

The Reformed Episcopal Church Declaration of Principles

Their Historic Context

In the 19th Century, major changes occurred in the Anglican Communion, especially in the Protestant Episcopal Church in America. As a result of a liberal movement in the previous century (18th), some began to argue that the English Reformation was wrong and that Anglicanism should return to a more Medieval Church. To do so, however, meant a significant departure from historic Episcopalianism. As a result, there was a concern on the part of others to protect what can be called the Anglicanism of the English Reformation. Their view was that liberalism was to be combated by clearly proclaiming the Good News of salvation through faith in Christ, by protecting the integrity of the Holy Scriptures, and by preserving the Prayer Book of Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop who was martyred for denouncing certain innovative Roman Catholic doctrines of the Middle Ages.

One evangelical priest in the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg, attempted to summarize the core issues for evangelicals in the 19th Century by formulating in essence what became known as the Muhlenberg Memorial. The Rev. Mr. Muhlenberg was himself an evangelical who worked in close ecumenical association with the Old Catholic Church. As such, he was a high church "Gospel Man," which explains why some evangelicals of his day had a range of liturgical practice, while uniting around the ancient Reformed Catholic truths. Although he never became a Reformed Episcopalian, the newly established Reformed Episcopal Church made good use of his statements.

Some in the latter quarter of the 19th Century concluded that their beloved Protestant Episcopal Church had so dramatically changed that they had no alternative but to preserve the old Church by forming another denomination (though not another church). In 1873, the Rt. Rev. George David Cummins, the Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of Kentucky in the Protestant Episcopal Church, believed he must continue the old Church by becoming the founding Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church, thereby maintaining historic succession of orders to this very day in the REC. Bishop Cummins utilized some of the Rev. Mr. Muhlenberg's statements in his creation of the Declaration of Principles. Cummins even wanted him to become a bishop in the REC. Thus, the Declaration of Principles are the heart of the essential convictions of the Reformed Episcopal Church. However, given who the Rev. Mr. Muhlenberg was, his churchmanship, and what Bishop Cummins said he wanted the Reformed Episcopal Church to be, the following clarifications should be kept in mind as the reader attempts to interpret the Declaration of Principles.

First, the opening principle clearly recognizes Scripture as a primary authoritative document, but not exclusively so. Holy Scripture was not given in a vacuum apart from the Church, and thus, the ancient creeds as interpreted by their English commentary, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, are also authoritative.

Second, the statement on the episcopacy is straight out of Richard Hooker, the late 16th Century Anglican theologian, who wrote the classical defense of Anglicanism, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Hooker endorsed episcopal polity as rooted in Scripture and as historically verified by its universal, uncontested acceptance for the first 1500 years of church history. Nevertheless, this classical Anglican resisted being so exclusive as to unchurch those who did not have bishops (his European Reformed brethren) by denying the validity of their Baptism or Communion. Those who came later in the 19th Century decided to depart from the English Reformation of Hooker and reject the Holy Communion of nonepiscopal protestant denominations. As such the second principle embraces the episcopacy for the well-being but not the being of the church.

Third, the Prayer Book of the REC is the 1785 American version of the 1662 BCP. Due to the allowance for revision, the 1928 and the Australian BCP are permitted for use as long as the Declaration of Principles are placed in the front of the Prayer Book.

Lastly, the denials of the 4th Principle clearly oppose any language defined to imply that the sacraments in and of themselves convey salvation apart from faith. However, a negative does not establish a positive. Particular terms such as priest, altar, and real presence are not actually forbidden, only their incorrect use. Specifically, these denials should in no way be understood as rejecting the clear language of documents subscribed to in the Declaration of Principles (*The Scriptures, Book of Common Prayer, Thirty-Nine Articles, etc.*) (1) The Articles allow the use of the word priest as the anglicized version of the word presbyter by their consistent use of it to describe a minister of the Word and Sacrament (XXXII, XXXVI), and not as someone who can uniquely provide atonement (XXXI) is clear. (2) Table and altar are used interchangeably in Holy Scripture (Malachai 1:10, 12), suggesting the table of Holy Communion is an altar of praise and thanksgiving. (3) The Articles affirm belief in the real presence of Christ when they say, *The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner* (XXVIII). (4) The Holy Scriptures (Titus 3:5) and the Catechism of the BCP speak of baptism as an outward sign of an inward grace such that regeneration should be understood as normally occurring at Holy Baptism, but not inseparable with Baptism.

Thus, the Declaration of Principles are not an attempt to depart from historic Anglican beliefs. Rather, they are an expression of a return to the old paths of the Protestant Episcopal Church and our English Reformers, in the words of Bishop Cummins. Moreover, their rejection of peculiar Medieval errors that have sometimes reappeared in the history of Anglicanism has held Reformed Episcopalians to orthodoxy for 133 years without a single occurrence of schism or doctrinal deviation.

The Declaration of Principles Of the Reformed Episcopal Church Adopted, December 2, 1873

I.

The Reformed Episcopal Church, holding "the faith once delivered unto the saints," declares its belief in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, as the sole rule of Faith and Practice; in the Creed "commonly called the Apostles' Creed;" in the Divine institution of the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; and in the doctrines of grace substantially as they are set forth in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

II.

This Church recognizes and adheres to Episcopacy, not as of Divine right, but as a very ancient and desirable form of Church polity.

III.

This Church, retaining a liturgy which shall not be imperative or repressive of freedom in prayer, accepts The Book of Common Prayer, as it was revised, proposed, and recommended for use by the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, A.D. 1785, reserving full liberty to alter, abridge, enlarge, and amend the same, as may seem most conducive to the edification of the people, "provided that the substance of the faith be kept entire."

IV.

This Church condemns and rejects the following erroneous and strange doctrines as contrary to God's Word:

First, that the Church of Christ exists only in one order or form of ecclesiastical polity:

Second, that Christian Ministers are "priests" in another sense than that in which all believers are a "royal priesthood:"

Third, that the Lord's Table is an altar on which the oblation of the Body and Blood of Christ is offered anew to the Father:

Fourth, that the Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is a presence in the elements of Bread and Wine:

Fifth, that regeneration is inseparably connected with Baptism.