

## The English Reformation

### Transcript of the talk: What is the English reformed tradition, how does it differ from other reformed traditions and why it is worth preserving

Tertullian, the early Latin Church Father, at the end of the second century, issued a warning. It was against listening to any theological discussion unless you know the spiritual pedigree of the writer. He said:

“We admit no man to any disputation concerning sacred things, or to the scanning and examining of particular questions of religion, unless he first show us of whom he received the faith, by whose means he became a Christian, and whether he admit and hold the general principles wherein all Christians do, and ever did, agree.”

So first this afternoon I will say something of my own pilgrimage and pedigree. The key influences relevant to this afternoon were in the late 1950s and early 60s. First, there was, in my university vacations, a North London evangelical rector, while in term time there was the Christian Union with men like the young John Stott, the young Jim Packer, and the young Michael Green being regular visitors.

Then secondly there was Basil Gough, the rector of St Ebbe's Church in Oxford, and his confirmation classes—basically on the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer.

Thirdly, there was an unknown clergyman, dressed in a cassock and dog-collar, standing on the chancel steps of St Ebbe's, giving consecutive addresses for the Christian Union mission. This was the first systematic and coherent exposition of the Christian faith I had ever heard. The unknown clergyman, by the way, went by the name of Richard Lucas! (It may have been his first university mission).

With that said, I must address what Tertullian would call the *Theological Question* for this afternoon, namely:

“What is the English Reformed Tradition, how does it differ from other Reformed Traditions and why is it worth preserving?”

The classic answer has to begin with Sir Thomas Browne. He was a seventeenth century medical doctor, who wrote about the Church of England at the time of the Reformation. In his *Religio Medici*, published in 1642, he said this:

“As there were many reformers, so likewise many reformations - every country proceeding in a particular way and method, according as their national interest together with their constitution and clime inclined them.”

He then gave high praise to the Church of England “whose Articles, constitutions and customs seem so consonant unto reason”. He also referred to Luther, Calvin, the Council of Trent, and the Synod of Dort. So we have to realise that there were various reformed traditions.

Five were alluded to by Thomas Browne—the Saxon tradition of Luther, the Genevan tradition of Calvin, the Dutch tradition at Dort, Rome (trying to Reform itself) and, yes, the English tradition of the Church of England as Elizabeth I had left it. Browne was writing his book with King Charles I still, just, on the throne. And the Puritan majority Westminster Assembly, wanting to restructure the Church of England, began just after he had finished the first edition of his book. And the Civil War had started in 1642. It was a frenzied situation. But Browne did not want the destruction of the Church of England.

And he wrote about things not covered by the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer - the “standards” for what became the mainstream English Reformed tradition - as follows:

“Whatsoever is beyond, as points indifferent, I observe according to the rules of my private reason, or the humour and fashion of my Devotion; neither believing this, because Luther affirmed it, or disproving that because Calvin hath disavouched it. I condemn not all things in the Council of Trent, nor approve all in the Synod of Dort.

In brief, where the Scripture is silent, the Church is my Text; where, that [*the Church*] speaks, ‘tis my comment; where there is joyn silence of both, I borrow not the rules of my Religion from Rome or Geneva, but the dictates of my own reason.”

That is the classic method of the English tradition as seen by a layman—Scripture, first, and absolute; then, the wisdom of the ages and other contemporaries that agree, the tradition of the Church; then, my own view or reason.

But we have to be careful about this word “tradition” and how you define it. Yes, you can read the key results of the Council of Trent and, today, the current Church of Rome’s tradition in its *Catechism of the Catholic Church – popular and definitive edition 2000*—778 pages long.

It is relatively easy to define the English Reformed tradition because its historic doctrinal defining documents have been few and they have been enshrined in the law of the land. So these legally, define uniquely and simply, the Church of England. For, now, a Church of England Measure has the force of an Act of Parliament—it is a statute.

And, so, the English tradition has been Established and, with the monarch as the supreme layman, is defined legally in *the Worship and Doctrine Measure 1974* in words that also form the Church of England’s Canon A5:

“The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the 39 Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.”

And, in passing, that implies at least the clauses that make up the *Reform Covenant\**, which I trust all of you know and, to which, all of you assent. And that is where you find defined the English Reformed Tradition.

