ANGLICAN ECCLESIOLOGY:
Summary of its History and Current Assessment

The First phase of Anglicanism: The Sixteenth-Century Reformed Church. For Cranmer, the Anglican Formularies, Jewel and Hooker, Scripture is Polaris, that fixed and certain unmoving guide by which Christians should orient their lives. However, tradition and reason remain useful guides. Like the auxiliary stars of the Big Dipper, when tradition and reason are lined up, they helpfully point to the Bible’s own position. Therefore, the sixteenth-century Church of England gradually, but steadily, saw itself under Elizabeth as part of the wider Reformed branch of Continental Protestantism. In terms of ecclesiology, this meant that the visible church was considered to be primarily a human institution with a divine vocation to proclaim the Gospel through Word and Sacrament. As a result, mission determined order. Recovering the Gospel meant institutional separation from the Church of Rome. Spreading the Gospel effectively in England meant the retention of the historic three-fold orders. Apostolic succession was of the bene esse of the English Church. Apostolic teaching was of the esse.

The Second Phase of Anglicanism: The Seventeenth-Century Caroline Divines. As exemplified by Lancelot Andrewes, William Laud and Jeremy Taylor, the theologians favoured by King Charles I and King Charles II consciously rejected the reformed ethos of the Elizabethan church. Instead, beginning with their leadership of worship at Westminster Abbey and the cathedrals but gradually spreading throughout the land, the Caroline divines shaped Anglicanism as something free from both Roman and Protestant “innovations.” For them the Church of England’s doctrine was expressed, not by the
homilies or the articles, but by the prayers and ancient creeds in its liturgy. Their vision was a church where bishops as well as kings were divinely instituted, where grace flowed primarily through the sacraments, where the liturgy was to be performed with as much heavenly splendour as possible, and human wills strove to co-operate with sacramental grace so as to lead holy lives. Their commitment to the “holiness of beauty” was the genesis of what many later commentators would call “Classical Anglicanism.” Committed to repristinating the belief and practices of the undivided church, the Caroline divines insisted that both the interpretation of Scripture and theological reasoning had to be in accordance with the consensus of the Fathers. For them, apostolic succession and apostolic teaching were of the esse of the church.

With the outbreak of civil war in 1642, both Laud (1645) and Charles I (1649) were executed, episcopacy abolished and prayer book Anglicanism proscribed. When the monarchy was eventually restored in 1660, Charles II (1630-85) also restored the Anglican Church of his father, including a new Book of Common Prayer moderately revised along Laudian lines (1662). Consequently, nearly 3000 Puritan clergy left the state system.

The Third Phase of Anglicanism: Latitudarianism. The Glorious Revolution deposed Charles II’s Roman Catholic brother James II after only three years on throne in 1688. Some 400 Anglican clergy, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, left the church, since their belief in the divine institution of kings and bishops would not allow them to swear an oath to the new sovereigns. Wearied by more than two decades of strife with the Reformed clergy who had left the Church of England upon the return of the prayer book, the new government passed the Act of Toleration (1689) that permitted with certain
restrictions Trinitarian Protestants who dissented from the established Anglican parochial system to gather legally their own worshipping communities.

Having already lost those clergy who were most committed to Reformed Protestantism and now the most dedicated to the principles of the undivided church as well, the Whig leadership of the Anglican Church after the Glorious Revolution increasingly found its inspiration in the prevailing intellectual principles of the Enlightenment. As a result, the triumvirate of theological authority was reprioritized by such leading thinkers as Archbishop John Tillotson (1630-94) and John Locke (16321704). Now the search for simplicity of doctrine and the necessity of morality was begun through reason, whose conclusions then evaluated Scripture and church tradition. Moreover, reason itself was understood anew, as an autonomous, impartial judge, unlike reason in Cranmer and the Caroline Divines which was to be aided by grace and devotion. The Bishop of Bangor spoke for the Whig leadership when he insisted that the Church of England was a decidedly human institution that needed simply to stress Enlightenment sincerity rather than Caroline apostolicity. The end result was a church whose chief purpose was to inculcate personal morality so as to maintain public order.

**The Fourth Phase of Anglicanism: The Three Streams of the Nineteenth Century Church.** During the Nineteenth Century, three vigorous parties with the Church of England emerged, each appealing to the primacy of one of the theological authorities and the century of its dominance as the basis for its claim to be the true Anglican church.

