

By the Rt. Rev. William Bower, SSC
"Are Anglicans Protestant or Catholic?"

Perhaps one of the most asked questions that we receive is regarding whether Anglicans are Protestant or Catholic. It is a natural question as our worship looks and feels more catholic than Rome and yet we are not a part of the Roman Church. Our clergy are married, and our governance is far more inclusive of the laity than in the Roman Catholic Church. The whole thing can seem confusing to those unfamiliar with the history of the Church in the British Isles. This is especially so since much of the popular history is written with a bias towards the Roman Church. To answer this question, we must first consider how and when the British Church was established.

An Ancient and Apostolic Church.

What is widely thought is that merchants from the Middle East brought the Christian faith to the British Isles during the early apostolic period. One such story includes Joseph of Arimathea, the man who gave the new tomb for the burial of Christ, who travelled to Britain with a group of Christians and established the faith at the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire. The earliest concrete evidence is that of Aristobulus of the Seventy, the first Bishop of Britain. St. Aristobulus is the brother of the Apostle Barnabas and was consecrated in Rome by St. Paul in 65 AD specifically to become the first Bishop of Britain. St. Paul even mentions St. Aristobulus in Romans 16:10.

Those early missionary activities in Britain were successful in that three British bishops were present at the First Council of the Church of Arles in August 314 AD and are documented in the official record. This is significant as it occurs immediately after the Edict of Milan, 313 AD (which granted religious tolerance in the Roman Empire), and 11 years before the First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea 325 AD). These bishops represented a purely British Church sometimes referred to as the "Celtic Catholics" and the British Church developed entirely separate from the Roman Church. The British Church was mission minded with great saints such as Alban, Illtud, Ninian, Patrick, Columba, Adian, and Cuthbert, just to name a few.

Even though there was an existing and established Church in Britain, Pope Gregory the Great sends Augustine of Canterbury from Rome to England to Christianize King Aethelberht and the Kingdom of Kent in the year 597 AD. While Augustine of Canterbury was successful in converting entire small kingdoms in the eastern regions of Britain, his meetings with the Celtic Catholic bishops in the west were entirely unsuccessful. Disputes over the tonsure, the date of Easter, the organization of the Church, the liturgy, and supremacy of Rome (a foreign power), prevented an agreement to unite the two Churches.

So, the Church in Britain was an ancient and apostolic church, but was it Roman Catholic?

The short answer is no, or at least not until the Synod of Whitby in 664. At the Synod of Whitby the Northumbrian church agreed to adopt the Roman customs rather than the Celtic ones. The Celtic Catholics, under the leadership of Bishop Colman, left Lindisfarne and withdrew to Iona.

This romanization of the British Church continued from 664 throughout the Middle Ages. The British Church is dominated by the Roman Catholic Church albeit several local peculiarities are allowed to continue. Rome seemed to be more interested in money and power that can be gained from the English church rather than what is occurring religiously (read the Canterbury Tales). This continued until 1534 and the separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church by the Act of Supremacy. For this reason, many British church historians refer to this period of over 800 years as the “Roman occupation of the church in Britain”.

While the need to obtain a divorce by King Henry VIII occasioned the Separation, the centuries of concerns over polity and doctrine made the timing right for the reemergence of a purely British Church – the Church of England. The Church of England protested the departure of historical Catholicism by the Roman Church and thus are considered Protestant.

Why is all this history important?

Unlike other Protestant churches that were originally established by the Roman Catholic Church and then separated during the Reformation, the Church of England was established in the infancy of Christianity by an Apostle, one of the Seventy. While it was dominated for financial and political gain by the Roman Catholic Church for 800 or so years, it never lost its early ethos and praxis. The British Church always maintained a certain religious independence which culminated in the Separation and subsequent English Reformation. Thus, the Church of England was always a Catholic Church – just not Roman.

The Church of England, a True and Apostolical Church.

Whosoever shall hereafter affirm, That the Church of England by Law established, under the King’s Majesty, is not a True and an Apostolical Church, teaching and maintaining the Doctrine of the Apostles; let him be Excommunicated ipso facto, and not restored, but only by the Archbishop, after his Repentance and publick Revocation of this his wicked Error.

Constitution and Canons of the Church of England, 1604, Article III

Churches of the Continental Reformation differ from those of the English Reformation.

Churches of the Continental Reformation were established by the Roman Catholic Church and broke away over various theological and practical causes. These include the Dutch and Swiss Reformed, the French Huguenots, and the Germanic Lutheran churches. None of these are ancient or apostolic churches but rather those formed out of schism from the abuses of the Church of Rome. Many adopted synthetic doctrines developed from men like Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and Jacobus Arminius, each of which claiming to be right.

By contrast, groups like the Puritans, which included the Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, were all formed out of schism from the Church of England – post separation from Rome. Each of these groups imported pieces of doctrine from the strands of the

Continental Reformation.

What is the Anglican basis for authority?

Authority in the Church defines how you form your approach to faith.

For the **Roman Catholic Church** that basis is articulated in the term **Sola Ecclesia** (the Church alone) and authority is held by the Magisterium and is outwardly visible in the office of the Pope. The focus of Sola Ecclesia is on the organization rather than the apostolic nature of the Church.

For those of the **Protestant Reformed tradition**, it is the “**5 Solas**”; Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), Sola Gratia (Grace alone), Sola Fide (Faith alone), Solus Christus (Christ alone), and Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God alone). The 5 Solas focus on the individual and are problematic on their surface as even the base concept of having five things “alone” is at best a series of competing claims and at worse gives way to misinterpretation and further schism. It should be noted that modern Protestantism has become largely detached from the 5 Solas with each local pastor determining what is right or what feels right.

