

# JBTS

VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF  
BIBLICAL AND  
THEOLOGICAL  
STUDIES

## The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

*Edited by Ryan A. Brandt and Matthew Y. Emerson*



## Catholicity from an Anglican Perspective

EUGENE R. SCHLESINGER

*Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University*

Every Sunday, Anglicans,<sup>1</sup> along with the majority of other Christians, confess their belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed). Such a confession carries within itself the implicit premise that we understand ourselves to belong to this church. And, indeed, as shall become clear over the next several pages, one finds within this creedal confession the pith of the Anglican understanding of catholicity, an understanding that there is indeed a church catholic, that we belong to it, and that we are not alone in that belonging.<sup>2</sup> This Anglican notion of catholicity is, on the one hand, nothing all that groundbreaking. We are far from unique here. And yet it does present a genuine ecumenical contribution and stands as an invitation to all other Christian churches.

It bears noting that Anglicanism is a broad and diverse tradition, one in which evangelical and reformed expressions exist alongside Catholic or charismatic ones, if not always comfortably, at least authentically.<sup>3</sup> In our more charitable moments, we refer to this phenomenon as comprehensiveness, though at times, it threatens to become incoherence. Nevertheless, it is an ineluctable given of Anglicanism, which, from the Reformation onward, has sought to embrace within the Church of England the varied pieties and convictions of the English people, and with its global expansion through means both colonial and missionary (and often both at once) has also taken

1. Within my own North American context, the label “Anglican” has become politicized, especially after the formation of the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), which broke away from the Episcopal Church in 2009. As it currently stands, “Anglican” tends to be deployed with an implicit and often explicit contrast to “Episcopalian.” I resolutely refuse to give into such politicization or to cede the term to the ACNA. The Episcopal Church is a member province of the Anglican Communion and does well to remember this in its own life.

2. This understanding is expressed in the Church of England’s Declaration of Assent (Canon C 15), and the Preamble to the Constitutions and Canons of the Episcopal Church. Hence, throughout this article, references to the “Catholic Church” do not refer exclusively to that communion of churches in communion with the bishop of Rome, but rather to that church which the creed confesses. Below, in connection with the 1920 Lambeth Conference, I will specify precisely what is meant by this usage.

3. Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Stephen W. Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 8–24; Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 25–36; *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective*, Revised and Expanded ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2002); Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2015), pt. 4.

root in a number of non-English contexts and found non-Anglo expressions.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, to articulate *the* Anglican view on nearly any question, including the question of catholicity. So, in what follows, I will be presenting *an* Anglican understanding of catholicity. While I speak from the Catholic end of the Anglican spectrum, I do so cognizant of the comprehensiveness of the tradition. I view this comprehensiveness as a gift and strength, if not at times also a challenge. In fact, it lies rather close to the notion of catholicity that I shall articulate. This is a notion that I hope can be recognized and embraced by Anglicans of different persuasions, even if they might not put things in quite the same way.

Stated briefly, this Anglican understanding of catholicity is the recognition that all Christian people belong together and that the ideal of the church is the visible union of all the baptized with one another and with Christ.

### **Foundations of Catholicity**

Belief in the church's catholicity is grounded in the Scriptures, particularly those of the New Testament, but in many ways is an outgrowth of the monotheism that the Christian community, itself initially a movement within Second Temple Judaism, inherited from Israelite religion. To be catholic is to be universal, having to do with all times and places, and with all dimensions of humanity. No segment of humanity nor any dimension of humanity is left out in a catholic expression of Christianity. Because there is one God who is the creator of all, Christian faith must necessarily be catholic. God is the God of all of us (collectively) and the God of all of us (every aspect).

At a few junctures in The Acts of the Apostles, Luke utilizes the Greek phrase that will eventually develop into "catholic" (Acts 9:31, 41; 10:37). In each case, καθ' ὅλης (*kath holes*) refers to dispersal throughout the entirety of a region, whether it is the church (9:31), the word of Peter's raising of Tabitha (9:41), or the message that Jesus is Lord (10:37).

The foundation of catholicity, though, rests on foundations more theological than lexical. Paul, writing to the Romans, in a nod to Israelite monotheism, contends that God is the God of all, and not just of the Jews but also of Gentiles (Rom 3:29). The conviction that both Jews and Gentiles belong to the people of God essentially amounts to a belief in catholicity; for taken together, Jews and Gentiles comprise the whole of humanity.<sup>5</sup> The whole of humanity is alienated from God due to sin (Rom 1:18–3:20), and similarly, the whole of humanity has been redeemed by Christ (Rom

4. Ian S. Markham et al., eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pts. 1 and 3; Chapman, Clarke, and Percy, *Oxford Handbook*, pt. 3.

