

THE USE OF THE PRAYER BOOK

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The finest sight short of heaven would be a whole congregation using the prayers of the Liturgy in the true spirit of them.¹

The use of the Prayer Book is a topic of great moment, as Charles Simeon's words emphasise. The variations in liturgy in the Church of England, and the ephemeral nature of the many alternatives now permitted, have broken the principle of liturgy within the Established Church. It is taken as self-evident that there is a need for what is termed freedom in worship, and that worship according to the Book of Common Prayer must be unspiritual and dull. This discontent with the Book of Common Prayer marks the extent to which the contemporary Church is alienated from the scriptural doctrines of the Reformation and the spirit which breathes in the historic Liturgy; it is a symptom of the divergence which exists between that doctrine and spirit and so much of what is heard from the pulpit today.

THE VALUE OF LITURGY

Liturgy is a set form of public worship, or a collection of formularies for the conduct of public worship. The word is now sometimes used of any form which has been set down on paper — of a special service composed for a single occasion. In this paper it is used in its fundamental and broader sense — a set form, used regularly, which will be familiar to a regular worshipper.

Scriptural authority for set forms

There is scriptural authority for set forms of prayer. A classic example is the Aaronic blessing prescribed in Numbers 6: 22-26

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel

There were set prayers when the ark was set forward and when it rested (Numbers 10: 35, 36). When the body of a slain man was found, the elders of the nearest city were to make a solemn affirmation before God, and pray in a set form for the mercy of the Lord (Deuteronomy 21: 7-8). At the beginning and at the end of the service at the offering of the first-fruits, there were lengthy set forms (Deuteronomy 26: 3, 5-10, 13-15).

When Hezekiah restored the worship of God, he appointed the psalms as the form of praise to be used (2 Chronicles 29: 30). Similarly Ezra appointed the psalms to be sung at the laying of the foundation of the second temple (Ezra 3: 10-11).

The Lord's prayer was not only appointed as a pattern for prayer — Jesus declared in Matthew 6: 9, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" — but also as a set form — Jesus said unto them in Luke 11: 2, "When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name."

The evidence of Scripture is that set forms of prayer are sanctioned. This sanction is not limited to those set prayers recorded in Scripture, but to all set prayer that is scriptural. So John Newton argued:

A prayer is Scriptural, if conformable to the promises, patterns, and truths of Scripture, though it should not contain one phrase taken *totidem verbis* from the Bible.²

The value of set forms

A liturgy, rightly fashioned, is a mighty instrument in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the teaching of the people. If it is suffused with scriptural doctrine, it will at all times of its use present that teaching to those who worship according to it, whatever the other attendant circumstances may be. Fashioned with careful thought it presents the whole counsel of God, and is a rich and balanced presentation of Christian truth.

A liturgy, rightly fashioned, allows the participation of the congregation, to an extent that an unpremeditated form cannot. Prayers and responses, being set down in the order, can be used by all. Where there is no set form, the involvement of the congregation must of necessity be difficult and minimal. The Litany of the Book of Common Prayer, the earliest English service, is an excellent example of the extent of congregational involvement which a set form allows.

A liturgy, rightly fashioned, allows the participation of the congregation in a more profound way. Being known beforehand it is generally better comprehended; and, since the worshipper is satisfied beforehand that the form is good, it is more readily and wholeheartedly entered into. There are none of those cautions which arise from doubtful expressions or those distractions which attend clumsy expressions. In the words of Josiah Pratt, the prayers "are previously assented to, and, therefore, readily and fully concurred in".³

A liturgy, rightly fashioned, is a help to the minister. He does not have to consider the words which he is to use, but only has to attend to the spirit of their utterance. In many churches today the minister spends a large amount of time devising services and preparing materials, like overhead projector slides: yet a liturgy relieves him of such tasks, and frees him to give himself “continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6: 4).

The disadvantages of extempore forms

There are immense disadvantages in the use of extempore prayer rather than a liturgy. Most particularly, a form of worship which relies on extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on its minister and on his doctrinal soundness. As J.C. Ryle wrote: the minister

may be, almost insensibly to himself, little by little, departing from the truth, adding to or taking away from the Gospel of Christ. His people, in this case, are sure to suffer, His inward unsoundness will almost always appear in his prayers. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.⁴

Similarly, the people will be dependent on his memory and on his frames and feelings.

