

# Authentic Anglicanism

(A report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission)

(This report was endorsed by the Standing Committee on 10 February 2025 and approved for publication on the website.)

## 1. Reference

On 27 June 2022 the Standing Committee raised concerns regarding Archbishop Philip Aspinall's Presidential Address to the Brisbane Synod delivered on 25 June 2022, particularly those comments which suggest the inadequacy or insufficiency of God's written word in the light of changed circumstances in the twenty-first century and secondly those directed against the Diocese of Sydney and resolved as follows.

Standing Committee –

- (a) offers prayerful support to the Archbishop of Sydney in any response he makes to the Archbishop of Brisbane in response to the Presidential Address,
- (b) requests the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission to produce a report on Authentic Anglicanism, noting in particular –
  - (i) its confessional character with special relation to the 39 Articles, the theology of the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal, and the Book of Homilies,
  - (ii) the supreme and final authority of the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the written word of the living God,
  - (iii) the contingent and relative authority of all ecclesiastical pronouncements and institutions, and
  - (iv) the role of bishops as guardians of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and
- (c) confirms its support of those parishes and ministries in the Brisbane Diocese who are distressed by the words and actions of Archbishop Aspinall.

## 2. Methodological issues

2.1 'Anglicanism' is the label attached to a form of Christian corporate life that traces its theological convictions and ecclesiastical practice to the New Testament, with an especially formative moment of clarification and development at the time of the English Reformation. Its congregations are particular instantiations of the one holy catholic and apostolic church confessed in the ecumenical creeds, yet they share distinctives that mark them out from other communions and denominations.

2.2 These distinctives could be defined and described in a number of ways, of which two are most common: a phenomenological approach and a theological approach (Paul Avis). A phenomenological approach often begins by drawing attention to the diversity of practice

that has emerged over the past 500 years, despite numerous Acts of Uniformity. It then proceeds to infer from this a distinctive 'ethos' of Anglicanism that claims for itself apostolicity, catholicity, comprehensiveness, and so on. The advantage of this approach lies in its attention to history and the way canon law has or has not shaped the practices of the church. In other words, it emphasises description. Its disadvantage lies in the way it sidesteps the question of what Anglican identity *should* be on the basis of its foundational documents. In other words, it ignores what is normative.

- 2.3 A theological approach, in contrast, draws attention to the common convictions that shape the doctrine and practice of Anglican churches and which have proven to be stable markers of Anglican identity. These arise from Scripture and are given formal expression in *The Articles of Religion* (1571), the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) and the *Ordinal* (1662), together known as 'the formularies'. The theology contained in these documents provides a summary of an Anglican reading of Scripture and its application to Christian corporate life. The advantage of this approach is the way it gives due weight to these foundational documents of Anglicanism and the intention of those who wrote them as part of their attempt to reform England. Its disadvantage lies in its potential to be doctrinaire and to disregard the historical complexities of application.
- 2.4 This report will take a theological approach, convinced that it has always been the case that Anglican practice ought to be explained by Anglican doctrine. Put differently, the confessional aspects of Anglicanism are (or at least should be) the best explanation of its practice and the way it orders ministry. In order to avoid the disadvantages mentioned above, and to prevent a presentation of Anglicanism that is merely a projection of our own preferences on to a larger canvas, this theological approach is anchored in the formularies, recognising that the formularies themselves allow for a flexibility to respond to the changing context of the church in its ministry and mission. Whatever its accidental features may be, the Anglican Church can be authentic only on the basis of its confessions of faith as they are expressed in the formularies. Perhaps the three most distinctive elements of authentic Anglicanism are its confessional, liturgical, and episcopal character. However, before turning to these, it will be important to consider the place of Scripture in authentic Anglicanism.

