

Understanding the Church of England

**A guide for those new to the church, including from
a Free Church background**

by

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Understanding the Church of England

When I first attended the Church of England as a student, I found some things quite difficult because I had been brought up in the Free Churches. Some born and bred Anglicans are blissfully unaware of such difficulties, but I remember them well. This leaflet is for those new or fairly new to the church. Below I comment on the issues I wrestled with. But it is important to start with the basis of faith of the Church of England.

What is the Church of England's attitude to Scripture?

According to the Canons (church law), the most important authority for what the Church of England believes is the Bible and nothing is to be believed which is clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture. However the Church takes very seriously the teaching of church leaders in the early centuries, if it is consistent with the Bible.

So Canon A5 states: The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal [Ordination Service].

Similarly, but in more historic language, Article 6 of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion states: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canoni-

cal Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.”

The Church's Authority is subject to the Bible. This is clearly taught by Article 20 of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion which states: “The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.”

So the Church of England is based on Scripture.

Is the Church of England sound on the Gospel?

Yes, absolutely. Read the following from the 39 Articles: *“We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort.”*

“They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.”

Of course, there are C of E churches where the gospel is not obvious in the sermons etc., but that is the case in various denominations.

But isn't the Church of England controlled by the state?

No, it isn't. Because the C of E was born in the context of rivalry between the monarch and the Pope, it was inevitable that there was an insistence that the church should be loyal to the monarch. After all, the church was a very powerful influence in the country. So today Anglican ministers have to swear allegiance to the Queen.

But the other side of the coin is that, at the Coronation, the Archbishop asks the monarch: "Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the *true profession of the Gospel?* Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the *Protestant Reformed Religion* established by law?

Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?" And the monarch replies: "All this I promise to do." [Emphasis mine].

In theory, on behalf of the Queen, the Prime Minister can appoint Bishops. But for many years the way this has been achieved is that the church recommends two names in order of priority (to give a theoretical choice) and the Prime Minister chooses the first name. So, in effect, the church chooses its own bishops.

What about Henry VIII?

It is sometimes said that the C of E was started by Henry VIII because he fell out with the Pope who wouldn't let him have a divorce. Actually, the story is far more complex than that. Henry's action was a convenient circumstance which facilitated the Reformation in England, which was already happening and affecting the Church. It should be remembered

that some of the early C of E leaders, like Archbishop Cranmer (who wrote the old prayer book) were burnt at the stake for their Protestant principles. The C of E is no mere political accident but was born in the spiritual revolution of the Reformation and the fires of persecution.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SERVICES

Isn't liturgy (the written service) a recipe for vain repetition?

Any written prayer could be said without thought or meaning. But all Christians use liturgy – even those who think they don't! Hymns and worship songs are a type of liturgy? They are written prayers, drafted by someone else. I very soon found that the liturgy was wonderfully rich, so long as it is said with meaning. So often more spontaneous forms of worship only include hymns/songs, reading(s), prayer by the preacher, sermon and Grace/Blessing. They omit a call to confession, a confession, absolution, creed, (sometimes intercessions) or in Communion various other aspects. I think the Anglican liturgy is wonderfully rich and comprehensive, and because it is biblical, it ensures continuity of sound doctrine.

Why do some churches use chants?

Chanting is simply an old form of singing, which may or may not be to our taste, but has no theological significance. It dates from the time of the monasteries.

Isn't the minister saying absolution a bit of medieval priestcraft?

No, because just as a preacher or counsellor might assure people they are forgiven by God, so the minister declares that God forgives the penitent. The Minister cannot forgive sins in place of God, but he can assure people that God forgives them.

Why do some churches turn East to say the creed?

In the early church baptisms took place at dawn on Easter Day. As candidates stood in the water they turned to the West (which was dark) and renounced the Devil and all his works. Then they turned to the East (sunrise) and affirmed what they believed. This custom has remained in some churches, though rather out of context.

Why does the creed refer to the catholic church?

I used to worry about this, having been brought in a very Protestant background. It is not referring to the Roman Catholic church but the universal church. Jesus only has one church. The word comes from the Greek *Katholikos* which means “universal.” So, in the creed, we say we believe in one, holy, universal church.

What about prayers for the dead?

Actually, our services don’t include prayer for the dead, except to remember them with thanksgiving. What is ruled out biblically is any idea that we can pray for those who have died to be saved if they weren’t believers when they died. However some Anglican churches pray for the dead but the prayers are not from our prayer book.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MINISTERS

Why are the ministers called priests?