No ministerial gift of prayer is promised in Scripture. A prescribed form, then, in some good measure supplies the want of a gift in prayer. Thus Newton wrote:

for ought I know, if the compilers of our liturgy could have expected, that all the parishes in the kingdom, and from age to age, would be supplied with ministers competently acquainted with the mysteries of the Gospel, and possessed of the spirit of grace and supplication, they might have left them under less restraint in conducting public worship.⁵

A further disadvantage in the use of extempore prayer is that, in course of time, it becomes as much a form as any set form of prayer. Thus, in Simeon’s words,

the use of a well-composed form secures us against the dry, dull, tedious repetitions which are but too frequently the fruits of extemporaneous devotions.⁶

More generally, a non-liturgical service lacks the breadth and richness of a liturgical service. The non-liturgical service so often becomes a “hymn sandwich”. Instead of the fulness provided by a liturgical service — confession, psalms, lessons from both

Testaments, canticles, collects, and prayers — the first part of a non-liturgical service can often be a brief preliminary (a reading, notices, and a long extempore prayer sandwiched between hymns) to the sermon. A prescribed form preserves the fulness of worship.

The charge of formality

A common charge against the use of liturgy, and one that is easily made in our undisciplined and sensual age, is that it engenders formality. This is a false charge. Formality is the fruit of the individual worshipper's inward spiritual condition, not the result of the use of a form of prayer. Commonly one may hear people speak in a manner that presupposes that the Holy Spirit will use or inspire extempore prayer, but will not use liturgical prayer. Newton argued:

Is it not too hastily taken for granted by many, that God cannot be worshipped in spirit and in truth by those who use a form of prayer? or that he will not afford them who so approach him, any testimony of his acceptance? If the words of a form suit and express the desires and feelings of my mind, the prayer is as much *my own* as if I had conceived it upon the spot. On the other hand, if I have the greatest readiness and fluency in diversifying expressions, so that my prayer should always appear unstudied and new; yet, if my spirit, or the spirit of those who join with me, be not engaged in it, though I may admire my own performance, and be applauded by others, it is no better than a mere lifeless form in the sight of Him who searcheth the heart.⁷

A desire for novelty and for sensual gratification too easily leads to a low view of liturgy and a high view of extempore prayer and informal services generally. Many today have been led to evaluate services by their entertainment value rather than by their power to edify; by their effect on the feelings, rather than their spiritual value. A recent number of *UK Focus* (which provides news and teaching from Holy Trinity, Brompton) had as its leading article "The search for intimacy in worship". Simeon wrote:

Many, if their imaginations are pleased, and their spirits elevated, are ready to think, that they have been greatly edified: and this error is at the root of that preference which they give to extempore prayer, and the indifference which they manifest towards the prayers of the Established Church. But real edification consists in humility of mind, and in being led to a more holy and consistent walk with God: and one atom of such a spirit is more valuable than all the animal fervour that ever was excited. It is with *solid truths*, and not with *fluent words*, that we are to be impressed: and if we can desire from

our hearts the things which we pray for in our public forms, we need never regret, that our fancy was not gratified, or our animal spirits raised, by the delusive charms of novelty.⁸

Formality, then, is a matter of the heart, and not of the form. Worshippers must seek to come before God with a true and penitent heart; they will then find in a liturgy, rightly fashioned, an ideal vehicle for prayer and worship. The text on which Charles Simeon based his famous series of sermons on *The Excellency of the Liturgy* in November 1811 applies to the value of the Liturgy and the need of the worshipper to use it in a right frame of heart:

They have well said all that they have spoken: O that there were such an heart in them! (Deuteronomy 5: 28-29)

THE VALUE OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

A potent influence in teaching

The first characteristic of the Book of Common Prayer to note is that it is eminently scriptural. H.C.G. Moule wrote of this characteristic:

I venture to say that no Service Book in the world is quite like ours in this. This characteristic lies on the surface; in the wealth of Scripture poured out in every service before the people; Psalms, Lessons, Canticles, Epistle, Gospel, Introductory Sentences, Decalogue, Comfortable Words. At the Font, in the Marriage Ordinance, at the Grave, it is still the same; Scripture, in our mother tongue, full and free, runs everywhere. And below the surface it is the same. Take almost any set of responses, or any single prayer, and see the strong warp of the Bible in it all.⁹

A worshipper who attended, on an ordinary Sunday, Morning Prayer, the ante-Communion, and Evening Prayer, as the compilers intended, would have heard two Old Testament lessons, two New Testament lessons, an Epistle and a Gospel reading, and read or sung some five Psalms and four Canticles, besides hearing Scripture in the other ways on and below the surface which Bishop Moule listed.

