

SERMON: THE DISCIPLINED CENTER

Adapted from a sermon preached by +S. McLaughlin (retired), at the National Convention of the Orthodox Anglican Church, held at Richmond, VA, June 18, AD 2010.

Prefatory note: The text below originated as an orally-delivered sermon, and thus differs from the author's normal style of writing.

"It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Acts 15: 25,26

The epistle for this evening's service is from Acts Chapter 15. It describes the first General Council of the Church and the astounding decision that was made there to allow gentile believers into what had been, up until that point, a Jewish church. In other words, the Jewish followers of Jesus as Messiah would, at this Council, with great liberality, open the doors of the church to gentile believers.

Led by the Holy Spirit—despite differences in ethnicity, language and culture, much less religious background—the Church was in one accord in true unity and found the solution of bringing two very different cultures together in one Body of the Church. What they did was very astounding. On the other hand, it's not that surprising because, you see, the Church was in its infancy. It was a small movement at the time. The Church was operating under a leadership perspective that we might consider "the family leadership" model. The Church was a family; it was anxious to grow. The decision of the first Council, however, was threatened as the Church grew and matured as an organization, as the letters of St Paul attest. The agreement made at the first General Council was not always kept faithfully by the entire Church. There was still conflict. The reason? Organizationally, the church was growing up... It was becoming a more mature organization.

I believe the Lord is calling us to consider how we do stand united, how we do show strength and how we do perpetuate stability. Because we are moving beyond the family model of leadership and cooperation, our jurisdiction is maturing. So, we must ask ourselves, "Will we remain in one accord?" as they were in the first General Council.

I said there was reason to believe in dramatic growth in our church in the next two to five years. I sincerely believe that. I am being contacted by clergymen of other Anglican jurisdictions, priests outside the Anglican tradition, and even Protestant ministers who are interested in becoming Anglican. The Orthodox Anglican Church is perceived as a strong, stable and safe place to be. It seems that so many other Anglican jurisdictions are bent on becoming either praise-and-worship centers on the one hand, or Roman Catholic on the other. There are literally thousands of clergy and laity and, potentially hundreds of parishes, that are watching us today. We need to be prepared for a great influx into our church. We must ask ourselves now: "How can we maintain unity, stability and strength in the future?"

Evangelical

- **Word-based**
- **Personal Conversion**
- **Human Freedom**

Reformed

- **Word-based**
- **God's Sovereignty**
- **God's Covenants**

We need to answer this question using the widest possible horizon. So I want you to do something. Imagine a square--just the figure of a square. I want you to label the left upper corner of that square "Evangelical". An evangelical approach to the faith is based upon the word of God and the preaching of the Bible. It represents human free will, personal conversion to Christ, and personal holiness. It is expressed in individual relationship to God.

Label the bottom left corner of the square, "Reformed". The reformed tradition also is based upon the word of God and the preaching of the bible. It is expressed by the profound proclamation of the sovereignty of God and everything He does: His covenants, His kingdom, His promises to His people. It understands and proclaims the grand sweep of God's salvation and providential care of His people from creation to the end of the age.

Now, label the top right hand corner "Roman Catholic". The Roman tradition is based upon the celebration of the sacraments, rationally defined and applied to the needs of God's people in the Church, and maintaining the Holy Order of the church as a source of leadership and discipline.

Roman

- **Sacrament-based**
- **Rational Theology**
- **Holy Orders**

Eastern

- **Sacrament-based**
- **Mystical Theology**
- **Holy Orders**

Finally, label the bottom right corner, “Eastern Orthodox”. This tradition, too, is based upon the celebration of the sacraments. But the sacraments are understood as mysteries that defy rational analysis. In the beautiful worship of the East, the people of God are brought to an ineffable experience of worshiping the Holy, Blessed, and Undivided Trinity.

So, in your imagination you have a square labeled: Evangelical, Reformed, Roman and Eastern. These are the four great traditions of the Church. If we look at the Christian Church as a whole, we see that the way of the Church is both verbal and non-verbal. It is word-based and sacrament-based. It is rational and it is ineffable. It is free and yet it is under discipline. It is all of these things simultaneously.

Evangelical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word-based • Personal Conversion • Human Freedom 	Roman <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrament-based • Rational Theology • Holy Orders
Reformed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word-based • God’s Sovereignty • God’s Covenants 	Eastern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrament-based • Mystical Theology • Holy Orders

Now, where is Anglicanism in that square? Where do you put it? The *Book of Common Prayer* tells us plainly that we are committed to the proclamation of the gospel in both word and sacrament. At every ordination the new priest makes a vow to God to proclaim the Word, and to duly administer the Holy Sacraments. We use that as a tag line, in fact, for our church, “proclaiming Jesus Christ in word and sacrament”. So, in your imaginary square, draw a vertical line straight down the center, separating word-based and sacrament-based traditions. Next, draw a horizontal line straight across the middle fur-

ther separating the different branches of the church's tradition. The vertical and horizontal lines cross in the center--the Disciplined Center—and that is where Anglicanism truly can be found. The disciplined center presents Christ to the world with a full expression of all the great Christian traditions. Anglicanism, done right and understood correctly, can be a source of the unity of Christendom, We can be a force for the unity of all Christians if we maintain this disciplined center.