This worried me too. The word “priest” actually comes from the Old English “preost” from the Late Latin “presbyter” (and probably the Vulgar Latin “prester”). The word “presbyter” or “presbuteros” in Greek means an elder. The Church of England does *not* teach that its ministers are sacrificing priests (offering the mass, see below) or essential mediators between God/Jesus and human beings.

Don't robes and processions make the clergy too important?

The Church of England officially states that robes are of no particular theological significance. They simply add to the dignity of the services. This goes for bishops' robes too. Some robes use the different colours of the church year (green, red, purple, white) and these are simply visual aids reminding everyone of what season we are in. By the way, I think the church year is one of our riches. We re-live the drama of Jesus' life every year from before his birth to his return in glory.

QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNION

How does the Church of England understand Communion?

The Church of England makes it very clear that:

It does *not* believe in transubstantiation - the change of the bread and wine literally into the body and blood of Christ (*"Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions."*)

It does believe that *"the Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is Faith."* In other words, Communion is not a mere visual aid but when we take it in faith the Holy Spirit blesses us and strengthens us. There is no change in the bread and wine, but there is a change in us. This is described as "feeding on Christ."

Unbelievers who might take the bread and wine do not spiritually and by faith) feed on Christ.

Communion does not repeat, re-enact or add to the sacrifice of Christ. The wording is quiet definite, and, in fact, rather strong: *“The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits.”*

So when the service refers to a “sacrifice of thanks and praise” it is referring to our offering worship to God, not to any offering of the bread and wine.

Why does the minister at the rail say: “The Body/Blood of Christ”?

This needs to be understood in the light of the above. He is only saying what Jesus said: “This is my body/blood.” The bread is still bread, the wine is still wine. But as we take it in faith we spiritually feed on Christ.

Why does the minister put his hand over the bread and wine or use the sign of the cross?

This is symbolism. He is setting apart/dedicating/consecrating the bread and wine for a holy purpose and it seems helpful to show this in symbolism. It's the same for using the sign of the cross in the absolution or blessing.

Why do some people bow towards the altar?

Again this is symbolism. It is actually reverencing the cross which is on or above the table. It is simply expressing thanks for the death of Christ in a symbolical way. As a matter of fact, the communion service does not use the term “altar.” Many Anglicans refer to the Holy Table. But use of the word “altar” is a long-standing popular tradition. It does not imply any sacrifice other than remembering the sacrifice of Christ.

Why do some churches stand for the Gospel reading?

It is simply a sign of respect for the very words of Christ. I don't have a problem with this but it doesn't seem a necessary or important tradition.

QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

The official teaching of the Church of England is that baptism (often traditionally called "christening" is a visible sign of the new birth and a visible seal or confirmation of the truth of God's promises to those who believe. (*"Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed, Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God."*).

Again, faith is required. The wording: "*And in such only as worthily receive the same [the sacraments], they have a wholesome effect or operation*" refers to baptism as well as communion. There is nothing magical or automatic about baptism.

Before being baptised a person has to make solemn promises: "I repent of [my sins], I turn to Christ, I submit to Christ, I come to Christ."

What about sprinkling, as opposed to immersion?

Immersion is the first alternative for baptism in the C of E. The service says: "The Minister dips each candidate in water, or pours water on them." Many baptisms by immersion take place. I have done numerous immersion baptisms myself. It is, in my view, the best method.

What about infant baptism?

This question was probably the biggest one for me when I first started attending the Church of England. The Anglican theology of infant baptism makes it clear that parents (and godparents) make the above-mentioned promises on behalf of the child. This is done in faith that the child will, after Christian teaching and nurture, eventually take these promises on himself/herself – formally at confirmation, but informally before that. So infant baptism is on the basis of faith just as much as the baptism of those able to answer for themselves. If the child does not come to personal faith then the Baptism is incomplete and s/he is not born again. Some Christians will disagree with this approach but at least there is general agreement that all baptism is based on faith.

But why baptise infants when we don't see the practice in the New Testament? Here are the reasons I became convinced that infant baptism is in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament:

All who believe are children of Abraham. Even small children (8-day olds) were included in the Abrahamic covenant. We are spiritually more privileged than Old Testament people. Surely, because we are believers, our children should also be included in the covenant before they reach the age of being able to answer for themselves.

Circumcision, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, was a sign of justification by faith (i.e. God accepting sinners on the basis of faith). See Romans 4, esp. v 11. Yet it was given to babies.

