Article 8 - The Elizabethan Settlement and the Anglican *Via Media*

When Elizabeth I became queen in 1558, England had experienced decades of religious upheaval. Within a single generation, the nation had undergone dramatic shifts in religious policy. Under Henry VIII, England had severed its ties with Rome while retaining much of the Church's traditional theology. Under Edward VI, Protestant reforms transformed the Church. Under Mary I, England returned to communion with Rome, and Protestants faced persecution.

The people of England scarcely had time to adapt before another change occurred. Churches had been altered and altered again. Clergy had been instructed to teach one thing, only a short time later to be told to teach something quite different. Communities lived with uncertainty about what the future would bring.

Elizabeth inherited a nation divided by religious change. Her challenge was not merely theological. It was political, social, and pastoral. How could England achieve stability when its people held deeply opposing convictions about religion?

The answer that emerged became known as the Elizabethan Settlement. The Settlement was neither a return to Roman Catholicism nor a simple adoption of the more thoroughly Reformed churches found on the continent. It established a Protestant Church that nevertheless retained significant elements of historic Catholic order and worship. In later Anglican thought, this instinct for holding together different strands of the Christian tradition would often be described by the Latin phrase *via media*—the “middle way.”

To understand what Elizabeth and her advisers accomplished, we must first understand the situation they faced.

When Queen Mary I died in 1558, the English Church had once again been brought into communion with Rome. Papal authority had been restored, the Latin Mass was again the normal form of worship, and many prominent Protestant leaders had either been executed or fled into exile.

English Protestants had taken refuge in places such as Geneva, Strasbourg, Frankfurt, and Zurich, where they encountered some of the most influential Protestant thinkers and churches of the age. When Elizabeth came to the throne, many returned to England with strong reforming convictions.

Meanwhile, many English Catholics hoped to remain in communion with Rome. Elizabeth therefore inherited a nation containing competing religious visions. Catholics hoped to preserve the restoration achieved under Mary. Many Protestants wanted a more thoroughly Reformed Church like those they had encountered on the continent. Between them were people whose religious convictions and loyalties did not fit neatly into either category.

Elizabeth herself was Protestant, but the precise character of her personal religious convictions is not always easy to define. She valued continuity, order, ceremony, music, and the historic structures of the Church. At the same time, she firmly rejected papal jurisdiction and supported the Protestant direction of the English Church.

Elizabeth also possessed a strong practical political instinct. She recognized that religious division could threaten the stability of the realm. Her government therefore sought sufficient religious uniformity to establish order while avoiding some of the more radical changes desired by certain Protestant reformers.

This desire helped shape the Elizabethan Settlement.

In 1559, Parliament passed two critical pieces of legislation: the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity.

The **Act of Supremacy** restored the English Crown's authority over the Church and rejected papal jurisdiction. Significantly, Elizabeth adopted the title “Supreme Governor” rather than her father Henry VIII's title “Supreme Head.” Clergy and certain public officials were required to acknowledge royal supremacy.

The **Act of Uniformity** restored the *Book of Common Prayer* as the authorized form of worship throughout England. The Prayer Book of 1559 was based largely on Cranmer's 1552 Prayer Book but included several significant modifications.

One of the most famous occurred in the words spoken when Communion was administered. The 1549 Prayer Book had said:

“The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.”

The 1552 book had replaced this with:

“Take and eat this, in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving.”

The 1559 Prayer Book combined the two formulas. The precise theological significance of this change remains debated, but the combined wording became characteristic of Elizabethan worship and allowed the language of sacramental reception and faithful remembrance to stand together.

Together, the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity formed the legislative foundation of what became known as the Elizabethan Settlement.

One of the most enduring features of the Settlement was its emphasis on common worship. The Church of England certainly possessed doctrinal standards, but shared liturgy became especially important in shaping its identity. Elizabeth and her advisers demanded outward conformity in worship even though complete theological agreement among the population was impossible.

The Prayer Book therefore became an important instrument of religious unity. Week after week, people gathered in their parish churches, prayed the same prayers, heard the same Scriptures, and participated in the same liturgy. Over time, common worship helped shape a common religious identity.

