“THE REFORMED ANGLICAN TRADITION: THEOLOGY AND PRIORITIES”


Introduction

Contemporary Anglicanism is a broad tent indeed according to some observers. Roman Catholic theologian, Aidan Nichols for example described it as three churches in one: catholic, liberal and evangelical. The title of this chapter gives sharper definition to the evangelical dimension. Generally speaking, ‘Reformed’ as a descriptor takes us back to the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. In fact Anglican evangelicalism is indebted both to Western Catholicism and to the Reformation. In more specific terms, ‘Reformed’ draws attention to the ‘moderate Calvinism’ of The Articles of Religion (commonly referred to as the Thirty-nine Articles), ‘Agreed upon by the Archbishops, Bishops, and the whole clergy of the Provinces of Canterbury and York, London 1562.’ ‘Anglican’ brings the English Reformation into view and with it the Church of England. ‘Tradition’ makes us aware that we are dealing with a lengthy history and not a recent novelty. ‘Theology’ as I understand it tackles the normative questions of what Anglicans ought to believe and how Anglicans ought to live in that light. ‘Priorities’ flow from such theology and are shown by our practices.

How then shall we proceed? We begin by looking back to the English Reformation and its seminal influence on Reformed Anglicanism as I construe it. Next we consider the Anglican Church of Australia which in its constitution explicitly displays its debts to the English Reformation and the key documents that characterize it; namely, the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-nine Articles [many writers prefer ‘Thirty-Nine Articles’ as the convention]. The constitution of Anglican Church of Australia presupposes that Anglicans belong to one church and not three competing ones. We then consider the defining characteristics of Reformed Anglicanism. I write in ideal terms or put in other words, what I think ought to be the case, if both the adjective ‘Reformed’ and the noun ‘Anglicanism’ are taken seriously. (For the purposes of this discussion I will use ‘Reformed Anglicanism’ and ‘Reformation Anglicanism’ as synonyms.) Next we examine – albeit in brief – the priorities that arise from embracing Reformed Anglicanism. The last substantive matter to be tackled is that of the ideal versus the actual practice of Anglicanism in some contemporary circles. The discussion will then be brought to a close in a summarizing conclusion.

The English Reformation

The English Reformation, theologically considered, is rightly described as “a ‘reforming’ of the Western Christian tradition.” As P. E. Hughes comments: ‘It is important to realize that the Reformers did not view themselves as innovators, but as restorers: their aim was reform what during the intervening generations had become deformed.’ (Original emphases.) Their reforming had both formal and material aspects. Formally speaking, Scripture alone became the final court of appeal in religious controversies. (This is the meaning of the Reformation slogan sola scriptura. It does not mean that only the Bible operates as an authority in the church.) Tradition, reason and experience have a degree of authority but not the final authority. Final authority rightly belongs to God’s Word written. Authority in Reformation Anglicanism is not a three
legged stool with Scripture, reason and tradition equally important for safe seating. For example, the first reforming Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) appealed to early and medieval church thinkers. Even so for him final authority lay with the God’s Word written. This can be seen in his magnum opus on the Lord’s Supper. He deals firstly with the Biblical testimony and suggests: ‘This doctrine here recited, may suffice for all that be humble and godly, and seek nothing that is superfluous, but that is necessary and profitable. And therefore unto such persons may be an end of the Book.’ However, because others were appealing to tradition and reason Cranmer goes on at length to discuss both to show that tradition and reason were on his side and not on that of Rome. In a very real sense, Cranmer was a biblicist.

Matteriably speaking Reformation Anglicanism affirmed that a right standing before God (justification) is by faith alone based on Christ alone provided by grace alone. Article XI reads: ‘We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings.’ Good works flow from such a justification as ‘the fruits of Faith’ (Article XIII). Importantly Reformed Anglicanism drew a distinction between those things necessary to be believed for one’s salvation and matters of religious indifference. Cranmer, for example, distinguished between matters ‘faith and charity’ and matters ‘of order.’ The doctrine ‘Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ’ is a matter of faith and non negotiable as Article XVIII makes clear. Any who argue the contrary are ‘to be had accursed.’ However, religious ceremonies need not be the same in every country. The opening sentence of Article XXXIV reads: ‘It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers [diverse], and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word.’

Reformed Anglicanism adopts the permissive principle as do Lutherans. If Scripture does not forbid a practice it may be embraced (e.g. kneeling at Holy Communion). Other churches adopt the regulative principle. If Scripture does not explicitly sanction a practice then such a practice ought not to be entertained.