The Book of Common Prayer is scriptural in its doctrine. In his lecture on the doctrine of the Prayer Book Dr. Samuel has demonstrated the Book's doctrinal coherence by showing how it consistently sets forth the doctrines of predestination and election, of the bondage of the will, and of final perseverance.¹⁰ In this paper two significant areas in which the Prayer Book sets forth Biblical doctrine are noted.

The Prayer Book is in harmony with Scripture, though not in tune

with the spirit of this age, in its emphasis on the sinfulness of sin and the great grace of God in forgiving our sin through Jesus Christ. Morning and Evening Prayer both commence with a penitential section, as knowledge that sin is forgiven is an essential basis for fellowship with God in praise and prayer. We acknowledge that "there is no health in us"; and we hear the declaration of God's remission of our sins:

He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his Holy Gospel.

In the Holy Communion participants are exhorted to examine themselves:

Judge therefore yourselves, brethren, that ye be not judged of the Lord; repent you truly for your sins past; have a lively and stedfast faith in Christ our Saviour; amend your lives, and be in perfect charity with all men; so shall ye be meet partakers of these holy mysteries.

In confession, due acknowledgement is made of the awfulness of our sin:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable.

Thus the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, and the greatness of our redemption in Christ are acknowledged by the worshipper at each of the main Prayer Book services. Dr. J. I. Packer commented:

The Book of Common Prayer is widely censured these days for the fulness and intensity of its public confessions of sin, as if there was something morbid about them. . . . the theological and pastoral purpose of these poignant utterances is to highlight in the worshippers' minds and hearts the wonder and glory of free forgiveness through the cross of Christ. The lower we are made to go in knowing ourselves as sinners, the higher we shall rise in joy when assurance of God's pardon breaks in. To play down the sinfulness of sin is to obscure the greatness of grace, and to invite a shallow, superficial devotion and experience.¹¹

The Prayer Book's teaching on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is scriptural and entirely congruent with the teaching of the Articles. The finished work of Christ is magnificently proclaimed in a statement of great clarity and fulness, calling on God the Father who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death

upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;

There is no repetition in this declaration: every word contributes a special significance to the fulness and the precision of the statement — the words full, perfect, and sufficient each make a separate description, and the words sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, each view a different aspect of the eternal transaction on Calvary.

The Article's teaching that the Lord's Supper is "a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death" (Article XXVIII) is fully and exclusively stated in the order for the administration of the Lord's Supper. In the exhortation we are to remember

the exceeding great love of our Master and only Saviour Jesus Christ, thus dying for us, and the innumerable benefits which by his precious blood-shedding he hath obtained to us

and we are told that the bread and wine are "for a continual remembrance of his death". The petition in the prayer of consecration is:

grant that we receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood

The exclusive focus on the death of Christ, lost in modern liturgies, but faithful to St. Paul's teaching that in the Supper "ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Corinthians 11: 26), is maintained.

The bread and wine are set aside for a special use and significance, not changed in their essential character. This is consistently taught. We are told in the exhortation that

he hath instituted and ordained holy mysteries, as pledges of his love, and for a continual remembrance of his death, to our great and endless comfort.

A pledge is a token of something other than itself, and the sacred feast is an act of remembrance. Again, in the prayer of consecration we pray for ourselves as we receive "these thy creatures of bread and wine". The bread and wine remain unchanged in themselves.

The need to receive "rightly, worthily, and with faith" (Article XXVIII) is set forth in the exhortation, the invitation to confession, and the confession, and in the prayer of humble access. The nature of "our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving" is also made clear, when it is offered in the prayer after reception. It is not an offering which we make to induce God to be gracious, nor is it interwoven with the

offering of Christ; it is the response of the sinner to the grace of God declared visibly in the Supper.

