

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Christian Education: Religious Identity and Anglicanism

To date we have focused on general categories of religious identity: on how we gain knowledge of God and of His will for us, and of the differences between different categories of belief; on the history of Anglicanism and the Anglican rule of faith being defined in prayer. This week we will focus more specifically on Anglican belief and practice as these relate to sacramental theology and to the doctrine of salvation.

Anglican theology:

1. A review of the seven sacraments.
 - a. Where does The Episcopal Church differ from other sacramental churches?
2. What does Anglicanism teach about salvation?
 - a. Why is salvation necessary?
 - b. How and by Whom are we saved?
 - c. How does this differ from what other Christians may teach?
 - d. What must we do to be saved?

What is a sacrament? The catechism found in the prayer book defines a sacrament as "... [an] outward and visible sign of [an] inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as [a] sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (*BCP* 857). In other words, a sacrament is a vehicle by which God imparts His grace to us. This understanding of what a sacrament is is shared with the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches, and with some Lutheran churches. The *nature* of sacraments and *what* is accomplished in sacraments remain areas in which there are more disagreements, but the essential agreement amongst so-called "sacramental churches" is that sacraments are more than symbols, and that sacraments accomplish God's purpose by means external to the believer.

Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills (*BCP* 858).

Sacraments are considered to be real because they involve "ontological change". *Ontology* is the philosophy and science of being. It is concerned (in the case of human beings) with the *soul* and what the soul is. Therefore, ontological change refers to a change in being; that by the grace imparted in God's sacrament the being of the recipient is changed. The belief in a sacrament involving ontological change must be distinguished from two other possible views:

- a) That the "sacrament" is something which is functional only. For example, if Holy Orders are believed to be a sacrament, does the conferral of Holy Orders change the being of the person ordained (is his or her being conformed to God's purpose), or is being a minister of the Church simply a matter of what a person is trained to do? (In Anglicanism, ordained ministry is *not* considered to be functional only. This is why apostolic succession matters.)

- b) That the “sacrament” is symbolic only. For example, in Holy Eucharist a belief (as in Anglicanism) that the bread and wine of Communion truly involve the real presence of Jesus Christ, in His Body and Blood, is a recognition of ontological change. But, if the sacramental view is that only a symbol is involved (*e.g.*, as in Anabaptist churches), then the bread and wine are just bread and wine, and the “sacrament” involves only *recalling* what Jesus *did*. The act is symbolic only. Jesus *does* nothing in the sacrament. Any present action is in the spirit of the believer assenting to the symbol. In this view God’s purpose is only manifested in something internal to the believer.

What are the sacraments? Anglican belief distinguishes between sacraments and sacramental rites. In other traditions that recognize seven sacraments, the distinction is made that two sacraments (Baptism and Holy Eucharist) are “Dominical,” *i.e.*, instituted by Jesus Christ in His own baptism and at the Last Supper. The Anglican distinction that there are five sacramental rites is that these rites (confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, and unction) evolved in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but were not instituted by Jesus Christ while He was on earth. The sacramental rites *are* means of grace, but they are “... not necessary for all persons in the same way that Baptism and Eucharist are” (*BCP* 860). This language is, in effect, a classic Anglican middle way, because the language allows the believer to believe and argue that the sacramental rites are holy and important, but that they are not necessary to salvation in the same way that Baptism is, and in the same way that Holy Eucharist makes us one with Jesus Christ.

What does Anglicanism teach about salvation? Contrary to what may be considered politically correct (and to what is argued by some Anglican leaders), Anglicanism subscribes to the doctrine that we are saved by Jesus Christ *only*. This is the so-called “scandal of particularity” attendant on John 14.6: “I am *the* way, and *the* truth, and *the* life; no one comes to the Father, *but by me*.”¹ In the *Articles of Religion* the rejection of pluralism is made explicit in Article XVIII.

