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A Communion Table of Black Walnut



June 16, 1607 is the birthday of Anglicanism in America. On this day Captain John Smith and 104 others celebrated the Lord’s Supper when they arrived safely in Jamestown, Virginia. Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in America, settled some thirteen years before the pilgrims landed in Plymouth. Anglicans were America’s original forefathers!

The expression of faith they brought with them was that of the 16th century Protestant Reformation. How do we know this? William Strachey, secretary of the colony in 1610, wrote a first-hand account of the first simple church building in which the English colonist John Rolfe and Pocahontas, the Indian princess, were famously married April 5, 1614: "In the midst [of the fort] ... is a pretty chapel...it is length threescore foot, in breadth twenty-four...and a communion table of black walnut..."

Since Thomas Cranmer’s 1552 Book of Common Prayer until the 1979 Prayer Book revision, the communion table was called a "table" so as not to confuse it with “altar” and the medieval Catholic understanding of the sacrament. On an altar a sacerdotal priest re-offers Jesus as a sacrifice (the sacrifice of the mass). The newly formed Church of England was clear that Jesus was sacrificed once and for all on the cross (Hebrews 10:10) and that the Holy Communion service is not a re-sacrifice. As the Anglican formularies state, the Church of England understands that Christ is really present in the eucharist, not in the bread and wine as Catholics (and Lutherans) believe, but spiritually present in the hearts and affections of those who receive the grace of the sacrament by faith. “By faith” is the key to understanding the Reformation, and the central feature of Anglican sacramental understanding and worship.

The English reformers were all clear that stone altars permanently mounted at the east end of churches were idolatrous. Standing at them were sacrificing priests with their backs to the congregation saying and doing private things in a foreign language all pointing to the moment of consecration at which Jesus is lifted up for all to gaze upon. The Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley, stressed the need to wean people from “the popish” idea of sacrifice at the communion table where we do not come to “sacrifice up Christ again” but rather “we come to feed upon him, spiritually to eat his body and spiritually to drink his blood.” The 1552 Prayer Book added a new communion rubric that states that the “table. . .shall stande in the body of the churche, or in the chauncell,” with the priest positioned “at the north syde.” When the Jamestown chronicler described “a communion table of black walnut” he was making a theological statement about the character of their beliefs.

They were declaring their opposition to late medieval religion when the English reformers tore down altars and replaced them with moveable wooden tables, positioning them lengthwise in the chancel with the minister presiding at the north end of the table. This remained the practice, and in many dioceses the law, until the Laudian reforms (Archbishop William Laud) in the 1630s when tables were fastened again to east walls of churches, altar rails were constructed around them to spotlight where the magic takes place, chalices were reintroduced to replace cups, and the practice of bowing to altars upon entering a church or one’s pew was introduced. The Roman term “mass” for Holy Communion was discontinued altogether after the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, never to be used again in the English church, except by Anglo-catholic revisionists who secretly wish they were Catholics without the pope.

By changing "table" to "altar" in the 1979 Prayer Book and by adding the fraction anthem ("Christ our passover is sacrificed for us,” not "has been sacrificed") only shows the creeping influence of the 19th century Oxford Movement that sought to reintroduce into this church Roman understandings and ideals. Article 31 of the Thirty-nine Articles specifically calls the sacrifices of the masses "blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.”

Jesus and Pocahontas: Gospel Mission, and National Myth, Howard A. Snyder

https://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Pocahontas-Gospel-Mission-National/dp/1498202888

Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547-1700, Kenneth Fincham & Nicholas Tyacke

https://www.amazon.com/Altars-Restored-Changing-Religious-1547-c-1700/dp/019820700X

The Boy King: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation, Diarmaid MacCulloch

https://www.amazon.com/Boy-King-Edward-Protestant-Reformation/dp/0520234022

Chuck Collins

Chuck is the Director for the Center for Reformation Anglicanism

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