The scriptural character of the Book of Common Prayer, and its doctrinal richness and integrity, are immensely significant. A liturgy is a potent influence on those who use it. By its regular use it will shape and influence the thought of the worshipper, and by its content it will teach him. A liturgy that is erroneous in its doctrine must tend to shape the user to those erroneous beliefs; a liturgy that is empty of clear teaching will tend to shape the user into the same mould, and make him one who is uncertain of the faith or thinks that clarity in doctrine is unimportant. In using a liturgy, therefore, we are dealing with something which has immense power for good or ill. In the Book of Common Prayer the English Church has a liturgy which will rightly teach and influence its users; which will instruct them in their most holy faith; and which will provide true sustenance to their minds and hearts. Dr Packer wrote of this important matter under a heading "Spiritual health depends largely on the Church's worship":

The rituals of word and act that make up liturgy are, by their very nature, cultural patterns, and, like other cultural patterns, they shape us to themselves. They mould our minds at a deep, presuppositional level, laying rails for our thoughts to run on before ever thinking starts. The reflex action of liturgy — that is, its power to fix the basic attitudes of those who take part — is always stronger than calculation can show. This helps us to realise how potent a means of Christian edification a liturgy embodying a full measure of evangelical truth can be. Not merely does it inculcate the substance of the gospel, and the right response to the gospel, at conscious level; all the time it is moulding worshippers at a pre-conscious level, engendering those attitudes of reverence for God, and righteousness, and Christ, and Scripture, which all acts of true repentance and faith presuppose. . . . liturgies which are defective in presenting the gospel will engender, not merely active misbelief, but attitudes of mind which are either insufficiently reverent or excessively superstitious.¹²

The choice of a liturgy is often presented as a simple matter (whether one wants a service in "modern English" or not) or as a matter of taste (whether one likes the opportunity to pay social calls during the "Peace" or not): but it is a profound choice. It affects whether the worshipper will be worshipping God "in spirit and in truth" or falsely, and whether the worshipper will be taught and built up in the truths of the Gospel as he worships each week. All current modern liturgies are defective in their presentation of the truths of the Gospel — they will mislead their users and inculcate false attitudes.

The Book of Common Prayer, and it alone, teaches the Biblical Gospel and moulds and sustains its users aright.

In the four centuries in which the Book of Common Prayer has been in use, it has been a potent influence to present Christian truth to the people of this land. In times of spiritual life, the message of the pulpit has echoed the message of the reading desk, and preachers of the Gospel have been glad to show the harmony that existed between the message preached and the Liturgy. John Newton wrote of William Grimshaw:

Besides proving and enforcing the doctrines he preached by holy scriptures, he very frequently appealed for their confirmation to the articles, liturgy, and homilies of the church.¹³

In times of spiritual declension, when the pulpit has been dead and the sheep have looked up and have not been fed, the Liturgy has continued its teaching ministry. While in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in particular there were towns and villages in England where the message of the Gospel was not preached from the pulpit, its truth was still heard by the regular worshipper at the parish church; so, for instance, he would have heard the true significance of the death of Christ proclaimed to him at every administration of the Holy Communion. Newton wrote of the Book of Common Prayer:

the general strain of it is scriptural, evangelical, and experimental. It recognises with precision the One Great Object of Worship, in his personal distinctions and glorious attributes, the honours and offices of the Redeemer, the power and agency of the Holy Spirit, the evil of sin, the depravity of man, and all the distinguishing doctrines of the Gospel.¹⁴

Intelligent and reverend

The Book of Common Prayer furnishes worship which is intelligent and reverend. The Liturgy engages the minds of the worshippers, so that they may know what they are doing. We have seen that the Prayer Book is coherent in its doctrine and rich in the fulness of its teaching. The structure of the services, also, has been carefully thought out, so that there is a proper progression in them: so, for instance, in the Lord's Supper, there is first the penitential beginning, to prepare us to enter the presence of God; then the ministry of the Word, in the reading of Epistle and Gospel, the Creed, and the sermon; then

preparation for Holy Communion begins with exhortation to self-examination, invitation to confession, confession, absolution, comfortable words, and responses expressing praise; then the prayer of humble access, and the prayer of consecration, which is in fact a prayer for right reception and spiritual participation. That prayer is followed immediately by the distribution and reception of the bread and the wine, the only appropriate response to the prayer for the participants and the rehearsal of the Last Supper. Finally, there is the response of thanksgiving.

