

The British Church: The Anglicans

The first section of the course has been completed, studying the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In this lesson I will begin the second part of the course. I will be describing the church in the British Isles for the next three lessons. This lesson will focus on the church in England and specifically the part of the church in England that we can call the Anglicans. In the next lesson I will focus on the Puritans in England. Then I will turn to the Presbyterians in Scotland.

I will use a prayer from Jeremy Taylor, the author of a famous book entitled *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. The prayer was one of the favorites of the missionary to India, Amy Carmichael. Let us join together now as we pray this prayer to the Lord in the words of Jeremy Taylor.

“Grant, O Lord, that in Your wounds I may find my safety, in Your stripes my cure, in Your pain my peace, in Your cross my victory, in Your resurrection my triumph, and a crown of righteousness in the glories of Your eternal kingdom. Amen.”

I will begin with a question. What are the three most frequently reprinted books in the English language? The King James Version of the Bible is certainly one. *Pilgrim’s Progress* by the great Puritan John Bunyan is another. The third most frequently reprinted book in the English language is more difficult to guess. Some might guess the *Book of Common Prayer* or *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, but neither of those is the answer. The answer is *The Compleat Angler* by Izaak Walton, which is a book about fishing. There is something very interesting about those three books. The King James Version of the Bible, or the Authorized Version, as it is called in England, was first printed in 1611. *Pilgrim’s Progress*, by John Bunyan, was printed in two parts—the first part in 1678 and the second part six years later. *The Compleat Angler*, by Izaak Walton, was printed in 1653. All three of those books came from the seventeenth century. One was from the time of King James I. *The Compleat Angler* was from the time of the Commonwealth. Then *Pilgrim’s Progress* was from the time of the Restoration.

In this lesson and the next, I will be describing the history of the church in England that forms the background for those periods that I just mentioned.

I will begin with the Elizabethan church. I already talked briefly about Queen Elizabeth I, whose long reign helped to solidify Protestant control in England. Elizabeth became queen in 1558, and she ruled until her death in 1603. A contemporary tribute to Elizabeth I is found in the famous book by Edmund Spenser called *The Faerie Queene*, in which Queen Gloriana, as she is called in that long poem, is Queen Elizabeth I. The knights of medieval romance are described in the poem to celebrate the ideals of Elizabethan England. A modern assessment of Elizabeth I was given by the historian Lewis Spitz, who said, “Elizabeth, a young woman of 25, was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm by the people, who rallied to her at Hatfield, even as her half-sister Mary lay dying. Her 45-year reign saw England turn thoroughly Protestant and emerge as the leader of the Protestant states.” Spitz also said that even though some historians have perhaps exaggerated the contribution of Elizabeth to England’s history, nonetheless, she was a central and important figure, not only for English history, but also certainly for Protestant history.

Elizabeth was a great ruler. Was she also a true Christian? People have discussed that question for a long time, trying to get to the heart and soul of Queen Elizabeth’s faith. It is not easy to do that. Sometimes Elizabeth is depicted as a rather pragmatic ruler who was a Protestant simply because that suited her politically. Yet I believe that as we study the life of Elizabeth, and particularly as we read her prayers,

we can gain some insight into the fact that Elizabeth was more than merely a pragmatic Christian. She was not all that the Puritans wanted her to be. She did express, however, her faith and trust in God. She expressed her desire that in England there would be a “perfect Reformed church to the furtherance of [God’s] glory.”

Let us now consider the church that formed during the reign of Elizabeth in order to see whether indeed that church was the ideal church that Elizabeth envisioned. There is an expression that is often used for the church in England, which goes back to that time, and the expression is the *Via Media*. That means the “middle way.” It is celebrated in George Herbert’s poem, “The British Church.” It is defended by the modern Anglican J. I. Packer as an appropriate solution to the situation of the turmoil in the church during the time of Elizabeth. Anglicans celebrate the idea that their church is right in the middle. It does not veer to the side of the Puritans, nor to the side of the Catholics, but rather it stays right in the middle of the road.