However, for the Lutheran tradition you have to go to its Book of Concord of 1580 with a huge amount as its doctrinal basis—yes, the 3 Creeds, but the Augsburg Confession of 1530; the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (a vast document) of 1531; the Smalcald Articles of Luther, 1537; the Treatise on the Power of the Pope (1537); the Small Catechism of Luther (1529), the Large Catechism of Luther (1529), the epitome of the Formula of Concord (1577) and The Solid or Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord (1577).

But, if you ask what is the Calvinistic tradition where do you start? There are so many traditions in different countries. Take America. In the US there are a dozen Reformed denominations and perhaps another half a dozen with a Reformed heritage.

And by the way, this is one reason why I am not advising people to leave the Church of England at this time. It was disastrous in 1662. Already the Calvinistic Congregationalist Pilgrim Fathers had left, of course. But splits in this Calvinistic-Puritan tradition have given rise to so many further splits, about which Thomas Browne, again, was quite perceptive:

“Heads that are disposed unto schism and complexionally propense to innovation, are naturally indisposed for a community, nor will be ever confined unto the order or economy of one body; and therefore, when they separate from others, they knit but loosely among themselves; nor

contented with a general breach or dichotomy with their Church do subdivide and mince themselves almost into Atoms."

However, back to the Calvinist tradition. Calvin, the progenitor of the tradition, like Luther, wrote so much (or had written for him by way of transcription). And his thinking was necessarily developing, witness the number of editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. So where is a clear statement of this tradition?

Answer: fortunately, it is in the publicly agreed and published documents of the Westminster Assembly that met and worked in London from 1643 to 1653. These, in addition to the Westminster Confession, include the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Directory of Public Worship, and Presbyterian Church Government; and all were adopted by the Scottish Church and Government but not all paragraphs of the Confession by the English Government—and with 1662 none of them, of course. However, the Westminster Confession became influential throughout the English-speaking world, and especially in America. So, these documents were and often still are representative of the wider non-Anglican Reformed tradition. Therefore, it is fair to treat these as the Calvinistic interpretation of the Christian faith in contrast to the mainstream English Reformed tradition which is Anglican. So, we will proceed on that basis.

But now an important word of introduction before we get down to the key distinctives of the English Reformed tradition.

As our friend Thomas Browne said on the history of our English Reformed tradition:

"It is an unjust scandal of our adversaries, and a gross error in ourselves, to compute the nativity of our religion from Henry the eighth."

And that was because he was making the obvious point that what was being reformed was something already in existence—namely the Church of Christ truly Catholic. All the magisterial Reformers (i.e. those involved with the State)—unlike some of the radical reformers like the Anabaptists (many of whom were far more extreme than Baptists today, of course), wanted to be "catholic" Christians - ("catholic" being the transliteration of the Greek for the Latin "universal"). But from its use in the phrase "catholic creeds and councils", it importantly implies *doctrinal* universality and not just *territorial* universality. And, practically, in their "catholicity" these Reformers claimed to be going back to the wisdom of the early Fathers of the Church (and they were) and not just to the New Testament, as it were, nakedly. But these early Fathers pointed them back to the Scriptures. So it was a Scriptural Catholicity. In the Anglican Homilies in *An Exhortation to Obedience*, there is reference to "the Catholic faith contained in Holy Scripture." So our English tradition is truly catholic but *reformed* catholic.

Also, our tradition is not a "half-way house". It is unhelpful to say that the Church of England is halfway between the Pope and Calvin. It is more correct to call it "moderate". It is a moderate Calvinistic church. But still be careful. Oliver O'Donovan rightly criticizes the claim that "Anglican moderation" is "steering a steady middle path between the exaggerated positions of Rome on the one hand and Geneva on the other." He says:

"There was nothing particularly 'middle' about most of the English Reformers' theological positions ... Their moderation consisted rather in a determined policy of separating the essentials of faith and order from adiaphora [*things indifferent*] ... Anglican moderation is the policy of reserving strong statement and conviction for the few things which really deserve them."

The Anglican Settlement of Elizabeth I was by no means a fudge over essential matters. For from now on the Church of England was theologically rooted in the *Thirty-nine Articles*, the Prayer Book and the Ordinal along with the Homilies which were printed sermons to be read in churches. The first five in the first book of Homilies (written by Cranmer under Edward VI) are basic reading for the theology of

the Church of England. They are on Scripture, Sin, Salvation, Faith and Good Works. They are still easy to read; and they give you, in short space, the Gospel Foundations of the Church of England. The second book of Homilies, published by the authority of Queen Elizabeth I, and more Puritan, is important as showing the concerns current at the time of the Settlement. Read in context they are still relevant for today.