### 3. The place of Scripture in authentic Anglicanism

- 3.1 Every legitimate form of church gives a central role to engagement with the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. In doing so Anglicanism can hardly claim to be distinctive. The reading and exposition of Scripture has been part of Christian gatherings since the time of the apostles, just as the reading and reflection upon the Hebrew Scriptures was a central part of synagogue gatherings before the time of Jesus.
- 3.2 However, the English reformers recognised a critical role for sustained engagement with the Scriptures as a key strategy for the reformation of the English Realm. In one of the prefaces he wrote for the Book of Common Prayer, Archbishop Cranmer, the chief architect of reformation Anglicanism, presented this as a return to 'the godly and decent order of the ancient Fathers':

'For they so ordered the matter, that the whole Bible, (or the greatest part thereof) should be read over once every year; intending thereby, that the

Clergy, and especially such as were Ministers in the congregation, 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 to confute them that were adversaries of the truth; and further, that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be the more inflamed with the love of his true religion.' ('Concerning the Service of the Church').

- 3.3 Cranmer was convinced that the word of God written (Article 20) is powerful and that the Spirit is able to transform lives as he writes God's word on human hearts. Only doctrine that can be proved by Scripture is to be believed as 'an article of the Faith' (Articles 6, 20). Nevertheless, he did not restrict those things done within church to only those things that could be proved by Scripture. Rather, he retained 'ceremonies' from the pre-Reformation church as much because they promoted 'a decent order in the Church, (for the which they were first devised) as because they pertain to edification, whereunto all things done in the Church (as the Apostle teacheth) ought to be referred' ('Of Ceremonies, Why some be Abolished, and some Retained'). In other words, from the beginning Anglicans upheld the normative principle — what is not forbidden in Scripture is permitted — rather than the regulative principle — only what is commanded in Scripture is permitted.
- 3.4 In line with this new and somewhat distinctive emphasis on Scripture as the means of national reform, access to the Bible in the vernacular was championed. When the Book of Common Prayer was presented, its shape was determined by and its language saturated with the words of Scripture. This even found expression in Elizabethan church architecture, which placed neither an altar nor a pulpit in the most prominent place, but rather made the focal point the Bible on a lectern.

#### 4. Authentic Anglicanism has a confessional character

- 4.1 To speak of Anglican identity as 'confessional' is not merely to make a statement about its contingent historical foundations. It is to align that identity with a set of normative doctrinal commitments. The content and structure of *The Articles of Religion* give formal expression to these normative commitments.
- 4.2 First, the Articles uphold the supreme authority of Holy Scripture as 'the pure Word of God' and the *norming norm* of Anglican identity (Article 6). The unique and irreplaceable foundation of Scripture ensures that all doctrinal statements made by the church, including the Articles themselves, are always derivative and subordinate in character (Article 8). Their validity and normative force only arise from their consistency with the totality of biblical teaching (Articles 20, 21). In other words, the normative character of the Articles is itself *normed* by Scripture.
- 4.3 However, to refer to Scripture and its teaching as the foundational authority for Anglican identity, while indisputable, does not capture the totality of that confessional identity. Besides attesting to the final rule of Scripture, the Articles provide an authoritative doctrinal framework that assists the reading of Scripture. They make clear the way Anglicans read Scripture, not least in their insistence that no part of Scripture is to be read in a way that contradicts another (Article 20). In this the Anglican approach to Scripture finds its origin in,

and shares much in common with other early confessional documents of the European Reformation, both Lutheran and Reformed.

