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GRAHAM TOMLIN

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# Anglican Values: The Virtues and Vices of a Christian Church

**In the light of the changing face of Anglicanism and disputes as to what it means to be Anglican, Graham Tomlin here goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to find the central concerns of the Reformers that may still guide us today. By doing so he provides us with six Anglican values or commitments – Scripture, culture, modesty, accountability, politics and community – which he discusses in order to highlight both some of the virtues and some of the besetting vices of Anglicanism.**

An email recently arrived in my inbox that read thus:

The ANGLICAN VIRUS: This has no effect whatsoever. It just sits on your computer talking to lots of other computers. By the time it gets round to changing anything, you've upgraded your machine and rendered the virus obsolete.

Jokes like this demonstrate that Anglicans don't have a great reputation for change. However, the world is changing fast around us and, in fact, if we look carefully, the church is changing too – Anglicanism is fast becoming much more varied than it has ever been. The Anglican churches in most British cities display a huge variety in their ways of worshipping and ordering church, and that's not just to point up the differences between Anglo-Catholics, Liberals and Evangelicals. Evangelical churches, despite an underlying similarity of doctrine, actually express their faith in very different ways: conservative, charismatic, contemporary or traditional. Around the world too, many Anglican churches who don't have the characteristics we English think of as typically Anglican (for example establishment and a parish system) are also asking what it really means to be Anglican. Again with new ways of being church emerging around us all the time, from cell church to youth services, from the Minster model to seeker-driven church, there's a need in assessing all of these to ask the question whether they are compatible with Anglicanism or should be avoided as unAnglican.<sup>1</sup>

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1 For introductions to these different styles of church see: Phil Potter, *The Challenge of Cell Church: Getting to Grips with Cell Church Values*, Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford 2001; Nick Spencer, *Parochial Vision: The Future of the English Parish*, Paternoster, Carlisle 2004; Pete Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1992.

This article seeks to answer this question by going back to a seminal period in Anglican history – the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – when the church was reformed (not formed!). It tries to ask what were the central concerns of the Reformers as they re-shaped the church, in a process which has left an indelible mark on Anglicanism ever since. This exercise might in turn help us to identify the particular Anglican ‘style’ of doing church, worship, mission and everything else a church does.

What follows is not an exhaustive list, but identifies six Anglican commitments which at the same time might help us avoid some of our characteristic and besetting sins. It also suggests that there are some tendencies in Anglican history which have contributed to its decline in western societies, and that some of the answers to our predicament may also be found within that very history, especially in these years when the identity of Anglicanism took decisive shape. Perhaps if we had kept more true to our heritage, we might have avoided some of the sins which have sometimes led us into trouble.

## Scripture

The Anglican church has always been a *biblical* Church. It has always made an explicit appeal to Scripture, and its laity and clergy are encouraged to read Scripture regularly. If they said morning and evening prayer daily, as they are encouraged to do, then they would probably read more Scripture than that required by almost any other church. It’s worth remembering that one of the first acts of the English Reformation was the placing of an English Bible in every parish church in the land.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the troubled sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although deeply divided over many issues, mainly about church order and ceremonial, the surprising thing is that, even into the nineteenth century, the Church of England experienced a basic unity over the supreme authority of Scripture. Whether you turn to the seventeenth-century Puritans, the ‘High Church’ party of Archbishop Laud and Henry Hammond, or the Latitudinarians such as Edward Stillingfleet and William Chillingworth, all were committed to the principle of the authority of Scripture. Now, of course, they disagreed on the nature of that authority. Some, following Luther and, later, Hooker, took the position that Scripture taught all things necessary for salvation, but where Scripture was silent, there was liberty of practice. Hence, ceremonial actions, and liturgical nuances not explicit in Scripture could still be permitted. Others at the more Calvinist end of the spectrum such as Thomas Cartwright, the leader of the Elizabethan Puritans, claimed that what was not in Scripture should not be allowed in the church. It is of course the former of these positions that is enshrined in the 39 Articles. Yet the point is that the dispute was over the extent and nature of that authority, not the authority itself.<sup>3</sup>

Now this is not just an abstract point about dogmatic authority. It is at heart an essentially *pastoral* assertion. It refers to the question of what Anglicans choose to shape their lives, and on what they will feed their hearts, minds and souls. The Anglican belief in the authority of Scripture asserts that Scripture is good for us –

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2 For a brief account of this Bible see, Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible*, Doubleday, New York 2001.

