



## Session 2: By Hook or by Crook

**The choice to be unique or be assimilated**  
**“Be transformed by the renewal of your minds”**  
**- St. Paul to the Romans**

I want to begin with a prayer not often heard in Anglican Churches these days, but one which perhaps should be heard more, as much for it's content as for the commemoration it makes.

*O God of truth and peace, who raised up your servant Richard Hooker in a day of bitter controversy to defend with sound reasoning and great charity the catholic and reformed religion: Grant that we may maintain that middle way, not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.*

I don't know that you can claim a serious Anglican theological education without spending time with Richard Hooker. I don't need to tell you that he gave to Anglicanism its theological foundation and in some sense its unique identity as a church – a theological identity that has served well for some four hundred (400) years.

So forgive me for a few moments if I slip into a theological vein, but it will serve us well in addressing our concern of “being Anglican in a diverse Christian community”.

In Hooker’s masterpiece *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the philosophical base is Aristotelian, with a strong emphasis on natural law eternally planted by God in creation. On this foundation, all positive laws of Church and State are developed from Scriptural revelation, ancient tradition, reason, and experience. So often we hear of the three-legged stool and focus so much on the legs that we forget the seat that holds them all together – experience.

“In the course of his book he sets forth the Anglican view of the Church, and the Anglican approach to the discovery of religious truth (the so-called *via media*, or middle road), and explains how this differs from the position of the Puritans, on the one hand, and the adherents of the Pope, on the other. He is very heavy reading, but well worth it. ....Although Hooker is unsparing in his censure of what he believes to be the errors of Rome, his contemporary, Pope Clement VIII, said of the book: "It has in it such seeds of eternity that it will abide until the last fire shall consume all learning.”<sup>1</sup>

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James Kiefer Richard Hooker -Priest and Theologian

Now why have I chosen Richard Hooker and his principles in Ecclesiastical Polity as the underpinnings for this talk?

First, I think that Hooker not only defined Anglicanism from the theological point of view, but remains a touch-stone by which Anglicanism can continue to “discover religious truth”.

Second, in terms of how we present ourselves in the midst a diverse religious environment that three-legged stool, with its seat, provides us with an invaluable tool.

I'll be brief on the first point. Hooker defined clearly that Anglicanism is distinct from both Rome and (in his day) the Puritans. In other words, though today the Anglican Church embraces a wide variety of styles from pre-tridentine Roman ceremony to the simplicity of almost Puritan meeting house, the form does not dictate the content and to remain distinct we must not let the form control our theology. The military setting may be a greater challenge in this regard. Much could be discussed about this, I leave that to you, but for the moment enough said.

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On the second point let me be more expansive. We stand in a unique position among the Christian Churches. We are not a church where absolute authority rests with a single person or a small number of people. We are not a strictly clerical church. Yet we exist in a world where we are surrounded by other churches, and in fact other groups both secular and religious where that in fact is the case. It is easy to see authority in the hierarchical structures of the Roman Church, but essentially the same type of authority can be found, albeit in different versions, in other churches. The imposed authority of a Pastor, or the congregational board can and often is as resistive to change, questions and spiritual curiosity as various Roman pontiffs. This is not to criticize our brothers and sisters on either side. It is only to say that from the very beginning Anglicanism has been different.

I believe that a reading of both Hooker and Cranmer show us a church that is not built on a doctrine of Sola Scriptura like that of some reformed traditions, nor on a magisterium like that of the Roman tradition. We could in a way say that both of these are communities that live by the “crook” (crozier). One is the “crook” of a pontiff, the other is the “crook” of conformity to community. Both are a form of “confessional” church. The “crook” of the Anglican bishop is not solely one of authority imposed, it is also one that

invites the faithful to follow the shepherd, it leads and guides as much as it corrects and holds together the church.

Instead, Hooker's "scripture, reason, tradition and experience" have been, and if we are to maintain our uniqueness as Anglicans, must continue to be, the foundation upon which we seek enlightenment, journey to discovery and find truth as a community of faith. It's the way we do theology. These need to be the principles by which we minister and manage in our communities. The problem is that we often simply don't want to do theology and in that fault could be our undoing.

Unfortunately, and too often, these are not the principles by which the life of our faith communities is ordered. It has something to do with how you and I as pastors approach the life of the community in which we exercise ministry, and how we approach ordering our understanding of authority in the wider church.

Our primate before attending the last Anglican Consultative Council meeting made it clear that he was not sure that other parts of the church understood that he alone could not speak for the Anglican Church of Canada until the Anglican Church of Canada had in fact spoken on a given issue. How we see and exercise authority is also part of who we are.

Within Anglicanism there are those who would like to see a more hierarchically based authority and process for decision making, and there are those who would like to see a more congregationally based authority. The difficulty is that one is subject to abuse by its narrowness (a change of position threatens it) and the other by its breadth (in that it is subject to the sway of popular opinion). As Anglicans we find ourselves in the middle, and for many that is not a comfortable place to be.

It is uncomfortable either because we function better if everything is clearly laid out and we are in control, or, we are uncomfortable with the weight of responsibility and are happy to let the wider community bear the burden. In both cases, Hooker's principles are a challenge. None the less, we need to become comfortable once more with this theological process.

Standing in the midst of the variety of Christian communities, while still honouring those who choose to live by whatever form of "crook" they choose, we need to understand that in being Anglicans, we have chosen another way, a way that must be evident in the ordering of both our personal lives and our corporate life.

Hooker's wisdom provides us with a wonderful blueprint.

- Scripture is the foundation on which we build.
- Tradition is how we have received Scripture in the context of the Faith of the Church and have witnessed to, (and are witnessing to) the story of salvation.
- Reason is the process which nurtures discernment.
- Experience informs us as we see Scripture, Tradition and Reason accompanied by signs.

Let's not forget, the signs. We do have an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit leading the church into all truth and that we must seek the experience of the signs of the Spirit as confirmation.

What characterizes us most and sets us apart from other churches is that we intentionally invite the body of faithful into being a discerning church. Anglicanism is a church "on its way someplace" not a church that has settled someplace. It is not a church that is running helter skelter here and there, but one that is on its way within a disciplined framework.

Bertrand Russell in the Reith Lectures entitled "*Authority and the Individual*" had this to say. "A healthy and progressive society requires both central control and individual and group initiative: without control there is anarchy, and without initiative there is

stagnation.” The same may be said of the church. Anglicanism has grasped and maintained, although it may be in danger of losing, that fine balance.

Now what does this mean in practical terms?

In practical terms it means that as pastors we have to be part of the discerning process, not apart from it in our faith communities. We bring, along with all other members of the church, the wisdom of scripture and the formative character of tradition. We encourage reason, and stimulate prayer that puts into context our experience of community and of the Holy Spirit at work in that community.

It’s a difficult thing to do, especially when faced with challenges. But if we are to stand with our identity as Anglicans among the family of Christian Churches, we only stand if that which characterizes us is maintained and strengthened. How we do business needs to be seen and known.

The final thought in this vein brings us back once more to the Articles of Religion, in this case number 19 which reads in part “*As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred, so also the Church of*

*Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith."*

This Article reminds us that the Church can err. The fact that we are a Reformation Church must not be forgotten lest we slip into the mistake of thinking that we can make no mistakes and that the life of the church is carved in stone. As one anonymous writer put it, "in the scriptures is says it came to pass, it didn't come to stay".

Anglicanism is fluid, it moves, it grows, it changes shape, always on the foundation of scripture, coloured by tradition, guided by reason and inspired by experience. Anything less and we have lost who we are.