Article 9 – The English Civil War, the Puritans, and the Restoration of the Church of England

The story of Anglicanism is often told through the lives of kings, queens, bishops, theologians, and reformers. Yet there are moments in history when the future of the Church hangs in the balance. The English Civil War was one of those moments.

Between 1642 and 1660, England experienced civil war, political revolution, the execution of a king, the abolition of bishops, the suppression of the Book of Common Prayer, and the temporary dismantling of the Church of England as the established national Church. For nearly twenty years, the future of Anglicanism was uncertain.

Looking back, it is easy to assume that the Church of England would survive. Yet those living through this conflict had no such assurance. Many believed that the Church established under the English Reformation and shaped by the Elizabethan Settlement had come to an end. The survival and eventual restoration of the Church of England profoundly shaped Anglican identity. It taught Anglicans hard lessons about authority, worship, unity, and the dangers of allowing religious and political differences to become absolute.

To understand this chapter of our story, we must first understand the tensions that had been building for generations.

Although the Elizabethan Settlement brought a measure of stability, it had not resolved every disagreement. Many English Protestants remained dissatisfied with the Church of England. These reformers became known as Puritans. The name was originally intended as an insult. It suggested people who wished to "purify" the Church of England by removing practices they considered remnants of Roman Catholicism.

Puritans objected to a number of features of Anglican worship and church structure. Some opposed vestments. Others disliked certain ceremonies and prescribed forms of worship. Many questioned the authority of bishops. Some believed that the Book of Common Prayer retained practices insufficiently grounded in Scripture. At the heart of the debate was a fundamental question: How thoroughly should the Reformation transform the Church?

Defenders of the Elizabethan Church generally believed that ancient customs and structures could be retained provided they did not contradict Scripture. More radical Puritans argued that the Church should conform much more closely to practices they believed were prescribed in Scripture. The disagreement was not merely about ceremonies. It reflected two different visions of what a reformed Church should be.

When James I became king in 1603, many Puritans hoped for further reform. Instead, James largely supported the existing structure of the Church. At the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, he famously declared, "No bishop, no king." James believed that episcopal government and monarchy supported one another. If the authority of bishops could be overturned, he feared that royal authority might eventually be challenged as well. James's support for bishops strengthened the existing structure of the Church of England but disappointed many Puritans. The tensions did not disappear; they continued to simmer beneath the surface.

The situation became even more difficult under James I's son, Charles I. Charles strongly supported traditional forms of Anglican worship and appointed William Laud Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Laud sought greater uniformity, order, ceremony, and reverence in worship. He became particularly associated with placing Communion tables altar-wise at the east end of churches, often

surrounded by rails, and with encouraging greater care for the appearance and furnishings of church buildings.

For Laud and his supporters, these changes expressed the dignity and holiness of worship. For his critics, however, they appeared dangerously close to Roman Catholicism. Many Puritans viewed Laud with deep suspicion, contributing to growing polarization. Increasingly, each side viewed the other as a threat to the future of English Christianity.

Religious disagreements soon became intertwined with political disputes. Charles I believed strongly in royal authority and governed without Parliament from 1629 until 1640. Many members of Parliament opposed his financial, political, and religious policies. Questions of taxation, governance, and royal authority became increasingly difficult to separate from questions of religion. Tensions escalated, and compromise became harder to achieve.

In 1642, the conflict erupted into civil war. The English Civil Wars were not simply religious conflicts. They involved questions of political authority, constitutional government, taxation, and the relationship between king and Parliament. Yet religion played a central role.

The wars divided families, communities, and parishes. On one side stood the Royalists, often called Cavaliers, who supported King Charles I. On the other stood the Parliamentarians, many of whom were influenced by Puritan ideals. The fighting was bitter and destructive. Estimates vary, but perhaps as many as 200,000 soldiers and civilians died in England from fighting and diseases associated with the wars—an enormous loss in a population of roughly 4.5 to 5 million. The conflict fundamentally altered English society.

