



## Founding of the Episcopal Church, Part V

### Previously in This Series

Activities at the 1785 First General Convention and the first session of the 1786 Second General Convention aimed toward unification of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Both conventions represented only the middle and southern states, and the New England preference for top-down organization was therefore underrepresented. A committee of correspondence had engaged in two rounds of correspondence with the bishops and two archbishops of England, inquiring about the possibility of getting three American bishops consecrated in England. Now it was time to decide what to do.

### Second Session of the Second General Convention

The committee of correspondence called the adjourned meeting of the Second General Convention into session on October 10, 1786, in Wilmington to react to the two letters from the archbishops. David Griffith being ill, Samuel Provoost presided. The only business was to respond to the two letters and to endorse a suitable complement of American bishops elect. There was unanimous agreement that the Nicene Creed should be restored and widespread agreement that the Athanasian Creed should continue to be omitted. Opinion was divided concerning restoring the line "He descended into hell" to the Apostles' Creed. The archbishops had attempted to make it look like a small thing to include the line, saying that the line had been added to the original creed in order to address an ancient heresy, now largely forgotten. But the same argument could be made that it was not so important if the convention left the line out. What may have carried the day was that the bishops elect would not have been prepared to make the trip without assent to the archbishops' wishes on this point; thus the line was restored.

The elections of Samuel Provoost, William White, and David Griffith as bishops were ratified by the convention, with the testimonials signed. The official records are silent about action on William Smith.



**William Smith and His Grandson**

Possibly the explanation comes from a drinking problem that Smith was widely said to have had. The delegates could hardly vouch for Smith's having lived the past three years "soberly," as the form of the testimonials required, and the convention may have quietly arranged that Smith's nomination should not be pressed. This outcome was doubtless a disappointment for Smith, who had been one of White's teachers in Pennsylvania and had been bishop elect from Maryland since 1783. But Smith continued an active leadership role in the church, getting elected as president of the House of Deputies at the next four General Conventions (1789, 1792, 1795, and 1799).

A committee of nine that included Smith was formed and met on the evening of the 10th. White's memoirs say, "We sat up the whole of the succeeding night, digesting the determinations in the form in which they appear on the journal." In other words, they framed a resolution whose text they could send to the archbishops. This provided for the restoration of the line "He descended into hell" to the Apostles' Creed, it provided for the restoration of the Nicene Creed, it took note of the constitutional

change from the first session that captured the way the approval of a prayer book was eventually to be handled, and it mentioned small changes to the preface consistent with these changes to the creeds. The resolution was approved on the 11th. A cover letter was prepared, signed, and sent that day, and the convention's work was complete. The Third General Convention was scheduled to start July 28, 1789.

## Consecrations

Provoost and White sailed for England on November 2, 1786, and arrived in London on November 29. Griffith was unable to go with them because he had not been able to raise sufficient funds for the trip. Provoost and White were consecrated as bishops on February 4, 1787, they left London on February 5, and they arrived in New York on April 7. White's memoirs describe this trip in detail.

## Activities Before the Third General Convention

Samuel Seabury, Bishop of Connecticut, wrote to each of Provoost and White on May 1, 1787, after their return from England, offering his congratulations and proposing that the three of them get together alone to hammer out the outline of a united church. It was his first priority that such an arrangement succeed, but he also had a backup plan. Toward the end of 1785, discouraged over reports from the First General Convention, Seabury had written to Samuel Parker of Massachusetts, suggesting that it might be a good idea to have one or two more New England bishops consecrated in Scotland. Seabury was telling Parker his backup plan: if unity of the churches in all the states was not possible, then New England could arrange to have its own complete set of three bishops. The unstated but clear suggestion was that one of these ought to be Parker. Seabury had not acted further on this plan until February 27, 1787, when his discouragement with reports from the Second General Convention led him to convene the Connecticut clergy, who elected one of their number as a coadjutor (assistant) bishop. This person had not immediately departed for Scotland; Seabury's letter of May 1 was one more try at unity with Provoost and White.



Samuel Seabury

White responded to Seabury on May 21, 1787. He said that having the Episcopal churches united in one system of ecclesiastical government was a hope dear to his heart. But he thought it would first be good to tell each other the views of the churches in their own areas. Extrapolating from what he had heard, he cautioned, "If our brethren in Connecticut should be of the opinion that the giving of any share of the Legislative power of the Church to others than those of the Episcopal order is inconsistent with Episcopal Government, and that the requiring of the consent of the Laity to ecclesiastical laws is an invasion of Clerical rights, in this case I see no prospect of doing good in any other way than contributing all in my power to promote a spirit of love and peace between us; although I shall continue to cultivate the hope of our being brought, at some future day, to an happy agreement." On the other hand, he said that he was quite flexible about the liturgy and that if it was felt that the best way to obtain an agreement among the three of them was to meet alone, then he would use his best endeavors to bring about such a meeting. Seabury immediately forwarded White's letter to Parker in Boston, asking for his comments. The implicit message was that if a unified church was not possible, then perhaps Massachusetts could nominate Parker to be bishop of a new diocese and send him to Scotland.



