

Anglican Essentials and The Episcopal Church

Written by Calvin Fox

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A true Church is a group of people who confess faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and regularly assemble in His Name to worship God and to hear the Gospel preached and the Scripture expounded. They are Baptized and observe the Lord's Supper. This is a minimalist definition- the basic Essentials of a Church.

In a more complete definition, a Church would also have a 3-fold ordained Ministry (Bishop, Priest, Deacon) in historic continuity with the ancient Church, its Doctrine would be Apostolic and Creedal, its Worship Liturgical and its Ordinances (Baptism and Lord's Supper) sacramental. In a word, such a Church would be Anglican.

By these standards, the current Leadership is endangering of The Episcopal Church (TEC) as a true Church. This is because that Leadership, in many of its pronouncements and decisions, has departed from The Faith. Officially the Church still has all the essentials, but the Leaders are not faithful to the Apostolic Creeds and Reformation Doctrine. The evidence includes not only the actions and resolutions of National Conventions and Councils of Bishops, but also the actions and pronouncements of local Dioceses, specific Bishops, including the current Presiding Bishop, the writings and statements of many Theologians in the Church and local parish Priests.

Ignoring the Church's Historical Documents, the current 1978 BCP and Catechism (and Proposed Alternate Services) documents the shift away from its roots. The issue of Homosexuality is in the spot light and gets the media and popular attention, but that is not the major problem, contrary to what most people, in and out of the Church, seem to believe. Some Conservatives recognize this mistake and have tried to shift the focus, but very unsuccessfully, to the authority of Scripture. The major problem is actually not the authority of Scripture per se. The major problem is hermeneutics- how that Scripture is approached, interpreted or applied.

The latter is determined, we hear repeatedly, by the whole Church, particularly at the highest administrative levels and in Convention. The mantra is "Let us listen to what the Spirit is telling us." Repeatedly we are told, "We will determine both the meaning of the Scripture and what the Spirit is trying to tell us, in dialogue within the Church."

But the Church, in turn, is captivated by the current post modern, theological, sociological and psychological fashions of our times. The prevailing view is that there are no theological or moral absolutes and meaning is all socially constructed. Together, it is said, in our multi-cultural, pluralistic Age in which we want to be relevant, we will construct the truths that will be most helpful to us as a Church in our time. How the Church hears what the Spirit speaks is determined most by these factors. In this context, the Spirit, as well as Scripture, is seriously misunderstood.

I am concerned with this state of affairs. It has led to an inevitable denial of the Trinitarian Faith and historic Catholic and Reformation (Biblical) Doctrines by many of our Church Bishops and the current Presiding Bishop (who are canonically responsible for safe-guarding that ancient Faith). TEC is still officially a Church in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the world wide Anglican Communion. However, with the prevalence, among the Clergy at all levels, of concepts associated with Process Theology and Open Theism and the resurgence of the Social Gospel, TEC de facto has gone beyond the pale of Classic Anglicanism. It no longer continues in the Teaching of the Apostles. The debates about gender specific language and sexuality derive from this deeper, more fundamental theological captivity to our Times.

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What to do? First, I take comfort and hope that the Church, in and of England, belongs to Christ and that it has been around for almost 2000 years. He has preserved it through all kinds of turmoil and danger. We must keep this large and long perspective. Second, we must acknowledge the current reality of the Church as we know it today. Apart from another Reformation Movement, it is not about to change! Third, make a decision: A particular Diocese, Bishop, Priest, Parish or member may decide to remain in The Episcopal Church and try to be a remnant faithful to our Anglican Heritage, witnessing and working within this apostate organization. Or one may leave for some other "in-communion" Anglican Home and continue in the world-wide Church there.

I thank God for the many local Priests and Parishes (and some Bishops and Dioceses) of the Church who are choosing to remain within TEC and struggle to be truly Anglican and faithful to that Heritage. I am thankful for the steadfast witness of The School of Ministry (TESM). I have been blessed by many Reformed or conservative Anglican Clergy and Theologians and Scholars (mostly British) over the years and some are personal friends. All of these factors attract and hold me in the Church.

However, as important as being Anglican is to me, it is not essential to my Christian life. The preaching of the Trinitarian Faith and the teaching of historic Catholic and Reformation (Biblical) Doctrines are!