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3 See Paul Zahl, *The Protestant Face of Anglicanism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2003.

it breeds good healthy Christians. As Cranmer put it in his Preface to the Great Bible of 1540: 'In the Scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul; therein is no venomous meat, no unwholesome thing, they be the very dainty and pure feeding'.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the Anglican church places a great stress upon the private and public reading of Scripture, even before it is preached on. Before we speak about Scripture, we must first listen attentively to it. Bishop Jewel, in his *Apology* of 1562 boasted: 'There is nothing read in our churches but the canonical Scriptures, which is done in such order that the Psalter is read every month, the New Testament four times in a year, and the Old Testament once in a year.' How many of us do anything near that today?

Being gradually imbued with Scripture, steadily absorbing its mindset and its spirit (of course canticles and Psalms are Scripture just as much as the readings from the New and Old Testaments), the aim is familiarity with Scripture and basic Christian doctrine. It aims at slowly cultivated holiness of life, rather than dramatic but short-term spiritual special effects. The Book of Common Prayer commends the patristic idea of reading through the Scriptures every year, so that 'the clergy... should by often reading and meditation in God's Word be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine... and that the people, by daily hearing of Holy Scripture read in the church, might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God'.<sup>5</sup> Here is a church that sees the reverent, expectant and attentive daily listening to Scripture as the key to holiness. Perhaps the decline of personal daily Bible reading among Anglicans is both a sign and cause of our plight.

Besides its pastoral function, this Anglican insistence on the authority of Scripture is also a *polemical* assertion. Scripture is the text that is final and constitutive for Anglicans, not papal decretals, canon law, unwritten traditions, nor even psychological theory, sociology, opinion polls or the voice of the media, however important it may be to listen and learn from them.<sup>6</sup> This is an important assertion of the distinctiveness of Christianity as opposed to any other way of life on offer in our culture. Too often in the past, Anglicans have been seen as lukewarm, conformist, socially conservative. Now, along with so many other institutions in the west, we are disdained as part of an old passing established order. If we were more true to our heritage and identity, we might realise that our appeal to biblical authority is a call to live by the story of the Bible, and no other story. It is a call to be different, to live by a different set of rules, to march to a different drumbeat, to avoid the social conformity which has been one of Anglicanism's besetting sins.

## Culture

One of Anglicanism's more regrettable characteristics is a form of cultural imperialism which has insisted on imposing forms of worship, architecture and language on alien cultures. Sitting in nineteenth-century Anglican churches in

4 Gerald Bray, ed., *Documents of the English Reformation*, James Clarke, Cambridge 1994, p 238.

5 From 'Concerning the Service of the Church' in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

6 See Article 6 of the 39 Articles. Also Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity*, Paternoster, Exeter 1986.

Jerusalem or Lahore can feel little different from sitting in an Anglican church in Surrey (though it's usually a littler warmer in Jerusalem or Lahore). In the arena of worship, we have often clung to forms of liturgical rigidity and correctness which don't always take into account changing patterns of life or culture.

The early sixteenth century in particular was a time of great cultural change. As the Renaissance re-introduced the virtues of classical culture into European minds and burgeoning urban life, and as new worlds and continents were being discovered through the explosion of travel and exploration, this was a period in which those at the cutting edge of developing thought, including the reformers, were very aware of the shifting sands of culture.

As a result, we find in the writings of those very reformers, a refusal to prescribe too closely forms of worship and order for everyone. There is a recognition that the form in which the gospel is expressed, both liturgically and ecclesiastically, is not fixed and must change with changing culture. They tend to see in the silence of Scripture on these kinds of questions, a mandate for flexibility and adaptation. John Calvin had some important things to say on this, for example, in book four of his *Institutes*:

But because (God) did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones.<sup>7</sup>

The same principle is present among Anglican reformers as well. Article 34 of the 39 Articles (which was present in Cranmer's original articles as well) 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, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.<sup>8</sup>

This is all down to two particular aspects of Anglican theology. One is the Anglican view of authority: that Scripture alone has authority, not any particular interpretation of Scripture, or cultural reading of it, however compelling or contemporary that reading may be. Such a view of authority is very liberating. As a result, Anglicanism has an inbuilt flexibility to respond to different cultures and people, as long as this does not run counter to Scripture. The other aspect is the

7 *Institutes* 4.10. J.T. McNeill, (ed.) and FL. Battles, (trans), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, Westminster, Philadelphia 1960.

