

THE ANGLICAN APPEAL

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It should go without saying that Anglicanism is not the perfect or only God-ordained Christian tradition out there, yet much of what Anglicanism offers surprises many people. While different elements in the Anglican tradition appeal to different people, the following are some of the most prevalent.

The Anglican Communion

Anglicanism has both a deep historical heritage and a wide global community. Many who move toward the Anglican faith feel as if they are stepping out of a small denominational stream into a massive river—a tradition connected all the way back to the early church and presently spread out on every continent.

While Anglicanism arose as one of the four great Protestant branches stemming from the root of the sixteenth-century Reformation, its intention was always to restore the ancient practices of the church rather than start something completely new. In fact, of the initial four streams of the Protestant Reformation, only Anglicanism attempted to offer a *via media*, a “middle way,” between Roman Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism. Instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, Anglicanism seeks to incorporate the best of Christian tradition, restoring those parts that had been corrupted. So while in one sense Anglicanism’s origins lay in the sixteenth century, in another real sense its historical heritage reaches all the way back to the early church.

In addition to its historical heritage, Anglicanism offers a community that is global. The Anglican Communion, which includes all churches that are historically connected with the Church of England, consists of over an estimated 80 million members worldwide, making it the third largest Christian communion in the world after the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. Furthermore, in the past century, the center of gravity for the Anglican Communion has shifted from the West to the continent of Africa. So, for example, today there are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the United States, Canada, and England combined. Anglicans have a large family indeed!

Furthermore, it’s always a great encouragement to folks to know what great company they would be in as Anglicans. So, for a brief sampling, prominent Anglicans both past and present include John Wesley, George Whitefield, William Wilberforce, C. S. Lewis, John Stott, J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, Alister McGrath, John Polkinghorne, N. T. Wright, and Desmond Tutu.

Anglican Worship

Most people are aware that key theologians stand behind and almost define various Christian traditions. Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas greatly inform Roman Catholic theology. Lutherans are shaped by the thought of Martin Luther, and Presbyterians by John Calvin and John Knox. But what unites Anglicans more than almost anything else is not the writings of any one person, but rather a prayer book. *The Book of Common Prayer*, adapted according to the needs of each province throughout the globe, is what each Anglican shares with one another on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis, indicating that worship is central to what it means to be Anglican. So what is it about Anglican worship that connects with so many?

First of all, Anglican worship is intentionally participatory. In fact, one has to work hard *not* to participate in worship because everything is geared for an active experience. Everyone responds to the reading of Scripture together, declares the Nicene Creed together, confesses their sins together, prays for each other's needs together, recites the Lord's Prayer together, approaches the table to receive communion together, and much more. One can't get out the door of an Anglican worship service without feeling the pull to participate in both word and action.

But even more significant, Jesus Christ is explicitly made the center of Anglican worship. In an Anglican worship service, the table and the cross stand front and center. The call to worship, the prayers, and the departing blessing are sure to point to Jesus Christ and his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. The readings of Scripture always end with a passage from the Gospel, when everyone stands in recognition that the whole Bible ultimately points to Jesus Christ. And then, of course, the climax of the service is when we all together meet Christ in the partaking of bread and wine.

Granted every other Christian tradition would say that Christ is at the center of their worship, but many churches today—albeit unintentionally—succumb to crafting a service that tends to be preacher-centered or performance-based. Often the pulpit and the worship band stand front and center. At the end of a service, congregants are prone to evaluate the charisma of the preacher or the feel of the music or both. In an Anglican service, however, the sermon is one part among many, and definitely not the climax, and the music leaders are always off to one side so as not to distract those gathered from the center of our worship—Jesus Christ.

One can hardly discuss Anglican worship without talking about the sacraments. The standard Anglican definition of a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In a broad sense, Anglicans view much in life as potentially sacramental in that one meets and experiences God through the physical and the tangible. However, Anglicanism also continues to offer the seven sacraments that the church has practiced throughout its history: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, ordination, matrimony, penance, and unction. Two of these are held in higher regard as necessary for every believer since Christ directly gave them to his followers: baptism

and the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper. While Anglicans reject the notion that the sacraments are magical, they are viewed as gifts from God through which participants can experience Christ in a unique way, making them integral to Anglican worship.

Finally, many people discover that never have they prayed more or heard more Scripture read than in an Anglican service, and that in their praying and reading of Scripture together, they can feel how the liturgy is truly shaping their thoughts and reorienting their desires. In this way, Anglican worship lives up to the ancient Latin axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi*, "the law of prayer is the law of belief." As we worship, so we live and become.