In Acts 2:38-39 Peter preaches that the Gospel, covenant promises are “to you and your children.” It seems highly unlikely that Jewish people would have embraced the Christian faith without incorporating their children into it. They had been incorporating their children into the covenant for over a thousand years. When our children were

born I found it very meaningful to baptise them. I did not (and do not) believe they were excluded from the covenant simply because of a lack of intellectual capacity.

In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul calls the children of a believing parent “holy.” This is a technical term meaning they were in the covenant.

It is of significance that the church baptised infants from very early days. There is direct evidence for it from very early times and indirect evidence from the middle of the first century AD, just 30-40 years after the time of Jesus, when various of the Apostles were still alive.

I hope this rationale is meaningful to you and that, even if you don't become convinced about infant baptism, you will understand how those of us who do practise it firmly believe it is biblical, in the sense of in harmony with Scripture. However, it is a sad fact that many parents who are not believers have their children baptised, which means the children are less likely to come to faith themselves.

OTHER QUESTIONS

What about the High Church?

There is a high church tradition in the Church of England which was revived by the Oxford Movement in the 19th century. Over most beliefs there is no disagreement but over some there is, perhaps particularly over their attitude to Mary. With great respect, I feel that some High Church beliefs are not actually what the Church of England believes.

What is the Church of England's attitude to Mary?

Mary is (appropriately in my view) treated with respect by the Church of England. After all, she was used in the most remarkable way by God and she showed deeply spirituality.

However the C of E does not hold the particular Roman Catholic views about her. She is not queen of heaven or co-redemptrix. We do not think we have to approach God (or Jesus) through Mary. The official C of E view of Mary would not cause problems for Evangelicals.

Isn't the use of crucifixes, statues and stained glass saints unbiblical?

I used to worry a lot about crucifixes, because of my childhood fears about Roman Catholicism. The C of E does not worship or even venerate images. But they can be helpful visual aids. Again rather bluntly, the Church of England's official wording on the subject is: "The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God." However, as long as these things (crucifixes, statues, stained glass saints) are treated as visual aids, they can be helpful.

What about the liberal wing of the Church of England?

In the 1980s this wing seemed to be in the ascendancy under Archbishop Runcie's influence and I campaigned in the General Synod and national media against any watering down of biblical teaching on doctrine and morality. Since the time of Archbishop Carey, evangelicalism has been much more predominant. However there is a big debate at present in the worldwide Anglican Communion over the issue of gay bishops which threatens to break up the Communion. But the official teaching of the C of E remains rooted in the Prayer Book and Canons and in 1987, in a debate on my private member's motion, the General Synod reaffirmed by a 98% majority:

'This Synod affirms that the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God's love for each one of us,

and in particular affirms:

- (1) that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship,
- (2) that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion,
- (3) that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion,
- (4) that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders.'

What about women priests?

I will make a few comments here, but I did write some years ago a full theological paper on this issue, which is available free on request. *[Be warned, it is 28 pages long, quite detailed and in-depth. It includes: sections on how to interpret Scripture, biblical teaching on the equality of status and difference of function of male and female, the biblical ministry of women, plus appendixes on the parallel between the liberation of women and liberation of slaves from a New Testament point of view, New Testament teaching we don't obey, the submission of wives etc.]*

For years I had wrestled with the issue of women priests and couldn't see how it was in harmony with Scripture. I felt obliged to vote against the ordination of women in the General Synod debate in 1992.

But after doing further exhaustive study of Scripture (outlined in the theological paper) I came to the conclusion that:

"Taking everything into account, it seems that the NT does not teach any general principle which would exclude women from either the teaching or the presiding role in the church. So I believe there is no biblical barrier to women being ordained and taking headship positions in the modern church. It is disturbingly true that one can just as easily argue from

the NT against the liberation of slaves as one can argue against the ordination of women to headship positions. But, more important, it is clear to me that the main thrust of NT teaching on the issue is Gal 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.



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For 14 years Tony stood for biblical doctrine and morality in the General Synod and frequently witnessed on TV, radio and in the press. He has also written several books.

Later he became General Director of the Church's Ministry amongst Jewish People (CMJ), and also Rector of Christ Church, Jerusalem. In addition to evangelism, he emphasised reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. His email newsletter (tony@higton.info) informs Christians to pray about the Holy Land, taking the need, pain and fears of both sides seriously.