

Q: What does it mean to be Anglican*? Answer Part V: The Middle Way

**This was the focus question for Synod (the decision-making body of the wider Anglican church) which met on November 8th, so I have been using the *Question of the Week* for the past five weeks to examine different aspects of how we might answer. This is the last week in this *Question series*. This does not represent an exhaustive answer to the question, but it has hopefully sparked some further reflection and conversation.*

Anglicans have a particularly unflattering myth of origin. Anglicanism was created when King Henry VIII, a rather spoiled monarch, wanted to get a divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon. The pope wouldn't grant him his wish, so he broke with Rome, named himself the head of the Church of England, gave himself the divorce, and Anglicanism was born.

Except, that's not exactly how the Anglican church came to be. What happened in the Church of England actually started in Germany. Martin Luther, an ordained priest and professor of theology in Wittenberg Germany, came into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church over a scholarly paper in which he objected to the church's practices of selling indulgences (Indulgences could be bought in order to lessen the amount of time a departed soul would spend in purgatory). He lived and worked at a particularly fortuitous point in history: the printing press was just developing, which meant a great sea change in the number of 'common' people suddenly able to read and write, and therefore promote and discuss ideas for themselves. Luther's paper, now known as the *Ninety-five Theses*, was translated from Latin into German and published in 1518; his argument spread rapidly throughout Europe, one of the first controversies to be 'blown up' by aid of the printing press. Luther was excommunicated by Rome in 1521.

England was watching the movement unfold. King Henry VIII was very critical of Luther and wrote a paper condemning his actions and supporting the Roman church, which gained Henry the title of Defender of the Faith. But the energy and ideas coming out of Germany were inspiring an underground movement of thoughtful and intelligent people in England, along with a number of power-hungry social and political climbers looking for an opportunity to make their move into England's leadership. When Henry began to have marital troubles, these underground forces began to command the ear of the King, convincing him that the way out of his dilemma would be to follow Germany's suit, to break with Rome, to set the King up as the final authority in the leadership of the church (rather than the Pope), and then to grant himself the annulment of his marriage which he so desired.

King Henry, despite being married five more times after that first divorce, produced very few heirs, and the ones he did produce tended to be sickly. After he died, England waffled back and forth between returning to the Roman Catholic church under one leader and then breaking again with the next. It was a bloody and uncertain time in England's history, Catholics gaining power and persecuting Protestants, then vice versa. Many leaders, on each side of the divide, went to the stake as the factions battled it out for power in the wake of the King's death.

It was under Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of King Henry and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, who was able to bring stability to England, and she was able to do so primarily by bringing the two religious sides into one common expression of the faith – hence, the Anglican church's identity as The Middle Way.

What does that mean for us today? It means that Anglicans have a close relationship with the Roman Catholic church, sharing much in common with how we worship and the basic principles of faith to which we have held throughout our two thousand year history. The dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in our world today is open and respectful and shows promise for future collaboration and mutual support in accomplishing God's work. It also means that Anglicans very much honour and uphold the tenets of Reformation. The Anglican church in Canada is now, since 2001, in full Communion with

our Lutheran brothers and sisters, recognizing how much we share in common and bearing witness to the unity we find in God. Living out this Middle Way, honouring tradition and celebrating reformation, results in some strongly Anglican characteristics: a firm grounding in Biblical study, a commitment to expressing the faith of our ancestors in ways that are current for Here and Now, an ease with the conversation and questions that arise as we journey in faith, an acceptance of our need as God's people to be open to the renewing power of God's Spirit calling us out of complacency, ready to be guided by the One who challenges and re-makes us until such time that God's justice and peace and love is known to all.