Then the unthinkable occurred.

On January 30, 1649, after being tried for high treason, Charles I was publicly executed. Never before had a reigning English king been publicly tried and executed by his own subjects. The execution symbolized the collapse of the old political order. The monarchy and House of Lords were abolished, and England was declared a Commonwealth.

The years that followed were difficult for Anglicans. Parliament had already abolished episcopacy and, in 1645, prohibited the use of the Book of Common Prayer, replacing it with the *Directory for the Public Worship of God*. Bishops lost their offices, and many Anglican clergy were removed from their parishes. Cathedrals and parish churches suffered from neglect, alteration, and, in some cases, deliberate destruction of furnishings and images.

Yet amid all of this, Anglicanism did not disappear. The Prayer Book continued to be used secretly in some homes and private gatherings, and Anglican worship and spirituality survived among clergy and laity who remained attached to the old Church.

Oliver Cromwell remains a complex figure in English history. A committed Puritan, he believed deeply in God's providence and sought to create what he regarded as a godly society. After several years of republican government, Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653. Under the Commonwealth and Protectorate, England experienced a degree of Protestant religious diversity unprecedented in earlier generations. Various Protestant groups enjoyed greater freedom, and Cromwell even permitted Jews to return to England after centuries of exclusion. Anglican worship, however, remained legally restricted.

Although Cromwell achieved considerable success as a military and political leader, the republican governments of the 1650s struggled to establish lasting political stability. After Cromwell's death in

1658, his son Richard briefly succeeded him as Lord Protector, but the political situation quickly deteriorated.

By 1660, many people in England had grown weary of political instability. Support for the restoration of the monarchy increased. Charles II, the son of the executed king, returned to England and was restored to the throne. With the Restoration of the monarchy, the House of Lords returned, bishops were restored to their offices, and the Church of England was re-established. Yet the years of conflict had changed both the nation and the Church.

In 1662, a revised edition of the Book of Common Prayer was authorized. For many Anglicans, the restoration of the Prayer Book represented continuity with the past and hope for the future. The Prayer Book that emerged from the Restoration would become one of the most influential expressions of Anglican worship and identity.

Not everyone, however, could accept the restored settlement.

The Act of Uniformity of 1662 required clergy to conform to the revised Prayer Book and to the restored episcopal order of the Church. Those who could not conform were required to leave their positions. Around two thousand ministers were displaced or left their ministries in what became known as the Great Ejection. This created a lasting division within English Protestantism. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and other Nonconformists increasingly developed outside the established Church of England.

The experience of the English Civil Wars, Commonwealth, Protectorate, and Restoration profoundly influenced Anglican identity. The Prayer Book, episcopal leadership, and liturgical worship emerged from this period with renewed significance. These were no longer simply inherited traditions; for many Anglicans, they had become symbols of continuity and resilience.

Yet the period also left a more complicated legacy. The restored Church did not immediately embrace broad religious tolerance. Laws enacted after 1660 placed significant restrictions on Protestant Nonconformists and Roman Catholics. The religious divisions that had contributed to the Civil Wars did not disappear with the Restoration. England would continue to struggle with questions of religious conformity and toleration for decades to come.

The English Civil Wars and Restoration represent a dramatic chapter in Anglican history. During these turbulent years, the Church of England lost its bishops, its Prayer Book, and its established place in national life. Yet it survived.

The experience left lasting marks upon the Church. It reinforced the importance Anglicans placed upon common prayer, episcopal leadership, and continuity with the historic Church. It also revealed the dangers that arise when religious conviction, political power, and national identity become inseparably bound together.

Perhaps the deepest lesson is that the Church's survival did not ultimately depend upon kings, parliaments, bishops, or political institutions. Those institutions could—and did—disappear. Yet the faith endured. For Anglicans looking back on this turbulent period, the story is ultimately a reminder that the Church's deepest foundation rests not in political power, but in God.