The perennial problem we experience is when forces want to push Anglicanism into one quadrant or another of that square, and then limit it as the sole expression of Anglican tradition and history. If you think very carefully about the edges of that square, you will find that the further you go, the crazier you become. And the ultimate statement of “craziness” is, “We are the only true church”. Think about it. From the evangelical quadrant of one who appoints an infallible judge and pope of himself and becomes his own church, to the Roman quadrant of a billion Christians making one man an infallible judge and pope to them all. They both say, “We are the true church”.

Anglicanism can never claim to be the “one true church” because it is not on the edges, it’s right in the center. To understand this, embrace this, and to defend the cen-

ter requires great humility. It's very easy to make exclusive claims for yourself or your church when you're on the edges. It takes a great deal of humility to enter into the unity of the church with a brother who comes from a different tradition. I ask you this evening, both clergy and lay leaders at this General Convention, to stand with me and to resist anyone who would come to this jurisdiction and attempt to push us to the edge of that square.

These four great traditions of the church, of course, are often looked upon as personal choices, personal prejudices, or theological battlefields. They really are not. We should look at them as the gifts of God for His people. They are God's gifts of a full Christian "meal" for us to digest and enjoy because without one of these four great traditions, we all would be impoverished. Here is an example: When we think of a dinner, we think of meat, potatoes, veggies and a dessert. But, what if you went to a restaurant every day and they gave you only potatoes and they told you that all other types of food are suspect and probably poisonous and undoubtedly invalid as food. As if you were told, "You can eat only potatoes. That's all you can ever have." But another person in the restaurant is eating a steak. After a while, that steak looks pretty good to the potato-eater! And the steak eater says, "I wish I had a potato from that guy's plate"!

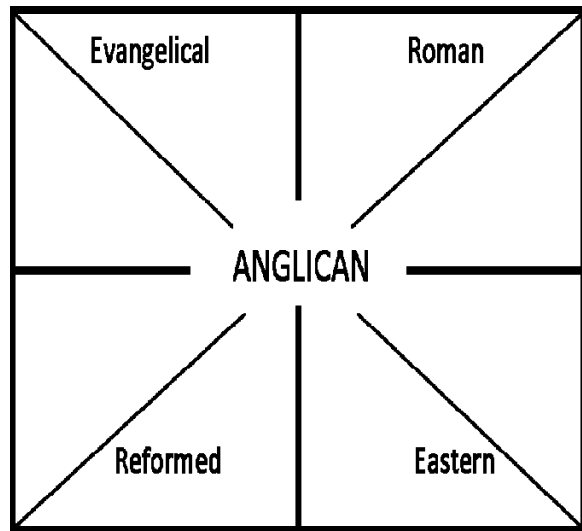
Anglicanism is the full plate. We're not feeding people with only part of the tradition--we present "the full menu": the verbal and the non-verbal; the Word-based and the Sacrament-based; the rational and the mysterious. They all have a place on Anglicanism's plate if we maintain the disciplined center. We must maintain the full plate and not subject ourselves or our parishioners to being fed simply the spiritual equivalent of potatoes, week in and week out. As we read in Mid-Day prayer today, in the words of St Paul, "if everyone is an eye, who will do the hearing?" (1 Cor. 12:17)

Secondly, we have to realize that if there is a push in one of the quadrants of that square, to the detriment of the balance of the others, to that same extent, the faith itself is weakened. Here's another illustration: In modern military strategy, one defeats an enemy by attacking his flanks, in other words, the edges of his line. At the flanks, he is the weakest. If you can successfully attack the flank, you can turn the whole line, collapse the forces against you and become victorious in battle. We are meeting at this General Convention in Richmond, Virginia, which was the capital of the Confederacy. The confederates did not practice modern military strategy. They practiced a very old military tactic that has been called the Celtic method of warfare. Their method of warfare was not to attack the flank, but to attack the center of the line with overwhelming numbers of men and weapons, and break the center of the line. They break the enemy in half and destroy him very quickly.