The *Low Church Evangelicals* preached a return to the sixteenth-century Reformed formularies with their insistence on the supremacy of Scripture, justification by faith as wrought by personal conversion and a life of good works as its appropriate fruit. Among
the most influential were: Charles Simeon of Cambridge (1759-1836) whose earnest preaching persuaded many generations of university students to enter the ordained ministry; William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who led the battle in Parliament to abolish slavery in the British Empire; and Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (180185), who fought to improve the working and living conditions of the poor.

The High Church Oxford Movement produced Tracts for the Times, a series of publications that called the Church of England to recover its spiritual heritage as an ancient catholic institution as described and defended by the Caroline divines in the Seventeenth Century. In his contributions John Henry Newman argued that the Church of England was a via media, following the beliefs and practices of the early church uncorrupted either by papalism or Protestantism. In fact, Newman was the first person to coin the term “Anglicanism” as a separate branch of Christendom. Although he eventually found his own arguments unconvincing and converted to Roman Catholicism, other early Tractarians such as John Keble and E.B. Pusey remained. Using their immense scholarship, they continued to promote the Oxford Movement’s vision of Anglo-Catholicism, which in the Twentieth Century would succeed in reshaping the liturgy and, indeed, the very self-understanding of much of Anglicanism.

Finally, the Broad Church movement responded to the advent of German biblical criticism and Darwin’s theory of evolution by drawing on the Eighteenth Century’s commitment to the primacy of reason in theological discourse. Listen to Benjamin Jowett in his chapter “On the Interpretation of Scripture” in the landmark book Essays and Reviews (1860):
Almost all intelligent persons are agreed that the earth has existed for myriads of ages; the best informed are of opinion that the history of nations extends back some thousand years before the Mosaic chronology; recent discoveries in geology may perhaps open a further vista of existence for the human species, while it is possible, and may one day be known, that mankind spread not from one but from many centres over the globe; or as others say, that the supply of links which are at present wanting in the chain of animal life may lead to new conclusions respecting the origin of man.

It is of importance that Christianity should be seen to be in harmony with them . . . It is a mischief that critical observations which any intelligent man can make for himself, should be ascribed to atheism or unbelief. It would be a strange and almost incredible thing that the Gospel, which at first made war only on the vices of mankind, should now be opposed to one of the highest and rarest of human virtues—the love of truth. And that in the present day the great object of Christianity should be, not to change the lives of men, but to prevent them from changing their opinions; that would be a singular inversion of the purposes for which Christ came into the world. The Christian religion is in a false position when all the tendencies of knowledge are opposed to it. Such a position cannot be long maintained, or can only end in the withdrawal of the educated classes from the influences of religion.

What remains may be comprised in a few precepts, or rather is the expansion of a single one. Interpret the Scripture like any other book.

Note the essentially moralist nature of Jowett’s argument. The purpose of Christianity is to inculcate virtues, not specific doctrinal beliefs. When received theological convictions conflict with the advances of science, the power of religion to encourage morality is in danger of being lost. We must adjust our religious persuasions to what intelligent people can give assent in good conscience.

The influence of the Victorian commitment to morality did not end with merely shaping the broad church movement’s justification for adherence to reason. The vibrant presence of three different understandings of Anglicanism at the same time presented a national church with a significant crisis of self-understanding. If neither a common doctrinal understanding nor even a common set of worship practices held the Church of England together, what could? In the end, Victorian moralism afforded a way forward.
Since each different stream of Anglicanism still emphasised the necessity of repentance and ethical renewal, all could agree that what ultimately mattered was the common end of a better people, even if they could not agree as to a common theological means to do so.