Anglican Theology

Theologically, Anglicanism is thoroughly Protestant. *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, the historically defining statement of doctrines for the Church of England with respect to the controversies of the English Reformation, clearly distinguishes Anglican belief from certain tenets that define Roman Catholicism. The most obvious pertains to the nature of authority. In line with all other Protestant traditions, Anglicans affirm *sola scriptura*, that is, Scripture is the final authority for matters of belief and practice. Of course, tradition and reason play key roles in doing theology, arguably more so than in other Protestant traditions, but never are they placed on equal footing with the Bible as a norm of faith like in Catholic theology. This has led Anglicanism to repudiate doctrines such as papal infallibility, purgatory, the Immaculate Conception, and others.

But more than defining its theology as Protestant, Anglicans give special attention to the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, incorporating these into its daily and weekly practice of worship. In this sense, Anglicanism is historically orthodox in affirming key doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the incarnation, and the resurrection.

Beyond these and other essentials, Anglicanism is unique in that it intentionally allows space for believers and local churches to discuss, disagree, and develop. Though there are indeed hills worth dying on, they are few and far between. Such a generous orthodoxy stems from the humility that recognizes we still see through a glass darkly, and our God is incomprehensible. Anglicans, then, often speak about mystery and tension, and how God should not be systematized or put in a box. This approach provides for a broad spectrum of theology that, while rooted in Scripture and historic orthodoxy, trusts the Spirit to guide and direct the church of Jesus Christ even today.

The Anglican Attitude

The spirit of Anglicanism is often described as having a "sweet reasonableness" toward other Anglicans, other believers, and unbelievers alike. While Anglicans deeply value their own tradition, they do not conceive of themselves as the one and only true church. And so Anglicans seek to be ecumenical rather than take a separatist or exclusivist posture. They are not only eager to work with other Christian traditions, but the Lord's Table is always open to every baptized follower of Jesus.

Furthermore, the best of Anglicanism strives to listen to the ideas of others, is willing to dialogue with those they disagree with, and hopes to treat all people with respect and dignity. Historically, Anglicanism does not present itself as dogmatic, nor does it employ the bully pulpit; on the contrary, Anglicanism simply sets forth its own thoughts, invites conversation, and asks insightful questions. Anglicans are unafraid of new or competing ideas because they recognize that much of one's faith journey consists in hashing things out, rethinking one's beliefs, and being ready and humble enough to change if need be.

Along these same lines, Anglicanism fosters an environment that places responsibility on the individual to develop his or her own beliefs. All Anglicans are encouraged to learn and figure things out for themselves. Folks are not told necessarily what they have to believe beyond the orthodox essentials of the faith, but rather are challenged to continue their journeys of faith because there is always room to grow. Such an atmosphere, by necessity, is full of grace and patience.

Church Leadership

One of the most attractive features of Anglicanism is their vision and structure of leadership. Most importantly, the Anglican vision of leadership is rooted in a calling to serve others in humility. Following the example of Christ, ministers are commissioned not to lord it over their people, but to focus their efforts on attending to and building up the church, setting aside their own desires if necessary. The following excerpt from the ordination rite for a priest serves as an example of such an emphasis.

As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. ... In all you do, you are to nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.

Anglican leadership, then, focuses on embodying an unassuming nature rather than an intimidating one; it seeks to cultivate a humble sense of one's place in the wider and historical world rather than to make a name for oneself in a little corner of it; it hopes to walk alongside others rather than run ahead of them.

Furthermore, the leadership structure of Anglicanism is intentionally arranged with a number of checks and balances. While a bishop provides pastoral oversight and guidance to a group of churches called a diocese, the priest is given latitude in guiding a local church to live out its mission faithfully in its own context. For the priest, part of this process includes working with the vestry, a body of parishioners elected by the congregation to make administrative and budget decisions. These individuals rotate off the vestry periodically as their terms expire, allowing other members to bring fresh insights and renewed energies to the group's responsibilities. No one person or one body has absolute authority, but rather authority is dispersed and shared between laity, vestry, priest, and bishop in the spirit of collaboration.

The Mission of the Church

Anglicans believe God is on mission working through the church in both the spiritual and physical realms to bring all things under the reign of Jesus Christ. Central to this task is making disciples, followers of Jesus who seek first the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. As this body of disciples is transformed by the power of the Spirit to be a life-giving community of God's grace and healing, they are also sent out to be a force of transformation in their own local contexts. The Anglican catechism sums this all up in a succinct manner.

The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

For Anglicans, the mission of the church, then, is centered on the gospel, holistic, and carried forth by local church communities empowered by the Spirit. This conception of mission is especially emphasized in the recently established province called the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA). The archbishop of the ACNA, Robert Duncan, speaks about his desire to empower local congregations to fulfill this three-fold mission: *captivating disciples, multiplying congregations, and transforming communities*. Now that's something any follower of Christ can get behind. No wonder a fresh wind is stirring within Anglicanism in America.

Recommended Reading

- *Our Anglican Heritage* by John Howe
- *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* by Robert Webber
- *Beyond Smells and Bells* by Mark Galli
- *What Episcopalians Believe* by Sam Wells
- *Accidental Anglican* by Todd Hunter
- *Never Silent* by Thaddeus Barnum