The collects also have been carefully structured: in their invocation they often mark one of the attributes of Almighty God which is appropriate to the petition about to be made. Thus in the Collect for the First Sunday after Easter, we call on the Almighty Father, "who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification". Then, in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we pray:

Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may
always serve thee in pureness of living and truth

Again, on the First Sunday after Trinity, we call on God, "the strength of all them that put their trust in thee"; then, having acknowledged that he alone is our strength, we pray:

because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing
without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping of thy
commandments we may please thee both in will and deed

The worship of the Book of Common Prayer is reverend. It leads the worshipper to approach God in humility and awe, and to fulfil the exhortation in Hebrews 12: 28, 29: "let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear". Thus at the beginning of the Litany:

O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, three Persons and one God: have
mercy upon us miserable sinners.

Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers;
neither take thou vengeance of our sins: spare us, good Lord, spare thy
people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and be not
angry with us for ever.

Or, at the Burial of the Dead:

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to
our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and

merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.

A right confidence in God and his promises does not lead to a false familiarity, or to the creature mistaking his place before his Creator.

Worship which is intelligent and reverend is opposed to that which is mindless. We may contrast the Prayer Book with worship which is not understood because it is in a foreign tongue or involves mysterious rites and ceremonies; and with worship which is emotional, sentimental, or charismatic, where again the mind is not engaged. To a great extent we may expect intelligent worship and reverend worship to go together, for where the worshipper understands the scriptural truths which are being taught in the Liturgy, there will be a reverend response. Where the rites and ceremonies of the mass are enacted, sometimes still in an alien tongue, the worshipper cannot take an understanding part, and his disposition will be one of distraction or superstition, rather than understanding and reverence. Where mindless worship, with the seemingly endless repetition of banal ditties, is enacted in charismatic churches, worshippers disengage their minds, and their behaviour often seems lacking in reverence. We do not need to seek intimacy in worship but understanding: St. Paul sets down principles for public worship in 1 Corinthians 14: 15:

I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

One of the greatest dangers of the day, and one in which professing evangelicals have pioneered the way, is the substitution of entertainment for worship. Entertainment is “the action of occupying attention agreeably”; it is “that which affords interest or amusement”. In many churches services are conducted on principles of entertainment. They are designed first and foremost to occupy the attention of the congregation agreeably: variety, humour, drama, interviews, activities are used; the overhead projector emphasises the visual appeal. They achieve their goal — the affording of interest or amusement.¹⁵

This approach is false: the criterion has ceased to be what has the

eternal God said, how may that be communicated to people, and what is their appropriate response; it has become what will catch the attention of the attender, what will keep that attention, and what will prove acceptable to him. To seek to make worship like a television show is absurd: for a television show and a service of Christian worship have entirely separate presuppositions and purposes.

The Book of Common Prayer furnishes worship which is scriptural, intelligent, and reverend, in a day when much worship is false. It will necessarily appear in severe contrast to much which passes for worship, because it is based on different principles and is seeking to fulfil different purposes. People may assert that worship according to the Book of Common Prayer is dull: judged by the criteria of entertainment, it is indeed dull — it does not occupy the attention agreeably or afford interest and amusement. The Prayer Book is poor entertainment, because it is not entertainment; many informal services today are poor vehicles for worship, because they are not scriptural, intelligent, and reverend. The excellence of the Book of Common Prayer is further revealed when it is contrasted with the fashions of the day. Charles Simeon wrote:

the gravity and sobriety of the whole service are fitted to impress the most careless sinner; whilst the various portions of Scripture that are read . . . are well adapted to arrest the attention of the thoughtless, and to convey instruction to the most ignorant. Indeed I consider it as one of the highest excellencies of our Liturgy, that it is calculated to make us wise, intelligent, and sober Christians: it marks a golden mean; it affects and inspires a meek, humble, modest, sober piety, equally remote from the unmeaning coldness of a formalist, the self-importance of a systematic dogmatist, and the unhallowed fervour of a wild enthusiast.¹⁶

Language: intelligible and sustainable

The language of the Book of Common Prayer is a matter which is frequently raised today; its usage is questioned on the grounds of intelligibility. Barry Spurr wrote in *The Word in the Desert*, a study of reactions to liturgical reform:

the ideas that the Authorised Version and Cranmer are beyond the understanding of the people, and that modern translations are

comprehensible, and must be preferred, are taken to be self-evident.¹⁷

In similar vein, we find neo-Anglicans indulging in, for them, the rare activity of quoting from the Articles, when they quote Article XXIV:

It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have publick Prayer in the Church, or to Minister the Sacraments in a tongue not understood of the people.

