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ANGLICAN  
CHURCH

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# The Anglican Tradition

## Three Streams, One River

The Rev. Dr. Les Fairfield

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The genius of Anglicanism is that for five hundred years it has held in creative tension three different strands of Biblical Christianity. Those three streams are the Protestant, the Pentecostal/Holiness and the AngloCatholic movements.

When the Church of England separated from Rome in 1534, its leader was not a world-class theologian like Martin Luther or John Calvin. Its earthly head was a canny monarch named Henry Tudor, the Eighth of that name. Henry was a monster. He was cruel, vain, foolish and self-indulgent (remember his six wives). He cut England off from Rome not for theological reasons, but because he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn and to seize the English Church's extensive lands. Henry had Protestant advisers like his Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer. But Henry was in charge.

If Henry founded the Church of England for ignoble reasons, God meant it for good. The Church of England had no single dominant theologian. Cranmer was a competent thinker and a composer of exquisite prose—see his magnificent Prayer Book—but he was not a Luther. This fact meant that over the next five hundred years, Anglicanism was free to extrapolate in three directions from the basic Biblical Christianity that Cranmer had affirmed.

Let me illustrate each of the three Anglican streams with a brief story.

## **The Protestant Stream**

Anne Askew was the daughter of a country squire in Lincolnshire. Born about 1520, she somehow learned to read. And after William Tyndale published his English version of the New Testament in 1525, Anne obtained a copy. It changed her life. She read in her mother tongue that Jesus Christ had died for her, had risen again and given the Church the great commission to tell everyone of God's love. The English Church had become so unfaithful to that commission that Anne concluded that she should take it up herself. Transgressing all the social customs of the day, Anne began to ride around the Lincolnshire countryside, stopping at peasant hovels and reading to them from the English New Testament. The people began to call her "the fair gospeller."

Anne's husband was furious with her. He beat her brutally. Seeking some protection from his physical violence, Anne went to the Court of Chancery in London to seek an annulment to her marriage. She had no wish to marry another. Rather, she took up her "gospelling" among the shacks of the fishermen who lived on the muddy banks of the Thames River. She also joined a Bible study led by Henry's wife number six, Queen Catherine Parr. The King's conservative Catholic enemy, his Lord Chancellor Thomas Wriothesley, had Anne Askew seized and tortured in the Tower of London, hoping that she would incriminate the Queen in some way. Anne remained mute on the rack. So Wriothesley and his allies burned her at the stake in 1546.

Anne was a minor player in the early English Reformation. But her Biblical faith and her evangelistic courage typified the Protestant strand in Anglicanism, that would include such later heroes as the preacher George Whitefield of the “Great Awakening” in America, William Wilberforce of the campaign against slavery in the British Empire, and the martyrs of Uganda in the 1880s. Today the Protestant tradition in Anglicanism numbers tens of millions of Christians, chiefly in Uganda and Nigeria.

## **The Pentecostal/Holiness Stream**

Two centuries after Anne Askew’s martyrdom, the Church of England had fallen into idleness and spiritual ignorance. By the 1740s a sub-Christian religion called Deism had persuaded the English aristocracy that God was infinitely distant, and the universe operated like clockwork with no divine intervention at all. This religion satisfied the top 3% of the population, cozy in their brick mansions and with dinner tables loaded with tasty food and cellars full of port. Deism had nothing to say to the bottom 50% of the population, freezing and starving in their mud-and-wattle hovels.

On a rainy Sunday morning in 1740, a small man in a black cloak and broad-brimmed hat stood atop a mound of bare earth and rock in a strip-mine near the great mercantile port city of Bristol. All around the mound stretched a lunar landscape in every direction. In this primitive coal mine, the surface of the earth had been violated and heaps of rock were leaching out green and yellow minerals when it rained (as it did most days). Some 20,000 coal miners and their wretched families lived in this ugly wilderness. They were filthy, starving, frequently drunk on cheap gin, and largely hopeless. The Deist English aristocrats had no interest in their physical squalor or in their spiritual agony.

But this Sunday the Rev. John Wesley stood on a mound of rubble in the strip-mine. In a clear voice that is audible for a hundred yards around, Wesley said that God loves the poor intensely. Quoting from Isaiah 61:1 Wesley told how the Spirit of the Lord rested on Jesus Christ, anointing him to preach good news to the poor. More than five thousand miners and their wives and children were listening. Slowly by twos and threes, then by dozens and soon by scores, these wretched miners sank to their knees in the mud, tears making gutters down their grimy faces. For the first time in their entire lives they were hearing the good news that God loved them.

Wesley formed his converts into “classes” of a dozen each, meeting weekly in Bristol for instruction in the faith, and for mutual encouragement and accountability. Soon Wesley noticed that the Holy Spirit had by no means finished the work of conversion in these transformed lives. Continuing works

of the Spirit enabled men and women to give up gin, to cease their physical abuse of one another, to acquire habits of thrift and self-care, and above all to hope in the God who was making their lives holy.

