CHAPTER ONE:

WHAT MAKES THE CHURCH “EPISCOPAL”?

A first-time Catholic visitor to an Episcopal Sunday Eucharist might ask, “Are you SURE this is not a Catholic church?” It can look, sound, and feel very similar to the Roman Catholic mass—so long as the clergy are not female! And a first-time Lutheran visitor (ELCA) might well comment, “This is just like my Lutheran church back home!” Worship in the three communions today has many similarities. (Upon careful observation, there are also some noteworthy differences among them.)

But a first-time visitor accustomed to any of the dozens of much more radically reformed, Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Holiness, or Pentecostal denominations would more likely be a bit taken aback, whether favorably impressed or put off, from all the contrasts with their previous worship experiences. That visitor would be struck by the orderliness (they might say “formality”) of the worship; perhaps disconcerted by people reading prayers from a book or worship folder (“by rote”); bemused by the vestments worn; confused by the bowing and hand gesturing that can be part of liturgical worship; and perplexed by the lack of familiarity of some of the music sung. (More on Episcopal Church worship follows in Chapter 2.)

What does all this mean, the visitor from either direction might wonder? Just what IS an Episcopal Church, anyway? What sets it apart from any other denomination, and how is it connected to Christianity as a whole?

Familiarity with just a few principles can go a long way toward clarifying those questions.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IS AN ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Episcopal Church is simply the American branch of the world-wide Anglican communion of Christian churches. We are derived from the Church of England, which was the established church in several of the American colonies at the time of the Revolution. Since the Church of England is a national church, with the head of state as head of the church, the creation of a new nation, with leaders who might or might not be church members, presented a challenge to the continuation of this form of Christian practice. How could there be an Anglican Church with no king and, at the time, no bishops, and how could it be funded and supported without government backing? It took some time and creative thinking to get around those historic obstacles.
As there was to be no established church in the United States, and Americans were very clear about being no longer English, Anglicans had to come up with another name, and we were legally incorporated as The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. The key word “Episcopal” reveals that they did find a way to provide bishops for their new independent church. Like all Anglican provinces, we continue the ancient practice of administration and governance largely by bishops (episcopos means “bishop” in Greek). “Protestant” set us apart from the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, which also have bishops, and it suited the spirit of the church in those times.

So The Episcopal Church was formed originally as a Protestant denomination and as a national church. Times change. Today, we have a province of our church that is outside the borders of the United States, yet fully part of The Episcopal Church, and largely Spanish-speaking. We are working hard to get our members not to say “the national church” when they refer to central church leadership—a tough habit to break! Additionally, when our present Book of Common Prayer was adopted in 1979, it dropped the word “Protestant” from its title, probably as a response to the great strides in our direction the Roman Catholic Church had taken in its Second Vatican Council. Not everyone agrees with us, but we like to think of ourselves as being as much catholic as protestant.

Let’s get something straightened out right away concerning the term “Episcopal.” It is an adjective! Therefore, one might belong to the “Episcopal Church,” but one can never be “an Episcopal.” When we need a noun, we have the form “Episcopalian.” So one may be “an Episcopalian,” but—ill-informed news media reporting notwithstanding—one may never attend “the Episcopalian Church”! Mastering this little trick of grammar is probably the most effective way to demonstrate “insider” lingo in our church.

“Anglican” refers to anything, but particularly the church, of English origins (from the Teutonic tribe, the Angles. “Angle-land” evolved into “England.”) Everywhere British people went establishing colonies, their church went with them, first to serve the religious needs of the British colonials, and secondly to carry out evangelism among the various indigenous peoples. The German, Dutch, Scandinavian, and various Catholic nations did the same, planting their own brands of Christianity around the globe. When these British colonies gained their independence, the church people there formed independent national churches just as we had done. In some branches, such as Scotland, where the terms “English” or “Anglican” set less well with the people, they used our term “Episcopal,” as in “The Episcopal Church of Scotland.” In most, where the mother country was more highly esteemed, the word “Anglican” is used, as in “The Anglican Church of Canada.” India has a unique situation in forming two ecumenical bodies, the United Churches of North and South India, which are in the Anglican Communion, though they include other strains of Christianity as well. Japan, having never been a colony, has an Anglican church called Nippon Sei Ko Kai, or “The Holy Catholic Church of Japan.” What all share in common is being in communion with the See of Canterbury, and therefore with one another as part of the Anglican Communion of churches.
Together, we are the third largest such body of Christians in the world, following the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.