Our catechism is more vague than the *Articles of Religion*. We are described as estranged from God in sin. In other words, we are acknowledged to be in need of salvation, absent which we suffer “... eternal death in our rejection of God” (*BCP* 862). The rite of Holy Eucharist (Canon B) describes us as “worthy to stand before [God]” by virtue of the saving work of Jesus Christ (*BCP* 368; *compare* 362, 374). In other words, we are “justified” (*cf.* Article XI) by and through the merits of Jesus Christ. Our faith in Jesus justifies us. We are not in any way justified (that is, saved, worthy to stand before God) except by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ and our faith that in Him we are saved. We are not saved in any way by good works, but good works are a manifestation of our faith. God is both righteous and the One who makes believers righteous by granting righteousness *apart* from law, *through* faith, *by means of* Christ’s atoning death, *for* all who trust (believe).

¹ The use of the definite article in the Greek of the gospels is notable. The definite article is to be understood in the sense of “the one and only”. Coupled with this is Jesus’ use of the words (in Greek) *ego eimi*, “I am,” by which He is using the Holy Name of God, I AM, as revealed to Moses (Exod. 3.14). Indeed, Jesus’ use of this Name is what causes the Pharisees to seek to stone Him (Jn. 8.58-59).

When we pray words like “In [Jesus], you [God] have delivered us from evil ...” (*BCP* 368) we are making a statement of faith which says: (a) We are in a fallen state. We need salvation; (b) Jesus saves us. The fallenness of humanity is accepted. Sin is not mere dysfunction. By ourselves we are not “OK”. We do not have faith and engage in worship in order to be better people (although we will, in fact, benefit in this life from faith and worship), but because absent a Savior we are lost.

Anglicanism is Protestant in the sense of believing in salvation by faith alone, and Catholic in believing that the sacraments are necessary vehicles of grace. God is both righteous and makes the believer righteous. Other Christian churches may emphasize the necessity of sacraments (Rome does this), or emphasize personal faith as salvific. In Anglicanism we recognize that we participate fully in the life of Jesus Christ by and through the sacraments, and that absent this participation our faith is not complete.

What must we do to be saved? In a nutshell, we must believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior; we must confess that Jesus is Lord; we must live in Christian hope that Jesus shall return to judge the living and the dead, and that by our faith in Him we shall be adjudged worthy to not suffer eternal separation from God. How we live this faith involves the practice of religion. It involves participation in God’s grace by and through the sacraments. It involves doing this *together* as members of Christ’s Body, the Church. It involves *trust* in a Person (in the three Persons of the Holy Trinity) and mental *assent* (agreement with) propositions of the faith (*e.g.*, that there is one God in three Persons).

To be saved we must participate in the life of God. In Baptism we participate in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and are reborn into the new life to which God calls us, by the Holy Spirit (*BCP* 306). In Holy Eucharist we pray that we may be united with Jesus Christ in His sacrifice, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (*BCP* 369). We confess that something essential *happens*. For example, we quote Jesus Christ in speaking of the bread and wine, in saying “Do this in remembrance of me,” and by this we mean that something more than a recollection of what Jesus *did*. The word used in the gospels that we translate as “in remembrance of” is *anamnesis*. In Greek this word has the connotation not of the present recollection of a past event, but of the *making present now* of that which has happened before. To remember Jesus Christ in this way is to participate in His real presence in the Holy Eucharist. This is not an action which is symbolic. We are not just by faith seeking to recall Jesus’ sacrifice for us. We are participating in His sacrifice *now*. It is by faith in Jesus and in His sacrifice for us that we are saved, and this faith is expressed by how we participate in His sacrifice.

Do I have to go to church? The Roman Catholic Church maintains the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside of the Church there is no salvation). In contrast to this teaching, many Protestant believers preach the need for an individual faith only. In Anglicanism, the traditional belief is that an individual faith which is not practiced by participation in the Church is not a complete faith. In other words, Anglicanism agrees with Rome that outside of the Church there is no salvation, but teaches that the Church thus referred to is the “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” which is confessed in the Creed. Individual faith is lived by participation in the Church. One who does not participate in the Church (by choice) does not have a real faith.