So now for some distinctions and the Regulative Principle

How did all this work out in practice? The Settlement certainly meant clearer distinctions between the English Reformed tradition enshrined in law and Roman Catholics; but it also led to distinctions with the other Reformed traditions. This accounts for how Anglicans can differ today from some of their Free Church friends. It is essential to understand the reasons for these differences. But it all started with robes!

In 1565 with the Settlement more or less established, Queen Elizabeth wrote to her Archbishop at that time, Matthew Parker, saying she was not happy about the way clergy were failing to robe in services. They were not conforming to the Prayer Book, which after all was a Protestant and not a Roman Catholic book, and she herself had championed it. Parker tried to take the side of the clergy along with other bishops. But their Reformed friends in Zurich, with whom some had taken refuge during Mary's reign of terror, advised the bishops and clergy to obey the Queen. What she was requiring, they said, was not a gospel issue.

But, unfortunately, this issue had the effect of helping to divide biblical Protestants into conformist and non-conformist groups. The first non-conforming manifesto was entitled *A brief discourse against the outward apparel*. It argued that in themselves vestments were harmless, but because they were associated with Rome, simple people could be led astray. A defence of conforming to the Anglican Settlement was given then by Archbishop Grindal, who succeeded Matthew Parker as Archbishop of Canterbury:

"We who are bishops [Grindal informed Henry Bullinger who succeeded the Reformer Zwingli in Zurich] on our first return [after Mary], and before we entered on our ministry, contended long and earnestly for the removal of those things that have occasioned ... dispute; but as we were unable to prevail, either with the Queen or the Parliament, we judged it best, after consultation on the subject, not to desert our churches for the sake of a few ceremonies, and those not unlawful in themselves, especially since the pure doctrine of the gospel remained in all its integrity and freedom."

However, none of this was actually new with Elizabeth I. She was just following Cranmer and Ridley. In their day John Hooper had been against robes. Cranmer would have none of it. A principle was at stake. So he refused to consecrate Hooper until he changed his mind. Hooper's views were expressed in his *The Regulative Principle and Things Indifferent*:

"Nothing should be used in the Church which has not either the express Word of God to support it, or otherwise is a thing indifferent in itself which brings no profit when done or used, but no harm when not done or omitted."

That seems fine. But then he said—and this is important:

"Indifferent things must have their origin and foundation in the Word of God."

This is the Regulative Principle. It seems to mean that as robes (and wedding rings together with a host of other things) are not mentioned in the New Testament, they cannot claim to have their origin in the Word of God. Therefore, it was argued, they ought to be ruled out. A response to this position was then given by Bishop Ridley (later to be martyred under Queen Mary - as was Hooper himself). However, Hooper in 1551 conformed and became the Bishop of Gloucester. But he was, and still is, known as "the father of English

non-conformity.” Nor were things really resolved as is evident from what subsequently happened under Elizabeth and Matthew Parker.

In some quarters the issue is still alive today. And with the current leadership in modern institutionalized Anglicanism too often giving little evidence of a commitment to the English Reformed tradition, more seem to be moving to this non-conforming “Puritan” tradition that has an instinct for the *Regulative Principle* where practices are not permitted unless clearly endorsed by the New Testament. This principle indicates a fundamental difference between the Anglican and non-conforming *Westminster Confession of 1643*. Chapter XXI, section 1, says:

“the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped ... according to any way *not prescribed in the Holy Scripture*”.

Some may already be asking, “isn’t this all academic?” The answer has to be “No!” For there is much to be said in favour of modest robes, festivals and the Church’s liturgical year, for example. Hooker said wisely, “that the church is a society and a society supernatural”. Hence, we have to take note of how human societies work. For the Church is not immune to the disfunctions of human societies that robes, festivals and routines seek to address. To over spiritualize the church and to ignore sociological realities is simply gnostic. However, very serious is the fact that this tradition rejects the Creeds! There is nothing in the *Westminster Confession* (or in the *Directory of Public Worship*) about Creeds. And evangelical free churches I visit still never recite the Creeds. That goes back to the 1640s and the *Westminster Assembly*.

*On Article XIX and the word “congregation”.*

All that leads us on to the doctrine of the Church which the Church of England, I believe, has particularly got right. I refer to Article XIX of *The Thirty-nine Articles* entitled “Of the Church”, which says:

“The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

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.”

