

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

SCRIPTURE, REASON & TRADITION: THE ANGLICAN “THREE-LEGGED STOOL”

Classical Anglican theology includes elements from many parts of Christian belief. Unlike other Christian movements, Anglican doctrine is neither established by a magisterium (the teaching office of the Vatican), nor derived from the theology of an eponymous founder (such as Lutheranism or Calvinism), nor summed up in a confession of faith (beyond those of the creeds). Instead, the earliest Anglican theological documents are its prayer books, which were themselves the products of profound theological reflection and compromise. It is within the *Book of Common Prayer* that Anglican doctrine was originally expressed in the selection, arrangement, and composition of prayers and exhortations, the selection and arrangement of daily Scripture readings (the Lectionary), and in the stipulation of the rubrics for permissible liturgical action and any variations in the prayers and exhortations. The principle of looking to the prayer books as a guide to the parameters of belief and practice is called by the Latin name *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the law of prayer is the law of belief"). Within the Prayer Book are the so-called fundamentals of Anglican doctrine: The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, Scripture (via the lectionary), the sacraments, daily prayer, the *Catechism*, and apostolic succession in the context of the historic threefold ministry (of bishop, priest and deacon).

Beyond the Prayer Books of various provinces, however, there are other important principles that have had an impact on Anglican belief. The earliest are contained within the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, as they appear in their final 1604 form. Historically, Anglican clergy had to take an oath of subscription to the Articles, although the practice has become uncommon.¹ Despite this, they have never been considered binding, but rather advisory. The degree to which each of the articles has remained influential varies. Arguably, the most influential of them has been Article VI on the "sufficiency of Scripture," which states that "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." This article has informed Anglican biblical exegesis and hermeneutics since earliest times, and the language is included in the ordination vows for priest and deacon, and the consecration vow of a bishop (*see, e.g., BCP* 513).

Anglicans also look for authority in their so-called "standard divines". Historically, the most influential of these—apart from Cranmer—has been the sixteenth century cleric and theologian Richard Hooker. Hooker's description of Anglican authority as being derived primarily from **Scripture**, informed by **Reason** (the intellect and the experience of God) and **Tradition** (the practices and beliefs of the historical church), has influenced Anglican self-identity and doctrinal reflection perhaps more powerfully than any other formula. The analogy of the "Three-legged Stool" of Scripture, reason and tradition is often incorrectly attributed to Hooker.

¹ The *Thirty-Nine Article of Religion* are found at pp. 867–876 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. These were adopted in America in 1801, but are no longer considered normative for the American Church.

The influential character of Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* cannot be overestimated. Published in 1593 and subsequently, Hooker's eight volume work is primarily a treatise on Church-state relations, but it also deals comprehensively with issues of biblical interpretation, soteriology (the theology of salvation), ethics, and sanctification. Throughout the work, Hooker makes clear that theology involves prayer and is concerned with ultimate issues, and also that theology is relevant to the social mission of the church.

In the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker argued against both the Puritans and Roman Catholics. He claimed that Puritans claimed too much in proposing that Scripture provided the only source of knowledge, including knowledge about all matters of church order and discipline.² In turn, he claimed that the Roman Catholic Church claimed too much in believing that the Church had infallible understanding of faith (as given by the Pope speaking in Council), much less the order and discipline of the church.³ Instead, Hooker maintained, Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation. We know this as we come into relationship with God through Scripture and worship. In other words, Scripture speaks to us the truths of faith as we have come to experience those truths in our lives. There is a mutual, inward hold that Scripture makes upon us and we upon it. The Christian life is then lived out in light of this faith, shaped by the order of Church and society as that reflects the continuing, developing understanding of both.

Hooker himself does not use the phrase "Scripture, Reason and Tradition". In fact, it is not clear who first used the phrase itself. However, Scripture, Reason and Tradition designate the sources that mediate Christian faith, inform the understanding of that faith, and shape the order and discipline of the church. They also have come to designate a method in which the understanding of Christian practice (as distinct from what is necessary to salvation) is understood to always be informed and shaped by these three sources.

Finally, it should be added that Richard Hooker and the early Anglican tradition is misunderstood when understood as theoretical reasoning. "Reason" was understood in a classical sense, drawing from Plato and Aristotle, as a participatory knowledge. To know something was to experience it, to share or participate in something. It is not just about how we think. Hence, Scripture and reason inform each other, with Reason allowing us to experience some of the revelation of God (His "general revelation") in nature; in how we can come to know some aspects of God through our experience of the world. Equally, there is a mutual, inward hold that Scripture makes upon us and we upon it. As such, reason may be best understood as a practical wisdom. It is in this sense that Scripture, reason and tradition inform each other.

"Tradition" is also misunderstood. It is *not* just about "how we have always done things in the Church," for in truth most of what we do in ceremony and order has changed.⁴ Tradition, understood properly, is defined under the so-called "Lerintian canon" of St. Vincent of Lerins (5th C.), who defined Catholic doctrine as "That which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Hooker was thinking of this rule, with a mind to dogma, doctrine and discipline *as defined in ecumenical councils of the Church*, when he spoke of "Tradition". In other words, when the Church has gathered in council and defined belief (*e.g.* in the Creeds), that constitutes Tradition. Tradition is about the content of belief, not just about practice. Universally in

² The Puritans claimed that unless something is allowed specifically in Scripture it is to be banned. For example, the use of musical instruments in church services was banned.

³ The Roman Catholic position has tended to be one of "If something is not banned in Scripture, then it is allowable." This position is consonant with that adopted in Anglicanism.

⁴ For example, the placing of candles on the altar led to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church refusing to consent to the election of James Dekoven as bishop of Wisconsin in 1874. The Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century thought of altar candles or the vesting of a choir as "popish".

Anglicanism, the first four general councils (Nicaea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus, and Chalcedon (in which the Creeds were agreed) are recognized as authoritative. Most Anglicans recognize the first seven councils; many recognize others.

Finally, many Anglicans look to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 (*BCP* 876) as the "*sine qua non*" of identity. In brief, the Quadrilateral's four points are the Holy Scriptures, as containing all things necessary to salvation; the Creeds (specifically, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), as the sufficient statement of Christian faith; the dominical sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion; and the historic episcopate.