Delegates--making their Church Episcopal in its orders, but Presbyterian in its government." In addition to all this Seabury objected in particular to the editing of the Psalter, the omission of the sign of the cross in Baptism, and declared that "the excluding of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds has alarmed the steady friends of the Church, lest the doctrine of Christ's divinity should go out with them."

These manifold objections alone would have sealed the fate of the "Proposed Book," but the attitude of the leaders of the mother Church of England put that fate beyond question.

The General Convention of this year, 1785, after adopting the draft of a constitution and compiling a Prayer Book, addressed a petition to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York asking them "to confer the Episcopal character on such persons as shall be recommended by this Church in the several States here represented." Under date of February 24, 1786, a sympathetic reply was received, accompanied by fundamental reservations. The English bishops had not at that time received a copy of the "Proposed Book" which had miscarried in the mail. But disturbing rumors of the character of the changes had reached them through "private channels." They therefore expressed their willingness to forward the plan for American bishops, but added,

"We cannot but be extremely cautious, lest we should be instruments of establishing an Ecclesiastical system which will be called a branch of the Church of England, but afterwards may possibly appear to have departed from it essentially, either in doctrine or discipline."

This reply came before the General Convention of 1786. Great care was taken in the drafting of a reply which was to reassure the Archbishops. As finally adopted it ran:

We are unanimous and explicit in assuring your Lordships that we have neither departed nor propose to depart from the doctrines of your Church. We have retained the same discipline and forms of worship, as far as was consistent with our civil constitutions; and we have made no alterations or omissions in the Book of Common Prayer, but such as were calculated to remove objections, which appeared to us more conducive to union and general content to obviate, than to dispute. It is well known that many great and pious men of the Church of England have long wished for a revision of the Liturgy, which it was deemed imprudent to hazard, lest it might become a precedent for repeated and improper alterations. This is with us the proper season for such a revision. We are now settling and ordering the affairs of our Church, and if wisely done, we shall have reason to promise ourselves all the advantages that can result from stability and union.

Meanwhile, events in England were moving rapidly. The passage of an Act of Parliament empowered the consecration of bishops who were citizens or subjects of "Countries out of His Majesty's Dominions." In America, in anticipation of this event, William White had been chosen Bishop of Pennsylvania; David Griffith, Bishop of Virginia, and Samuel Provoost, Bishop of New York, and formal applications had been made for their consecration in England. The General Convention adjourned pending a reply. When it met at Wilmington, Delaware, in October, the answer of the English bench of bishops was received and read. In effect it stated that they were willing to consecrate, but it was now incumbent on the American Church to remove the only remaining stumbling blocks which were certain clauses in the proposed constitution and some of the alterations in the Prayer Book of 1785. They "earnestly exhorted" the Convention. to restore the integrity of the Apostles' Creed by reinstating the words "he descended into Hell," and went on, "nor can we help adding, that we hope you will think it but a decent proof of the attachment which you profess to the services of your Liturgy, to give to the two other Creeds a place in your Book of Common Prayer, even though the use of them should be left discretional."

The minutes of the proceedings are extremely interesting. The first vote was taken on the matter of restoring the words, "He descended into Hell" in the Apostles' Creed. It was decided so to do by a divided vote. The Nicene Creed was restored by a unanimous vote. On the question, "Shall the Creed commonly called the Athanasian Creed, be admitted in the Liturgy of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America?" the clerical and lay deputies from New York, Pennsylvania and South Carolina voted in the negative; New Jersey and Delaware were divided, and so, as the Journal runs, "it was determined in the negative."

The result of these deliberations was conveyed in an official letter to the English Archbishops. The last paragraph reads:

We have taken into our most serious and deliberate consideration, the several

matters so affectionately recommended to us in those communications, and whatever could be done towards a compliance with your fatherly wishes and advice, consistently with our local circumstances, and the peace and unity of our Church, hath been done.

These concessions satisfied the Archbishops who were much too wise to make the Athanasian Creed an issue, and on February 4, 1787, in the Chapel of Lambeth Palace, London, William White was consecrated Bishop of Pennsylvania and Samuel Provoost, Bishop of New York.

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