

07/16/2017 – Different, Yet Related: The Anglican/Episcopal Church ©

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Scripture: Isaiah 55, Matthew 13

I will start by telling you that, of all the movements in the Christian tradition, the Anglican/Episcopal denomination confuses me the most. Part of it is because we are Congregationalists and we traveled all the way across an ocean to get away from it, and part of it is because, of all the movements we are looking at this summer, this may be the only one which has no real theological reason to have formed. The Anglican/Episcopal church exists because of a political dispute in the 1500s. The challenge for me is to see beyond my biases in our discussion about this tradition, and I therefore apologize here if I sound exasperated, snarky, or dismissive at any point.

The Anglican/Episcopal church is a bit of an anomaly because Great Britain has always existed somewhat separately from the influences of mainland Europe. We have witnessed a recent example of that with the Brexit a year ago. The Catholic Church had a presence on the British Isles since about 450AD. Monasteries flourished and the little village churches were heavily influenced by the mythology and culture which surrounded them. Because Britain was remote from the center of the Roman Empire and subsequent ruling authorities, things could develop on their own and in their own way. And so, we often share Celtic prayers and hymns and thoughts during our services that have been created in this cauldron of ancient forests, ancient mountains, and flowing rivers and meadows.

Britain was wholly Catholic, with some occasional outbreaks of heretical movements, up until the beginning of the 1500s. In 1521, King Henry VIII was declared by Pope Clement, a “defender of the faith” – a title which every king or queen has held since that time – for an essay he wrote defending the 7 sacraments. King Henry was exceptionally intelligent and well-educated and rose to the throne at 17 years old. He was creative and quite an athlete in his day. He also liked women. While married to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, Henry also conducted a public affair with Catherine’s lady-in-waiting, Mary Boleyn. Mary had a sister, Anne, with whom Henry fell in love with. Catherine was nearing 40 years old and had not provided a male heir, so Henry appealed to the Pope to have the marriage annulled. Henry also believed that he was married to

Catherine contrary to the dictates of Old Testament law. The Pope, however, refused.

For this reason, along with an adept understanding of the exploding Protestant Reformation on the mainland, King Henry rejected the influence of foreign dictates upon his land and instituted the Act of Supremacy in 1534. This effectively dissolved any relationship with Rome and made the English church independent. Pope Clement excommunicated King Henry soon after this. King Henry declared himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England, a position held by all rulers of the British Isles even today. Even though Henry saw the opportunities for independence within the writings and work of Martin Luther, he abhorred the democratic and deconstructed ideas of Luther, so it is better to think of the Anglican tradition as anti-Papal rather than pro-Protestant. With the appointment of Thomas Cromwell, the grand-father of Oliver Cromwell, Henry also destroyed the monasteries of England and claimed all Vatican lands as the property of England.

For all practical purposes, the new Anglican church retained the trappings of the Catholic church, including the structure, and simply switched out the head of the church from the Pope to the King. Oh, I forgot. King Henry banished Catherine from the royal court and married Anne Boleyn in a secret wedding during all this.

King Henry eventually had Anne executed for trumped up charges of adultery, but the simple reality is that Anne also failed to provide a male heir. It should be significantly noted, however, that Anne Boleyn was exceptionally well-learned and was steeped in the writings of the new reformers of the church. Anne Boleyn is responsible for the appointment of Thomas Cranmer to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury, who transported in many Protestant ideas into the Anglican church.

Thomas Cranmer is the primary author of the liturgy of the Anglican and Episcopal Church. Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer in 1549. This was revised again in 1555, then again in 1662, and then, incredibly, 1982. The Book of Common Prayer is the worship manual for the Anglican and Episcopal Church.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "*Why is there an Anglican and an Episcopal Church? Are they the same, or different?*" For all practical purposes, they are the same. The Episcopal Church is essentially the American branch of the Anglican church. As Diana Butler Bass puts it, the primary difference is that the

Anglican Church functions in a top-down manner, while the Episcopal Church attempts to embrace a bottom-up administration.

The Episcopal church is influenced by its American roots and functions a little more autonomously than the Anglican church. Both, however, are subject to the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who answers to the Queen, finally.

Before I get into the aspects of worship, theology, structure, missions, and spiritual disciplines, there is just one more thing I want to add as an observation of the Anglican church. From 1815-1915, Great Britain became the most expansive empire in the history of the world. At its height, 25% of the world's land and 25% of the world's people were under the rule of the British Crown. Everywhere the Empire extended its army, it brought the Anglican church with it. This is a Christian movement that is tied very closely to the desires and expressions of the ideals of empire.

## WORSHIP

Like the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Lutheran church, liturgy is very important to the Anglican/Episcopal tradition. The liturgy focuses around two poles, a little like the Orthodox church – the Sacrament of the Word and the Sacrament of the Table.

The rituals and words (and there are so many words) all reflect a deep devotion to the sacramental nature of the rites. The 'smells and bells' are constantly present in the Anglican/Episcopal service. If you walked into a Catholic church in England in 1300, and then went to an Anglican/Episcopal service today, you would be able to follow along. The Anglican/Episcopal church retained the liturgy of the medieval church even to today.