**The Fifth Phase of Anglicanism: The Birth of a Communion—The Lambeth Conferences.** It was in this atmosphere of increased but competing understandings of religious devotion held together by a state church’s justification as the supporter of public morality that the Anglican Communion as we know it came into being. The various Anglican missionary movements had produced daughter churches throughout the world-wide British Empire. Following Article 34, these where eventually gathered together in national churches and united with one another through the bonds of affections of their bishops, brought together at Lambeth for a conference every ten years or so since 1867. Since many denominations had often joined forces for the sake of more effective missions, the larger Protestant missionary movement also produced a greater desire for Christian unity. Sensitive to this development, the Anglican bishops meeting at Lambeth in 1888 addressed how such a reunion of the various strands of Christendom could take place. Before reading the resolution, however, it should be noted that this was considered the basis of an ecumenical project, not the definition of Anglican ecclesiology. Hence, it contains no reference to the Prayer Book or the Articles, just to the marks of a true visible church, i.e., the pure Word, as defined by *sola Scriptura* to which the ancient Creeds testify, and the Sacraments rightly administered, namely, the dominical sacraments whose efficacy was ensured by the Words of Christ spoken in association with what he used. The episcopate is added, but since it is to be locally adapted, it means that it falls under Article 34, namely, something to be rooted in the culture of a specific community as a *bene esse* of the church,
not as an esse. Although in good Anglican and ecumenical style, of course, the phrase is ambiguous enough, that an alternate interpretation remains plausible. Here is the famous Lambeth Quadrilateral:

*Resolution 11, Lambeth Conference 1888*

That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards home reunion:

a. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith

b. The Apostles' Creed, as the baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

c. The two sacraments ordained by Christ himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him.

d. The historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church.

**The Sixth Phase of Anglicanism: the Current Situation.** In the Twentieth Century we witnessed the increasing secularisation of western culture, with its growing emphasis on the church’s role as the encourager of public morality. As public morality became more and more associated with civil and then human rights, the eighteenth-century emphasis on the primacy of reason over Scripture and Tradition came to dominate the other two traditions as well. Now we have Affirming Catholicism and Open Evangelicalism. In the last fifty years we have also seen the advent of Anglican Charismatics who combine a commitment to Scriptural primacy with an emphasis on personal experiential renewal. However, rather than become a separate, fourth addition to the traditional high, low and broad Anglican church parties, they have tended to express their contributions to Anglicanism primarily through seeking to renew existing Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical
groups and institutions. The major exceptions to that comment is, however, of course, the new influential centres of missional activity founded by Anglican Charismatics such as Holy Trinity Brompton and New Wine.

So here we are today. On the one hand, we have an increasing secular mainstream Anglicanism who sees its main function as supporting public morality, rather than advocating for specific theological commitments. And, of course, an increasingly secular western society derives its public morality no longer even third-hand from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather from an obligation to protect the individualistic expression of self. And on the other hand, we have a renewed biblical Anglicanism, in which Evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics and Charismatics are united by a common belief in the power of the Gospel to forgive our sins, reconciling us to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so as to unite us to him and to fellow Christians now and forever. The sense of unity among these groups is so strong, that many of their adherents see themselves as personally combining all three streams together.

So on the one hand, we have a morality-driven Anglicanism mainstream which has adopted a new secular morality. On the other hand, we have a renewed historic Anglicanism with different theological stories but with a common understanding of new life in Christ and a common commitment to traditional biblical morality. What has happened as a result? Now that the nineteenth-century Anglican moral consensus has collapsed at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, we are witnessing the slow disintegration of the Anglican Communion itself.
Assessment

What are the options for the future of Anglican ecclesiology?

1. Can we rely on morality? That, of course, is the revisionist hope. Just like Benjamin Jowett’s contribution to Essays and Reviews before them, the reappraisers argue that since the dispute over doctrine at the heart of the sexuality debate is undermining people’s confidence in the church as a moral agent, we must put such academic discussions to the side and gather around mission. But what mission do they offer, the Millennial Development Goals—i.e., secular morality.

2. Can we rely on structures? No, the English Gentlemen’s Club that was the Lambeth Conference had neither the rules nor the will to confront flagrant rejection of its advice. As a result, the crisis over morality has destroyed the ability of any current instrument of unity to speak for all of Anglicanism. And here the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans itself must be wary. A reliance on structure, rather than substance, is what got the Anglican Communion into the current mess. Morality apart from a common relationship with Jesus Christ cannot hold a Christian community together.

