

## Church history in England from 1559 to the present.

My aim today, following the suggestion of a church member, and with our vicar, Andrew's agreement, is to follow our November sermon series on the 16<sup>th</sup> century protestant Reformation, with one survey of the history of the church in England since that time, especially explaining the origin of the main Free Church denominations. Even by just sticking to the churches in England this is not easy to do in one sermon, and it involves generalisations about a denomination which may not be true for the whole of it. If you feel I have got anything wrong I apologise and you are most welcome to tell me at the end of the service, or by email.

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1559 she agreed to restore the use of the 1552 Prayer Book, with certain small changes in a catholic direction.

However there were a good number of people in the Church of England would have liked to take the Reformation further, and make the Church of England even more in accord with the New Testament. These were the Puritans, some of whom held high office in the church. Elizabeth, who had a liking for ritual, opposed them, and so did her successor King James I.

Two areas of disagreement were the words used to describe Christian ministers.

The first area of disagreement was over the use of the term "bishop". The New Testament uses both the word bishop, meaning overseer, and the word presbyter meaning elder. But these were two words for the same people, as I shall show you.

We see this first in Acts chapter 20, in the Apostle Paul's farewell to the Ephesian church leaders. In verse 17 we read "Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church"; then in verse 28 he said to them "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops". So the same leaders were called both "elders" and "bishops".

Then we see it again in Paul's letter to Titus. He wrote in chapter 1 verse 5: "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since a bishop is entrusted with God's work he must be blameless" and he continues with further qualities needed for the men chosen. The words "elder" and "bishop" were interchangeable.

Also the New Testament bishops or elders only exercised leadership within their own local church. The practice of a bishop having oversight of churches in a wider area developed later.

The second area of disagreement was about the word "priest".

In the Old Testament priests were appointed to exercise their chief ministry of offering animal sacrifices in the tabernacle tent in the wilderness, and later in the temple at Jerusalem. They were intermediaries between God and men.

When Jesus died on the Cross the veil of the temple was miraculously split from top to bottom, signifying that all could now approach God directly without such priestly mediation. And as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament explains, Jesus' death on the cross was the final sacrifice. There is no need for any further sacrifices. So the New Testament refers to the priesthood of all believers, because we can each pray to God directly, without priestly mediation. So the New Testament writers do not use the word "priest" to describe Christian ministers. The Puritans correctly used the term presbyter, not priest.

But there were other areas of disagreement in which I think the Puritans went too far. For example they did not like any symbols, like making the sign of the Cross in baptism, and wedding rings. Some Puritans did not even like musical instruments in church.

During the reigns of Elizabeth and James I Puritanism developed two streams. The Presbyterians thought the church should have a central organisation. The Independents, later called Congregationalists, believed in the independence of the local congregation. Persecution of the latter led some of them to emigrate to North America. The early ones, in 1620, became known as the Pilgrim Fathers.

The first Baptist Church in England was established in London in the early 1600s. They too were independent in organisation.

Charles I was the next king, and he increased the persecution of Puritans. This is one of the factors which led to the Civil War in 1642. After the victory of the Parliamentarians in 1645 use of the 1559 Prayer Book was replaced by the Directory for Public Worship, a book which merely gave directions about worship, not set services.

The Independents were responsible for the execution of Charles I in 1649, against the wishes of the Presbyterians. A little after the death of parliamentary leader Oliver Cromwell the Presbyterians, who were in the majority, invited Charles II back to take the throne in 1660. Use of the Prayer Book was restored in 1662.

An Act of Uniformity demanded that ministers were to use this Prayer Book in every detail. As a result about 2,000 of 10,000 ministers in England resigned. This became known as the Great Ejection. They founded Presbyterian and Independent churches. Various Acts of Parliament were passed making life very difficult for them for the next quarter-century, until most of those Acts were repealed when the Christian king William III came to the throne in 1689.

Another denomination which can trace its roots to the 17<sup>th</sup> century is the Society of Friends or Quakers, founded by George Fox. They stressed the need for a direct relationship with Jesus, and inner light received through meditation. Some of them too emigrated to America because of persecution.

