

Anglicanism 101: Anglican History and Identity
Christ the King Anglican Church
Gregory Strong, Ph.D.
September 10, 2017

What is Anglicanism? Anglicanism is a worldwide set of churches connected by history, theology, ecclesiology, and liturgy. There are about 80 million Anglicans in about 165 countries. Anglicanism is the third largest church tradition in the world, after the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches. But what exactly is Anglicanism?

History

One way to answer the question is to tell the story of Anglicanism. Let me suggest that, in broad terms, there are three defining periods in this story.

Christianity comes to the British isles: 43 to 1534

The first defining period — 43 to 1534 — consists in the development of the Roman Catholic Church in England. In the years after the Roman invasion of the British isles in 43 A.D., Christians first came to the isles. Over the next 1500 years Roman Catholicism in England became a church characterized by a clerical hierarchy, the Bible and liturgy in Latin, sacramental dispensation of grace, and popular acts of piety such as veneration of saints, pilgrimages, and religious dramas.

The church in England reforms: 1534 to 1689

The second defining period — 1534 to 1689 — consists in the transformation of the Roman Catholic Church in England into the reformed Church of England. In the early 1500s, many in the Roman Catholic Church in England wanted little or no change in the church. Yet some in the church argued for certain changes, but within the existing framework of Catholic theology and church structure. Others, critical of what the Catholic Church had become, wanted profound change. They sought wide and deep reformation of theology, worship, and piety. One of the chief proponents and agents of such change was Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1533 to 1556. His work in reforming the theology and spirituality of the church in England — particularly through the Book of Common Prayer, a Book of Homilies (sermons), and Articles of Religion (doctrinal affirmations on matters contended at the time) — was profound and formative, then and in the subsequent history of Anglicanism. In the late 1500s and the 1600s, another set of people urged more radical change in theology, ecclesiology, and spirituality in the English church. While they succeeded for a time in the middle 1600s, between 1660 and 1689 the proponents of a Church of England reformed along the lines of the late 1500s and early 1600s restored the church to that earlier model (including worship according to the Book of Common Prayer and episcopal church governance).

The sun never sets on the Church of England (?): 1689-2017

The third defining period — 1689 to 2017 — consists in the transformation of the Church of England into worldwide Anglicanism. From the late 1500s to the 1800s, England as a nation embarked on economic and political empire-building around the globe. Through clergy serving largely as chaplains to English people in the colonies, the Church of England accompanied this global empire-building, thus “planting” little colonial outposts of the Church of England for English people around the world. In addition, beginning in the 1600s, the Church of England, in obedience to the gospel imperative, sent missionaries to the colonies and to other places to proclaim the good news of Jesus to indigenous people, thus initiating in small but eventually profound ways the Church of England for non-English people in various regions of the world. In these two ways — empire-building and kingdom-building — the Church of England eventually became worldwide Anglicanism, with the bulk of growth in numbers of Anglicans occurring in Africa and south Asia in the 1900s. Thus the “weight” of Anglicanism, demographically and spiritually, has been shifting from England and North America to the churches and people of the global south. Also

during this period, certain theological developments and contentions strained a sense of Anglican identity and commonality. Responding to issues of growth and contention, many Anglicans pursued ecclesial structures and theological frameworks to strengthen bonds of communion among the various and widespread Anglican churches. In all of these ways, and with a long complex history underlying it, Anglicanism today manifests dynamics of enduring cohesion, significant transformation, and even potential fragmentation.

This is only a broad, surface sketch of nearly 2000 years of Christianity in the British isles: the Roman Catholic Church in those isles; the reformation of the Catholic church leading to the Church of England; and then the expansion of the Church of England beyond England to become a worldwide movement we call Anglicanism. You can imagine that much happened during those years that shaped and that expresses Anglican history and identity. We don't have time to go further into details. Nevertheless, even this historical sketch gives us some understanding of what Anglicanism has been and is.

Identity

At the same time, there's another way to explore the question of what Anglicanism is, and that is to focus on certain theological, ecclesiological, and spiritual characteristics of Anglicanism. These characteristics relate closely to the particularities of Anglican history, and they express things that many Anglicans point to as manifestations and aspirations of the Anglican way or spirit. Let's consider four such characteristics.

One holy catholic and apostolic Church

What does this mean?

We are familiar with this from the Nicene Creed, dating from the 4th century and recited by us in the Eucharist. This line in the creed affirms the nature of the Christian Church in terms of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Let's look briefly at three of the terms in this phrase.

Catholic: with a lowercase "c", meaning universal or according to the whole; an appeal to universality, antiquity, consent; note the Vincentian Canon (St. Vincent of Lerins, 434), "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all"

Apostolic: *doctrinal fidelity* to apostolic teaching; *historical fidelity* to episcopal church governance as sign and guardian of the church's unity in Christ and doctrinal fidelity

Church: with a capital "C, meaning the Church across time and space; the communion of all saints in Christ, a mystical fellowship, those united to Christ and thus to each other

Why is this significant with respect to Anglican history and identity?

This affirmation is important to Anglicans. We claim that Anglicanism — the Church of England and its family of "descendants" — is theologically, ecclesiological, and spiritually rooted in and continuous with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

We see this affirmation at the time of the English reformation. Against Catholic charges of innovation, heresy, and schism, Cranmer and other reformers insisted they were in fact not deviating from true Christianity. They argued that medieval Catholicism had deviated. Rather, they were returning the church in England to its one, holy, catholic, and apostolic character. That is, they sought a *reformed catholic church* in keeping with the faith and life of the early church.