The Anglican Church of Australia

The Anglican Communion spreads across the world. For example, in the helpful survey of the Anglican Communion, edited by Alister E. McGrath, there are individual chapters on, Great Britain, United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Polynesia, South Africa, South Asia and East Africa. (A chapter on South America is sadly absent.) In the light of such spread to generalize about contemporary Anglicanism would be unwise. For instance, the present Archbishop of Uganda and the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church (USA) are not on the same theological page on key theological issues as the authority of Scripture and moral issues such as homosexuality. So I will consider what I know best, namely the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA). The ACA affirms in its constitution that the ‘Book of Common Prayer, together with the Thirty-nine Articles, are to be regarded as the authorized standard of worship and doctrine of this Church, and no alteration in or permitted variations from the Services or Articles therein contained shall contravene any principle of doctrine or worship laid down in such standard.’ (Original italics)
What form of life ought this church to have, given such core Reformational commitments? The following suggest themselves. I shall treat each point under a separate head.

**A Praying Church**

The Anglican Church is a praying church. Reformed Anglicans believe in a living God who answers prayer. Historically speaking, the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) is the most famous literary work and contribution to the English language of Anglicanism. Common prayer is a defining characteristic of its form of life. Congregational participation is to the fore. This common prayer has liturgical expression. It is written down.

Sunday by Sunday God’s people gather to call upon God’s name and God’s Christian name is Trinity. Reformed Anglican praying is Trinitarian. God’s people pray to the Father through Jesus Christ, our Lord in acknowledgment the Holy Spirit. ‘The Prayer of General Thanksgiving’ is representative. The prayer opens in these terms: ‘Almighty God and merciful Father, we give you hearty thanks.’ The Father is then blessed for our creation, preservation, all the blessings of this life, but above all for the divine love as seen in the redemption of the world by the Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer goes on to ask the Father for a sense of the divine mercies such that we who pray praise God with true thankfulness, not merely with our lips but in a holy life that flows into service. All this is prayed ‘through Jesus Christ, our Lord’, whom we worship, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This form of praying contrasts starkly with the praying in some churches who formally espouse a Trinitarian theology but which are sadly Unitarian in practice: ‘Dear God … Amen!’ is the rule rather than the exception.

**A Bible Hearing Church**

In Reformed Anglicanism God’s people not only gather to call upon God’s name but also to hear God’s Word. J.I. Packer (b. 1926) – an important contemporary representative of Reformed Anglicanism - rightly argues that Holy Scripture is central to Anglicanism.\(^{17}\) Traditionally those who gather hear a reading from the Old Testament, from the psalms, from the New Testament (Acts, Epistles, Revelation) and the Gospels. Indeed. The reformers constructed a lectionary that if rigorously followed takes the believer through the Old Testament once a year, the New Testament twice a year, and the Psalms once a month.\(^{18}\) Just as Jesus lived by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God, likewise his people are so to live (cf. Matt. 4:1-3). If God is to be worshipped in Spirit and in truth, then knowledge is crucial (John 4:24). But where is such knowledge of the divine to be found? The Reformation maintained that God has made himself known in special revelation now crystallized as Holy Scripture (cf. Heb. 1:1-2 and 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Consequently Reformed Anglicanism is intentional about the public reading of Scripture as God’s Word written.

The public reading of Holy Scripture, in Reformed Anglican perspective, is the basis for the ministry of preaching (1 Tim. 4:13). Significantly when a deacon is made they are given a New Testament, and when a deacon is ordained a priest (i.e. presbyter) they are give a Bible, likewise when someone is consecrated a bishop. The preacher’s brief is not to proclaim his or her opinion or to offer the latest counseling ideas from the pulpit or self help nostrums, but to expound the words of God. Expository preaching is a
corollary of special revelation. When such faithful preaching takes place it has the force of God’s Word written as Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) maintained.¹⁹

A Confessional Church

It is fashionable in some circles to assert that what matters is not so much what one believes as to be sincere in what one believes. Bishop J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) – an important past representative of Reformed Anglicanism – confronted this view in his own day and it elicited this response from him: ‘Once for all. I must protest the modern notion, that it does not matter the least what religious opinions a man holds, so long as he is in “earnest” about them,-that one creed is just as good as another.’²⁰ Reformed Anglicanism affirms the historic creeds of the Western Christianity: Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian. This is one of its debts to catholic Christianity and its Trinitarian framework. (Another is an Episcopal form of church polity or organization.) Importantly for the Reformed Anglican these creeds are to be believed because as Article VIII maintains ‘they may be proved by the most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.’²¹ The creeds have normative value but of a subordinate kind. They are ruled norms (normata normata) whereas Scripture has final authority as the norm of norms (norma normans). However, many crucial doctrinal matters are not dealt with in the classic creeds (e.g. justification by faith alone). The Thirty-nine Articles of the Reformation era fills out the doctrinal picture. Ryle wisely recommends that these Articles ought to be read at least once a year by Anglicans, that the Articles ought to be taught and that they ought to be used as a criterion to exercise theological quality control on what is preached in parishes. He writes: ‘Try all that is preached and taught by one simple measure,-does it or does it not agree with the Articles!’²²