5. This is expressed elsewhere in the Pauline literature (for example, Gal 3:1–29 and Eph 2:11–3:6). See also James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Garwood P. Anderson, *Paul's New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

3:21–31). The redemption of humanity through the death of Christ (Rom 5:15–21) establishes the catholicity of the faith. All are united because, in a singular act of salvation, all have been saved (at least in principle).<sup>6</sup>

For this reason, the church is one because its redeemer is one. There is “one body and one Spirit” because there is “one hope of [our] calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–6). Yet this unity is not monolithic but rather expresses itself in diversity. Immediately following the call to maintain a unity grounded in its common Lord, faith, and baptism, Paul speaks of the diversity of gifts that have been bestowed upon and within the church for the community’s common good (Eph 4: 7–16). This is a common feature of Pauline ecclesiology, which insists upon the diversity of gifts in service of the common good (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:1–31), and indeed, upon welcoming diversity of conviction on matters moral and theological within the parameters of a common confession of Jesus as Lord (Rom 14:1–15:6; 1 Cor 8:1–13). The famous Pauline image of the church as a body or even the body of Christ is deployed to express this dialectic of both unity and diversity. The body is one but comprised of many members, none of whom are dispensable.

To a certain extent, these biblical foundations represent nothing especially unique to Anglicanism. They are, simply, the common inheritance of all Christians.<sup>7</sup> And that is precisely the point because, at its best, Anglicanism recognizes that it is charged not with bearing any unique message but rather with the one gospel of Jesus Christ entrusted to the church for the good of the whole world. The gospel is not ours to modify, nor is our existence as a church one over which we have liberty. It is held in trust and belongs not to us but to all.

## **The Lambeth Quadrilateral and Conference**

For a time in the twentieth century, it was a commonplace for Anglicans to claim, perhaps somewhat high minded, that Anglicans have no doctrines of our own but only what belongs to the church catholic.<sup>8</sup> This viewpoint has, rightly, fallen by the wayside.<sup>9</sup> As many have observed, we do indeed have some doctrines of our own. Beyond that, Stephen Sykes has argued persuasively that if nothing else, Anglicanism

6. Recently, the question of the actuality and certainty of universal salvation has reasserted itself with David Bentley Hart’s *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) as a touchstone in the debate. My own sympathies are more broadly aligned with Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved? With a Short Discourse on Hell*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014), but my statement above is not intended to imply anything beyond the statement that Christ’s death suffices for the salvation of all and that any salvation that does occur will be the result of his saving act, not necessarily that all will certainly be saved, which I believe to be an affirmation we cannot responsibly make, even at an epistemological (to say nothing of a theological) level.

7. So also Paul D. L. Avis, *The Vocation of Anglicanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 102.

8. For example, Neill, *Anglicanism*.

9. Avis, *Identity of Anglicanism*, 39–55; Sykes, *Integrity of Anglicanism*, 36–61.

must have a distinctive ecclesiology in order to make any kind of sense of itself. In the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, to which I shall turn momentarily, we state that the Nicene Creed is the “sufficient statement of Christian faith,” but not everyone agrees on what a sufficient statement of the faith would be. Yet here we claim to be able to adjudicate the matter. At the very least, then, in this regard, we claim some competency for our church that is not shared by all.<sup>10</sup>

And yet this criticism of the view that Anglicans have no doctrines of our own notwithstanding, there is a genuine theological insight in that viewpoint. It recognizes that we are not alone in the endeavor of being Christian, that there is indeed a catholic deposit such that we are not at liberty to simply make things up as we go along, and that we belong to the catholic fullness to the church and not to our provincial expression of it.

This was the vision that animated the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which was adopted first by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in 1886 and then (in modified form) by the Lambeth Conference in 1888.<sup>11</sup> The Quadrilateral insists on four indispensable elements for any reunion among the divided Christian churches: the Old and New Testament Scriptures; the Nicene Creed “as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith”;<sup>12</sup> the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, using the proper form and matter; and the historic episcopate, adapted according to the needs of local contexts.<sup>13</sup>

The version of the Quadrilateral adopted by the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops is quite clear. These four elements are insisted upon because they belong to “the substantial deposit of Christian Faith and Order committed by Christ and his Apostles to the Church.” For this reason, they must be insisted upon, not as cherished features of Anglicanism but as indispensable elements of apostolic and catholic Christianity. Moreover, beyond these elements, the bishops expressed the Episcopal Church’s readiness “in the spirit of love and humility to forego all preferences of her own.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the only elements of the Episcopal Church’s life that were indispensable were those that it understood not to be distinctively Anglican but rather

10. Stephen Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 102–20.

11. Mark D. Chapman, “William Reed Huntington, American Catholicity and the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” in *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose*, ed. Paul Avis and Benjamin M. Guyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 84–106; Robert B Slocum, “The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: Development in an Anglican Approach to Christian Unity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33, no. 4 (1996): 471–86; John F Woolverton, “Huntington’s Quadrilateral: A Critical Study,” *Church History* 39, no. 2 (1970): 198–211; Woolverton, “The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and the Lambeth Conferences,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 53, no. 2 (1984): 95–109; J. Robert Wright, “Heritage and Vision: Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” *Anglican Theological Review* 10 (1988): 8–46.