**THE “BRIDGE CHURCH”—CATHOLIC AND REFORMED**

Since we Anglicans do not owe our founding to a premier theologian, such as Luther or Calvin, we have no body of original theological documents to stake out a definitive position for us. In The Episcopal Church, you will find many different views on most subjects, mostly, but not always, held in relative harmony. We tend not only to believe in individual freedom of conscience, but to practice it as well. For that reason, everything written in these chapters might well be disputed by another Episcopal priest, bishop, historian, or theologian, who would prefer to present a different view. What is being attempted here is to present a portrait of the Episcopal Church that would be recognized as authentic by most of our fellow church members!

At the heart of it, we Episcopalians are simply Christians—that is our religion. We often pride ourselves on our broad-mindedness, our tolerance of diversity, our willingness to live with a high level of ambiguity, for we are not inclined to precise definition of holy mysteries. This attitude is hard-learned, for there was a time when people were persecuted and sometimes slaughtered because of their non-conformist views. We have finally learned at least to stop killing one another when we disagree. We still argue strenuously among ourselves, though, mostly over the very same issues that provoke other Christians as well. From conflict, no Christian body is ever fully insulated.

We have a deep affection and personal preference for our tradition and its particular representation of the Christian religion, but we do not think that ours is the only one, or that it will get us into Heaven more dependably than the others. We have never claimed to be either the only true Christians, or the only truly correct ones. There is not one single article of our faith that would not also be shared by other Christian bodies, some by Catholics, some by Protestants. That fact may not be the best marketing ploy in the world; it certainly keeps us from being very effective recruiters of Christians from other denominations (which we don’t believe we should be doing, anyway). It just happens to be our true belief.

Nevertheless, the same ideas and principles that prompted Luther and others to dispute with Rome were also current in England during the sixteenth century. (We will have a full chapter on the history of the Church in England later, because so much of our thinking and behavior are best understood by looking at our story.) Once the power of the Vatican was broken in England, some practices of the church were altered in response to the criticisms of the Protestants. These are set out in the sections which follow.

Yet, the English also valued traditions and, for the most part, had little interest in a reformation that would essentially attempt to start the church all over again from the first century. They retained many Catholic practices, and others have been restored over
the years: some Latin terminology; our use (in many places) of vestments, incense, bells, holy water, private confession; our emphasis on the sacraments; our liturgical worship; our three orders of ordained clergy; our monastic houses for both men and women—all of these seem very Catholic. Gradually, a middle ground was marked off for the Anglican tradition, a via media between Rome and the spectrum of more radically reformed factions. Because of our peculiar “half-reformed” nature, we have sometimes been referred to as “the bridge church,” including some Catholic traits, some Protestant. So, in the end, there is a set of positions and theological principles which, taken together, express truly an Anglican position.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF ANGLICANISM: “THE BIBLE CONTAINS ‘ALL THINGS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION’”

It seems very odd today, but the separation of the church from Rome’s control was first accomplished by action of the English Parliament, at the behest of the King and his advisors. Later, in order to help define the extent of the Reformation in England, Parliament also passed The [Thirty-Nine] “Articles of Religion,” which you will find among some historical documents of the church in the Book of Common Prayer on page 867. Most of these are statements against either a Roman doctrine or an equally objectionable Protestant extreme. For example, they denounce the Catholic doctrines of Purgatory and Transubstantiation, but they also condemn Calvin’s doctrine of Double Predestination and the Anabaptists’ demand for adult-only, “believers’” baptism. There is an important Protestant principle involved in all of these Articles, which is enunciated in Article XX. This principle is worth noting carefully, for it continues to guide our deliberations to the present day: The Bible contains “all things necessary for salvation.”

On this basis, the Church not only eliminated the requirement to believe in Purgatory, Transubstantiation, Limbo, the Immaculate Conception, the sale of pardons, indulgences, masses for the dead, and any special intercessory role for the Virgin Mary, but it also justified its own disavowal of Papal authority, and the requirement for clergy to remain celibate. The issues of Papal Infallibility and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary are two Roman Catholic doctrines that have been promulgated since our separation, but they would fall in the same category.