- 4.4 In addition to their commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture, the Protestant character of the Articles is evident in their affirmation of the doctrinal authority of the Ancient Creeds (Articles 1–5, 8), the depraved condition of humanity, sovereign election to salvation in Christ, the necessity of justification by faith in the finished work of Christ alone (Articles 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 31), the two dominical sacraments of ‘Baptism and the Supper of the Lord’ — especially the baptism of children (Articles 25–28), and the broad contours of a magisterial ecclesial settlement (Articles 36–39). It is made even more clear by their rejection of key elements of distinctively Roman Catholic piety and doctrine, especially concerning the Mass, works of supererogation, purgatory, the invocation of the saints, and the authority of church tradition (Articles 7–9, 19, 20, 22, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34).
- 4.5 While the Articles exhibit a certain minimalism when placed alongside some other Reformed Confessions, their Reformed character (in distinction from being merely Lutheran) is unmistakable and unambiguous. The doctrinal *Homilies* enlarge upon key Reformed doctrines. The notebooks of the key drafters of the Articles, especially those of Thomas Cranmer, make clear their Reformed convictions. It is not at all surprising that within ten years of the *Articles* being promulgated (1571), works were published that demonstrated the Reformed character of the Articles and so of Anglican identity (e.g., Thomas Rogers, *A Harmony of the Confessions of Faith of the Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, 1581). Correspondence between the English reformers and Reformed theologians on the Continent, such as Calvin, Bucer, Vermigli and especially Bullinger, further establishes that the foundational documents of Anglicanism were meant to embody Reformed theology. Consequently, any interpretation of the Articles that contradicts their essentially Reformed character is a clear violation of their historical intention.
- 4.6 The purpose of the Articles was to provide binding guidance regarding the Anglican Church’s fidelity to Scriptural orthodoxy. This is underscored by the longstanding and widespread requirement of *ex animo* (from the heart) clerical subscription to the Articles extending back through the *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical* (1604) to *The Subscription Act* (1571). The 1604 Canons, mostly in place in Australia until the end of the twentieth century, even warned of excommunication for any laity who could not assent to the Articles in good conscience. The principle of clerical subscription to the Articles remains enshrined in contemporary versions of the Ordinal, and is implied in the *Canon Concerning Holy Orders* (2004) of the Anglican Church of Australia. So, once again, any interpretation of the Articles that treats them as a merely contingent historical statement is inconsistent with their historical intention.
- 4.7 It is undeniably true that the Articles have been received and interpreted by Anglicans in ways that do not neatly align with their Reformed heritage. It is also true that their original historical setting does not neatly align with the global context of Anglican identity today. Contextualising these doctrinal commitments in a way that is sensitive to the breadth of cultures represented in this global setting is a pressing need (e.g., concerning the character and expression of the church’s establishment in relation to the state). However, respecting and preserving their enduring Reformed character remains paramount.

## 5. Authentic Anglicanism has a liturgical disposition

- 5.1 The first major formulary of the English Reformation was the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*. Authorised and issued in 1549, it replaced the various pre-Reformational service books used in the Realm. It was written entirely in English, and the reformation principles of justification only by faith and the sufficiency of the Scriptures for salvation shaped the services significantly. Nevertheless, there were some problematic ambiguities and residual Roman features within the liturgy which required further revision. As a result, a second and more definitively reformed *BCP* was produced in 1552. An only very slightly modified version of this book was republished and authorised after the restoration of the monarchy in England (1662). It is this 1662 version of the Book of Common Prayer that has had a global influence and is still regarded in many places, including in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, as ‘the authorised standard of worship’.
- 5.2 The major principles that shaped the ‘Publick Liturgy’ of the *BCP* were explicitly outlined in its prefaces. These were (1) the *preservation* of the best liturgical practice of the previous fifteen centuries; (2) a *simplification* of the many and varied books and devices needed to conduct public worship; (3) *purification* through the removal of unbiblical aspects of Roman Catholicism; (4) *intelligibility* of the service through the use of understandable language which enables participation and edification; and (5) *uniformity* of worship across the thousands of parishes in order to strengthen unity between parishioners and throughout the national church. These remain relevant and desirable principles which inform authentic Anglican liturgical variations or revisions today.
- 5.3 Some of the major liturgical features of authentic Anglicanism include:
- Services guided by the public reading of Holy Scripture. The ‘continual course of the reading of the Scripture’ is the Cranmerian principle which implies that the lectionary is the backbone of regular worship. Cranmer’s lectionary took the congregation through the whole of the Bible in a year, the New Testament twice, and the Psalms once a month. These readings may but are not necessarily tied to the topic or text of the sermon when there is one, but they do direct and supply much of the substance of church services.
  - Services which regularly use ancient and biblically-based elements of corporate worship for the edification of the congregation. Such elements include declaring together one of the creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, or Athanasian), corporate confession and a general ministerial absolution of sin based on the promises of the gospel, the singing or saying of hymns of praise, and the seasonal collects and intercessory prayers.
  - Services which are tied to the pattern of Jesus’ earthly life. Though challenged by some on the basis of texts such as Galatians 4:8–11, the Anglican liturgies retained the yearly, weekly, and daily rhythm of the church calendar (especially focused on Easter and those which, from Advent to Trinity, provided an opportunity to rehearse the entire course of Jesus’ life).
  - Services which value both word and sacrament. The preaching of the pure word of God and the due administration of the sacraments according to Christ’s ordinance are