The background then as now to this article is that the Reformed churches, and the Reformed in the churches, did not really come to a common mind either in terms of its essence, its basic structure or its relationship to the State. Indeed, there were deep disagreements. And there still are! But, surely Hooker identified the problem:

“For lack of diligent observing the difference, first between the Church of God mystical and visible, then between the visible sound and corrupted, sometimes more sometimes less, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed.”

However, we’ve got what we’ve got and our Article is pretty clear. It is an attempt to state what is essential to being a Church of Christ. Cranmer was following Luther in the Augsburg Confession in attempting to define the essence of the church. But, unlike Luther, he has the wisdom to define what Church he was talking about. It is the “visible” church as distinct from the church “mystical” (his term and a better term than “invisible” as many of that church “mystical”, who are alive, are, obviously, in the “visible” church).

A substantive issue relates to what the word “congregation” means in Article XIX. This is important still for today. I once heard a bishop say it means the diocese not the local congregation. But that is not what the Article says. Article XIX defines “the visible church” as “*a congregation*”—note the indefinite “a”—a *local*

congregation. For where "the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered" visibly is not in the diocese (a geographical region) but in the fellowship of St Helen's or Jesmond Parish Church. And arguing in this way is simply to follow the Royal Declaration that prefaces the Articles by saying a man ...

"... shall submit to it [*text of the Articles*] in the plain and full meaning thereof: and shall not put his own sense or comment to be the meaning of the Article, but shall take it in the literal and grammatical sense."

But what about the Lutherans if Cranmer was following Luther? Well, Luther's Augsburg Article 8 entitled "What the Church is", simply says:

"The Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers."

That is the entire definition. So that looks like the church that is the Church "mystical"—because made up of "true believers". But Augsburg Article 8 then, confusingly, goes on to talk about the unworthiness of ministers which is covered in our Article 26. So, it cannot only be made up of true believers. It must be the church visible.

Practically Luther acted with the local church as the congregation where sometimes the buck had to stop. For we find him writing to *villagers* of Leisnig in Saxony as follows:

"Wherever there is a *Christian congregation* in possession of the gospel, it not only has the right and power but also the duty—on pain of losing the salvation of its souls and in accordance with the promise made to Christ in baptism—to avoid, to flee, to depose, and to withdraw from the authority that our bishops ... and the like are now exercising."

That is the village church and not the diocese. That advice follows (in terms of catholicity) Augustine, who wrote:

"We should not obey those bishops who have been duly elected, if they commit errors, or teach or ordain anything contrary to the divine Scripture."

And that principle, without being directed to any particular body appears, in Augsburg Article 28, "Of Ecclesiastical Power", the last Article of the entire Confession.

But what about the Calvinistic Westminster Confession? Well, Article 25, starts off with these words, "the Catholic or universal church which is invisible" as the primary unit. It conspicuously does not use the word "congregation". For its primary focus is the church mystical, subordinate to which is the local church, of course. True, at the beginning of the 16th century the Latin "*congregatio*" and the English "congregation" could refer either to "the whole body of the faithful" or a society of believers (like a diocese) or to a particular local assembly. So, you have to look at its context for the meaning. And interestingly in our Article XIX Cranmer doesn't use the Latin word *congregatio* but *coetus* (a coming together).

So the English Reformed doctrine of the Church is complex but clear enough. In outline our Reformers distinguished the church visible from the church "mystical"; the church as a clerical institution from the church as people; and the national church from the local congregation. We could do worse than follow those distinctions. And let Hooker have the last word. He said that for "convenience" churches like "the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch" of Article XIX have to be "limited" into "several *congregations termed parishes*".

Let me now deal with some other Fundamental issues which the Church of England, particularly has got right.

*First*, a short comment on the Papacy.