Note that, whereas the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation, that does not mean that it contains all things, or even all true things. There is plenty of room for science and for new discoveries. We allow that there are many things that are true and worthy to be believed that are not mentioned in Holy Scripture. They just aren’t necessary for salvation. Therefore, an Episcopalian may believe in Purgatory if he wants to; he just may not accurately say that Episcopal doctrine requires that belief for one to get into Heaven!
Despite these reforms, the English Reformation remained a moderate one. A number of traditions accumulated over the centuries were retained on the grounds that the Bible does not preclude them. When the Bible is silent or ambiguous on a subject, we have judged that it is permissible for us to continue to act according to medieval tradition, or to work out new traditions.

THE ANGLICAN SOLUTION TO AUTHORITY: “THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL”

The historic Church, both Orthodox and Catholic, has laid its claim to authority on the twin pillars of the Bible and the Apostolic Tradition. The Bible is our Holy Scripture, the main sourcebook of all revealed truth in our religion. For both Catholics and Orthodox, that means the Old Testament as it appeared in the form of the Septuagint (in original Greek for the Orthodox of the east, translated into Latin called the Vulgate for the Catholics of the western church; we’ll have more on the formation of the Bible in a later chapter). The Tradition is the teaching of Christ as handed down generation to generation from the Apostles themselves, without corruption (The Magisterium in Vatican parlance). The Orthodox are particular sticklers for avoiding any change whatsoever, since the completion of the Ecumenical Councils. For Rome, the one authoritative interpreter of both the scripture and the tradition is the Bishop of Rome, sometimes called the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. Rome allows for some evolution in teaching, as long as it comes from the Pontiff and does not contradict the major apostolic teachings. It is the exclusive papal claim to interpretive and administrative authority which caused the Eastern Patriarchs to break communion with the West in the eleventh century, and which Martin Luther and other Protestants challenged in the sixteenth century.

For Protestantism, authority rests on one pillar alone. When Luther’s opponents asked him whom or what he would set up as the final authority in place of the Pope, he responded famously, “Sola Scritura, Scritura sola.” (“Only Scripture, Scripture alone.”) That means that the Bible is the one and only source of all religious authority for him, and for all Protestants. A symbolic evidence of this fact is that at the front and center of a great many Protestant congregations’ worship space, you will find, not a cross or an altar, but a large, open Bible, the “enthroned Word of God.”

Anglicans had to decide which way to go. As traditionalists, they were reluctant to take any radical step away from fifteen hundred years of Christian practice. They did not want to defer to the individual power of a pope, Roman or English. Yet, the Orthodox rigidity would not suit them, either; they were also Westerners in the throes of Renaissance, and they acknowledged that the Holy Spirit is alive and active, and can prompt the doing of “a new thing,” as in their own break with Rome and the translation of the liturgy into English. An English priest and theologian by the name of Richard Hooker provided the answer to their dilemma. It has never been made official dogma or written into canon law, but it has been honored in Anglican teaching and practice for over 400 years. We often refer to this principle as “The Three-Legged Stool.”
Hooker took a different path from Luther in getting away from a Papal monopoly on authority in the Church. He also, like Luther and the Articles of Religion, asserted the primacy of Holy Scripture. But since not all truth is contained in the Bible, nor does the Bible speak on all relevant contemporary subjects, he also supported the Catholic argument for the retention of the Tradition of the Church—so long as it was not in conflict with the Scriptural witness. Yet whether one relies upon Scripture or Tradition, someone has to interpret those things to the larger Church. There, Hooker went one step further, saying that the third leg of authority is the God-given faculty of human Reason. This Reason, however, is not to be wielded by any one individual, nor is it to be a completely anarchic affair. The whole church, acting in its lawful councils, is responsible for the application of Reason to both Scripture and Tradition to determine the will of God in a particular matter.

Anglicans are well aware that the councils of the Church can err, though we have more confidence in the decisions of a large group of people than in those of any one person. We are not under the delusion that we have every detail right at any given moment. While we do not accept the doctrine of the Infallibility of the Pope speaking “ex-cathedra,” we (most of us, anyway), have considerable faith in the Infallibility of the Church, by which we mean, not that God would never allow his church to err, but that God would not allow it to stray so grievously that it could no longer be a fit vehicle for the salvation of souls. Thus the Church is constantly being reformed, and constantly straying in some way from the divine ideal. But there is no need to break away and establish a new “purified” church, as some are constantly attempting, for the new body also would be straying in some other way. There is no perfection on earth, yet the Church remains the Ark of our salvation, a sea-worthy vessel designed to convey souls from earthly corruption to heavenly perfection.