Some people believed that it was not a good place to be. They were the Puritans, whom I will talk about more in the next lesson. Very early on, however, there were people who expressed Puritan concerns. The Puritan church would form later as part of the Church of England. At first, it was not a separate church, but rather a part of the Church of England. Even in the days of John Knox, there were Puritan concerns expressed. John Knox feared that the Church of England was not becoming a perfect Reformed church under Elizabeth. He thought it was a half-way house between Geneva, where he wanted the church to be, and Rome, where the Catholics wanted the church to be. In the view of John Knox, Elizabeth’s church was not that perfect British church, the “golden mean” celebrated by George Herbert in his poem, but rather it was a compromise. The Puritans continued to view the Elizabethan settlement as a compromise. To them, the church was only partly, and inadequately, Reformed. One of the great early Puritans during the time of Elizabeth was Thomas Cartwright, who was also one of the first Presbyterian champions in England. He was a man who was “gifted, able, and learned,” according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. I will talk more about the Puritans in the next lesson. There emerged from Anglicanism a coherent, aggressive, and vigorous group of British Christians who wanted to push the English church more toward Geneva, John Calvin, and Presbyterianism. I will talk about those leaders in the church in the next lesson.

In this lesson, I will focus on the Anglican distinctions and distinctives. At first the Church of England was a national Protestant church whose Anglicanism was not yet conceived nor its Puritanism clearly disowned. In the Elizabethan period there was not yet a clear break between the two parts of the Church of England. The seeds were sown, however, for that break, and in the next lesson I will describe how that break took place. By the first half of the seventeenth century, however, the distinctly Anglican position began to emerge in theology, church order, public worship, and spirituality. T. S. Eliot described that moment well in his essay on Lancelot Andrewes, in which T. S. Eliot first revealed his conversion to Anglicanism in 1928.

The theology of the Church of England was set forth first under Edward VI and later under Queen Elizabeth I. Under Queen Elizabeth, it was set forth in the form of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Those Articles are distinctly Reformed. The Puritans had no real arguments with the Thirty-Nine Articles. The Westminster Assembly began its work by revising the Thirty-Nine Articles just to make sure that some of the statements in the Articles that seemed ambiguous would be interpreted in a Reformed direction. I believe that is the way those Articles should be interpreted. Theology was not an issue in England during that time. The Puritans and the Anglicans agreed on the theology of the Thirty-Nine Articles. It was basically, if moderately, the Reformed confession of the Church of England.

There was a difference, however, in church order, or church polity. Many different views emerged. Episcopal views marked the Anglicans. Presbyterianism was represented among the Puritans. Congregationalism was also a view that was held. The Anglican distinctive was the Episcopal position on church polity, which was set forth in an important book by Richard Hooker, called *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Richard Hooker stressed the importance of Scripture. The Bible was supposed to guide and direct in church polity. Hooker also emphasized the role of reason, even more than some of the other English ministers and people were willing to do. Hooker said, “The gift of natural understanding, wit, and reason is also from God.” So there was Scripture, tradition, and reason. Those three sources of authority were put together to establish the polity and order of the Church of England. Hooker’s book was tremendously important, even if it was not very inspiring.

The area of public worship was another very important point of Anglicanism. Public worship centered on the incomparable *Book of Common Prayer*. It has been the one part of the Church of England that has held the church together until the present. The Anglican Church has stayed together because Anglicans worship in the same way. The *Book of Common Prayer*, even though it has been revised somewhat in recent years, is the distinctive element in the life of the Church of England and Episcopal churches around the world. It is certainly a wonderful resource of liturgical worship. It gives the Church of England a treasure that is distinctive, and it is something that tends to unite Anglicans and Episcopalians everywhere. If Presbyterians are very concerned about doctrinal consensus, the Anglicans feel that same concern about liturgical consensus. Presbyterians fight their battles over theology, and worship is more flexible. In the Church of England, however, theology can be treated more casually, but worship cannot. The liturgy is the place where the battles of the Church of England tend to be fought. J. I. Packer said, “Long before the age of fish and chips, the *Book of Common Prayer* was the Great British invention, nurturing all sorts and conditions of Englishmen and holding the church together with remarkable effectiveness.”