8 The same idea is present in the Preface to the 1662 BCP: '... the particular Forms of Divine worship, and the Rites and

Ceremonies appointed to be used therein, being things in their own nature indifferent, and alterable... it is but reasonable... according to the various exigency of times and occasion, such changes and alterations should be made therein...'

Reformation doctrine of *adiaphora*, the belief that although there are central gospel issues which are not negotiable, others are secondary and changeable. Of course it is not always easy to discern which category some doctrines or practices fall into, yet, as Oliver O'Donovan points out, 'the point of a good theory is not to save us the task of thinking, but to organise our thoughts fruitfully'.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1960s, it was common amongst Anglicans (as well as others) to hear the opinion that, in response to a changing culture, we need to change the gospel message yet leave the rest of the church intact. Now perhaps we can recognise that this approach has not worked. Instead perhaps we are rediscovering that there is little wrong with the gospel. Instead it is the forms in which the gospel is presented, lived and expressed which need to change. Anglicanism is in fact entirely happy with this approach – from its (re)formation, it has always believed that, in changing cultures, our customs and habits need to change. It therefore has an ability to create new forms of Christian living and belonging and worshipping.

If innovation and Anglicanism have often seemed unlikely bedfellows, then perhaps it's because we have been untrue to our roots. New emerging forms of church and evangelism such as Alpha, Cell Church, Café church, Alternative Worship, so long as they are within the boundaries and under the authority of the Scriptures and relevant church authorities (see the fourth value below!), must not necessarily be assumed too quickly to be unAnglican. Instead, they must be tested. Then, if they meet with the deeper essences of Anglican faith and practice, they should be welcomed and embraced. Again Calvin gives us good advice: 'love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe'.<sup>10</sup>

## Modesty

Another of Anglicanism's besetting sins has been arrogance. Ecclesiastically, we have often been condescending to other churches, especially those who have seceded at different times from the established church. We have disparaged, or even created, other churches by our casting out of different groups, such as the Puritans, Wesley's Methodists or the non-Jurors. Yet again this assumption of superiority is outlawed by the reformers. For example, consider the position taken up by Anglicans over episcopacy.

After the Reformation, all churches in Europe faced a choice over what to do about bishops. Some (for example the Roman Catholics and conservative Anglicans such as William Laud) retained the idea that bishops were of the *esse* of the church, guaranteeing continuity from age to age. Others ('free' churches and Presbyterian puritans within the Church of England) argued that they were unnecessary. The position taken up by the mainline Anglican reformers was different from both of these. It was that bishops were not essential to the being of the church, but useful for guaranteeing good order. They were not of the *esse* but they were of the *bene esse* of the church.

Most Anglicans (even Laud himself!) didn't argue that the three-fold order of bishops, priests and deacons was the only possible pattern for church leadership. They simply argued for it on the basis of long custom in the church and its provision of a good workable system of government. What they refused to do was to

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9 O'Donovan, *Thirty-Nine Articles*, p 110.

10 McNeill, *Calvin's Institutes*. 4.10., p 1208

unchurch non-episcopalian Christians. Whereas the Roman church effectively decreed that in the absence of bishops there was no real church at all, most Anglicans held back from this stance. They saw episcopacy as a matter of pragmatism, not dogma, a matter of external government, not necessary for salvation. Continuity of the identity of a church depends not on the presence of an office or person, but on the presence of Jesus Christ through the Spirit and the good news of his grace, expressed in word and sacrament. If that is lost, then there is no church, no matter how many bishops it has!

The result of this attitude and perspective is a church which acknowledges the right of other churches to exist. Perhaps the fruit of this came in 1689 with the Act of Toleration, at the time of the 'Glorious Revolution'. This Act, which allowed dissenting congregations to meet, and took away the right of clergy to compel attendance at Anglican churches, was on the one hand the surrender of the Church of England's claim to be the only legitimate form of Christianity in England, but on the other, a right and proper act of humility and modesty, true to its reformed and catholic identity.