The Confederacy did this time after time and they were successful time after time after time, until they invaded Pennsylvania. Gettysburg and Pickett's Charge will be remembered for many reasons by many people. One of the lessons that battle teaches is that a disciplined center can withstand the force of a frontal attack. The Confederates

were never able to use their Celtic method of fighting again. They were actually beaten there. If we maintain the disciplined center, we, too, will be able successfully to defend against the onslaughts that will come toward us--right to the middle of the line. Don't let anyone attack us off the flank where we are weak, but maintain the disciplined center.

In your mind, you have a square with a cross. To bring your attention to remain in the center, I want you to draw a line diagonally from one side to the other, and another diagonal line from one corner to the other so that the four great traditions of the church meet in the center of that cross. In your mind, you should have the image of a "Union Jack", a symbol of the disciplined center of Anglicanism as it should be known and practiced. Now, some of you may be asking, "Bishop, what is the width and length of that disciplined center?" I will tell you that the width and length of that center is under my guidance as your Presiding Bishop. I know there are some who wish it were broader or higher or lower. Some wish it were narrower. I believe we must maintain this disciplined center in order to maintain our unity, our stability and our strength.



Our true unity is found in very center of the center. The heart of the center is the *Book of Common Prayer*. Not only must we maintain balance, but also the second step to continued unity, especially unity in times of rapid growth, is to be with one accord and respect to the tradition of the church, with the Prayer Book seen as the balance, the full meal. Not the flank steak on the edge (to mix my illustrations). It is the heart of unity. I ask you secondly to respect the tradition: to know it, to use it, and to learn it from the inside out. Start using the *Book of Common Prayer* as a basis for evaluation of theological issues. Too often, I see clergy and laity who treat the prayer book from the outside in, bringing their prejudices against it and declaring that "it" is deficient before they know the tradition from the inside out. One of our priests recently talked with me about an evangelical leader who is converting to Orthodox Anglicanism. But, the evangelical leader had scruples with the fact the Decalogue is said on an occasional Sunday. He said, "we live under grace, not under law. Why are you reciting the Ten Commandments?" That's fine. That's part of the process of making sure we know and respect tradition from the inside out, and can answer that question.

I have seen former Roman Catholics, both clergy and laity, struggle mightily with the Word-based emphasis of the Prayer Book. All of these things are to be as expected. We must insist, however, for both our laity and clergy, that they must look from the

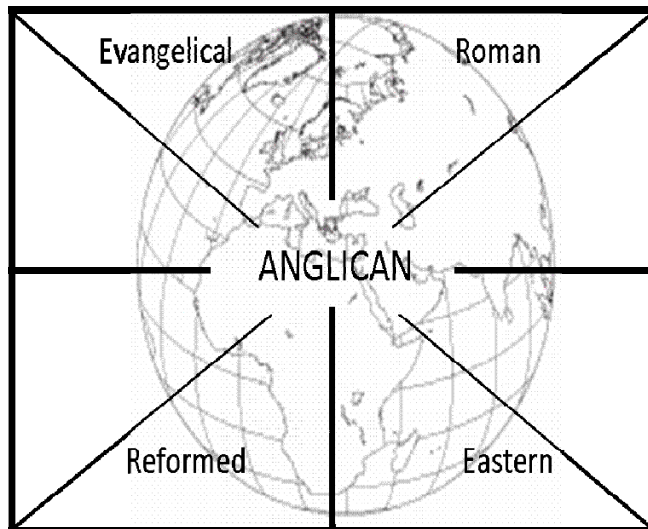
center out, from the heart out, from the thing that truly brings us unity; the unity that the Prayer Book provides to maintain balance and stability. If the Prayer Book is the heart of unity, the one way that you could destroy unity is to change the Prayer Book. Have you ever heard of that technique before? Change the Prayer Book and you change the Faith. Change the Prayer book and you destroy unity. Liberal “prayer books” abound. But there are also prayer books which are supposedly Anglican, but they have been altered to the point that they are actually Roman. We have many prayer books today which have been altered to the point they are actually Eastern. We have had prayer books for many years that are written in such a way as to deny the fact the word “priest” exists and minimizes the sacraments altogether. None of those things are the disciplined center. All of them are putting a bad heart in the middle of tradition.

I can tell you from very practical experience, those of you who are planting parishes that present Christ in Word and Sacrament, using the full *Book of Common Prayer*, not just simply part of it, will experience consistent and healthy parish growth. If you respect the tradition and if you evaluate from that tradition outwardly and you run your church accordingly, you will experience growth. However, I have also seen parishes that mix other traditions into the liturgy, so much so that it threatens to change the very nature and balance crafted into the Prayer Book tradition for nearly five hundred years. The result? No growth. No heart. No stability. No unity.

