

## *Anglicanism*

Anglicanism is the catholic faith as expressed through the Church of England. An Anglican is a member of the Anglican Church, or more properly the Anglican Communion. The word "Anglican" derives from the word "Anglo" as in "Anglo-Saxon" and means "English." The Anglican Church originally was the Church of England and indeed the Anglican Church began in England. Today, many centuries later, The Anglican Communion is made up of 38 Provinces that include 77 million members in 164 countries. It is the third largest Christian church, right after Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. "Anglicanism" is the beliefs and practices of the Anglican Communion.

Although considered Protestant by many, the Anglican Communion identifies itself with the catholic faiths. In fact, many refer to the Anglican faith as being reformed Catholicism, while others call it Biblican Catholicism. But, whatever the definition, Anglicanism is a hybrid between the Catholic and Protestant faiths.

In the summer of 2006 the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams identified three things that, when held together, make Anglicanism distinct from other Christian denominations and contribute to the essential character of our church. Other denominations share one or two of these qualities. What makes Anglicanism unique is the balanced presence of all three. They are:

- A reformed commitment to the priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine.
- A catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons.
- A habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly.

In conjunction with this definition is the principle set down by one of the church's theologians, explaining that Anglicanism is a "three-legged stool." One leg is Scripture; the second is Tradition; the third is Reason. Scripture has priority, trumping the other two when stating dogma. But, the Traditions of the unified Church, when Scripture is silent, is also very important. Finally, Reason must be applied to discern what is meant by Scripture and Tradition and to apply these two to new or different situations. Clearly Archbishop Williams's explanation and the image of the three-legged stool links our reformed heritage, our catholic heritage, and our intellectual heritage nicely, capturing the core strength of the Anglican way of living out our Christian Faith...

## 1. A reformed commitment to the priority of the Bible.

The word "Doctrine" means a belief or set of beliefs that is taught. For Example, the Doctrine of the Trinity is taught by all Christians. In Anglicanism all Doctrine is based on the Holy Bible. We approach the Bible as the word of God given to us for our instruction and formation. In addition to Scripture, we also take very seriously the customs and beliefs of those who have gone before us. Of particular importance are the teachings of the very first Christians. We call these beliefs passed down through the generations, "Traditions."

But there are times when we need our best intellectual abilities, or "Reason," to lead us to deeper and richer understandings of God's Holy Word and also God's Will. This results in the reworking of our doctrine, as it did in the abolition of the English Slave Trade and in allowing the remarriage of divorced persons.

We are cautious about changing doctrine that has been taught for hundreds of years. We will do so and have, but only when we are convinced that a deeper understanding of God's unchanging Word requires such a change. But, upholding the authority of Scripture in determining doctrine provides us with a solid foundation.

## 2. A catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons,

The second distinctive of Anglicanism has two parts: a catholic loyalty to the Sacraments and the threefold order of ministry. To understand the sacraments, we need to understand "Grace."

Grace is the "unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification." Grace is the power to change lives. God gives it to us. We cannot earn it, and we do not deserve it. God gives it to us so that we can become holy people.

We receive Grace when we encounter God. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward invisible grace. Sacraments are means of receiving grace. Sacraments are encounters with God. While all things are potentially sacramental, we Anglicans talk about two major sacraments and five minor sacraments. The two major sacraments are Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. These are sacraments that Christ, Himself, instituted. The five minor are called minor only because not everyone experiences them. These include Ordination, Marriage, Confession, Last Rites, and Confirmation.

Baptism is a sacrament for the beginning of our faith journey and Holy Communion is a Sacrament for the journey. What we feel isn't as important as knowing that the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is working in us as we participate.

Very early in the church's history it ordered itself into four ministries. They are Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and Laypeople. Originally, the church only had Bishops and Deacons, but when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, Bishops could no longer "feed" the entire "flock." They thus founded the priestly order as a subset of the role of the Bishop. This traditional division of roles has proven helpful over the centuries. Other churches have other patterns of ministry and other titles, but Anglicans continue, along with the Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, with this traditional pattern. This chain of bishops ordaining bishops, priests, and deacons ties us to the very early church and is a living reminder of our tradition. We call this chain of ordination the "Apostolic Succession" and believe that the chain began with the first apostles.

3. A habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly.

Anglicanism has long held the belief that "in essentials, uniformity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity (love)." This belief has been expressed in two main ways. The first is an openness to local responses to local challenges. The church in Asia worships God a little differently than the Church in Africa or the Church in North America. Anglicanism places a high value on finding local solutions to local challenges and opportunities. Anglicanism has also always found much good to celebrate in society even as it calls culture to a wholeness of life in Jesus Christ. The first two marks of Anglicanism that I described – a commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine and a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the three fold order of ministry- safeguard Anglicanism from becoming too reflective of local culture.

Intellectual flexibility is a companion to cultural sensitivity, and results in a church that is open to unexpected questions that can result in a change in doctrine. Anglicanism has never been afraid of critical examination of its core teachings, and indeed welcomes unexpected questions as an opportunity to critically reflect upon and reexamine our faith and doctrine.

There remains the question of Balance. Each of the three marks of Anglicanism are shared with many other churches, but held together they give Anglicanism its unique flavor. Holding the three in a balance is how the character of Anglicanism is maintained. When one mark is emphasized at the cost of others, the church becomes less Anglican and more like another denomination that stresses that particular mark.

When these three elements are in balance we have Anglicanism. Problems within Anglicanism occur when these three are out of balance.

The Anglican Way of being a Christian has much to commend it. It encourages thoughtful reflection while remaining faithful to God's word. It maintains a strong

link to historic Christianity that helps keep us humble about our contemporary views and opinions. And it encourages local innovation in response to local needs and opportunities. It is a grace filled way of living out a Christian faith. But the best way to understand this faith is to experience it. And that is why we welcome all to our church, to grow, to understand, and ultimately to feel the love of God.

~ Courtesy of St. Luke's Chapel in the Hills, Los Altos Hills, CA