The Article refers, of course, to the use of foreign languages, and no doubt had particular reference to the use of Latin by the Roman Church.

The idea that the Book of Common Prayer is not comprehensible is an emotional reaction, not founded on a proper consideration of the Liturgy, but part of a false desire for modernity and making everything pleasing and palatable to man. The Book of Common Prayer is generally comprehensible to the people; immediate and complete comprehensibility is, as we shall consider later, a false goal. There are few real difficulties in the language of the Book of Common Prayer. As a petition of scholars, writers, and academics in the field of English literature wrote of the Authorised Version and the Prayer Book in 1979: "they contain nothing which cannot be easily and profitably explained".¹⁸

Such words and usages as need explanation should be explained. This is part of the work of the clergy as they minister in the parishes; the explanation of certain less common words would strengthen the congregation's understanding of the Liturgy, and enable important homiletical points to be made. Dr. R.T. Beckwith has produced a booklet entitled *Praying with Understanding: explanations of words and passages in the Book of Common Prayer*, which is a valuable aid to this task. Dr. Beckwith wrote:

One of the greatest failures of the church in recent years has been the failure to teach. So much so, that lay people today are often crying out for teaching, but the clergy . . . are still not supplying the need. The services which are used every Sunday are an obvious subject for teaching, yet it has often been taken for granted that people know why they use them and fully understand what they mean. Much, of course, can be learned about them simply by thoughtful use of them, but certain things cannot. Then, when the church enters an era of revolution, as at present, it is possible for the revolutionaries to decry the traditional services as 'unintelligible', simply because they contain some things hard to understand, which nobody troubles to explain.¹⁹

The paucity of words and expressions which need explanation drives

us back to our main thesis, that the Book of Common Prayer is generally comprehensible to the people.

The spirit of our age seeks rapid change, instant gratification, and a feeling of relevance. Those who have sought to revise the Liturgy have been influenced by that spirit, and have sought to write in a style that is immediately and completely comprehensible. As a principle it is doubtful, as there must be a depth and richness to liturgy to allow for its repeated use; and as a goal it is doubtful, because it must require the most restricted use of the English language. Barry Spurr commented on Professor David Martin's study, *The Breaking of the Image*:

Professor Martin is on surer ground when he confronts the cherished principle of the liturgical modernisers, that liturgy should be immediately and completely comprehensible — a questionable axiom and probably an unattainable goal.²⁰

The language of the Book of Common Prayer is generally comprehensible to the people. If there are some things which require explanation, or thought, or further consideration by the worshippers, that is not a mark of weakness in the Liturgy. We must be willing to give some effort to developing our understanding. Dr. Packer wrote in 1992:

We do not complain of having to learn the language of computers, daisy wheels and bytes and floppies and so on; we simply learn it, in order to be able to use computers; why then should anyone baulk at learning the language one needs to worship God?²¹

The language in which a liturgy is written is of profound importance. It must, above all, be able to bear repetition many times over; it must be able to provide continuing sustenance to the worshipper; it must be written for speaking aloud; it must be suitable for the worship of Almighty God. In the idiom of today, a good liturgy is a sustainable liturgy; the Book of Common Prayer is a sustainable liturgy, and all the current revisions and alternatives are not.

The arguments of those who wish to see the Book of Common Prayer preserved because of the excellence of its literary qualities are often dismissed. It is said, rightly as far as it goes, that the church is not in the business of preserving literary masterpieces; thus the petition of scholars, writers, and academics in English literature in

1979 was dismissed by many. This reaction, however, is simplistic. The literary excellencies of the Book of Common Prayer are vitally important because they are a major factor in the Book of Common Prayer's being a sustainable liturgy. Because it is so well written for its purpose, the Book of Common Prayer can bear repeated use, an essential quality for a liturgy. It has the qualities which have sustained the worship of many generations, and those same qualities can sustain the worship of this generation and of generations to come.