The Reformed Anglican admires those Anglicans who are prepared to pay the ultimate price for their confession of the Faith; whether a Bishop Hugh Latimer in 1555 or an Archbishop Janani Luwum in 1977 at the hands of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. However, he or she is deeply disappointed with those like an Anglican leader of last century of whom it was said that he nailed his colours firmly to the fence.

A Gospel Believing Church

Reformed Anglicanism is a gospel believing church because the gospel is the great burden of the Scriptures (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:14-15). Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles is eloquent on this point: ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.’²³ This expression of Christianity holds to the Biblical understanding of the plight of humankind before a holy God who in sovereign love has graciously provided a way back to himself through the sending and sacrifice of the Son, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Rom.3:23; 5:1-5).

Humanity needs more than a teacher and a dose of enlightenment. We need a saviour who is also Lord of all (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:5). God needs to do for us what we cannot in our fallen state do for ourselves. In other words, God shows grace (e.g. Eph. 2:8-10). This gospel of grace informs all the great services in the Book of Common Prayer as J. I. Packer has so helpfully shown. Packer argues that Archbishop Cranmer, without whose genius there would be no subsequent Book of Common Prayer, used a device to shape the
1552 prayer book that informed the classic 1662 one. Cranmer built a sequence into the services of the Anglican Church that takes the worshipper on a gospel journey. Packer writes:

To join in a service of worship is to be taken on a journey through a prescribed series of thoughts and actions. How did Cranmer secure evangelical worship? By ‘routing’ his regular services via a sequence of three themes: first, the detecting and confessing of sin; second, the announcing of grace, in God’s promise to pardon and restore the penitent through Christ; third, the exercising of faith, first, in believing God’s promise and trusting Him for pardon, and then in acts of praise, testimony, intercession, and obeying instruction, all based on the prior restoring of fellowship with God through forgiveness, all the main Prayer Book services have this built-in design. 24

Thus the gospel shapes the classic liturgy of the Anglican Church: ‘sin acknowledged, grace announced, faith exercised in response.’ 25 (Original emphases.)

The gospel is made audible in words and visible in Sacraments (baptism and Lord’s Supper). 26 Indeed, in the Sacraments the gospel is preached to our senses. According to Cranmer: ‘For as the Word of God preached putteth Christ into our ears, so likewise these elements of water, bread, and wine, joined to God’s Word, do after a sacramental manner put Christ into our eyes, mouths, hands, and all our senses.’ 27 P. E. Hughes correctly comments regarding the English Reformers: ‘This word which, audible in preaching becomes visible in the sacrament is essentially the word of the Gospel.’ 28

**A Worshipping Church**

When Reformed Anglicans meet they meet the Lord by faith and one another by sight. They do not meet merely to hear some great preacher. Nor do they meet for some form of Christotainment as though the Christian assembly is a religious form of concert. Rather in meeting they form a living temple in which the living God is acknowledged and enthroned upon the praises of his people. The earthly gathering of God’s people thus manifests the life of heaven where the cry is worthy is the God who created us (Rev 4:9-11) and the new song celebrates the worth of the Lamb who died for us (Rev 5:9-14). This new song is full of rich content and does not fall into the trap of what has been described as seven eleven Christian singing (seven words sung eleven times in the form of a love song addressed to Jesus).

Of course there is a New Testament sense in which the language of worship can be rightly used of the whole of life lived in response to the Gospel of God’s mercies (Rom 12:1-2). The Apostle Paul, for example, could describe his ministry of evangelizing the non Jewish world in categories that belonged to Old Testament temple based worship (Rom. 15:15-16). But such worship does not replace the corporate dimension of Biblical worship. This is an area where conjunctive theology ought to prevail: both/and not either/or. Importantly the Reformed Anglican is attracted to simplicity in worship as opposed to excessive interest in the ceremonial or the so-called ‘theatre of Anglicanism.’ 29