12. That is, anyone who professes the Nicene faith can be and ought to be regarded as a Christian.

13. “The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979 ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1983) 877–78 (cited as “CLQ”).

14. “CLQ,” 876–77.

simply Christian. The bishops further specified that their intent was not “to absorb” other churches but instead to enter into cooperative relations with them.<sup>15</sup>

The vision of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, then, is of a church reunited on the basis of a common faith in Christ with no other criteria imposed. While Christians from non-episcopally ordered traditions might demur that the insistence upon the historic episcopate is precisely an additional imposition, this is not the intent, as will become clearer as we consider the flowering of this ecclesiological vision in the Lambeth Conferences of 1920, 1930, and 1948.

The 1920 Lambeth Conference is the high-water mark of twentieth-century Anglican ecclesiological and ecumenical reflection. The Lambeth Conference, one of the Anglican Communion’s four instruments of communion, alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates’ Meeting, and the Anglican Consultative Council, is a roughly decennial gathering of all bishops of the Anglican Communion, which had its beginning in 1867.<sup>16</sup> Because the Anglican Communion is comprised of autonomous yet interrelated national churches (provinces), the Lambeth Conference’s statements are not binding upon the Communion’s member churches in any formal or juridical sense. They are, though, intended to be expressive of the mind of the Communion.

At the 1920 Lambeth Conference, the bishops undertook to address themselves to “All Christian People,” explaining that they considered all who have been baptized to be members of the catholic church, which is properly understood as “an outward, visible, and united society, holding one faith, having its own recognized officers, using God-given means of grace, and inspiring all its members to the world-wide service of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>17</sup> This is the meaning of catholicity, then: to be in visible communion with all baptized Christians in all their diversity.<sup>18</sup>

While this visibly united “Church, genuinely Catholic, loyal to all Truth, and gathering into its fellowship all ‘who profess and call themselves Christians’ . . . is not visible in the world today,” nevertheless, it is not a fiction.<sup>19</sup> Rather, “The unity we seek exists. It is in God, Who is the perfection of unity, the one Father, the one Lord,

15. “CLQ,” 877.

16. Stephen Pickard, “The Lambeth Conference Among the Instruments of Communion,” in Avis, *Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose*, 3–22; Norman Doe, “The Instruments of Unity and Communion in Global Anglicanism,” in Markham et al., *Wiley-Blackwell*, 47–66; Robert W. Pritchard, “The Lambeth Conferences,” in Markham et al., *Wiley-Blackwell*, 91–104; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 46–50.

17. 1920 Lambeth Conference, “Appeal to All Christian People,” in *The Six Lambeth Conferences, 1867-1920*, ed. Randall Thomas Davidson and Honor Thomas (London: SPCK, 1929), 26–29. All citations of the 1920 Lambeth Conference refer to this volume and are cited as 1920 Lambeth Conference; Charlotte Methuen, “The Making of ‘An Appeal to All Christian People’ at the 1920 Lambeth Conference,” in Avis, *Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose*, 107–31.

18. So also Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 49.

19. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 27.



the one Spirit, Who gives life to the one Body. Again, the one Body exists. It does not need to be made, nor to be remade, but to become organic and visible.”<sup>20</sup>

Echoing the preambular material included in the 1886 version of the Quadrilateral, the letter stresses that “terms of reunion must no longer be judged by the success with which they meet the claims and preserve the positions of two or more uniting Communions, but by their correspondence to the common ideal of the Church as God would have it to be.”<sup>21</sup> It is this vision of the catholic church, rather than any denominational identities or particularities, that ought to drive all concerns. Rather than being maintained for their own sake, these elements of denominational heritage need to be “made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> This vision applies to the churches of the Anglican Communion as well, of which they note, “As the years go on, its ideals must become less Anglican and more Catholic. It cannot look to any bonds of union holding it together, other than those which should hold together the Catholic Church itself.”<sup>23</sup>

It is in this context that the Anglican commitment to the episcopacy can be seen not as an additional imposition adding to the baseline criterion of common belonging to Jesus Christ. The Appeal to All Christian People reaffirms the Lambeth Quadrilateral, but with a key modification to the final point on the episcopate. The church’s visible unity will involve adherence to Scripture and creed, celebration of the sacraments, and “a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.”<sup>24</sup> Then, in the next paragraph, they offer, “May we not reasonably claim that the Episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry?”<sup>25</sup> The Scriptures and creeds mark out the boundaries of Christian faith, while the office of bishop allows the unity of all Christians to be visibly expressed.