3. Can we rely on our Anglican heritage? That is the question before us. We have a motley inheritance. No group identifies with all parts of our past! Nevertheless, let me take a personal privilege to make some suggestions on the way forward.

   a. Article 19 makes clear that the church is above all else the fruit of mission. The Anglican church must be rooted in the absolute primacy of the power of the Gospel to create, sustain, renew, reform, enlarge, deepen, and eventually bring home into eternal unity the church militant with the church triumphant.
b. Article 11 make clear that for Anglicans the Gospel is grounded in the good news of justification by faith which permits our unity with God and each other in this earthly life, despite our blemishes, both personal and corporate.

c. Article 20 makes clear that the first task of the Church is to witness to Scripture’s saving message and protect Scripture’s authority to define it. Article 8 reminds us that the power of the Creeds is derived from their accurate witness to and summary of the teachings of Scripture.

d. That all biblical Anglicans can agree that the true visible church, by proclaiming the Gospel through Word and Sacrament, is the ordinary means by which the mystical church is called into being, and because of that divine vocation, God is present in its midst and works through it, being faithful to eventually at the end of time unite the Eucharistic Fellowship of the institutional church with his eternal Heavenly Banquet of the mystical.

e. That despite its divine vocation, a true earthly church is still a thoroughly human institution, subject to error (Article 20) and intended by God’s design to be rooted in the local community (Article 34). This commitment to the church as a human community in the process of redemption has both a strength and weakness—like human nature itself!

f. As a human community in need of redemption, the church as God’s instrument of mission is called upon to use theological reason (i.e., as guided by the Holy Spirit through Scripture and tradition) to inculcate the unchanging Gospel into the specific cultures of an individual human community. That’s how we ended up with both Royal Supremacy in the Sixteenth Century in the UK and the
separation of Church and State in the Eighteenth Century in the USA. That’s why we have such a wonderful diversity of Anglican expressions gathered together at this conference. Here is the strength of understanding the visible church as primarily a human institution.

g. However, there is a significant weakness to this approach as well. As we have seen, effectiveness in mission is the highest historic priority in Anglicanism, for the church derives its existence, purpose and power from the faithful proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament. Because of this divine call, the church has God’s assurance of his abiding presence among his people. Nevertheless, since the church as a human institution can err, the theological reasoning necessary for adapting the proclamation of the Gospel to a specific culture can all too often lead to the culture adapting and changing the Gospel to their own human idolatries. Therefore, a global fellowship is necessary to help individual national churches to discern whether a specific gospel proclamation is an effective adaptation to culture or merely a capitulation to it.

h. Finally, we need to take seriously the problem of our Erastian inheritance. The ethos of Anglicanism is as the definer and defender of a culture’s morality, whether de jure in England or merely de facto in many other, but not all, provinces around the Globe. While this position in human society has in the past undoubtedly greatly aided Anglicanism’s platform for gospel mission, the world has changed. Now that very instinct, too often that very need, to be the cultural leader in matters of morality, seriously undermines Anglicanism’s witness to the Gospel, because western culture has by and large abandoned
biblical morality. We must turn once again to Article 34 and realize that to proclaim the Gospel to current culture, we must use theological reason once again to learn how to become a post-Constantinian church.

i. What would that look like for Anglicanism?

- a fellowship of national churches
- confessing a common statement of biblical faith like the Jerusalem Declaration, rather than seeking to be the guardians of western secular morality
- sharing a common structure of catholic order as, at the least, the *bene esse* of the church
- exercising between the national churches the ecclesiastical discipline implied in Article 19’s phrase the sacraments “duly administered” and made explicit in the rubrics of the prayer books. For as a human institution, albeit with a divine vocation, the provinces need the fellowship of each other to help and guide them to maintain a true understanding of the Gospel.
- sending forth in mission the various Anglican expressions of orthodox Christian faith to be the church in local communities.

j. What will be the result?

If the FCA merely clings to a common morality and a mutual rejection of neo-colonial imperialism, God will not express his mission imperative through us, and all our efforts will flounder in the end. However, if we will devote ourselves to inculcating the Gospel in our lives and life together, both as
individuals and as ecclesial communities at all levels, from local to international, then whatever happens in the larger Anglican Communion will be of decidedly less importance. For then FCA’s witness to the Gospel in Word and deed will stand the test of time, come what may, whether as the agent which will have renewed the wider Communion, or as the enduring expression of Anglicanism which outlasted it.

In conclusion, “mission,” I say, “mission.” Mission in our hearts, in our heads, in our hands, in our hopes, in our failures, in our dreams, in all our lives and at our death, mission. For mission has always been the essential DNA of authentic Anglicanism, since mission is the very nature of God’s active presence in our midst as the church militant. Thanks be to God, our Lord will not rest until we and all that are his are revealed as the church triumphant for all eternity.