The **Anglican Church** employs the three-part understanding of **Scripture, Tradition, and Reason**, as defined by the Caroline Divine, Richard Hooker. Scripture is the primary source of authority, especially whenever it speaks plainly and clearly. Tradition (or Holy Tradition to distinguish it from mere custom) is that collective voice of the Church throughout the ages, “That which has been believed and taught by all” (The Vincentian Canon) or “The faith believed everywhere, always, by all”. And Reason as guided by the Holy Ghost, which brings coherence to our understanding of both Scripture and Holy Tradition. It is important to realize that unlike the other two positions, Hooker’s threefold definition is not dogmatic, but rather a systematic approach to understand matters of faith and morality. Hooker’s work, “Of the Law of Ecclesiastical Polity” was a defense of the Church of England against both attacks by the Roman Catholic Church who defined the English Church as schismatic, and the different Puritan groups who desired a complete break from the ancient and apostolic historical past.

“The Protestant communions on the continent have not so much as pretended to revere antiquity. The Church of Rome has not been wanting in the pretension; but instead of revering antiquity she has idolized herself. The Church of England alone has adopted a middle course; moving in the same delightful path and treading the same hallowed footsteps with Vincentius and the Catholic bishops and ancient Fathers; proceeding as far as they proceeded; and stopping where they stopped.”

John Jebb (1775–1833), afterwards Bishop of Limerick, Ardfert, and Aghadoe

The **Anglican view** of the basis of authority in the Church has often been described as the “**Via Media**” or the “middle way” betwixt the extremes of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. This middle way represents the “golden mean” as seen in both the Elizabethan Settlement and more fully articulated by Richard Hooker.

Likewise, Anglican theology is based on the foundation of Word and Sacrament and is perhaps best expressed by “**lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi**” (the law of worship is the law of belief,

and the law of our lives). In other words, what we believe is reflected in our worship and expressed in our lives.

If you really want to know what Anglicans believe, come and see how we worship. There is Scripture shot through and through the service, a defined and ancient structure, and a life of prayer and thanksgiving, coupled with holiness and reverence, and praxis assists us to enter that timeless worship of the Holy Trinity.

Dogma or doctrine?

How we see the authority in the Church will define how we interpret and understand theological implications of both dogma and doctrine. Theologians regard dogma as that which must be believed for salvation. While doctrine is more fluid and allows for our best understanding of issues of faith and morality against the backdrop of the Scriptures. Here we also experience a difference between the three primary divisions in Western Christianity:

The **Roman Catholic Church** tends to canonize various pious doctrines, including highly speculative ones that exist outside of the scriptures, into their dogma. Thus, doctrinal issues such as papal infallibility and the immaculate conception of Mary (indicating that Mary was conceived through the Holy Ghost), become dogma by decree of their council and required for salvation. There is absolutely no justification in the ancient and undivided Church for speculative theology becoming dogma. Rather the undivided Church relied on a conciliar process whereby issues were debated at a true ecumenical council – not just a council of a singular portion of Christianity.

In the **Protestant Reformed** tradition, where they do not acknowledge the authority of the Ecumenical Councils of the undivided Church, there is no dogma as such, only doctrine. Absent the dogma, doctrine takes on a modern meaning and becomes sacred and even required belief for someone to be a member of a particular denomination. In modern Protestantism, the doctrine is often defined by the local pastor who may, or may not be educated, and likely relies on modern synthetic theologies to interpret Scripture rather than ancient writers and the dogma of the undivided Church. Therefore, the differences in doctrine can vary wildly from local church to local church, each insisting they are correct.

The **Anglican** tradition acknowledges as dogma that which is contained in the Scriptures and the dogmatic decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. These dogmas are summed up in the three Creeds of the Church, the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. However, Anglicans have always recognized that there are issues that were not addressed by the Ecumenical Councils which create the need for doctrine.

Whenever it comes to different doctrines that are not defined as dogma, we are once again approaching them with the threefold **Scripture, Holy Tradition, and Reason**. What we shouldn't do is become judgmental towards other Christians for a pious belief that might be different from our own understanding that is not a dogmatic issue. This is precisely why Anglicans pray for all other Christians twice a day, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. While we may differ in some of our doctrines, the dogma (that which is necessary to believe for salvation) unites us despite our own

proclivities and misunderstandings.

So, for an Anglican, what is necessary for the layman to believe?

We hold to that which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as expressed in the dogmatic words of the Nicene Creed. We start with the acknowledgement and repentance of our sin, confess our faith in Jesus Christ, receive regeneration through Baptism and study the Creed, the Decalogue, and other catechetical works prior to Confirmation.

Are we Catholic or Protestant?

Anglicans are both. As an ancient Church, we are a part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As the Roman Catholic Church moved away from the universal (catholic) faith, it became necessary to separate once again in protest of these innovations, while maintaining the ancient faith of the undivided Church. We are the Via Media, the middle and narrow road that exists betwixt the extremes of both sides in order to practice and hold "the faith that was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3)

In the words of Bishop Christopher Wordsworth: "The Church of England became Protestant at the Reformation that it might be more truly and purely Catholic."

In Summa

Anglicanism is an ancient and apostolic faith and a part of the undivided Catholic (universal) Church of the first millennium. We were dominated by Rome from 664 until the Separation of 1534. When the Church of Rome returns to the ancient Catholic faith, Anglicans will no longer need to protest.

Protestant or Catholic? Better to say that we are fully Christian in every sense of the word.