### **Catholicity and Incompleteness**

This understanding was echoed some sixteen years later in Michael Ramsey’s classic *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*. Taking as his watchword the Pauline phrase, “One died for all; therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14), Ramsey articulates his vision of the “Catholic Church” as the saving union of all with all in Christ.<sup>26</sup> The church’s ground is in the gospel of Jesus’s death and resurrection, and its purpose is to be expressive

20. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 12.

21. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 12.

22. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 28.

23. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 137.

24. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 28.

25. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 28.

26. Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1990), 17–42.



of this saving union.<sup>27</sup> All of those elements that pertain to its polity and order, its liturgy, the sacraments, episcopal office, do not exist for their own sake but in order to give expression to this more fundamental and organic reality.<sup>28</sup> They express the unity and catholicity of the church.

In a tour de force, though not one without its flaws, Ramsey surveys the church's history, noting the ways that this catholic vision was expressed in the New Testament and the church fathers, at times obscured and distorted, sullied by divisions, but never lost.<sup>29</sup> The Protestant Reformation was a summons for the Catholic Church to once more attend to and find its *raison d'être* in the gospel, not in the sense that it had lost the gospel but in the sense that it had lost the vital connection between its catholic substance and the gospel that animates it. The reformers recovered the saving gospel but failed to recognize the vital connection between that gospel and the structures in which it naturally belongs.<sup>30</sup>

The English Reformation both stood at the Wittenberg door to hear once more the gospel summons and also maintained such catholic elements as the episcopal office.<sup>31</sup> While we might expect Ramsey to parse this in somewhat triumphant terms, with Anglicanism as the Goldilocks who has gotten the mix "just right," he avoids this. Anglicanism has also obscured the vital connection between the gospel and Catholicism, whether by an Erastianism that aligned church and state too closely or by the so-called "Branch Theory," which sees the church catholic as existing within the three branches of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism but fails to recognize the deleterious effects of church division or by what Ramsey saw as a renewed clericalism within the Tractarian movement.<sup>32</sup> Instead,

While the Anglican church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to Gospel and Church and sound learning, its greater vindication lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as 'the best type of Christianity,' but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died.<sup>33</sup>

27. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 3–9, 43–50. See further Rowan Williams, "The Lutheran Catholic," in *Glory Descending: Michael Ramsey and His Writings*, ed. Douglas Dales et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 212; Williams, "Theology and the Churches," in *Michael Ramsey as Theologian*, ed. Robin Gill and Lorna Kendall (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 11.

28. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 55–67.

29. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 139–80.

30. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 181–203. Compare Avis's overlapping yet distinct attempt at parsing Anglicanism's character as both catholic and reformed. Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 101–28, 145–67.

31. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 204–20.

32. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 217–18.

33. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 220.

This is the essential point: the Anglican understanding of catholicity demands that we recognize our own incompleteness. Yes, we are a portion of the catholic church confessed in the creed. Were we not, it would be incumbent upon us to abandon the Anglican project altogether and align ourselves with a church that is indeed expressive of the one catholic church.<sup>34</sup> And yet we also recognize that we are not ourselves the entirety of this church. Moreover, we recognize that there are other portions of this church with whom we are not and yet with whom we should be united. If the church catholic is the union of all with all in Christ, we cannot be content with less than its full realization.

As a result, we are incomplete and even wounded. Ramsey notes that all churches stand in need of the restoration of the episcopate, even those who have retained it.<sup>35</sup> Episcopal office is meant to express the church's catholic unity, and so to the extent that the church is divided, this purpose is thwarted. All of us possess the episcopate in a wounded form.<sup>36</sup> And so there is no room for triumphalism. At its base, this understanding of catholicity is a recognition that we all need one another because Christ has saved us together and not separately.

This vision of catholicity led the 1930 Lambeth Conference to aim for "nothing less than the Catholic Church in its entirety," and to suggest that

The Anglican Communion is seen in some sense as an incident in the history of the Church Universal. It has arisen out of the situation caused by the divisions of Christendom. It has indeed been clearly blessed of God, as we thankfully acknowledge; but in its present character we believe that it is transitional and we forecast the day when the racial and historical connections which at present characterise it will be transcended, and the life of our Communion will be merged in a larger fellowship in the Catholic Church.<sup>37</sup>

Strikingly, then, the Anglican Communion's bishops understood the particular vocation of the Communion as one to eventually disappear, not through attrition, nor through abandonment of its ideals, which they insisted were simply the common inheritance of the Christian faith, particularly as instantiated in those items articulated by the Quadrilateral,<sup>38</sup> but through a transcendence in a wider catholic reality: the union of all with all in Christ. This transcendence would not be the loss

34. Avis underscores this point well. Avis, *Identity of Anglicanism*, 2–8; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 78.

35. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 223.

36. Ramsey, *Gospel*, 85, 174, 219–23; Douglas Dales, "'One Body'—The Ecclesiology of Michael Ramsey," in Douglas Dales et al., *Glory Descending*, 227; Louis Weil, "The Liturgy in Michael Ramsey's Theology," in Gill and Kendall, *Michael Ramsey as Theologian*, 146–47.

37. 1930 Lambeth Conference, *The Lambeth Conference, 1930: Encyclical Letter from the Bishops: With Resolutions and Reports* (London: New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Macmillan, 1930), 153. All citations of the 1930 Lambeth Conference refer to this volume and are cited as 1930 Lambeth Conference.

38. 1930 Lambeth Conference, 154.

of Anglicanism but rather its fulfillment, for Anglicanism is not ultimate, only the one holy catholic and apostolic church is.

### The United Churches

This conviction also led to the formation of various united churches of the Indian subcontinent in the twentieth century. The Church of South India was initially formed as a merger of Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian bodies, which were amicably released from their mother churches in order to pursue this venture in 1947. The resulting church was not Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian, but an expression of catholic Christianity within the South Indian context: “A distinct province of the Universal Church.”<sup>39</sup> Similar united churches in North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were formed in the 1970s. The united churches were an attempt to transcend denominational limitations in the pursuit of a catholic fullness.

The 1920 Lambeth Conference had noted,

This ideal cannot be fulfilled if these groups are content to remain in separation from one another or to be joined together only in some vague federation. Their value for the fulness of Christian life, truth, and witness can only be realised if they are unified in the fellowship of one visible society whose members are bound together by the ties of a common faith, common sacraments, and a common ministry.<sup>40</sup>

Hence, the catholic fullness at which the united churches aimed could not be found in affirmations of an “invisible” catholic church underlying the outwardly divided churches, or in mere friendly cooperation between them.<sup>41</sup> Recognizing this, the united churches sought to give visible expression to it.

Reflecting from the midst of these developments, the 1948 Lambeth Conference was bolstered by a vision of Anglicanism being transcended for the sake of something greater, and yet with a recognition that there remained a positive vocation for the Communion: “If we were slow to advance the larger cause, it would be a betrayal of what we believe to be our special calling. It would be equally a betrayal of our trust before God if the Anglican Communion were to allow itself to be dispersed before its particular work was done.”<sup>42</sup> In this regard, they were not unique; the

39. 1930 Lambeth Conference, 27. See also Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *Beyond Anglicanism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 27–51, 147–71; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, Revised ed. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1960).

40. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 12.

41. See Avis’s assertion that an “invisible church” is “a contradiction in terms.” Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 125.

42. 1948 Lambeth Conference, *The Encyclical Letter from the Bishops, Together with Resolutions and Reports* [London: S. P. C. K., 1948], 22–23. All citations of the 1948 Lambeth Conference will refer to this volume and are cited as 1948 Lambeth Conference.

1920 and 1930 Lambeth Conferences were also clear that they were not calling for a disparagement or dismantling of the Anglican tradition even as they recognized its provisionality.<sup>43</sup> And yet, now, in 1948, with the Church of South India a fait accompli, and plans for the other united churches already under consideration, the bishops seem far less sanguine about the prospect of such self-transcendence. I shall return to this momentarily.

### **The Vocation to Disappear**

First, though, we must consider this special calling and particular work that the Anglican Communion felt bound to maintain faithfully. In 1948, the Committee on the Unity of the Church suggested that it lay, at least in part, in the Anglican comprehensiveness mentioned above. They note the tensions and internal difficulties that this breadth creates: for instance, divergent views on the nature or relative necessity of episcopal orders, and hence, evaluation of nonepiscopal ministries, and hence, plans for reunion with nonepiscopal churches. At the same time, they recognize that it is precisely by virtue of this diversity “that the Anglican Communion is able to reach out in different directions, and so to fulfil its special vocation as one of God’s instruments for the restoration of the visible unity of His whole Church.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, having a Catholic wing allows Anglicans to interface with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches on the one hand while having Evangelical or Reformed wings allow for engagement with various Protestant bodies.<sup>45</sup>

While there is perhaps some truth in this, at least in principle, it still falls short of persuasion and has been rendered obsolete by the modern ecumenical movement.<sup>46</sup> Since the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*,<sup>47</sup> the Catholic Church has shown itself to be perfectly capable of carrying on dialogues with the range of Protestant bodies without any mediatory assistance from

43. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 12; 1930 Lambeth Conference, 112.