The theological character of the Elizabethan Church was further defined by the **Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion**. Their roots lay in Thomas Cranmer's Forty-Two Articles of 1553. A revised set of Articles was approved by Convocation in 1563, and the Thirty-Nine Articles received their definitive authorization in 1571.

The Articles clearly reflected Reformation convictions concerning Scripture, justification, the Church, and the sacraments. At the same time, the Church of England retained the ancient creeds and the historic episcopal ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons. The Articles rejected a number of medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices while also distinguishing the English Church from more radical expressions of the Reformation.

Their purpose was not to create Christianity anew but to define the doctrine of a reformed English Church.

The Elizabethan Settlement soon faced challenges from different directions.

Roman Catholics objected to the rejection of papal authority and the restoration of Protestant worship. Some continued to practise their faith privately, while others hoped England would eventually return to communion with Rome.

The conflict became considerably sharper after 1570, when Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth in the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* and declared her subjects released from allegiance to her. Thereafter, English Catholicism became increasingly entangled with questions of political loyalty and national security, especially as England faced plots against Elizabeth and growing tensions with Catholic powers abroad.

At the other end of the Protestant spectrum stood those who came to be known as Puritans. They believed that the English Reformation had not gone far enough. They wanted to remove what they regarded as remnants of Roman Catholic worship, reform church structures further, and bring the Church of England more closely into line with Reformed churches on the continent.

Elizabeth resisted pressures from both directions. She was determined to preserve the religious order established under her authority. As a result, the Church appeared too Protestant to many Catholics and insufficiently reformed to many Puritans.

That tension continued long after Elizabeth's death and became an important part of the story of Anglicanism.

The phrase *via media*, meaning “middle way,” is often used to describe Anglicanism. However, it is important to understand what the phrase does—and does not—mean.

The Elizabethans themselves did not generally describe their Settlement as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The Church established under Elizabeth was Protestant and understood itself as a reformed expression of the historic catholic Church. The familiar use of *via media* to describe Anglican identity developed more fully in later centuries.

Nor does *via media* simply mean compromise for the sake of compromise. In later Anglican thought, it came to express an instinct for holding together elements of the Christian tradition that were sometimes separated: Scripture and tradition, catholic order and Reformation theology, sacramental worship and biblical preaching.

The Elizabethan Settlement helped create the conditions in which this Anglican identity could eventually develop. Rather than simply reproducing Roman Catholicism or one particular form of continental Protestantism, the Church of England gradually developed its own distinctive character.

For ordinary people, the Settlement again transformed parish life. English was restored as the language of public worship. Scripture was read in English, and the *Book of Common Prayer* shaped the worship of parish churches. People were baptized, married, and buried according to its rites. They gathered for Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Holy Communion and lived within the rhythms of the Christian year.

Over time, these patterns contributed to the development of a distinctive English Protestant culture that later generations would recognize as part of the Anglican tradition.

The influence of the Elizabethan Settlement reached far beyond sixteenth-century England. Several characteristics associated with Anglicanism today have important roots in this period: common prayer, episcopal leadership, reverence for Scripture, continuity with the historic Church, and the attempt to maintain unity amid theological difference.

Yet we should be careful not to romanticize the Settlement.

Elizabethan England did not practise religious toleration in the modern sense. Attendance at the established Church was legally required. Catholics who refused to attend—known as recusants—could face increasingly severe penalties. Puritans who openly challenged the established order could also face punishment. Religious disagreement was often treated not simply as a theological matter but as a potential threat to political order.

The unity Elizabeth sought was therefore not achieved simply through generous theological accommodation. It was also enforced by the power of the state.

Nevertheless, the Elizabethan Settlement remains a significant moment in the history of the English Church. Faced with deep divisions and competing religious visions, Elizabeth I and her advisers established a religious framework that brought greater stability after decades of upheaval and helped shape the distinctive character of the Church of England.

Perhaps its most enduring legacy for Anglicanism is the recognition that common life does not always require complete agreement on every theological question. Christians with differing convictions can nevertheless gather around common prayer, common worship, Scripture, the sacraments, and a shared commitment to Christ.

The Elizabethan Settlement did not create the Anglican *via media* overnight. But it helped create the conditions in which a Church both catholic and reformed, rooted in tradition and shaped by Scripture, could gradually emerge.