The English Reformers held that the canonical scripture, the Bible, was to be the supreme theological authority in the Church. That is why they were opposed to a Pope getting in the way of God and the believer. But the English Reformers were against *all* “popes”. They were against the wrong sort of adulation for heroes amongst Protestants as well as adulation for the Pope. Bishop J.C. Ryle, the first Anglican bishop of Liverpool, was a later strong exponent of this conviction. In his paper *The Fallibility of Ministers*, Ryle is arguing that the Church’s Bible is the only infallible authority. That contrasts with the potential fallibility of *all* the Church’s ministers including the Reformers. After discussing the apostle Paul’s public opposition to Peter at Antioch, recorded in Galatians 2.11–16, Ryle surveys some history and says:

“The first great lesson we learn from Antioch is that *great ministers may make great mistakes*. The Reformers were honoured instruments in the hand of God for reviving the cause of truth on earth. Yet hardly one of them can be named who did not make some great mistake. Martin Luther held pertinaciously the doctrine of consubstantiation. Melanchthon was often timid and undecided. Calvin permitted Servetus to be burned. Cranmer recanted and fell away for a time from his first faith. Jewel subscribed to Popish doctrine for fear of death. The Puritans, in after times, denounced toleration ... [and] Wesley and Toplady abused each other in the strongest language.”

This conviction is very releasing. For when a great teacher is wrong over something, it does not mean you reject all the good that teacher also teaches. No-one is perfect. Only the Bible, says Ryle, is to be considered infallible [*or to use Wycliffe’s excellent and better term, “incorrigible” – it cannot be corrected*]. And Hooker was concerned at the way some people were already putting Calvin in the place of Scripture and making him their “pope”. They were reading him rather than the Bible. “His books” were, says Hooker, “almost the very canon to judge both doctrine and discipline by.” Hooker had a great respect for Calvin. But Hooker typifies the Anglican Reformed view. It was once put brilliantly by Bob Fyall, the Old Testament scholar (and himself a Scottish Presbyterian): “It is a pity Calvin didn’t write the Bible”.

So first the papacy.

*Secondly*, comes what I call the Severe Logic of the Westminster tradition and some other Reformed traditions, which the Anglican tradition avoids.

That is seen most clearly in the issue of Predestination. Apart from the Regulative Principle this was another main contention of our Anglican Reformers against some other forms of Calvinism. Nor was this Anglican position a compromise of Elizabeth I. It, too, was all there with Cranmer. Take Article XVII and compare that with the *Westminster Confession*, Chapter III entitled *Of God’s Eternal Decree*. In that chapter of the *Westminster Confession* you read this in section 5:

“Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.”

So, there is no foreseeing by God of who would believe and then predestining them. No! It is all of God’s “secret counsel and good pleasure.” Nor was this controversial. The English Reformers agreed, as did the Roman Catholic tradition. But then in section 7 of the *Westminster Confession* you read this:

“The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.”

This is called “reprobation”—the predestining of people to death and hell. But our English Reformers do not affirm this doctrine in our Articles. Here is Article XVII – it is entitled, *Of Predestination and Election*:

“Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour ...”

The Article goes on:

“As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons ... So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation. Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.”

Our English Reformers realised that you had to be very careful with the doctrine of Predestination. Pastorally if presented wrongly, it could do more harm than good. That is why they were so keen to keep the balance *and proportion* of Scripture. So, they said:

“we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture.”

We are to focus on obedience to God's *clear* will “which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God”. We are not to waste time on speculation into God's “counsel that is secret to us.” Our Reformers had looked at the Bible and they found they should not jump to conclusions about God's “hidden wisdom”. And they wanted biblical balance and proportion.

For, *first*, the Bible shows that Jesus avoided talking about “double predestination”. In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats he speaks of the faithful believers who are “blessed by my Father” (Mat 25.34) as inheriting “the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”. But with regard to the unfaithful who are “you who are cursed” (yet with no mention of “my Father” as the curser), he speaks of “eternal fire prepared [*not for you*] but for the devil and his angels.”

*Secondly*, in Romans 9, where verses 14 and following form a key passage on predestination, Paul says:

“What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath - prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory” (Rom 9.22-23).

Note, *one*, “what if”—Paul hesitates about being dogmatic. Note, *two*, God's sovereignty in this section is clearly a sovereignty of mercy. God is withholding immediate judgment—“What if God ... bore with great patience the objects of wrath.” Then, *three*, Paul explicitly mentions in verse 23, “objects of his mercy whom he [God] prepared in advance for glory”, while in verse 22 Paul does not mention God as the agent. Paul referred simply to “objects of wrath prepared for destruction”—not “prepared by God for destruction”. It is a simple passive. No agent is mentioned.

Then, *thirdly*, in addition to Jesus and Paul, there is Peter who says in his first letter:

“They stumble because they disobey the message - which is also what they were destined for [*again there is no agent*]” (1 Pet 2.8).