Along with theology, church order, and public worship, I would like to add spirituality. There was a spirituality, devotion, and piety that marked some of the figures of the Church of England, people who have influenced the church in many ways, especially in spirituality. Lancelot Andrewes was one. His private devotions have been a treasure of Anglican spirituality and Christian spirituality until the present. *The Private Devotions of Lancelot Andrewes* was not a book he wrote to be published. They were his private devotions, his prayers. Those prayers, which were bound together in a little book in his own handwriting, were found by his trustees after his death. It was a book that he had written himself, and they were prayers that he had written himself and used throughout his whole life. He had so often turned to those prayers that they could hardly be read anymore. Alexander White, the Scottish Presbyterian minister, said that the prayers of Lancelot Andrewes were the “best prayer” and that Andrewes was the “best composer of prayers in all the world of prayers.” That book is something you may want to read some time and use in your own private devotions—the private devotions of this great Anglican of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

John Donne was the dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London, one of the great churches in London in his day as it is today. John Donne was also a great preacher and poet. His *Devotions* is a book of real importance. It is a book that he wrote about an illness that he had, during which he thought he was going to die. I had read that book years ago, but in recent years when I was taking treatment for chemotherapy and not able to teach, I read the *Devotions* of John Donne again. I found the writing of this great Anglican minister very helpful. He prayed, “O most mighty and merciful God, who, though Thou hast taken me off of my feet, hast not taken me off of my foundation, which is Thyself.” As you read the *Devotions* of John Donne, you realize that the writings of this man have influenced people, literature, and even popular culture until the present. He wrote in one of his devotions, “Therefore never send to

know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.” The last phrase became the title of Ernest Hemingway’s book on the Spanish civil war. Also from John Donne’s devotions comes the phrase, “No man is an island.” Many people who know that quotation may have no idea that John Donne was the first to write it in his book, *Devotions*. John Donne also produced great sermons, one of which was entitled “Death’s Duel.” It was Donne’s last sermon. It was preached before the king during Lent in 1630. It has been called “the doctor’s own funeral sermon.” He died shortly after preaching the sermon, and in the sermon he offers some remarkably helpful and inspiring things about life and death. John Donne was a great poet as well. He was one of the great metaphysical poets of English literature.

The next person I will talk about is George Herbert. Herbert was also a minister in the Church of England. He was not the minister of a great city church in London—like John Donne, who was Herbert’s friend. He was rather a minister in a small country parish. His short ministry was given to serving God and his people in an out-of-the-way church in a rural part of England. He died as a young man, but he wrote a book called *The Country Parson*. It is one of the great books of practical theology in English literature. Both *The Reformed Pastor*, by the Puritan Richard Baxter, and *The Country Parson* are tremendously helpful books for ministers—even today. In *The Country Parson* George Herbert said that he wrote the book not to set forth himself as an ideal or as a perfect pastor, but rather to give himself a mark to aim at. Thus the standards in the book are high, and George Herbert attempted in his own ministry to live up to those standards. In the book he said that everything the parson does is his ministry. He teaches in every way. He teaches directly through preaching and catechizing. He teaches through visiting the sick and other people of his congregation. He also teaches through leading worship. Then he teaches indirectly through every other thing that he does in his life, through the life he chooses and what he does with his life. He teaches through what he does with his money, how he raises and disciplines his children, and how he treats his neighbor. So in *The Country Parson* there is a full view of what it means to be a pastor and to teach, not only from the pulpit, but also among the people, in the marketplace, and in public life.

Like John Donne, George Herbert was also a poet, one of the great poets of English literature. Much of his poetry has been collected in a book called *The Temple*. I must say that I love reading George Herbert. Somebody has said, “He loved words, and he loved God.” As you read George Herbert, you can see a man who loved words and who loved God. George Herbert was fascinated with words, not only with the meaning of words, but also with the shape of words, the arrangement of letters, and how it all looks. Some of his poems take the form of acrostics or they have certain shapes, and they also have deep, significant religious meaning.

I also want to talk about Izaak Walton. He was not a minister. He was a layman, an ironmonger, a man who traded in metal and hardware. He lived in London, where he was a parishioner of John Donne. He later lived in Winchester, where he is buried in the magnificent cathedral of that city. Izaak Walton had a long life, living to be 90 years old. He was not only a Christian layman who had a job that he worked, but he was also a writer. He was a biographer. He was not a poet, but he wrote several *Lives*, which were biographies about some of the famous people of English literature. He wrote *The Life of Dr. Donne*, which was a book that Samuel Johnson believed was the best biography ever written. He also wrote a life of Hooker and of George Herbert. He wrote a life of one of the bishops of the Church of England, a man named Robert Sanderson, Bishop of Lincoln. Izaak Walton wrote that when he was an old man in 1678, and he included these words, “It is now too late to wish that my life may be like his, for I am in the 85th year of my age, but I humbly beseech Almighty God that my death may be like his and do as earnestly beg of every reader to say ‘amen.’”