Consider this carefully: To be pushed into one quadrant of the square leads to extinction, but to adulterate the center, to alter the Prayer Book beyond its historic balance, leads to obscurity. So, respect the tradition. Look from the tradition, evaluate from the tradition. Look at it from the inside out. Ask yourself and of your parish, “Is this teaching that I am setting forward in accord with the Prayer Book and to what extent? Is this parish activity in accord with the church envisioned in the Prayer Book? Is this liturgical practice congruent with the Prayer Book? Or, is it in violation of it?”. We must know, respect, uphold, and evaluate from the disciplined center, the heart of which is the *Book of Common Prayer*. Stand with me and resist someone who wishes to define Anglicanism in some extreme part of that square. Stand with me in the disciplined center, maintaining a loyalty to the Prayer Book as the very pure heart of what it is that we are doing in the Lord’s service.

Finally, I would ask you to look beyond the square and imagine a circle, or better yet, a sphere. I want you to embrace the international ministry the Orthodox Anglican Communion represents on this planet. The communion is growing at a great, fantastic rate. We are adding a new national church, at this point this year, of about one per month. Anglicans are joining our communion where the Union Jack never flew. We have worked hard to provide a better organized structure for overseas leadership, fellowship and cooperation. Across national lines we are seeing the fruit of that now. The African Bishops just met in their own Provincial Council, agreed to their own cooperative efforts in ministry, and are organizing themselves according to the new Canons issued

last year. With 1.5 million members of the Communion, we have a unique and precious opportunity to be an example of unity, stability and strength all over the world, not just to the troubled United States.



Embrace the international nature of this ministry. Look beyond your own local parish. Look beyond your own personal ministry. Look beyond the national church and embrace this global ministry that God has given us. More than simply sending them money on occasion; more than stories and pictures of exotic places: genuinely embrace your brothers and sisters in Christ, your fellow Orthodox Anglicans around the world. Be pro-active in making this international ministry part of your own. Join your parish to assist a parish overseas. Go

and visit them. They would love to have you visit! You will be blessed beyond words if you visit. Don't simply raise money to send me overseas, raise money to bring their leadership to your parish. Enter into a genuine relationship with them. Don't keep them at arm's length. Their churches are a lot larger than ours. And, they have much they can teach us.

What are we going to do? We're going to maintain the disciplined center. We're going to deliver the full menu, not just part of it. We're going to defend the center against the onslaughts that will come against us from the Evil One. We will maintain our unity and strength and stability in the disciplined center that is classical Anglicanism, proclaiming Christ in word and sacrament. We also will respect the Prayer Book traditions at that disciplined center's heart and keep that heart pure. We must also apply these principles all over the world.

From a practical perspective, we must do several things at once in order to be prepared for the growth to come. One, we must maintain our commitment to growth from the inside. Second, we have to have, from the entire church, a commitment to training new priests. That means, in this country, the support of St Andrew's (and we have five theological seminaries operating around the world). We have to have a commitment to the growth of our religious orders and demand that they continue with integrity to add value to the church by their teachings, by the charisma they bring to the church, the spiritual disciplines necessary to "the full menu." We must uphold the work of our military chaplains, understanding that the work they do will reap lifetime rewards among thousands of people who will eventually come back to one of your churches.

We must pray and pray and pray for more church planters. And, we must overcome our reluctance to use new technologies in the ministry. Sign up for Twitter! Let us make a commitment to use the new technologies to teach the old traditions, because it is the only way the old traditions will stay alive.

We must also be prepared to grow from those on the flanks who are looking for a place of stability, yearning for the disciplined center. So many Anglican jurisdictions are being unwisely led into one part or another of that square. If they go, it leaves more room for us.

Be prepared to embrace those who come from the outside and incorporate them very quickly into this ministry, imparting to them the vision of the disciplined center and the pure heart at the middle of it in the Prayer Book. Embrace them, build relationships with them. Don't be a partisan: be an Anglican at the disciplined center.

At the first General Council of the Apostles, the Church enjoyed a small, family-based mode of leadership which soon turned the world upside down. I believe we are facing the same opportunity. But, with greater numbers come greater challenges, and God's own gift of a greater opportunity. Let us seize it.

Roland Allen, in his book *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*, quotes Harnack's work on mission and expansion of the early Church. "Seventy years after the foundation of the very first Gentile Christian Church in Syrian Antioch, Pliny wrote in the strongest terms about the spread of Christianity throughout remote Bithynia, a spread which in his view already threatened the stability of other cults throughout the province. Seventy years later still, the Paschal Controversy reveals the existence of a Christian federation of Churches, stretching from Lyons to Edessa, with its head-quarters situated in Rome. Seventy years later again, the emperor Decius declared that he would sooner have a rival emperor in Rome than a Christian Bishop. And ere another seventy years had passed the cross was sewn upon the Roman colours." Let us use their means, and may God, in His providence, give us the same result.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.