Peter does not say their disobedience was “destined for *by God*”. Now, of course, logically if God is sovereign over all, logic says there must be a double predestination. But Jesus and the apostles did not teach this. They did not deny it. They kept silent. There is a legitimate place for mystery or for us simply not to know. This side of heaven not everything is revealed, either by special revelation in Scripture or by general revelation through the natural order - as Psalm 19 verse 1 teaches some things can be. But sufficient is revealed. Paul makes this clear:

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part: then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13.12).

Our Anglican forefathers were conscious of the Old Testament truth taught in Deuteronomy:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deut 29.29).

Unlike some other Reformers, the Anglican Reformers were less “systematic”. They did not write great theologies. They gave us instead *Thirty-nine Articles* and Homilies—serious sermons—not a *Westminster Confession* which is a mini systematic theology and, indeed, has much to teach us. But as Griffith Thomas, the first Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, put it:

“There is obvious danger in every attempt at systematizing Christian truth ... it is far better to be content with ‘Articles’ or ‘points’ with gaps unfilled ... This method prevents teaching becoming hardened into a cast iron system which cannot expand. It is the virtue of the Church of England articles that they ... do not commit Churchmen to an absolute, rigid system of doctrine.”

Bishop J.C.Ryle saw this “over-systematizing” also behind the concept of a “limited” atonement where many of you will know some Reformers asserted that Christ died only for “the elect”, not “the world”. When commenting on John the Baptist’s statement in John 1.29 that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and those who claim that this does not mean the world but the elect, Ryle writes this:

“I hold as strongly as anyone that Christ’s death is profitable to none but to the elect who believe in his name. But I dare not limit and pare down such expressions as the one before us. I dare not say that no atonement has been made in any sense, except for the elect. *I believe it is possible to be more systematic than the Bible in our statements.* When I read that the wicked who are lost, ‘deny the Lord that bought them’ (2 Pet 2.1) and that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself’ (2 Cor 5.19), I dare not confine the intentions of redemption to the saints alone. Christ is for every man” (*Expository Thoughts in the Gospels* John vol 1, pp 61-2 - italics mine).

This seems to be the view of Cranmer, too. In Article XXXI we are told,

“The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for *all the sins of the whole world*, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.”

How, in the divine economy, Christ died “for every man” surely remains one of those “secret things that belong to the Lord our God.”

In the remaining time I’ve got, let me mark one other way, among a number of others, why the English Reformed tradition is worth preserving. But first, a problem with our own tradition that we must deal with because, I believe, the tradition *is* worth preserving,

George Marsden, the US historian, studied the traditions of those 20 US Reformed (or with Reformed heritage) denominations and groups. He saw three identities. *First*, the doctrinalists—sticklers for the Westminster Assembly. *Secondly*, the Dutch tradition from Dort via Kuyper and in the modern age Francis

Shaeffer with their concern for the whole of the culture and Christ's Lordship over all of life. And, *thirdly*, the tradition of mainstream American evangelicalism, from places like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Fuller Seminary, the Billy Graham Organization, the Gospel Coalition, and in England, of course, the Proclamation Trust, the Christian Institute, and UCCF—in fact, many of us here, English Reformed people. But the history of such Evangelicalism is that, necessarily because of the their distinctives, they have a lowest common denominator theology. That Marsden says is from ...

“... the evangelical-pietist tradition – a certain style of emphasis on evangelism, personal devotion, Methodist mores [*or Wesleyan disciplines*], and openness in expressing one’s evangelical commitment.”

And that is true. But that is not sufficient when key doctrines are at stake or key policies with doctrinal implications are at stake, as we are all facing today. I was on the General Synod of the Church of England for 15 years, a chairman and eventually on the Standing Committee (now the Archbishops Council). There I saw, first hand, too many good Evangelicals go with the flow—a liberalising flow. And they still do, especially when they become bishops!

What can you do about it? Many things need to be done about it. But, certainly, there needs be better general theological understanding but not an “ivory tower scholasticism”. And in that better understanding one focus now needs to be on the doctrine of man. The previous great crises in the church doctrinally were in the fourth and fifth centuries over the doctrine of God; at the Reformation it was over Salvation and the Church; and today it is over the doctrine of Man.

So much for a problem in our own tradition which we need to address, if the tradition is to be preserved.