Note the full title for the reformed worship contained in the Book of Common Prayer (1549): "The booke of the common prayer and administration of the Sacraments and other rites and ceremonies of the Church: after the use of the Church of England".

Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) summarized the theological and spiritual foundation and framework of the Church of England: *one* canon (the Bible); *two* testaments (Old and New); *three* creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian); *four* councils (Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon); (the first) *five* centuries (of the church).

Comprehensiveness

What does this mean?

Anglicans often refer to Anglicanism as a *via media*, meaning a middle way, rather than an extreme in one direction or another, or between mutually exclusive options. This *via media* can appeal to a variety of people and theological positions. For example, some Anglicans present Anglicanism as the bridging, uniting way between Catholics and Protestants. Another metaphor is that of the tent. Anglicanism is a big tent with room — comprehensiveness — for many.

Why is this significant with respect to Anglican history and identity?

Comprehensiveness relates to catholicity. Anglicans want to locate Anglicanism in the catholicity — universality and wholeness — of the early church in the New Testament and first centuries, as renewed in the reformation after medieval corruptions. Cranmer and others emphasized the catholic (remember, *early church*) nature of their reforms for the church. More recently, note the opening of the baptismal rite (BCP 1979):

There is one Body and one Spirit;
There is one hope in God's call to us;
One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism;
One God and Father of all.

Comprehensiveness has particular relevance with reference to the emergence of several theological and spiritual emphases, types, or parties in Anglicanism from the 1600s to the present. Each advocates for its perspectives to be the central or authentic expression of Anglican Christianity. We can only sketch them here, but it is helpful to know something of them, particularly in relation to the claim or aspiration of comprehensiveness.

High church and Anglo-Catholic: growing out of the Caroline divines of the 1600s and the Oxford or Tractarian movement of the 1830s

Low church and evangelical: growing out of the Wesleyan revival of the 1700s and the moderate Calvinist Anglicans of the 1700s and 1800s

Broad church and liberal: growing out of the Latitudinarian moralists and the rationalists of the 1600s to 1800s

Experiential and charismatic: growing out of postmodern emphasis on personal truth and the charismatic revival of the 1900s

Can Anglicanism comprehend these groups or other varied perspectives? If so, what holds them together? Would this be the true center or authentic nature of Anglicanism? History and our present circumstances suggest both “yes” and “no” in answer.

Lex orandi lex credendi

What does this mean?

It is an ancient concept. For example, Prosper of Aquitaine in the 5th century said, “The rule of prayer should lay down the rule of faith.” An example of this in practice in the early church was the influence of worship on development of the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time we must assert the influence of doctrine on worship. Note Geoffrey Wainwright in *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, page 218): “The linguistic ambiguity of the Latin tag corresponds to a material interplay which in fact takes place between worship and doctrine in Christian practice: worship influences doctrine, and doctrine worship.”

Why is this significant with respect to Anglican history and identity?

One of Cranmer's fundamental and most significant endeavors as a reformer and the Archbishop of Canterbury was to shape people in heart and mind and practice (faith and life), collectively and individually, through worship and prayer (the Book of Common Prayer). Theological and spiritual reform shaped liturgical reform. Liturgical reform shaped theological and spiritual reform.

Yet over time it has become common for many Anglicans to point to their worship when asked what Anglicans believe. "What do we believe?" "We don't articulate it in statements like some churches do. We live it in worship and prayer. Come worship and pray with us to experience what we believe."

There's some truth in this in that we do have a *lex orandi* in the Book of Common Prayer — a law of praying or a rule of prayer replete with spiritual truth and experience. Yet we also have a *lex credendi* — a law of believing or rule of belief in articulated forms — preeminently in Scripture, three creeds, the Articles of Religion, and two Books of Homilies. A truer and better Anglican understanding and use of *lex orandi lex credendi* is this: prayer and belief mutually shaping, correcting, deepening, and enabling us to follow Jesus more faithfully.

Unity liberty charity

What does this mean?

"In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity"

In the church there should be *unity* in essentials: core doctrine and practice (faith and life). There should be *liberty* in nonessentials: *adiaphora*; matters not required by Scripture, therefore "indifferent" or not essential, even if otherwise important. There should be *charity* in all things: an aspiration and counsel to act with grace, respect, and love in all matters, especially matters in dispute or contention.

Why is this significant with respect to Anglican history and identity?

While the exact origin remains in question, this phrase in various forms stems from church disputes in Europe in the 17th century. It is a good, high-minded framework to shape and guide our dispositions, discussions, and decisions in church matters.

The challenge comes in agreement on what counts as essential and nonessential. The question of essentials has been in dispute since the beginning of the English reformation: between Catholics and reformers; between conservative reformers and radical reformers; between Anglo-Catholics, evangelicals, liberals, and charismatics. The question of *adiaphora* has been and continues to be difficult and contentious. Charity often gets pushed aside. The motto itself does not help sort this out, and much divergence in emphasis and even divisive conflict result from different conclusions about what counts as essentials and nonessentials.

Questions of Anglican history and identity are not mere matters of the past. They continue into the present. We are now part of profound theological and structural realignment in Anglicanism, perhaps most notably with the gathering of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) in Jerusalem in 2008. It consisted of bishops, clergy, and laity from around the world, especially the global south, concerned about the theological witness of Anglicanism. From GAFCON came encouragement to form the Anglican Church in North America, the province to which the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic belongs, the diocese to which Christ the King Anglican Church belongs, the parish to which you belong. As our spiritual antecedents did in the first centuries of the church and in the reformation, we entrust our future to God.