

Why Anglicans Matter to the Rest of Us

~ Rev. Douglas Wilson ~

In the brief and troubled reign of James II, an event took place that illustrates how connected Anglicans and non-Anglicans can sometimes be. James the Second was a fervent supporter of the interests of Rome, and during his reign—in the memorable phrase of J.C. Ryle—“traitors were hatched in the sunshine of corruption.”

James had begun his reign by persecuting the Nonconformists—jailing the great Richard Baxter after a farce of a trial, for example, and being responsible for the death by drowning of the young Scottish martyr Margaret Wilson. Because of this kind of thing, the pitch was set for the song *he* intended to sing, and the Nonconformists were reinforced in their intention not even to get their Psalters out.

But in April of 1688, James issued a “Declaration of Indulgence” along with a requirement that the declaration be read in all the chapels and churches of the kingdom by their officiating ministers. Seven bishops refused to have anything to do with it, and their subsequent trial was the *cause celebre* that brought James down in the Glorious Revolution.

But there was a striking element in this Declaration of Indulgence. James was trying to make room for the Church of Rome, and yet the declaration allowed both Roman Catholics *and* Protestant Dissenters the freedom to perform worship publicly. Before the bishops had made their decision to refuse to obey the king, the Nonconformists stepped forward, in the words of Ryle, “to their eternal honour,” and offered their support to the bishops in their defiance of the

king, even though it meant *their* continued exclusion and exile. “They refused to be bribed just as they had formally refused to be intimidated.”

“They would have none of the Royal indulgence, if it could only be purchased at the expense of the nation’s Protestantism. Baxter, and Bates, and Howe, and the great bulk of the London Nonconformists, entreated the clergy to stand firm, and not to yield one inch to the King.” (J.C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (London: Thynne & Jarvis, 1924, p. 438)

In other words, what the Anglicans did mattered very much to those outside the Church of England. Their differences were great, but for those disposed to look for it, the commonality was greater. And while circumstances alter, and the current landscape looks very different in many ways, some things don’t change—and this is one of them. Anglicans matter very much to the rest of us, and the spiritual health of the global Anglican Communion should be the prayerful interest of every faithful Christian the world over.

If I may take my own case as a minister as representative—and from the time I have spent in the world of evangelicals I believe that I may—the debt we owe to faithful Anglicans is simply enormous. I grew up among the Southern Baptists, and I now minister as a Reformed Presbyterian. And yet if I were to make a list of those published mentors who have profoundly shaped my life and theology, Anglicans would

make up about half the list. Such a list would include, but not be limited to, C.S. Lewis, J.I. Packer, Edmund Burke, John Stott, T.S. Eliot, and G.K. Chesterton (before he had his romantic spasm and bolted). When I perform a wedding, the echoes of Thomas Cranmer fill the ceremony. When I read the history of the Church, I cannot understand the story of where God has brought His entire kingdom without great appreciation for the shaping contributions made from within the Church of England—from men like Wyclif, and Tyndale, and Cranmer, and Hooker. As a loyal Presbyterian, I would even include John Knox in this, who labored faithfully for years as an Anglican chaplain under Edward VI—think of that as a sort of Reformational exchange program. When I preach every Lord’s Day, the text I read beforehand is from the Authorized Version—a spectacular and priceless gift to the entire English-speaking world from the Church of England.

Having said all this, I want to make a distinction between an intelligent appreciation of the great gifts of Anglicanism, or even an intelligent embrace of Anglicanism by a thoughtful *adult* seeker, on the one hand, and the very silly desire of some rootless young people as they play Anglican dress-ups. When the latter head off toward Canterbury, I don’t know what to feel worse about—the fact that our ranks are producing such immaturity, or that we are sending such folly over to afflict our brethren in other communions. As the great Anglican Latimer once put it, “Whenever the devil gets into a church, his plan is to cry, ‘Up with candles and down with preaching.’” Faithful Anglicans know what they are up against—faddish feel good theology, man-centeredness in all its permutations, feminism, sanctified sodomy and more. But the ecclesiastical naïf is always bedazzled by the trappings—he grew up in the

liturgical wilderness of American fundamentalism, and when he first decides to pursue some kind of cultural maturity in worship, he does so with all the discernment of a vacuum cleaner. So for his first Ash Wednesday (which he had to look up on Wikipedia first), he goes and gets ash on his forehead from a local homo-shaman. That’s not really a minor problem—why get your sign of repentance from the least repentant person within a five-hundred mile radius?

The hymn writer Samuel Stone, writing of the Church of England, once wrote this in his hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation”:

Though with a scornful wonder
men see her sore oppressed

By schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed:

Yet saints their watch are keeping,
their cry goes up, ‘How long?’

And soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song!