the confessional marks of the Church (Art. 19). Neither the preaching of sermons, nor the celebration of sacraments are to be seen as appendages to the ordinary liturgical diet of authentic Anglicanism. This is because they are gifts of God's grace, given to grow, mature, and build his church.

- 5.4 There is a rich pastoral dimension to Anglican liturgical expression. The *BCP* itself includes services for the Solemnization of Matrimony, Public and Private Baptism, Visitation of the Sick, and the Burial of the Dead. A Catechism is provided for the spiritual strengthening of the young, and – though less used in modern contexts – the 'Churching of Women' service demonstrates deep care for the challenges related to childbirth. Moreover, the *BCP*'s prayers show sensitivity to both the problem of sin ('We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table') and the solution of salvation ('But you are the same Lord, whose nature of always to have mercy'). Altogether, these liturgical words evince much pastoral wisdom from the past for the present.
- 5.5 While the *BCP* itself is no longer used in many contemporary churches, its doctrine and principles continue significantly to shape authentic Anglican corporate worship. The ordered and principled shape of what we do when we are gathered by the Spirit to hear God's word, to respond to that word in prayer and praise, and 'to stir up one another love and good works' does need to be expressed in an appropriate contemporary idiom. Cranmer himself envisaged that revision to the *BCP* would continue, guided by the principles of preservation, simplification, purification, intelligibility and uniformity. Above all, an authentically Anglican approach to liturgy is undergirded by an important Scriptural interconnectedness in both form and substance. This requires careful thought and preparation, paying due attention not only to the liturgical features mentioned above, but also to the intention lying behind them. Authentic Anglican liturgy is not chaotic but draws on this great heritage in order to promote the edification of God's people (1 Corinthians 14:26), and the manifestation of the wisdom of God in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10).

## 6. Authentic Anglicanism has an episcopal Government

- 6.1 Finally, a confessionally Anglican identity is distinctively episcopal, with a commitment to the three-fold order of Christian ministry: Bishops, Priests (Presbyters), and Deacons (Article 36). This order is reflected in the *BCP* and affirmed in the *Ordinal*, the third traditional formulary of Anglicanism. It is also embedded in section 3 of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia.
- 6.2 Why did the English reformers retain this threefold order when others on the Continent had dispensed with it? The answer lies in the principles of reformation we have already identified in Cranmer's preface to the *BCP*. One of these was only to abolish ceremonies that were a perversion of Christianity and to retain other traditional aspects of church experience. In addition, to retain those forms and practices that were not inimical to the gospel reinforced the conviction of the Reformers that they were not creating a new church but calling a compromised church back to its true heritage. The emergence of Anglicanism was an exercise in Reformation not reconstruction.
- 6.3 Cranmer believed that episcopacy ought to be retained as it was compatible with the teaching of the Bible and it had been a consistent feature of ecclesiastical order 'from the

Apostles' time'. Yet Cranmer did not believe that bishops are essential to constitute the church. Rather, they are provided for the welfare of the church.