44. 1948 Lambeth Conference, 50–51, (quote on 51). See the rather extensive analysis of the history of Anglican assessments of nonepiscopal orders in Avis, *Anglicanism and Christian Church*, 1–58.

45. This vision is also articulated in E. S. Abbott et al., *Catholicity: A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947).

46. Avis, *Identity of Anglicanism*, 23.

47. Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, (November 21, 1964), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html).

Anglicans,<sup>48</sup> and bilateral and multilateral dialogues continue apace.<sup>49</sup> If we are to discern a particular ecumenical vocation for the Anglican Communion, we shall need to look elsewhere.

I would propose that this vocation and role lies precisely in the Anglican understanding of catholicity, the full visible unity of all baptized persons with one another and with Christ, and its corollary, the recognition of our own incompleteness and provisionality. Of course, in this regard, all the Christian churches are incomplete and provisional; Anglicans hardly have a corner on this market.<sup>50</sup> However, insofar as we have been able to recognize both the ideal of an all-embracing catholicity and our own provisionality in the face of it, we can and should take the stance of inviting all other Christian churches to inhabit this vision as well. All of the churches stand in need of the others, and, insofar as Anglicans are clear-sighted about this, we are positioned to offer this vision to the others. Were we to simply forgo our own unique identity and be absorbed into some other Christian body, we would have failed to maintain this trust because our dissolution would perhaps advance Christian unity in some limited sense, insofar as we would no longer be divided from that church into which we had been assimilated, but it would still fall short of the ideal of the union of all with all in Christ. Unless and until we are united with all other Christians, ours remains the task of calling all others to embrace their incompleteness in service of that catholicity in which alone we shall finally all be complete.

### **Barriers to Catholicity**

The greatest barriers to the pursuit of such a catholicity lie within Anglicans themselves and can be distilled into two broad tendencies. Even here, though, we are not unique. These issues are prominently on display within the Anglican Communion, but, in reality, they pervade the human condition.

48. Indeed, the greatest achievement of Catholic-Protestant dialogue, the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (October 31, 1999), more or less inverts this vision of Anglicans as the ideal brokers between the Protestant and Catholic worlds. The agreement was reached by the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation, with the Anglicans later signing on (Anglican Consultative Council, Resolution 16.17). If anything, the Lutherans provided the mediation. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

49. For a compendium of dialogue texts and agreed statements, see World Council of Churches, *Growth in Agreement*, vols. 1-4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and World Council of Churches, 1982–2017).

50. Avis, *Identity of Anglicanism*, 2; Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 107; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 78.

### **The Problem of Provisionality**

The first is the challenge that faces any institution faced with its own provisionality and involves two facets. To be told that your calling is, ultimately, to disappear is a hard saying, and who can hear it (John 6:60)? It is exceedingly difficult for us not to make ourselves an end in ourselves. Must we really face the giving up of what has made us distinctive and unique, what has, perhaps, nourished our faith in Christ and life of discipleship? Put in these terms, one can certainly understand why such a calling meets with resistance. Nevertheless, the answer to the question is *perhaps*. The Lambeth Conference suggested that many such elements would be retained within the future united catholic church, though likely in a transformed fashion.<sup>51</sup> But we cannot forecast precisely what form a future reunited church will take, nor can we definitively predict what elements will be preserved and what will be let go.

Tempting as it may be, it is also not for us to clutch these treasured elements of our ecclesial identity and heritage and insist that they be preserved.<sup>52</sup> We are not the masters of our destinies. God is. We can, though, I think, trust that nothing that truly belongs to the church's catholic fullness will be lost. Our provisionality is not a summons towards a loss of identity or principles or heritage but to a greater fullness.

Even apart from this wrenching sense of potential loss, there remains the difficulty of the need to maintain a distinctive identity as long as our task remains incomplete while also not setting ourselves up as a self-perpetuating entity that, in the end, finds it impossible to cede itself to the larger catholic whole. This is, I think, precisely what the 1948 Lambeth Conference—with its more sober assessment of the need to avoid being dispersed before the proper time—was beginning to recognize after the formation of the Church of South India.<sup>53</sup> It was not a weakening of the earlier vision (the bishops made this statement in the context of restating their commitment to it) but rather a recognition that one must tread cautiously, even without holding back.