Here, Anglicans ate a good slice of humble pie, and rightly so. The particular decisions taken about episcopacy in the sixteenth century are an illustration and indication of the principle of Christian modesty which lies at the heart of Anglicanism. Since then we have hopefully learnt from, rather than disparaged, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists. Maybe today we can learn much from Vineyard churches, Korean Pentecostals and home churches. In particular, western Anglican churches must adopt the same modesty, humility and willingness to learn towards their younger and more vigorous sister churches in Southeast Asia and Africa, rather than feeling superior to them, insisting they fall into line with western (and often failing) ways of doing things.

## Accountability

Having said all this, the Reformation in England did insist on keeping hold of bishops. Apart from the brief and chaotic period of the Commonwealth in the mid seventeenth century, the Anglican church which emerged from the Reformation retained the medieval threefold order of ministry - bishops, priests and deacons - rather than move over to a Presbyterian system as many Elizabethan Puritans would have preferred.

One of the ongoing tendencies, particularly true perhaps of evangelical Anglicans, has been a tendency to go it alone. John Berridge in the nineteenth century, for example, argued that he was quite entitled to cross parish boundaries without permission, on the grounds that his neighbouring clergy were not preaching the gospel: 'if they would preach the gospel themselves, there would be no need of my preaching it to their people; but as they do not, I cannot desist'.<sup>11</sup> Charles Simeon on the other hand held the more mainstream evangelical Anglican view that it was right and proper to keep to one's own patch: 'a Preacher has enough to

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11 Charles H.E. Smyth, *Simeon & Church Order: A Study of the Origins of the Evangelical Revival in Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century, Birkbeck Lectures 1937-8*, CUP, Cambridge 1940.

do in his own parish'.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes evangelical impatience with the rest of the Church of England has led to a spirit of independence, autonomy and, dare we say it, spiritual pride, claiming that God speaks to us alone, and no-one can argue with that.

The Anglican commitment to episcopacy in this context is not a claim that only episcopal churches are real churches. Instead it is a commitment to right and proper accountability within the church. It derives from a healthy theology and spirituality that knows that, left to ourselves, we are quite capable of getting it wrong, reading the signs badly, and mistaking God's will. We need other Christians, older, wiser and more experienced than us, to check our bold ideas, discern whether they are of the Lord, and to ensure our vision and passion does not trample on the ideals and godly plans of others. And so, while Anglicans can dream up new ways of being church, new styles of worship, new approaches to ministry, we try to do this with right and proper consultation, and submitting ourselves duly to authority - the authority of those God has placed over us, just as the Scripture says (1 Cor. 16:15-16).

Of course, this sometimes feels uncomfortable. We may often feel that bishops get it wrong (and being human they sometimes will). However, this is, at least so Anglicans tend to think, far better than the alternative that is sometimes glimpsed in the more radical wing of the Reformation (and in some forms of popular American Christianity) where everyone who wants to plant a church does so, regardless of the needs of the wider church, ending up with a different kind of church on every street corner, and the Christian witness broken into a thousand tiny fragments.

Accountability is a sign of health and not inertia. It connects us to others, and prevents a damaging spiritual independence that ignores the whole body of Christ in favour of the particular part of the body which may be my responsibility. And that is what episcopacy preserves. It connects the local church with the regional, national and global church. It maintains the Christian virtue of humility and correctibility. It is, in other words, a response to the biblical doctrine of sin – my tendency to see and do things my way. Yes there are limits – bishops themselves need to be held accountable to the will of God revealed in Scripture and due processes must be in place to ensure that happens. Yet that does not take away this precious and vital Anglican value – the discipline of accountability.

## Politics

The churches of the Reformation related to their respective state powers in a bewildering variety of ways. Calvin's Geneva was a city state, independent of wider regional powers, and it established a delicate balance between the roles of minister and magistrate in the order of a Christian society. Zwingli saw state and church in Zürich as two sides of the same coin so that, as a pastor, he could play both a political and a pastoral role at the same time. Lutheran churches often saw religion imposed and protected by state authorities. Calvinist churches in France operated under suspicion and distrust from the state, having to function largely as underground movements.

12 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Unwin Hyman, London 1989, p 31.



In England, the Church that emerged from the Reformation was tied closely to the realm, with the monarch as supreme governor of both church and state – a unique arrangement among Reformation churches. Clergy were both pastors of the church, yet also servants of the monarch, taking a strict oath of allegiance to the Crown, a position which has not been without its tensions then and ever since. Naturally not all Anglican churches remain established in this same way, but this historical fact still has important implications for Anglicans today.