The “Methodist” movement spread to America in the 1760s, and after the War of Independence it hived off as a distinct denomination (as it later did in England). The 19th century summertime “camp meetings” spread the work of the Spirit far and wide among the small towns of the growing Midwest. By 1900 more than twenty “Pentecostal” denominations had emerged, growing out of the Wesleyan tradition. And in the 1960s the “Baptism in the Spirit” came back into the Anglican Church. The Rev. Dennis Bennett in America and the Rev. Michael Harper in England spearheaded the “Charismatic Revival” that spread to all the mainline churches. By the 21st century the Anglican Holiness/Pentecostal movement had produced the famous evangelistic Alpha Course that has spread around the world. Firmly grounded in the Bible like the Protestant tradition, the Pentecostal movement emphasizes the good news that the Holy Spirit is still working wonders today. And all God’s people, women and men alike, are eligible for all the gifts that the Spirit bestows.

## **The AngloCatholic Stream**

Both the Protestant and the Holiness/Pentecostal streams have fueled the evangelistic outreach of the Anglican tradition. But what about the centripetal force of the Gospel as well, the love of God that draws us together in worship and fellowship and community? Here the AngloCatholic stream has profoundly enriched the Anglican tradition.

In the 1830s the Industrial Revolution was altering the face of England more profoundly than any force had done since the invention of settled agriculture thousands of years before. New factories were exploiting the former peasant population of England, as landlords drove them off their farms and they fled to the huge new cities for work. Families of these wage-slaves lived in crowded tenement houses, as many as twelve to a room, with no sanitary facilities and no clean water. Twelve of fourteen hours a day they labored in cotton mills and other factories. These “dark, satanic mills” belched black clouds of smoke that covered the cities with toxic grit. The new urban landscape was hideously ugly.

A young Cambridge undergraduate named John Mason Neale took a holiday from his studies in 1838, riding on horseback around the East Anglean countryside. He was a tall, angular youth, nearsighted, tousled and careless of his dress. He was terminally shy and usually in ill health. This unlikely youth was to transform the decayed worship of the Church of England, and to return the Anglican tradition to the beauty of holiness.

Everywhere he rode in Cambridgeshire, Neale saw parish churches untended and decrepit. Medieval parish churches had once been colorful and lovely, their gothic architecture highlighting the elaborate altars at the east end of the buildings. With the Reformation and its emphasis on the Word, however, altars had been dismantled and the chancels boarded up and used for storage. For three hundred years, English church interiors had been plain and whitewashed, the prominent pulpit underscoring the primacy of preaching. Often the plain Communion Table was small and obscure, sometimes even used as a coat-rack. John Mason Neale grieved at the decay of beauty in Anglican worship. How could the industrial working class imagine Heaven, if their erstwhile rural churches were decrepit, and the relatively few urban churches no better?

Neale had learned from the Oxford Movement, a group of scholars like John Keble and John Henry Newman in the rival university town a few years earlier. The Oxford reformers had recalled the Church of England to its historic roots in Early Christianity. They believed that political leaders like William Wilberforce had weakened the Church in their efforts to reform society. They had paid scant attention to the worship and the community life at the heart of the Church's identity. Keble and Newman insisted that the Church of England was a divine institution, the Body of Christ, and accountable to its Head through the tradition of bishops, and not to an increasingly secular Parliament. The Oxford leaders called the Church of England back to its primary task, namely to the worship of Almighty God and particularly to the sacraments that Our Lord had commanded.

John Mason Neale absorbed the ideas of the Oxford Movement, and took them a step farther. How to embody this new primacy of worship? Neale believed that the revival of gothic architecture and medieval ceremony would draw the masses back into the churches, and shed the light of heavenly beauty into their grimy and squalid lives. Neale founded a journal called *The Ecclesiologist* that aimed to restore ancient principles of church architecture and the Christian piety that had inspired it. Over the next thirty years the program of *The Ecclesiologist* transformed the worship of the English Church and its daughters throughout the expanding British Empire.

Light, color and symbolism beautified the worship of the new AngloCatholic movement. Stained-glass windows were repaired. Chancels opened up to restore the altars to their visual primacy in the building. Crosses, candles, and liturgical colors reappeared in all their glory. Colored stoles and chasubles came out of the clothes-presses where they had lain in the sacristies. Bishops once again donned copes and mitres. All this outward symbolism reminded Anglicans that their God is high and lifted up, majestic and worthy of all

worship. John Mason Neale reminded Anglicans that the Church is not only missional but also liturgical and sacramental.

### **Three Streams, One River**

Fellowship amongst the three historic strands of Anglicanism has often been difficult. Protestants initially abhorred the “ritualism” of the 19th century AngloCatholics. Both streams questioned the “enthusiasm” of the 20th century Pentecostal revival. But each stream has challenged the others in their weak points and their blind spots. The Protestant movement recalled the 16th century Church to the primacy of the Word—written, read, preached, inwardly digested. The 18th century Holiness movement reminded the Church of God’s love for the poor. The AngloCatholic movement re-grounded the Church in the sacramental life of worship. All three strands are grounded in the Gospel. Each one extrapolates the Gospel in a specific direction. No strand is dispensable. Other Christian bodies have often taken one strand to an extreme. By God’s grace the Anglican tradition has held the streams in creative tension. This miracle of unity is a treasure worth keeping.

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