“By heresies distressed.” I am reminded of a poem my father used to quote when I was a boy—“There once was a girl who had a curl, right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad she was horrid.” Because the Anglican Communion matters a great deal, the devil attacks it. And when he attacks it, he uses his standard tactics, which should not be surprising. The glories of the Anglican contributions to the larger Church matter very much to those of us outside, and hence the heresies promoted in her midst also matter to us—for the same reason. For that reason I trust that a few comments and exhortations from an outsider will not be taken as impudence.

The rot of modernity and post-modernity is transdenominational. In the groves of the Lord, there are many different trees—and we all have our preferences whenever we seek to build things out of wood. As one very charitable minister once said to another, “We both serve the Lord—you in your way, and I in His.” But even though our different shops use different kinds of wood—oak, cherry, or teak—and we have our debates about it, we also have to remember that different kinds of wood can always be destroyed by the same kind of termite. And when one carpenter figures out how to deal with the termites, the other carpenters may be permitted to look on with interest.

First, many observations have been made about the orthodoxy of Third-World bishops, and the demographic shift to the South that the Christian faith is experiencing. As Philip Jenkins has observed, the “average” Christian in the world today is an Anglican—not to mention being a Nigerian woman. An obvious lesson from this is never to forget the duty of evangelism and presenting the gospel to an unbelieving world. Because the Anglicans of the 19th century were so missions minded—out of godly desire to bring Christ to the heathen—they set the stage for a remarkable development. They could not have envisaged the time when the heathen would bring Christ back to us. Their labors on the mission field were obviously what they were on the surface—simple evangelism—but it would have been the rare missionary who would have seen his labors as an essential contribution in the fight for orthodoxy back home a century and a half in the future. So obedience *now* provides unexpected protections *later*. This means that in the fight for orthodoxy, we must never forget our current obligations in evangelism and church planting.

Second, God loves to test our faithfulness in situations that look hopeless to us. When Athanasius made his famous *contra mundum* comment, he was not talking about the *mundum* of the pagans and secular humanists, but rather the *mundum episcoporum*, the world of wobbly *bishops*. That world is with us still, but we should take a lesson from the courage and insight of Athanasius. Things have been this bad before. In the history of the Church, things have been this bad many times before. And when God delivered Abraham and Isaac, the knife was in his hand and his arm was upraised. When God delivered Moses and Israelites, the Red Sea was lapping at their feet and Pharaoh’s army was right behind them. We all understand why more than a couple of Israelites were probably tempted to think and perhaps to say, “Way to go, Moses.” But God is the God of all deliverance, and He is frequently the God of unexpected, eucatastrophic deliverance.

And third, unbelief has made the inroads it has throughout the Church in the name of “relevance,” but the history of the Church shows that few things are as irrelevant as the lust for this kind of relevance. God will resolve this story, and when He does, it will be to show the relevance of doctrinal “stodginess” and the ongoing irrelevance of cutting edge unbelief. As Lewis once put it, whatever is not eternal is eternally out of date. But while liberals have touted their own kind of intellectual relevance, doctrinally conservative Anglicans can be tempted by certain kinds of liturgical “relevance” as well. Ditching the prayer book (or as much of it as the authorities will let you ditch), and substituting pop culture worship may juice the attendance for a short time, but in the long run it will pall, just like all other relevance fads do. Marrying doctrinal orthodoxy to insipid cultural traditions is a short-term rear-guard action, one

that is ill-advised in my view, especially when you have a cultural tradition that has already lasted for centuries.

But if that is the case, then why are services straight out of the prayer book so famously ill-attended? The structure of a worship service is a like a fire-place and mantel, and the prayer book is a gloriously-fashioned and decorated fire-place and mantel. But people *will* wander off if nobody ever lights a fire in the fireplace. Orthodox preaching and warm application will bring people to worship God, and the warmth of the fire will keep them there long enough to come to appreciate the craftsmanship that went into the surrounding fireplace. They won't be tempted to head off to a charismatic fellowship down the road just in order to get *some* kind of warmth—a place where they light fires on the liturgical sofa and coffee table, but with the knowledge that there is *supposed* to be a fire around here some-

place. I once worshipped near Oxford in a prayer book Anglican service that was dead enough to make my back teeth ache. And another time I was visiting about this very problem with a friend who is a loyal son of the prayer book. We were talking during the fellowship hour after a very crowded service at an Anglican church that had a low approach to liturgy, but a solid view of the gospel and of teaching. He had come over from his church—which had been very empty—and was lamenting the choice that was presented to him. In my view, though it is often a practical choice, this is theologically a false alternative. Latimer would not have had the devil say, “Up with the prayer book and down with preaching.” A revival of great expositional preaching with keen application is just what the traditional Anglican communion needs, and because we worship the God of all deliverance, I have no doubt this revival is already underway.



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