As a result of this history, the Anglican church has always been a *political* church. Not in the narrow sense of being allied to any particular political party, but in being concerned for the *polis*, the city, the public life of the wider society and community. We have never been keen on the gathered church model of a pure group, separate from public life. Instead we have wanted to be involved in and committed to society, even if that sometimes is a difficult place to be. This has imposed upon Anglican churches a prophetic role. We may prefer to avoid this - our leaders will get criticised for poking their noses into 'political' matters – but, to be true to our identity, we must not run away from this responsibility. Whether at a national or local level our history of intimate relationships with government means that we must take an interest in issues which affect all the people in our parishes, not just the Christians. We must articulate with boldness the principles and vision which should shape public life. It is part of our care for whole people, not just disembodied souls. This is in a sense a central part of a distinctive Anglican missiology. How do Anglican churches relate to the wider society? Yes, by evangelism, but also by taking a keen interest in the whole of life, not just the religious aspects of it.

Since the Enlightenment, the temptation for all religion in the west has been to buy into what Lesslie Newbigin calls the split between private values and public facts.<sup>13</sup> Thus Christianity (and Anglicanism) can be tolerated as a spiritualizing force, speaking only about the inner life, a retreat into the private sphere of beliefs, not addressing the public world of facts. There is a real temptation to build separatist church communities which glory in their vertical privileges but shun their horizontal responsibilities. Our identity-forming history denies us that option. By sticking close to our heritage we can avoid the temptation to pietistic withdrawal and public irrelevance.

## Community

The English Reformation was, among many other things, a reassertion of the importance of the *laity* in church life. The reformers insisted worship must be done in the vernacular – an end to Latin, the private language of priests and theologians. Clergy were to be like other Christians, married, bringing up children, no longer the only ones allowed access to the cup in the Christian family meal. Holy Communion was just that – communion both with the Lord at his Supper, and with each other. The distinction between clergy and laity was primarily to be one of function not status. Children were seen as included within the covenant, belonging

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13 For example Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, SPCK, London 1986, pp 36ff.

to the family, still baptised and welcomed. Luther's belief that the rite which confers the right and responsibility to engage in Christian ministry was baptism, not ordination, also finds an echo in our Anglican formularies. Printing made Bibles available to all, so that Cranmer's preface to the Great Bible of 1540 could urge lay people to take responsibility for their own reading of the Scriptures: 'for the Holy Ghost hath so ordered and attempered the Scriptures, that in them, as well publicans, fishers and shepherds may find their edification, as great doctors their erudition'.<sup>14</sup> Not put off by the possibility that they might not understand the Bible, Cranmer urges them to read it for themselves, due to the great benefit they will derive from it.

At least this was the theory. The practice was a bit different. The laity were in fact only partly 'released' by the Reformation. Clericalism soon raised its head again and catholic priests were often replaced by protestant preachers, every bit as authoritarian as their forebears! One only needs to read the novels of Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope to get a sense of the way in which Anglican churches soon developed a clerical monopoly that effectively distanced lay people from true Christian liberty and responsibility.

At least the idea was there. That ideal - of a church as a community of people ministering to one another, of every believer as a priest, standing in the place of Christ to offer counsel, encouragement, even absolution to Christian brothers and sisters - remains. This was a distinct move away from the medieval notion of church as a place where the laity were largely passive recipients of grace dispensed by the clergy in the form of sacraments.

This was a vision of church as community rather than institution. Lay people were intended to be active ministers, not passive observers, taking responsibility for their own & each other's growth in faith, understanding and holiness, even taking responsibility for the church itself. If we had remained a little more true to the vision of church laid out in the time of the Reformation, perhaps we might have avoided clerical domination, another besetting Anglican sin.

## Conclusion

The past often contains the secrets of the future. As we search for a way forward for the Anglican churches into the twenty-first century, these commitments made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may help point a way ahead. If we can rediscover a church shaped by Scripture, quick to respond to cultural change, humbly willing to learn from others, properly accountable, committed to the public life of society and with a strong sense of mutual life and community, then perhaps God may be able to use us as he has done in the past.

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<sup>14</sup> Bray, ed., *Documents*, p 237.