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Laud: Anglican’s Greatest Calamity



　　The English Reformation was founded on the reading and hearing of God’s written Word. This is clear on every page of the historic Anglican formularies of the Edwardian and Elizabethan settlement, from the collects that affirm that God “caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning,” to the daily Bible reading plan (lectionary), to the reminder of the first homily for all church members to “ponder, quietly, and certify our consciences with the most infallible certainty, truth, and perpetual assurance of them” (The Reading of Holy Scripture, Gatiss edition). Reformation Anglicans recognized the innate power of the gospel read and preached to be God’s transforming agent for individuals and the whole of society, and they saw the two sacraments in the light of the word of God (heard by one of the human senses from the pulpit, what is experienced by all the other senses at the communion table). As a result of the Reformation, Medieval stone altars placed on the walls at the east end of churches were torn down and replaced by communion tables in the nave of the church, and the words “altar,” “mass,” and “priest” were retired from Church of England vocabulary because they were associated with the inherently idolatrous practices of late Medieval religion.

　　To call this a “settlement,” however, begs the question: to what extent and to what degree would future understandings and movements be allowed and the church still maintain its “Anglican” integrity? The church that stands for nothing will fall for anything, and where does innovation start and stop if not guided by the formularies: The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the two books of Homilies? The Constitution and Canons of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA, 2009) and the Jerusalem Declaration (Gafcon, 2008) link us inextricably to Anglican’s formularies, but in practice many Anglican churches would just as soon forget that we are tied to anything so old.

　　As much as anyone else, Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud was responsible for steering the Church of England away from its “settlement” in an attempt to remake it into something that looks curiously like the pre-Reformation church - to move it from its historic formularies to no formularies to speak of except the subjective aesthetic of “the beauty of holiness” - and from Calvinism to Arminianism and the sacramental and ceremonial dimensions of a wholly different theology. Laud was beheaded on January 10, 1645 by order of Parliament. He was a mean man, and especially cruel to the Puritans and other dissenters whom he waged war against and who were numerous in the Church of England at the time.

　　Before the English Civil Wars, Archbishop Laud helped resurrect altars in churches throughout England to replace Edward’s “stripping of the altars.” If he had it his way, stone altars would be permanently installed against the east wall of churches set on platforms (daises), with altar rails around them to somehow guard their sanctity. The Laudian altars, as they were called, were erected in the 1630s along with Medieval Catholic ritual and ceremonial never before seen in the Church of England. Among the new practices was the manufactured practice of “acknowledging” (bowing to) the altar as a sacred object upon entering a church, before entering and leaving a pew, and while approaching or crossing the entrance to the chancel. Queen Elizabeth I’s conservative churchmanship, as seen in the imagery and ceremonial of the royal chapel, may have been a hint of things to come, but the ball didn’t drop before King Charles I who fully endorsed the Laudian ascendancy with all that came with it (William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury 1633-45). And despite the reversals of the 1640’s-50s after the English Civil Wars, Laud’s mark had lasting consequences for Protestant beliefs and practices. Laud called the altar “the greatest place of God’s residence upon the earth,” and Laudians often referred to it as “Christ’s mercy seat” (I.e., equivalent to the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies). Even though the reformers before him opposed the Roman Catholic understanding of the “sacrifice of the mass” and believed supremely in the power of the Bible, Laud declared the relative unimportance of the preached word when he famously said, “in all ages of the church the touchstone of religion was not to hear the word preached, but to communicate.”

　　The driving force behind Laud was his anti-Calvinism, his Arminian theology that was contrary to the theology of which the newly formed Church of England was formed. Calvinism with its strong convictions about the sovereignty of God and predestination was the only allowed form of Protestantism in the English church until an anti-Calvinist (Arminian) challenge arose at Cambridge University first, then Oxford, in the 1590s. And by the 1630s-40s Arminianism had taken a hold of the Church of England and has not let go since. Arminianism almost always leads to free-willism, which inevitably leads to moralism and away from the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. We see a rise of moralism in the Caroline Divines (Charles I), from the early divines who were thoroughly committed to salvation by faith to a more synergistic understanding - God needs our help, obedience, and devotion for our salvation (Jeremy Taylor).

　　Laud coined the term “High Church” to describe clergy who were not puritans or Calvinists of the Edwardian/Elizabethan Anglican variety. You can be sure that William Laud has visited a church if you walk in and find it ornate in decorum with ritual that is unintelligible to nonmembers of the club. If heads are bowing in the direction of the altar (communion table) as a sacred piece of furniture where the magic of transforming bread and wine is performed, you can be sure that Laud has been in that place. Laudians successfully injecting into the rubrics of 1662 Book of Common Prayer a “fraction” (breaking of the bread in communion) and fussy instructions for the disposal of the leftover bread and wine reminiscent of pre-Reformation understandings, thus laying the ground work for later practices of reserving the sacrament in a tabernacle, red sanctus lights to indicate that “Jesus is home,” and practices of adoration of the sacrament (elevation, genuflecting, sanctus bells, etc.). The ritualist descendants of the 1830s Tractarians found justification for their sacrament-centered piety and sacerdotal ceremonialism in the Laudian revival of the 1630s.

　　Perhaps Laud’s biggest mistake was overstepping his authority and forcing High Church Anglican worship on the church in Scotland (in the form of the Prayer Book version of 1637). This actually fueled the English Civil Wars in Scotland, Ireland and England. With its Laudian standard of decorum and ritualism that included an “epiclesis” (prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to make the elements of communion into the body and blood of Christ in a moment of consecration), the 1637 Book was roundly rejected and forgotten until after the Glorious Revolution when, in 1688, this Prayer Book revision was picked up again by the Anglicans who formed the Scottish Episcopal Church in opposition to the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. (Parenthetically, it was this Prayer Book revision, not the 1662, that was brought back to America by Samuel Seabury in exchange for his consecration to be the first bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States.) Church historian Patrick Collinson, in his usual blunt way, said that William Laud was "the greatest calamity ever visited upon the English Church.” Hugh Trevor-Roper, Laud’s sympathetic biographer, spoke of the Elizabethan “compromise,” studiously avoiding the term “settlement” - and “like all compromises, it depended for its success on a certain lack of definition, a permanent ambiguity.” However, if there was settlement of Anglican identity however flimsy it was in the authority of Holy Scripture as preserved and interpreted by the historic formularies of the Church of England, then hope for our future will be in those formularies plainly interpreted, or Anglicans today as in the past will eventually walk the road to Rome. “It is possible to justify the puritan charge,” wrote Trevor-Roper, “that Laudianism led to Rome - at least if one started from Cambridge.”

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