So here is a little formula to help you:

If you want to worship in the way of the very early church – from about 200AD to 750AD, you should check out the Orthodox church.

If you want to worship in the way of the Middle Ages anywhere in Europe, you should check out the Episcopal Church.

If you want to worship in a way that changes over time but retains the essential elements of the sacraments of the Word and the Table, and is recognizable around the world, you should check out the Catholic Church.

If you think all of that is too much and too authoritarian for your rebellious mind, but you still like some meaningful ritual, you should check the Lutherans out.

## THEOLOGY

The theology of the Anglican/Episcopal tradition can best be described by one phrase: *It depends*. For the most part, the theology is heavily influenced by early Protestants – Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cranmer, Robert Hooker, and others. For a long time, the tradition was heavily influenced by the ideas of double predestination and some of the Lutheran doctrines of grace. Because the tradition is so focused on liturgy and ritual, Anglican and Episcopal theology draws from many traditions. Some truly exceptional theologians come out of the Episcopal tradition. Some of those theologians press toward very Protestant understandings of theology, like John Stott or CS Lewis, while others press closely toward Catholicism, like John Henry Newman (who eventually became Catholic).

This broad theological tent is inspiring, but contentious and continuously challenged. There is no real “Anglican/Episcopal” theology, but very broadly we could say the American Episcopal tradition trends toward a more liberal social position on many issues – they advocate and perform same-sex marriages, women are priests, and they are active in environmental conservation practices.

The Anglican tradition, focused more in Britain, trends more socially conservative and is struggling with some of these issues. The Anglican and Episcopal church consider themselves to be a *via media* between Protestant and Catholic theologies and worship. It is a difficult and fragile position to maintain, but they have done so for about 400 years or more.

As mentioned above, this is a Christian movement which is not separated from the Empire of which it was birthed and as a result much of the theology of the Anglican and Episcopal church can be easily influenced by the concerns of the state, and they often struggle to separate themselves from the influence of the state.

## STRUCTURE

The structure of the Anglican/Episcopal church is very like the Catholic Church. There are deacons and priests at the church level, there are bishops at the regional and national level, there are archbishops which oversee countries, and a single point of authority in the king or queen of England. The Episcopal church enjoys some fluidity in their reliance on the structure of the overall church.

Do you remember at the beginning when I said virtually all the movements in the Christian church have to do with authority issues? Many of the disagreements in the Episcopal and Anglican church are issues of authority and are resolved by the final approval of a higher human authority, with the understanding that they are appointed with the blessings of the Holy Spirit.

The Anglican and Episcopal church maintain the idea of apostolic succession in their bishops and archbishops, meaning each leader can trace their lineage back to one of the disciples of Jesus.

In fact, the Anglican tradition claims the entire history of the church in the British Isles as their own and see the arrival of Christianity to their land as the beginnings of the Anglican and Episcopal church.

## OUTREACH

The attitude toward missions in the Anglican tradition are heavily influenced by Protestant theology, so there is a strong attention to the poor. In America, a lot of inner city missions are run by Episcopal churches. Because the Anglican church was the church of the British Empire, there are Anglican churches around the world.

Their presence in places like Africa, India, Asia, and South America put them in contact with the suffering and impoverished of those places, and those churches respond in awareness of their Christian call. Education is of very high importance for this tradition and so there are many schools run by Anglican and Episcopal churches around the world.

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The Anglican/Episcopal tradition has a rich devotional history. Prayer books, devotional readings, and prayer practices reach all the way back to the very beginnings of the tradition. These drew on the deep influences of the British Isles and the spiritual traditions of the land rather than rejecting them completely. And so as the Anglican/Episcopal tradition developed, their own brand of monastery life came back in. Celtic prayers and practices are present even today in the rituals and prayers. One of the practices which I really love that is used extensively in Anglican and Episcopal churches is walking the labyrinth. A labyrinth is a spiritual discipline in which the person walks a set pattern that is intended to mimic one's spiritual journey from birth to death to resurrection.

As you walk the pattern, you pray and meditate. It is quite beautiful and powerful.

The devotional practices and spiritual disciplines of the Anglican and Episcopal tradition have a very large private dimension that crosses over into a public dimension. Or to put it another way, the private spirituality has a public dimension, and vice versa. Because of the broad reach of the Anglican and Episcopal church, there is a broad spectrum of spiritual disciplines from many regions of the world.

Next week, we will look at another foundation of our own tradition – the Reformed, or the Calvinist, movement.

As many of you know, Kate is the administrator at St. Peter's Episcopal Church just down the road. Ever since she started there, whenever she is confronted by something egregiously technical and common knowledge in the Episcopal tradition, she will respond to her boss with, "Yeah, this is why I am a Congregationalist, and this is why we got into a ship in late September to sail across the Atlantic."

May the Lord bless the roots of our tradition!

Amen!