- 6.4 The consecration service constructed by Cranmer emphasises the upholding and teaching of Holy Scriptures as central to episcopal ministry. Those being consecrated are asked if they are persuaded of the sufficiency of the Scriptures for everything required for salvation. They are asked if they are determined to use the Scriptures to instruct the people in what is essential for salvation and not teach anything as necessary which is not contained in the Bible. Thirdly, they are asked to commit themselves to the study of the Bible so they may uphold what is true and drive away false teaching.
- 6.5 This emphasis on the role of an Anglican bishop as a guardian of the faith is significant in grounding the spiritual authority associated with the role of the bishop. It is an authority that is derivative from the authority of God's word and its legitimacy is forfeited when the bishop begins to teach or condone things contrary to the Bible.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1 This report has endeavoured to give a theological account of authentic Anglicanism that is grounded in its foundational documents: *The Book of Common Prayer*, *The Ordinal*, and *The Articles of Religion*. This approach has been taken because of a fundamental conviction that doctrine should determine practice rather than practice dictate doctrine. What we are committed to believe as Anglicans is given to us in the formularies and those beliefs fleshed out in practice lie at the heart of what it means to be Anglican. However, through the centuries other Anglican 'identities' have been fabricated that are grounded quite differently.
- 7.2 Some have attempted to characterise Anglicanism as a middle way (*via media*) between Catholicism and Protestantism, or more specifically between Rome and Geneva. However, this way of conceiving of Anglican identity is fatally flawed. In the first place, the term is not explicitly used by the first English reformers. It finds no expression in the Articles of Religion, which repudiate Roman doctrine and that of the Anabaptists while affirming mainstream Reformed doctrines, as noted above. The idea of a *via media* does not appear even in Richard Hooker, to whom it is regularly attributed. Even Archbishop Matthew Parker's use of the expression 'golden mean' was not about a doctrinal mid-point between Catholicism and Protestantism. The *via media* idea emerges, rather, in the context of the Oxford Movement as part of a call for a more 'Catholic' form of Anglicanism. John Henry Newman manufactured this conception in Tracts 38 and 41 of his *Tracts for the Times*, published in 1834. Newman came to realise any attempt to reconcile Anglican doctrine and that Roman Catholicism was futile, and so he converted to Roman Catholicism (1845), and was eventually made a Cardinal (1879).
- 7.3 From at least the time of Resolution 49 of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, it has been common to speak of a defining characteristic of Anglicanism as 'communion with the See of Canterbury'. The expression had been in use for century earlier by that time, but it was not until the second half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century that it was elevated to the measure of membership of the Anglican communion and so of Anglican identity. Yet, as Andrew Atherstone makes clear, this involves the misstep of taking an expression originally meant to counter 'the universalizing claims of the Church of Rome' and

therefore applied externally, and using it to distinguish between those claiming to be Anglican, and so applying it internally. To define being Anglican by communion with the See of Canterbury also raises a number of very difficult questions, such as what to do when the See of Canterbury is occupied by someone who has abandoned the teaching of Scripture at one point or another.

- 7.4 A third approach to defining Anglicanism adopted by some in recent years has been to emphasise toleration of doctrinal diversity as characteristic of Anglicanism and so to valorise its comprehensiveness. This view was promoted strongly by Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice in the nineteenth century and Archbishops Runcie and Carey in the twentieth. Perhaps none has been more scathing of this conception than Professor (later Bishop) Stephen Sykes, who wrote of how ‘it has served as an open invitation to intellectual laziness and self-deception’ and ‘has led to an ultimately illusory self-projection as a Church without any specific doctrinal or confessional position’ (*The Integrity of Anglicanism*, 19).
- 7.5 None of these alternatives are satisfactory as a definition of authentic Anglicanism, even if they provide descriptions of perspectives valued by many contemporary Anglicans. Anglicanism that is true to its heritage is not indifferent when it comes to theology. It has a clearly confessional character which is not simply a matter of doctrinal assent but also determines church practice and even the shape of church government: confessional, liturgical and episcopal.

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## Recommended Reading:

Andrew Atherstone, 'Communion with the See of Canterbury?' *The Global Anglican* 138/1 (2024): 13–25.

Andrew Atherstone, 'The Incoherence of the Anglican Communion', *Churchman* 118/3 (2004): 235–255.

James I. Packer, *A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensive-ness* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1981).

James I. Packer, 'Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Width: Comprehensiveness in the Church of England', in Melvin Tinker (ed.), *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1995), 111–123.

James I. Packer, 'Unity and Truth: the Anglican Agony', in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *Grace and Truth in the Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 235–251.