Quakers have founded banks and financial institutions, including Barclays, Lloyds, and Friends Provident; manufacturing companies, including shoe retailer Clarks and the big three British confectionery makers Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry; and they have been prominent in philanthropic efforts, including prison reform. Many have been pacifists.

Overseas Quakers usually have singing in their meetings and addresses based on the Bible. English Quakers however generally meet mostly in silence, with contributions as those present feel led. As a result English Quakers have become the most liberal of churches, encouraging practices far from the standards of the Bible.

The first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of sad decline in the church and country, both in belief and in behaviour. Some Presbyterians and Baptists became Unitarians, no longer believing that Jesus is God. Many Church of England clergy were only interested in making money by taking as many appointments as they could, and then employing curates on a low wage to do their jobs for them. Meanwhile people's morals declined. Gambling was rife. Prostitutes abounded. Drunkenness was a big problem. So was swearing.

However in the late 1730s George Whitefield and John Wesley were converted and they began to travel the country preaching the need for repentance and faith in Christ. Many pulpits were closed to them, so they often preached in the open air; large crowds attended, and many turned to Christ through their ministry. Whitefield did not form a separate denomination, though one of his supporters, the Countess of Huntingdon formed a small one, the Countess of Huntingdon's connection.

Wesley encouraged those converted through his ministry to meet together in local societies, as well as attending their local church. These local societies were divided into weekly classes, which might be seen as the forerunners of home groups today. Many of Wesley's societies, after his death, separated from the Church of England and formed what became known as the Methodist Church.

The number of evangelical clergy in the Church of England also began to grow.

The 1700s were also the century which saw the major beginning of hymn writing, beginning with the Congregational writer Isaac Watts, and continuing later especially with John Wesley's brother, Charles, who wrote around 600 hymns.

Another notable person was the Member of Parliament William Wilberforce. He is best known for his work in bringing the English slave trade to an end. But he also persuaded the King, George III, to issue a Proclamation in 1787, to encourage a Reformation of Manners in people's lives. Wilberforce enlisted support for this from some of the nobility, the two Archbishops, and some other bishops. This was what began the trend towards higher moral standards in the reign of Queen Victoria.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time when other new movements emerged. Time does not allow me to comment on the small ones, like the Free Church of England or the Strict Baptists.

But one was the Brethren, sometimes called by others the Plymouth Brethren, founded in the late 1820s. They call their gatherings Assemblies and do not have a paid minister. Their Sunday gatherings are like those of the Society of Friends, in that they do not have any set pattern, but those present contribute as they feel led.

However the contributions are not from "inner light", but are passages of Scripture and comments on them, and extempore prayer. The Brethren divided 20 years later into the

Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren. The former are willing to join with other churches in certain events like Spring Harvest; the latter are not. The Brethren were particularly notable for their emphasis on the promised return of Jesus.

The middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the growth of the Oxford Movement. This was the birth of Anglo-Catholicism, an attempt to turn the Church of England away from its Protestant roots, and it back towards Catholicism, in doctrine, in church furnishings, in robes and ritualism. Sadly it was very successful in doing so.

One particular doctrine they emphasised was the supposed apostolic succession or historic episcopate - bishops having been consecrated in a continuous line from the Apostle Peter. This lacks firm evidence, and was a stumbling block in some attempts for church unity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of its teaching that Free Church ministers are inferior to Anglican clergy. It has been well said that the important apostolic succession is not a continuous line of ordinations but the maintenance of the Apostles' teaching.

Regarding church furnishings, pews, which had focused on the pulpit, were rearranged to face stone altars, which had replaced wooden tables, and which had been placed against the east wall of the building. This was called church restoration.

In some places where the Oxford Movement had brought about these changes, evangelical Anglicans founded their own separate churches, like Christchurch, Westbourne in Bournemouth; churches without parishes.

History is beginning to repeat itself this century with the founding of churches by the Anglican Mission in England, in response to growing liberalism within the Church of England today.

Not that liberalism is anything new. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning in Germany, so-called biblical scholars began to pick and choose which parts of the Bible they regarded as authentic. This approach spread to England and affected most of the mainline denominations.