FOUR ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Ever since the breakup of the Western Church into denominations, sincere Christians have lamented the schisms that have divided us into competing and often unfriendly camps. Many have longed for the day when we might truly be one again. Probably each denomination harbors a hope that all the others will one day “wake up” and become like them! Anglicans have had a particular awareness of their place in the middle, between Catholics and Protestants.

More than a century ago, it had become common for Episcopalians to speculate that if the Vatican and the leading Protestant denominations were ever to make equal (and, in our view, reasonable) compromises with one another, the place where they would all wind up is the very ground we have already occupied! That speculative, and perhaps ego-centric, hope led the Episcopal House of Bishops, meeting in Chicago in 1886, to ponder just what Christian practices they would consider essential. If another
communion of Christians wanted to enter into union with us, what would we consider to be negotiable, and what could we never give up without violating our deepest religious convictions. They came up with four essentials. Two years later, they presented their statement to all the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference of 1888 (a meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury every ten years.) The bishops of the Communion concurred, and the statement is now called the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.” These four elements can be taken as basic identifiers of an authentic Anglican body.

1. **The Bible, including both Old and New Testaments.** Though we have used the Apocryphal books ourselves, the bishops designated them as expendable in scripture, as long as the Hebrew Old Testament is included along with the New Testament books.

2. **The Historic Creeds of the Church.** Two forms were designated as essential: the Nicene Creed, which we use in celebrations of Eucharist, and the Apostles’ Creed, which we use at baptisms and daily offices. A third creed, the Athanasian Creed (see Book of Common Prayer, page 864), was considered optional.

3. **The two Major Sacraments of the Church.** We actually practice all seven, but the bishops only insisted on Baptism and Holy Communion, as those are specifically mandated by Christ in the Gospels. The other five are desirable, but not essential.

4. **The Three Orders of Clergy.** Deacons, Priests (Presbyters), and Bishops are separately ordained in the traditional church. One may not be a priest without first being made a deacon; only a priest can be ordained a bishop.

Declining to insist on the Apocrypha and the Lesser Sacraments would appeal to Protestants, as would the lack of any mention of the Papacy. Maintaining the Creeds, the Sacraments, and the three ordained ministries would appeal to the Catholics. The bishops hoped that they had achieved a fair and balanced, yet Biblically founded, compromise that could yield union.

Interestingly enough, but perhaps not surprisingly, not many have seriously taken us up on our offer. We do have inter-communion with the Old Catholics, a small western European communion, and with the Lutheran Church of Sweden. We have a Concordat of Agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, U. S. A., which permits sharing of communion and ordained ministers. Recently, a similar agreement was reached with the Moravian Church. There is an interim sharing of communion with the United Methodist Church, though much remains to be resolved in those discussions. Conversations are presently underway with the Presbyterians, USA. For a while, the Orthodox were interested, and great ecumenical strides were being made with them. However, our decision to ordain women underscored a huge cultural gulf between us; we are willing to do differently those things which we consider to be un-essential, but the Orthodox do not consider any tradition to be un-essential. The English Church once hammered out a deal to merge the English Methodist Church back into the Church of England—but it collapsed when the English bishops insisted that all the Methodist clergy be re-ordained.
(by bishops rather than fellow presbyters). So, spotty progress has been made, but ecumenical unions continue to be very hard to produce and to maintain.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Conspicuous in its absence from the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral is any mention of the Book of Common Prayer. Anyone who knows The Episcopal Church might be justified in expecting that it would be the very first thing our bishops would try to preserve! However, it is not mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, though we might have excellent and valid reasons for using it, we could not honestly say that we think ALL Christians should.

Nevertheless, use of the Book of Common Prayer is a major source of identity for us Anglicans—at the moment. We tend to value worship that is orderly, dignified, and truly “common,” meaning that it is shared by all of us, not the whim of an individual or handful. If we can be said to have an area of specialization, it is liturgy. On the whole, nobody does it better! However, that said, it should also be noted that in this present generation, EVERYTHING seems to be up for grabs in all the mainline churches! The Protestant Reformation has ended, and we simply do not know what is coming upon us next. Not much is certain, but expect more variety, more experimentation, more stylistic differences than ever before in Episcopal worship from one locale to another.