Samuel Parker

White had his own backup plan. At about the same time, White wrote to Parker in an undated letter, saying in part, "I wish most sincerely that Massachusetts would unite with us, and choose a person for consecration; not merely as it would tend to cement the Church throughout the whole continent, but because I think it would add to the wisdom of our determinations, whenever a General Convention shall be had for the final settlement of our ecclesiastical system.

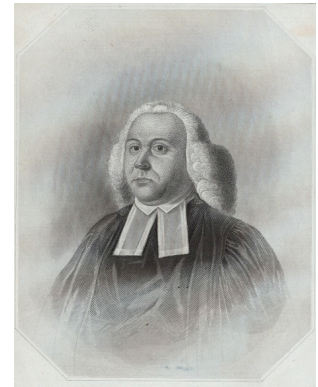
Parker was squarely in the middle but behaved like a skilled diplomat. He replied to White on July 19, 1787, first offering his belated congratulations for White's consecration and telling what was happening with the *Proposed*

*Book* in Massachusetts. He continued, "Nothing will be determined in this state respecting a Bishop till we see how matters are settled between you and the Bishop of Connecticut. We are but six Clergymen in the whole state ... and are divided in our sentiments respecting the expediency of obtaining a Bishop. Two seem to adhere to Connecticut, two to your states, and the other two will join either party that will bid fairest to cement the whole. Should the case happen, that a person should be chosen for this state, will it be necessary for him to go to England to obtain it, or can two Bishops confer it authentically; or is Dr. Griffith on his way to England, or will the Southern Bishops unite with Bishop Seabury in this act? If the last question is premature or impertinent, I beg pardon, and request not an answer to it. The reason of my proposing these questions is, that the answers may operate very considerably in the determinations of the Clergy here."

Parker, Seabury, and White continued to exchange letters on this subject well into 1789, occasionally involving Smith and others in the exchange. It remained true that fundamentally Seabury wanted a top-down system of organization while White wanted a bottom-up system. But the two began to understand each other's views better and to acknowledge that some elements of each kind of organization were required. Historically the power to act in the name of Jesus went first to the apostles and then down to others; on the other hand, the individual churches in the United States depended on the voluntary contributions of the laity to function, and it was only right to give the laity some say in things that affected them. Seabury was able to limit his main objections concerning the role of laity in the organization to two: he objected to having laymen sit in judgment of clergy in trials when laymen played no comparable role in ordinations, and he objected to the insistence that every state include lay representatives because Connecticut laymen were not sure they were willing to offer such representation.

Seabury and White were in agreement that any discussion of the liturgy should start afresh, ignoring the *Proposed Book*, and make only minimal changes. Seabury's reasons were philosophical and White's reasons were pragmatic, but that distinction did not matter.

For his part Parker decided on a course of action. He organized a meeting of the six clergy of Massachusetts and New Hampshire to carry out a plan to push the church toward unity. He himself did not want to be bishop, and he arranged for one of his colleagues to be willing to be elected. On June 4, 1789, the group accordingly elected one of their number, Edward Bass (1726-1803), as bishop. They passed two resolutions. One attested to the fine qualities that Bass had, and it asked the three bishops in the United States to join in his consecration. The other empowered Parker to be their agent at the Third General Convention, to lay their resolution about Bass before that convention, and to support any measures that might promote unity. This resolution he communicated to White a few days before the start of the convention.



Edward Bass

### **First Session of the Third General Convention, Overview**

The Third General Convention met in Philadelphia in two sessions. The first session went from July 28, 1789, to approximately August 16. The second session began September 29 and ended October 17. William White was the only bishop in attendance at the first session, Provoost being ill, and White therefore presided at it. The main business of the first session was to deal with the related issues of uniting the church and arranging for a full complement of bishops. Everyone agreed that both these ends were desirable. The plan was to agree tentatively on a number of proposals that together would create an organization that the church in Connecticut should be willing to join, to invite Seabury and other delegates from Connecticut officially to the second session, to modify details in the proposals if necessary at the beginning of the second session to ensure agreement, to have the Connecticut church officially join with the churches in the other states, and to have the united group approve all the proposals. Under the overall plan, the organization was thus being set up officially in top-down fashion

but was being set up unofficially in bottom-up fashion. The blend of top-down decisions and bottom-up decisions would occur in the details also.

--Tony Knapp

### **Picture Credits**

1. William Smith and His Grandson, oil painting by Charles Wilson Peale, 1788, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: [www.vmfa.state.va.us/collections/75\\_11.html](http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/collections/75_11.html).
2. Samuel Seabury: [anglicanhistory.org/usa/seabury](http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/seabury).
3. Samuel Parker: Picture courtesy of the Diocesan Library & Archives, The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.
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