Here, I have no prescriptions except to suggest that to the extent we keep this vision before ourselves, we will be better equipped for what is ahead. We must maintain ourselves, but for a distinctive purpose, and this is a purpose that prevents us from becoming an end in ourselves. To the extent that we are reminded of this, we will, hopefully, be able to avoid the pitfall of maintaining our distinct identity as an end in itself rather than for the purpose of pursuing the larger vocation to disappear as a distinct identity in the union of all with all in Christ.

51. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 28; 1930 Lambeth Conference, 112.

52. This distinguishes my approach from the otherwise fairly similar one taken by Peter Leithart in *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church*. Leithart is confident in his ability to identify those elements of his own tradition that will certainly be retained in a future reunited church. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016).

53. 1948 Lambeth Conference, 23.

### Unwillingness to Maintain Communion Across Disagreement

The second barrier is instantiated in particular ways within Anglican life but is illustrative of issues faced by all the churches. We tend to live with a forgetfulness of our dependence upon each other, which leads us to resist the call of a catholic communion that embraces all Christian people. Indeed, over the last few decades, Anglicans have had trouble upholding this ideal within our own tradition, to say nothing of embracing other types of Christians.

From the outset, the Anglican Communion has not been characterized by central authority. Instead, “The Churches represented in it are indeed independent, but independent with the Christian freedom which recognizes the restraints of truth and love. They are not free to deny the truth. They are not free to ignore the fellowship.”<sup>54</sup> This principle was clarified at the 1963 Anglican Congress in Toronto as “Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence.”<sup>55</sup> Yet the Anglican Churches have come to value their autonomy more than their interdependence. This plays itself out in somewhat inverse ways. We have lost our sense of even being a Communion, much less our sense of belonging to something that transcends even our Communion.

As intra-Anglican debates over human sexuality and the place of LGBT persons in the church have raged over the past three decades or so, our commitment to catholicity has been sorely tested, and, perhaps, been trumped by other concerns.<sup>56</sup> While the presenting issue has been human sexuality, it is decidedly not the case that questions of sexuality, and certainly not LGBT persons and couples, are the barrier to catholicity. Instead, the problem lies in our difficulties in finding ways to remain in communion, even despite disagreements in these areas. Neither side has been especially keen on discerning the way forward as a Communion. In this regard, we are not unique; all churches are reckoning with the cultural sea change in human sexuality brought about by the past several decades.

Those who take an affirming view of the question have declined to wait for the mind of the Communion. Though the 2004 Windsor Report called for a moratorium on same-sex weddings and the consecration of partnered gay and lesbian bishops,<sup>57</sup> progressives in the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Scottish

54. 1920 Lambeth Conference, 14. See also Pickard, “The Lambeth Conference,” 3–4; Gregory K. Cameron, “The Windsor Process and the Anglican Covenant,” in Avis, *Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose*, 58–62; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 29–32.

55. Toronto Anglican Congress, “Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ,” (Project Canterbury, 1963), [http://anglicanhistory.org/canada/toronto\\_mutual1963.html](http://anglicanhistory.org/canada/toronto_mutual1963.html). See also Jesse Zink, “Changing World, Changing Church: Stephen Bayne and ‘Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence,’” *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 2 (2011): 243–62.

56. For example, see the discussion in Andrew Goddard, “Sexuality and Communion,” in Chapman, Clarke, and Percy, *Oxford Handbook*, 413–26; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 61–98. See also the wide-ranging discussion in the special issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 1 (2011), which was devoted to the issue.

57. Lambeth Commission on Communion, “The Windsor Report” (Anglican Communion Office, 2004), nos. 134, 144, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/68225/windsor2004full.pdf>.



Episcopal Church have proceeded with these actions. Here, it is crucial to note that the Windsor Report took no stance on questions of sexuality but rather recognized that the Communion was not of one mind. These moratoria were proposed not to settle the matter but to open up space for Communion-wide discernment. Moreover, and importantly, they distinguished between public liturgies and pastoral care for LGBT persons and couples.<sup>58</sup>

In a similar vein, the Windsor Report also called for a moratorium on cross-border interventions whereby bishops would interfere in the jurisdictions of others.<sup>59</sup> This could happen for a variety of reasons, but the presenting issue was that of traditionalists insinuating themselves into diocese or provinces where progressives were going ahead with same-sex unions or ordinations (and often enough in dioceses where the practice was *not* allowed), and doing so without the consent of the relevant bishop. And, just like their progressive counterparts, these traditionalists refused to abide by the moratoria, demonstrating their own unwillingness to engage in a genuine process of discernment. Taken together, the progressive and conservative flouting of the Windsor moratoria represent the loss of an opportunity for the Anglican Communion to walk together and discern the way forward. Rather than expressing the bonds of catholicity, the two sides have asserted their own autonomy.