There is something very delightful about reading Izaak Walton. He is also the man who wrote the book of fishing that is so popular in English literature. It is a book called *The Compleat Angler*. The title of that book, which continued on at some length, as titles typically did in that period, included a text of Scripture, John 21:3, which was undoubtedly Izaak Walton's favorite text. John 21:3 says, "Simon Peter said, 'I go a-fishing.'" And they said, "We also will go with thee." The book ends with another quotation from Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, which says, "Study to be quiet." Izaak Walton believed the best place to do that was out by a stream, with a fishing line and nicely tied fly, on a beautiful English day, with nobody to disturb you, so you could fish all day long and be quiet. That is something that people must have found very difficult in the turmoil of the middle years of the seventeenth century. If you like fishing, and if you like theology, then you can get them both in *The Compleat Angler*.

Let me try to describe in a few words the Anglican mind and soul. I have been describing it in the lives of these famous people of the Church of England. The first point that summarizes this issue is comprehensiveness. Anglicans wanted to open the door, or open the window. When we consider the Puritans, we will see a more narrow definition of Christianity. They had a more proscribed way of looking at the church. The Regulative Principle began to function in a definite way. In Anglicanism, however, the words to describe their view are breadth or comprehensiveness. Illustrated by the people I have described, the Anglicans were devout, learned, cultured, and moderate. Charles Williams, in his book, *The Descent of the Dove*, describes Mr. George Herbert, who "in a sedate Anglican manner renounced the world for God." That says much about the Anglican understanding of the Christian faith.

Second, beauty in worship was a value for Anglicans. The *Book of Common Prayer*, by Cranmer, preserved much of the beauty of the medieval liturgies. It corrected those liturgies theologically and brought them into contemporary use in the reigns of Edward and Elizabeth. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Church of England has a treasure of beauty in corporate worship. Church architecture was also something in which Anglicans excelled. Other traditions objected to certain features of the architecture of Anglicanism. Yet we all can appreciate the beauty and splendor of many of the buildings that were erected for the use of the Church of England.

The doctrine of grace was taught by the Anglicans. The Thirty-Nine Articles certainly set forth grace in an unambiguous way. In the sermons and poems of such people as Donne and Herbert, there is a clear presentation of the Protestant teaching of salvation by grace. At the same time, we must admit that within the Church of England there was the rise of moralism. Even the great devotional classic by Jeremy Taylor called *Holy Living and Holy Dying* is much clearer about what it means to live for God than how one becomes a Christian and how eternal life is given to us by God. Those teachings are not missing, but the book gives the impression that the Christian life is something that we must constantly be working at in order to achieve. It is not wrong, but that idea should be supported by, undergirded by, and surrounded by a great expression of the doctrine of grace. It is there in Jeremy Taylor, but you must look hard for it. Around the same time in the Arminianism of Archbishop Laud there was a full-scale moralism being taught that undercut the doctrine of grace of the Reformation. It led at least some Anglicans into a kind of works righteousness. There is a book by C. F. Allison called *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* that traces this move from a true understanding of the doctrine of grace to a distorted presentation of it.

One question that may be asked is how free the worship in the Church of England was. Eventually there arose three parties. One was the "High Church," which is sometimes described as the Anglo-Catholic church. It had its highest point in the Tractarian Movement in Oxford, with John Henry Newman who eventually became a Roman Catholic. The High Church movement still continues and has great influence. The "Low Church" is usually viewed as the Evangelical wing of the Church of England.

There is also the “Broad Church,” which is rather Latitudinarian in its theology. The High Church and the Low Church movements both stand for something. Someone has described the Broad Church as simply “the Tory party at prayer.”