Finally, one very important reason why we need the English Reformed tradition preserved is this. I believe it has been more right on marriage and sex, a fundamental in the doctrine of man, than the tradition of the Westminster Assembly. Three things are to be said.

*First*, there are the purposes of marriage. The difference between the English Reformers and the Westminster tradition is over the first purpose of marriage. The English in its marriage service said it was, “the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.” But the Westminster Confession puts it like this in Chapter 24.2:

“Marriage was [*first*] ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; [*only then, secondly*] for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and [*finally*] for prevention of uncleanness.”

Of course, Genesis 1 comes before Genesis 2. And the first command, the first words, in fact, to man were: “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28). That was, indeed, the blessing of God. Many are so sad when they cannot have children. But the words, “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him,” come in chapter 2.18. Of course, if the number one purpose of marriage is companionship—well, two men or two women can fill the bill, as people have been claiming recently.

And getting this wrong has serious demographic considerations. For, contrary to awareness, there is serious underpopulation in much of the world today in spite of the demographic momentum in which longevity masks the fall in birth-rate. In China it has been dire (in Taiwan it is worse, with Singapore worst). The Maoist only one child policy means that, in time, one adult is responsible economically for seven adults—themselves, two parents and four grandparents. And England and Wales is also seriously failing in this regard. For 2.1 children is the replacement fertility requirement. But in England and Wales 1.7 is the current birth rate, and the birth rate to non-UK born mothers, which keeps us as high as we are, is down. And other European countries are worse.

And that is why, among other things, not least Christian obedience, we want to preserve the English Reformed doctrine of marriage.

*Secondly*, here we are half-way between Rome and Westminster. The English tradition allowed for nullity and separation but not remarriage. Interestingly even Westminster Confession Chapters 24 sections 5-6 on divorce and remarriage were excised by the Puritan English Parliament in 1648 and it was published without them. But Scotland kept them and so has the mainstream of the Westminster tradition. Unlike Rome, in the English Reformed tradition the repentant remarried are admitted to Holy Communion. But much more can and needs to be said about all that on another occasion.

And, *thirdly*, on sex and marriage, the English tradition benefits from reading the Apocrypha which Article VI says, “the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners [*modern morals*.]” We need the Apocrypha to know something about the intertestamental period. But in the opening chapter of the Westminster Confession, section 4 says the books of the Apocrypha are “no part of the canon ... and of no authority ... nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”

But when you read 1 Maccabees 1.55 and 2 Maccabees 4.10–17 you read, significantly, that the Maccabean revolution was occasioned by the Hellenization of the Jews under Antiochus IV. And the establishment of a Gymnasium in Jerusalem was its flash point. For Greek Gymnasia shocked even the Romans and so even more the Jews. To quote Marrou,

“their [*the Romans*] sense of modesty was shocked by its nudity, and they regarded homosexuality - which centred round the gymnasium – as something that Greek civilization should be ashamed of.”

However, when the Temple was eventually cleansed after its desecration by Antiochus IV—with its abomination of desolation—a Festival of Dedication was established. And Jesus was in the temple on one occasion at the time of the Feast of Dedication (John 10.22). And everyone would have known about the Gymnasium and the paganism from which the Jews had escaped. That escape was what the feast celebrated! So arguments that the New Testament Christ and the Apostles did not know about a homosexual culture, such as we now have, are quite implausible.

We should therefore read the Apocrypha, not for doctrine but to know the background to the New Testament. There, of course, is an ESV version now of the Apocrypha. So our Reach ordinands at JPC, on being made presbyter, are given a copy of the Bible, with an Apocrypha included (as I was on my ordination).

And with that I rest my case, that the English Reformed Tradition is different from other traditions but is certainly worth preserving.

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#### \* THE REFORM COVENANT

We who subscribe this Covenant bind ourselves together in fellowship to uphold, defend and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the doctrine of the Church of England.

We affirm the definition of this doctrine that is set out in Canon A5 as follows:

*The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the 39 Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.*

**Specifically, we lay emphasis on the following:**

1. The triune personhood of God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the historical incarnation of the Son of God through the Virgin Mary.
2. The substitutionary sin-bearing death, bodily resurrection, present heavenly reign, and future return to judgement of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.
3. The universality of sin, the present justification of sinners by grace through faith in Christ alone, and their supernatural regeneration and new life through the Holy Spirit.
4. The calling of the Church and of all Christian people to a life of holiness and prayer according to the Scriptures.
5. The primacy of evangelism and nurture in each local church's task of setting forth the kingdom of God.
6. The significance of personal present repentance and faith as determining eternal destiny.
7. The finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the uniqueness of his ministry as our prophet, priest and king, and the only Saviour of sinners.
8. The infallibility and supreme authority of "God's Word written" and its clarity and sufficiency for the resolving of disputes about Christian faith and life. (See [Article 20](#)).