Relatedly, in response to the Episcopal Church's decisions to consecrate bishops in same-sex marriages and to celebrate such unions for its members, various Anglican Churches, particularly in the Global South, have announced that they are no longer in Communion with the Episcopal Church and have refused to take part in any meetings of the Instruments of Communion at which the Episcopal Church is represented.<sup>60</sup> Such a move is also a loss of the catholic vision sketched above. If catholicity is expressed in the union of all with all in Christ, then this includes all of the baptized, and we are not at liberty to exclude one another, no matter how serious our disagreements may be. If the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral states that the Nicene Creed is the sufficient statement of Christian faith, then we are obliged to maintain communion with all who profess this faith.

Hence, both "traditionalists" and "progressives" find the idea of a diverse Communion to be an encumbrance to be circumvented rather than an ideal to be upheld. Unable (read: unwilling) to maintain communion with the baptized in our own tradition, we are incapable of realizing the ideal of communion with all of the

58. This is especially important to recognize as it is not lost on me that such calls for delay can sound strikingly similar to the counsel offered by the "white moderates" with whom Martin Luther King expressed such disappointment in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Allowing the time for a Communion-wide discernment must not come at the expense of the mistreatment or exclusion of LGBT persons and couples.

59. Lambeth Commission on Communion, "Windsor Report," nos. 147–55.

60. See, though, Avis's assessment about the ineffaceability of some degree of communion, even in the midst of damaged relationships. He goes on to note in *Vocation of Anglicanism* that such moves from the Global South represent a rejection of Anglican polity. Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology*, 150–55; Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 64, 82–7.

baptized throughout the world. While the 1948 Lambeth Conference feared that premature dispersal would prevent us from fulfilling our calling in service of the unity of the wider catholic church, it turns out that a myopic vision, constricting our gaze to ourselves, has been just as detrimental.

From the outset, catholicity has involved a dialectic of unity and diversity.<sup>61</sup> We must reckon with the fact that the catholic ideal sketched by the Lambeth Conferences will invariably involve us being united with those with whom we have disagreements, some of them potentially quite severe. Thus far, the Anglican Communion's attempts to adjudicate this diversity through formal or structural means have faltered.<sup>62</sup>

In this way, we represent a microcosm of the wider ecumenical reality. The greatest problem is not that we disagree nor any particular issue upon which there is disagreement, but rather our willingness to let our disagreements divide us and our unwillingness to embrace one another across these disagreements. This, though, brings us right back to the foundations of catholicity; it is grounded in the singular redemptive act of Jesus Christ by which he embraces the whole of humanity, not out of agreement but despite hostility and opposition.<sup>63</sup> Our resistance towards adopting the same posture is evidence of our need for ongoing conversion.

## Conclusion

Catholicity, ultimately, means the diverse unity that results from the union of all with all in Christ, who is the redeemer of all and gathers all to be his one body. Any unity that falls short of the visible union of all the baptized also falls short of the ideal of catholicity. In view of this ideal, we must all reckon with our incompleteness and provisionality. At its best, Anglicanism has been quite clear in its recognition of its provisional character, even if it seems commitment to this vision has been waning. Yet the witness of early twentieth-century Anglicanism still issues its challenge and invitation first to the Anglican Communion, then, by extension, to all churches. The ideal of the catholic church is one worth pursuing at all costs, even the end of our distinct identity. For indeed, this *is* the end of our distinct identity. Our existence is meant to be at the service of this wider catholic reality, and it is high time we

61. See Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology*, 30–32.

62. Chief among these means has been the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant, which, while showing great promise initially, seems to have lost its momentum. See, variously, Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 61–80; Ruth A. Meyers, “The Baptismal Covenant and the Proposed Anglican Covenant,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): 31–41; Timothy F. Sedgwick, “The Anglican Covenant and the ‘Puritan’ Temptation,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355311000222>; Andrew Goddard, “The Anglican Communion Covenant,” in Markham et al., *Wiley-Blackwell*, 119–33; Cameron, “Windsor Process.”

63. This is the central thesis of Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). It also informs Eugene R. Schlesinger, *Sacrificing the Church: Mass, Mission, and Ecumenism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 143–50.

remembered that. Doing so would not resolve the problems faced by Anglicans among themselves or together with or in relation to other Christians, but it would set them within the proper context.

In the meantime, the primary barrier to such catholicity is our own will, for ultimately, it is our refusal to be joined to one another that prevents the realization of the visible unity of all the baptized in Christ. The way forward, then, is conversion, which lies outside our capacity and competence. It is the gift of God and not a human achievement. So, perhaps, the starting point for the pursuit of catholicity is prayer. *Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.*