However the Baptist Church in England grew considerably in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly through the Ministry of gifted preachers, especially Charles Spurgeon in London.

There was a wonderful revival in 1859, which spread from America to Ulster and thence to England. 600,000 were converted in England in the next five years. Church attendance continued high through the rest of the century, and more men and women went overseas as missionaries in the next 50 years than in any other period.

The Seventh-day Adventist church was founded in America in 1863. It lays particular emphasis on worshipping on Saturday rather than Sunday, and on the return of Jesus Christ. It has grown in other parts of the world faster than in England, but it has about 35,000 members here.

The Salvation Army was founded in 1865, also in London, by Methodist preacher William Booth and his wife Catherine, as the East London Christian Mission. In 1878 Booth

reorganised the mission as the Salvation Army. He became its first General and introduced uniform and the military structure which has been retained to the present day.

The Salvation Army's main converts were at first alcoholics, morphine addicts, prostitutes and other undesirables, who were unwelcome in polite Christian society, which prompted the Booths to start their own denomination. William Booth described the organisation's approach: "The three 'S's' best expressed the way in which the Army administered to the 'down and outs': first, soup; second, soap; and finally, salvation.

1874 saw the birth of the first university Christian Union, at Cambridge. This evangelical interdenominational movement continues to be a blessing to many in tertiary education up and down the country, spreading to all universities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There was a good deal of emphasis in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on personal holiness. One result of that was the start of the Keswick Convention in 1875. Christians from a range of denominations have met there in July ever since, except during the world wars, to hear Bible teaching.

Another fruit of seeking holiness was a movement which began in America in the early 1900s, spreading to England soon afterwards, through the ministry of the Vicar of All Saints, Sunderland, Alexander Boddy.

This is the Pentecostal movement. Like other forms of evangelical Protestantism, Pentecostalism adheres to the authority of the Bible and the necessity of accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour.

But it is distinguished by emphasis on the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, enabling a Christian to live a Spirit-filled and empowered life. This empowerment includes the use of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues and divine healing, which most other Christians thought had died out after New Testament times.

Pentecostalism has split into many different denominations. Some of those present in England are the Assemblies of God, the Elim church, and various churches like the New Covenant church, founded by Caribbean and Nigerian Pentecostals who have come to England.

But in the early 1960s a movement of the Holy Spirit began in the mainline denominations, even amongst Roman Catholics. This became called the charismatic movement. It was marked not only by use of spiritual gifts, but by a much greater freedom in Christian worship. Some Christians whose lives were renewed through it remained in their denominations, some forming renewal groups within them.

But some, despairing of their local church, began to form what became to be called house churches, though they often met in schools or other halls rather than in houses. It is more accurate to call them new churches, a term they prefer. The largest seems to be Newfrontiers, founded by Terry Virgo; among the other groups are Pioneer, Vineyard and Hope churches. Together the new churches are said to have 800,000 members.

In contrast most of the older denominations have been in decline since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main exception to this has been the number of evangelicals within the older denominations. This was particularly helped mid-century by missions, especially those led by Billy Graham, who by the way is still alive and is now 99, and from the end of the century onwards by the Alpha Course of Holy Trinity, Brompton.

Many local churches now use modernised forms of worship and contemporary translations of the Bible. While this commendable change has not in itself led to growth, churches which have resisted such modernising changes have been in gradual decline in their size.

A proposal for uniting the Church of England and the Methodist Church failed in the 1960s. But since then these churches have been gradually drawing together.

In 1972 Presbyterians and most Congregationalists in England merged to form the United Reformed Church. My late father-in-law, Philip Eastman, was for many years the Minister of the second pair of Presbyterian and Congregational churches to demolish their two buildings and build a new joint one.

Many denominations emphasise truths which have been neglected, and from which others can learn.

It is good that churches of different denominations work together in various ways these days.

The history of the church is a history of ups and downs, rather like the history of Israel in Old Testament times. It is sad to be living in what is, in the developed world, in some ways a down period in the church, but who knows, a refreshing, or even a revival may be just around the corner. We must pray for it.

What is certain is what we heard in our Bible reading. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7.9-10). Whatever denomination you belong to, all believers will be united in heaven. Praise God. Amen.