**An Engaged Church**

The prayers of a church show its real commitments (as does its budget). Are its prayers self-preoccupied in nature? Or do they look both within and without its ‘walls’?
The great advantage of a liturgical church – liturgy constitutes another debt to Western Catholicism – is that its prayers are written. The Great Litany affords a prime example of what an engaged church looks like. In it the Reformed Anglican prays for the governance and direction of the church, boldness to preach the gospel in all the world and to make disciples of all the nations, that its ministers be enlightened, that God’s people have divine grace to hear the divine Word and respond appropriately, that the leaders of nations be guided into the ways of peace and justice, that society’s laws be administered justly, honestly and truthfully, that the resources of the earth be used for the good of all, that the lonely, bereaved and oppressed be comforted, that the traveler be kept safe, the sick in mind and body be healed and the homeless, the hungry and destitute be provided for, the prisoner and refugee be pitied. Other prayers range across a wide gamut of concerns: the need for peace, national and international tensions, conflict, good government, natural disasters, places of learning, our homes, the media, the judicial system, industry and business, the aged, the unemployed, the abused, the spread of the gospel and so forth. The Reformed Anglican is no solipsist.

Priorities That Arise

Theology deals not only with what is to be believed but also what is to be practiced. Crucially our practices betray our real priorities. What practices then ought to arise from the foregoing discussion? I will be brief.

The Reformed Anglican ought to be a prayerful person. As Calvin insightfully argues prayer is ‘the principal exercise of faith.’ The health of a church is seen in its prayer life or lack of it. The Reformed Anglican ought to be a hearer of the Word of God both read and proclaimed. The printing press has proved great boon to the Christian faith but there is a downside. The engagement with the Word of God can become individualized and privatized. The individual and privatized can replace the corporate and public. The Reformed Anglican ought also to learn the confessional basis of the Christian Faith in its historic Anglican expression. The place to start is with the Thirty-nine Articles. These articles are brief, crisp and to the point. The Reformed Anglican ought to affirm the classic creeds (Apostles, Nice and Athanasian) and maintain the great solas of the Reformation: Scripture alone (sola scriptura), Christ alone (solus Christus), grace alone (sola gratia) and faith alone (sola fide) embodied in the Thirty-nine Articles. He or she, however, ought to distinguish matters of faith and charity from matters of order and indifference (adiaphora). The Reformed Anglican ought to be a gospel person affirming the things necessary for salvation and advocating the same. The world needs to hear the story of what God has done in Christ. The Reformed Anglican ought to engage society with the gospel of God and endeavour to live the life that flows from it (holy, compassionate and just). In other words live a life in keeping with the church’s Scriptures, confession of faith and prayers. There is a mission involving the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) informed by the Great Commandments (Matt. 22:34-40). The Anglican Church in Uganda provides an example. Some of those who prayed for the spread of the gospel went to Uganda in the Nineteenth Century. Some were martyred like Bishop James Hannington in 1885. In those days vengeance was regarded as a family virtue. However, the gospel of forgiveness brought by the missionaries and embraced by Ugandans broke the cycle of vengeance and violence. Lastly the Reformed Anglican ought to gather with others as children of the Father and as the Body of Christ to form a
living temple of the Holy Spirit, as mentioned previously, and in so doing join those in heaven in the corporate worship of the triune God. As the Holy Communion service expresses it: ‘with angels and archangels, and with the whole company of heaven.’

Let me now specifically consider the priorities of those who lead Reformed Anglicanism. Of course, they include the above. But what else? Packer puts it so well: ‘Priority one is to teach, priority two is to teach, and priority three is to teach.’ We Clergy should have a conscience whereby we ask ourselves at the end of each day, ‘What teaching have I done today? To whom have I taught what?’ He elaborates: ‘We have got to teach the bible; therefore we must ourselves be masters of the Biblical text, soaking ourselves in Scripture as our reformers directed that we should.’ Packer’s admonition applies to all who exercise some leadership in the church whether an archbishop or an assistant minister or a Lay worker.

Ideals Versus Realities

Both Bishop J. J. Ryle and theologian J. I. Packer have figured in this discussion. Both may be described as committed Prayer Book Anglicans. Not all contemporary Anglicans share this commitment. Packer is aware that these days his might be an isolated voice, whereas in an earlier day famous Anglican leaders such as Charles Simeon (1759-1836) of Cambridge preached on ‘The Excellency of the Liturgy.’ For Simeon to speak of the excellency of the liturgy was not a mere parroting of a party line. He was actually converted whilst a Cambridge undergraduate through wrestling one Easter with the theology of the Holy Communion service of the Book of Common Prayer. (Attendance at Holy Communion by undergraduates was compulsory at the time.) Packer writes: ‘But many today treat the set services as a mere stodgy preliminary, tending only to take the edge of one’s appetite, and the idea of the Prayer Book as an aid to worship leaves them cold.’