In today’s Anglican community, there is some flexibility. The *Book of Common Prayer* still binds the church together, but there are different forms of it. There are different ways in which it can be used. So there is some flexibility, though not as much as we find in the Presbyterian Church, which simply has a directory for the minister in designing the service. Presbyterians do not have an equivalent of the *Book of Common Prayer*. We have a directory, which has both its advantages and disadvantages.

In worldwide Anglicanism today there is much turmoil. There are many movements and organizations that are trying to recover some of the traditional Anglican emphases. Some people want to go back to the earlier version of the *Book of Common Prayer*, from before 1929, which is the more historic version. Others want to stress more the return to theological Orthodoxy. There are numerous renewal movements within Anglicanism, particularly in America. A new one recently started that believes that the other renewal movements have not done enough.

The *Book of Common Prayer* has been very significant for Episcopalians, even in its very words and language. There have been battles and divisions over those issues. One such battle occurred over the expression “miserable offenders.” If you use the old *Book of Common Prayer*, you will have to pray that you are a “miserable offender.” Some modern Anglicans do not want to be that miserable, so there has been a revision.

I have tried to present this topic, as I do with each part of the course, in a positive way. I must admit that I am very attracted to people like Herbert and Donne. This whole tradition is one that I respond to, including the *Book of Common Prayer*. I am a Presbyterian, as you will find out in the next lesson and when I talk about Scotland. Yet I do not believe that I need to say that all of this is bad. Much of it is good. In some ways, this emphasis on liturgy, worship, and beauty is something from which we can learn.

One thing you might wonder about is what the average churchgoer in England was thinking while all of these things were taking place. With all the shifts back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism, sometimes people just went along with whatever was going on. They knew it was not a good idea to question their leaders. Some people did question what was going on, and they died as a result or they had to flee. By the time of Elizabeth, the churches were certainly Protestant. Catholics who were still in England were underground. The Jesuits were trying to keep something alive there. Elizabeth and her advisors were always worried that there would be a Catholic uprising. Occasionally there were uprisings, such as the gunpowder plot to blow up Parliament. That was undoubtedly a Jesuit, or at least Catholic, movement that failed.

Once the church was Protestant, people still went. Yet within the development of this history, some churches in certain parts of England went more in the Anglican direction. Some others went more in the direction of Arminianism. Other congregations had Puritan ministers. They were all within the Church of England, so there were not multiple denominations, but there were multiple parties within the one church. I visited the parish church in Howarth in Yorkshire in England. That was where Charlotte and Emily Bronte worshiped. Their father was a rector of that church. It was also the church of William Grimshaw, the great evangelical leader of the evangelical revival period. It was interesting to look at the list of rectors of that church, which went back at least to the Reformation. At a certain place in that list, there were three or four names left out with the word “Puritans” written in. After the Restoration, those

names were erased from the list and the Anglican tradition was maintained. In the early part of the seventeenth century, that became more of an issue. People began to battle over the issue of Anglicans versus Puritans, just as the earlier Christians battled over Catholics versus Protestants. That was what the English civil war was about, Puritans versus Anglicans.

J. I. Packer has said that Episcopal Church government is a matter of expediency. I am glad an Anglican said that. Dr. Packer may be a Presbyterian in Anglican clothes. This idea reflects Hooker's influence. Hooker said not to forget the Scripture. He began his book with a tribute to John Calvin in which he said John Calvin was the wisest man in the French church. He also said, however, that John Calvin was a man, and truth is truth. He was giving a warning that he was not going to follow Calvin as closely as some others would. We can agree with his statement. Yet as Hooker developed his ideas, while wanting to keep Scripture foundational, tradition and reason began to fill an important role in his thinking. The Anglican way of developing polity was to put those things together. It is expedient to have bishops so things can get done. It works more smoothly than a general assembly. Presbyterians work from another foundation, and we at least like to think that reason does not play much of a role in our decisions. We can admit that it may not be expedient to do things the way we do them, but we like to think they are biblical. Of course, Baptists like to think that too, and everybody does. I believe that Anglicans would not be too upset to hear Packer say that decisions are made based on expediency. They would say that God gave us our common sense and wit, so we should use them.

I will end this lesson with a quotation and a prayer from George Herbert. It is one that we can certainly join in praying: *“Lord, You have given so much to us. Give one more thing: a grateful heart.”* Amen.