



*Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

COLLECT FOR PROPER 8 (BCP, P. 230)

The Episcopal tradition, like every other Christian tradition, is founded on the affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord. That affirmation is essential to the foundation of the unity of the Church. As Episcopalians, we believe that Christ's **transcendent** presence in the Holy Spirit has continually formed, reformed, informed, and transformed who we are as one branch of the tree, which is the Christian church.

The Episcopal Church is a descendant of the Church of England, which was itself founded in 597 as a mission outpost of the Roman Catholic Church, through St. Augustine of Canterbury at the direction of Pope St. Gregory the Great. A variety of factors led to the parting of the ways between England and Rome some five hundred

years ago, and it's one that we're still working to heal. Many of the rituals, traditions, and ways of believing in Christ have been passed down to us through the Roman Catholic strand of our heritage.

When King Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church by the Act of Supremacy in 1534, it became necessary to revise the Church's worship to reflect the change. Henry told Archbishop Thomas Cranmer that he wanted all liturgical books revised and written "in our native English tongue." "The Book of Common Prayer" was established in 1548 as the official worship book for the Church. This, and all subsequent editions and adaptations, including the one used by Episcopalians is often referred to simply as "the BCP."

As such, our Episcopal **tradition** represents the continuous tradition of the one, holy catholic, and apostolic church. The Episcopal Church has consistently been labeled a "middle road"—a "*via media*"—between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Originally and officially it is known as the Protestant (meaning not Roman Catholic or Orthodox) Episcopal (paradoxically meaning not Protestant) Church.

Our primary identity is as a community of practice. That is, we are bound together by our **liturgy** rather than doctrinal emphasis, or social organization. Orthodoxy for us is right worship and not right belief. Our life of prayer shapes our beliefs and behaviors.

In other branches of Christianity, the decisions of councils, the writings of particular theologians, catechisms, confessional doctrinal statements, the decisions of bishops, particular interpretations of Scripture, and polity have significance unknown to Episcopalians. To know what Episcopalians believe about issues of faith and life, all one needs to do is turn to the Book of Common Prayer and engage in the process of discovering the wealth of tradition and liturgy. We shape our understanding of faith and life through participation in our liturgies, and we reform our understandings and ways of life by reforming our liturgies. We are constantly seeking to hear the Spirit moving among us as changes in the historical development of our understandings of Christian belief and practice are seen through additional liturgical resources and revisions to the Book of Common Prayer.

Within the Episcopal Church, our styles of worship in different congregations may be quite diverse, but our substance and content are consistent. You may encounter the terms High Church and Low Church, although they are somewhat less common than when they were in style in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These reflect

to some extent how the clergy are vested and whether incense is used (or not). Other terms used are “Anglo-Catholic” and “Evangelical.” These concern more than just worship style, although the differing emphasis of each tradition is reflected in worship. While many churches fall somewhere in between all of these descriptors, in most cases it is a question of style and emphasis, rather than content. The Gospel is ultimately the Gospel.

No matter its style in the Episcopal Church, liturgy is the “work of the people.” Episcopal liturgy is communal worship connected to our daily life and work as ministry. We bring the reverence and rootedness of an ancient liturgical tradition alongside a clear devotion to the Bible. Although we have ordained ministers (including the bishops that give us our name—Episcopal), we also value the shared ministry of all believers.

People join the Episcopal Church for many reasons. For some, it has been the church of their family for generations. For others it may be because of our views on Holy Communion, women’s ordination, and human rights. Some love the music; others love the liturgy. There is an atmosphere of open curiosity, allowing people to ask and answer questions, striving to let the Holy Spirit work among us.