In fact, in some parts of the Anglican world liturgy has been abandoned altogether. There are those within the Anglican Church who would prefer to accent ‘Reformed’ over ‘Anglican’ and adopt a ‘non-liturgical Anglicanism.’ This to my mind would be a departure from the Reformed Anglican tradition per se whatever may be its missional virtues. These missional virtues, it may be argued, include flexibility in constructing services, comfort in a communal setting for any converted out of little or no church background, and informality. Those who depart from the tradition at this point would do well to consider the principles of classic Prayer Book worship as discussed previously in this chapter and incorporate them in their conduct of corporate worship. These principles include simplicity, congregational participation in prayer, communal confession of faith, the weekly and systematic exposure to Scripture through its public reading, and the hearing of preaching that arises from it, sacraments that are not ‘dumb ceremonies’ but conducted in the context of the heard Word of God. Importantly, the shape of each service needs to reflect the gospel journey so brilliantly articulated by Cranmer in his own time.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered Reformed Anglicanism in ideal terms with special attention given to the Anglican Church of Australia. This was entirely fitting given that this church has been and remains integral to Ridley’s context of service.
Importantly we observed that Reformed Anglicanism is no recent novelty. Rather Reformed Anglicanism takes with utmost seriousness its Reformation heritage. Three of its representatives have figured prominently in this discussion: Thomas Cranmer, J. C. Ryle and J. I. Packer. This tradition boasts martyrs from Cranmer to James Hannington to Janani Luwum to name just three. Even more importantly Reformed Anglicanism presupposes a church committed to the Scriptures as God’s Word written, to the gospel of grace - and its spread - appropriated by faith alone in Christ alone. Such a church worships the triune God of Biblical revelation as affirmed in the historic creeds of the early church and *Thirty-nine Articles*. Although there are Reformed Anglicans who are impatient with Prayer Book Anglicanism, the principles embodied in it are as relevant as ever.

2 Adam, Peter. {1988}, *Roots of Contemporary Evangelical Spirituality* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, No. 24, 6. Anglican evangelicalism is also indebted to the Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century (e.g. George Whitefield and John Wesley) but that story is beyond my brief.
3 *A Prayer Book for Australia: Shorter Edition*,[1999], Sydney: Broughton Books, 476. On ‘moderate Calvinism’ see Turnbull, Richard (2007), *Anglican and Evangelical?*, London And New York: Continuum, 93-95. ‘Inchoate’ may be more accurate than ‘moderate’ since the *Thirty-nine Articles* can be endorsed by both Five Point Calvinists (e.g. J. I. Packer) and Amyraldians (e.g. D. B. Knox). In Article XVII the accent falls on ‘Predestination to Life.’
5 Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe [1965].*The Theology Of The English Reformers*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 143.
9 *Prayer Book*, 478.
10 *Prayer Book*, 478.
12 *Prayer Book*, 480.
13 *Prayer Book*, 483.
16 *Constitution*, ch. 2, section 4 quoted in *Prayer Book*, ix.,
18 Packer, ‘Centrality,’ 10.
20 Ryle, J. C. {1959 reprint}, *Knots Untied: being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in religion from an Evangelical Standpoint*, London: James Clarke, 46, original emphasis.
21 *Prayer Book*, 478.
22 *Prayer Book*, 477.
24 Packer, J. I., ‘The Gospel In The Prayer Book,’
25 Packer, ‘Gospel.’
26 Packer, ‘Gospel.’
27 Quoted in Hughes, 199. Also see Null, Ashley, Dr. Ashley Null on Thomas Cranmer,’
28 Hughes, 192.
29 Ryle, 201.
30 Prayer Book, 189-191.
33 Archbishop Orombi, ‘Anglicanism?’, 24-25.
34 Prayer Book, 110, First Order.
35 Packer, ‘Centrality,’ 17.
36 Packer, ‘Centrality,’ 17.
38 Packer, ‘Gospel.’
39 Interestingly there is also a trend in some parts of the world (e.g. USA) of a younger generation being attracted to liturgical churches. See Campbell, Colleen Carroll [2003], The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy, Chicago: Loyola Press.
40 Hughes lists seven principles of Reformed worship that characterize the English Reformation. These include Scripturalness, Catholicity, Purity, Simplicity, Intelligibility, Commonness and Orderliness, 149.

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