
In 1787, We Had Three Different Ways of Being An Episcopalian!

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

Later this week, the Episcopal Church will observe two very different feast days. On Friday, November 14, some of us at daily Eucharist may remember the feast day of the consecration of Samuel Seabury. He is widely noted to be the first bishop of the Episcopal Church. However, on the very next day, November 15, the Episcopal Church, in our mercy, takes time to remember Francis Asbury and George Whitefield, great leaders of the Methodist movement with John and Charles Wesley.

The juxtaposition of these two days, both proper days in the Episcopal calendar, could not be more jarring. In those days, the 1780s, there were no Episcopal bishops at all in the new American colonies, and there was much question about what sort of Episcopal Church might emerge in the United States of America.

Many of us recite the observation of Seabury as first bishop without noting how very much a different sort of bishop he was from those who would follow in the American tradition. In fact, he had remained a British loyalist throughout the American Revolution, and he refused to attend the first general conventions of the Episcopal Church because he did not think lay people should have a vote in them. In Connecticut, he called special conventions in which only clergy voted. He stood for quite the imperialistic notion of bishop.

On the other hand, in the southern and middle American colonies, the early Methodists including Francis Asbury and George Whitefield were wary of Episcopal bishops at all. They believed that the gospel could easily be preached in the colonies, and churches could be formed, without any need for a bishop at all.

In the middle, in Pennsylvania, between these two expressions of Episcopal polity, stood a priest named William White. In his plan, local districts would elect “presiding clergy;” and, then, “elected representatives of the general vestries” would attend district and triennial national conventions. Presiding clergy, the other clergy, and laypersons would meet together in unicameral bodies.

Ultimately, it would be something like the plan of William White that emerged as the future for the Episcopal Church. And, unfortunately, the Methodist movement would go its own way, apart from the Episcopal Church. But, for a considerable time, it was uncertain what the Episcopal Church would look like.

Robert Prichard, in his book, *A History of The Episcopal Church*, has a wonderful description of this situation: “By 1787, American Episcopalians had, in effect, established three denominations: a middle and southern states’ church with English lines of consecration and a representative clerical and lay convention; a New England church directed by a bishop with Scottish consecration and governed through a clergy convocation; and a Methodist Episcopal Church with a form of government drafted by John Wesley. Efforts to reunite with the Methodist Episcopal Church proved unsuccessful; the two remaining groups, would, however, find a way to combine” (pp. 94-95).



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