**Our understanding of God's way of life for his people includes:**

- a. The special teaching responsibility of ordained leaders within the every-member ministry of the body of Christ, and the need to provide for its continuance.
- b. The unique value of women's ministry in the local congregation but also the divine order of male headship, which makes the headship of women as priests in charge, incumbents, dignitaries and bishops inappropriate.
- c. The vital importance of monogamous life-long marriage for the care and nurture of children, and the well being of human society.
- d. The rightness of sexual intercourse in heterosexual marriage, and the wrongness of such activity both outside it and in all its homosexual forms.
- e. The urgent need for decentralisation at national, diocesan and deanery level, and the need radically to reform the present shape of episcopacy and pastoral discipline, to enable local churches to evangelise more effectively.

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**The correction provided to the Oxford English Dictionary**

I have not been following much the present discussion on "the church" and what people are saying. Are the Church of England (C of E) people really saying that the local congregation is the only subject for the predicate "church"? In this discussion I think it is important we distinguish the C of E's official doctrine of the church from the function and meaning of Article XIX. With regard to the official doctrine of the C of E, that is defined by Canon A5 according to the Church of England (Worship and Doctrine) Measure 1974. That gives us a Catholic Western English Reformed doctrine, which has to take account of Article XIX,

which I think gives us a congregational and a connectional doctrine of the church. That is not a woolly via media. Richard Hooker expressed the issue near the beginning of Book 3:

"For lack of diligent observing the difference, first, between the Church of God, mystical and visible, then between the visible sound and corrupted, sometimes more, sometimes less, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed."

With regard to what the word "congregation" means in Article XIX—if it means a "local" congregation in that context, as I think it does, that can't give you a congregationalist polity, witness the reference to the Churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome as you rightly say.

Below is a short note I wrote, originally for the Oxford English Dictionary some years ago, after our Bishop, quoted the dictionary as an authority for the meaning of the word "congregation" in Article XIX and referring to the wider visible church (which it can do) but I don't think there. There, I think, the focus is to be on the local congregation but of course not in isolation but connected with other congregations under a presbyter and, in the C of E, a bishop.

Below is my note:

#### **On Article XIX and the word "congregation".**

At the beginning of the 16th century the Latin "congregatio" and the English "congregation" could refer either to "the whole body of the faithful" or to a particular local assembly or society of believers. But as time went on distinctions were being made. The Thirty-nine Articles and the developing Book of Common Prayer did not just reflect those distinctions. They helped make them.

It is quite correct to point out that the Latin of the Article is *coetus* ("a coming together") and not *congregatio*. But this is an important clue to what the Article means. It means that Article XIX is not a verbatim repeat of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession on which it is based. The Augsburg Confession uses the Latin *congregatio* and in the context clearly means "the whole body of the faithful".

Article XIX has to be read in the context of, and in contrast with, both the Homily for Whitsunday and the contemporary *Reformatio Legum*. The former—the Homily—speaks of "the true church" and says it is "an universal congregation ... of God's faithful and elect people". The latter speaks of the "visible church" and says it is "that coming together of all faithful men". Article XIX is most certainly not referring to "the pure church" (Article XXVI tells us that "in the visible church of Christ the evil be ever mingled with the good"). But most significant of all Article XIX omits "universal" before *congregation* and "all" before "faithful", while using the indefinite and not the definite article in the English form of the Article. It says: "the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men."

The Reformed doctrine of the Church is complex but clear enough.

In outline our Reformers distinguished the church visible from the church "mystical"; the church as a clerical institution from the church as people; and the national church from the local congregation. We could do worse than follow those distinctions.

But in accordance with Charles I's declaration on the Articles, we must conclude that "the plain and full meaning ... in the literal and grammatical sense" is that in Article XIX, as in the final edition of 1662 BCP, "a congregation" refers to an actual group coming together to hear the bible preached and the eucharist celebrated—a *coetus*—a parish.

Let Hooker have the last word. He said that for "convenience" churches have to be "limited" into "several congregations termed parishes". This may be of help.