Dr. Beckwith recognised the quality and comprehensibility of the idiom of the Book of Common Prayer when he wrote:

the Prayer Book never was in everyday speech — rather, it was in a finer form of speech, which sometimes differed from everyday speech chiefly in being simpler and clearer. An unusual way of speaking is quite a different thing from an unintelligible way of speaking, though today they are so regularly supposed the same.²²

Similarly, Newton wrote:

As to the composition, I question if any thing in the English language (our version of the Bible excepted) is worthy of being compared with it for simplicity, perspicuity, energy, and comprehensive fulness of expression.²³

Comprehensive

The Book of Common Prayer is comprehensive in its best and purest sense. In the face of current criticisms of the Prayer Book, it is worthy of note that J.C. Ryle, writing in the later nineteenth century, could list as one of the merits of the Prayer Book, its wonderful suitability to the wants of the poor and unlearned. Thus he argued:

The bulk of all congregations will probably be ignorant, as long as the world stands. Long, argumentative, doctrinal prayers, however clever and gifted they may seem, are utterly unfitted to most men's minds. Now here is exactly the point at which the English Liturgy is most excellent. It is full of little short collects, containing much in few words, and easily understood. It is consequently full of little breaks and pauses, which to an ignorant worshipper are of great importance. . . . The Litany alone is a simple but eminently comprehensive collection of petitions, which even a child, if attentive, can hardly fail to understand.²⁴

George Whitefield also wrote of the universal appropriateness of the Liturgy:

Both [the Homilies and the Book of Common Prayer] contain the same godly and wholesome doctrine, and both are equally adapted to instruct the

ignorant, and at the same time to raise and elevate the devout and simple heart.²⁵

The breadth of the petitions comprehended in the Prayer Book is worthy of note, and makes it peculiarly appropriate and excellent as a liturgy for general use. Ryle wrote:

It fairly sweeps the whole circle of man's wants, necessities, and relations. Our bodies and our souls, our temporal and our eternal interests, our position as subjects and members of families, our sorrows and our joys, our sickness and our health, our poverty and our riches, our journeys by land or water, — all are remembered in the Liturgy. Nothing seems to be forgotten or left out. A man's circumstances must be very peculiar indeed if he does not find his case mentioned in the daily prayers of the English Liturgy.²⁶

Similarly, Simeon wrote:

Astonishing is the wisdom with which the Liturgy is adapted to the edification of every member of the Church. There is no case that is overlooked, no sin that is not deplored, no want that is not specified, no blessing that is not asked: . . . Indeed there is a minuteness in the petitions that is rarely found even in men's private devotions; and those very particularities are founded in the deepest knowledge of the human heart, and the completest view of men's spiritual necessities.²⁷

Finally, the Book of Common Prayer is comprehensive by reason of its congregational character. Every member of the congregation frequently joins in the worship: in confession and creed and the Lord's Prayer; in psalms and canticles; in many responses, not least in the Litany; and in saying Amen after every prayer. As Ryle wrote, "No Church on earth makes so much of the laity in public worship as the Church of England".²⁸

THE USE OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

The only suitable liturgy

We have considered the value of liturgy and the excellency of the Book of Common Prayer. The Book of Common Prayer is the only liturgy which is faithful to the teaching of Scripture: modern liturgies, like the *Alternative Service Book* for instance, have false teaching on the sacraments of baptism and the holy communion, have prayer for the departed, and teach a sacerdotal view of the ordained ministry. The Book of Common Prayer is the only liturgy which uses aright its

potent influence to teach and mould the thinking of the worshipper. It is the only liturgy which is intelligent, reverend, and comprehensible. It has the linguistic excellence which allows it to be used repeatedly to the edification of the worshipper; it is the only sustainable liturgy. It is comprehensive in its application. The Book of Common Prayer alone can be set on a list of liturgies satisfactory for use in this land. There is no choice: the Book of Common Prayer must be used.

The Book of Common Prayer must be used

In the national church the Book of Common Prayer needs to be restored to full use. Its present position of increasing eclipse is a disaster for the church and nation. It remains constitutionally the official liturgy of the Church of England; the mistakes of the years since 1965 are merely permitted alternatives. It must become in practice what it is in theory, the abiding liturgy of the Church of England. Barry Spurr has written:

That a prayer book that is no longer in significant liturgical use and which, moreover, has been substantially replaced by books of markedly different linguistic style and doctrinal emphasis and entailing a variety of ceremonial changes and innovations can continue to be regarded by a Church as its abiding worshipping authority is nonsense.²⁹

The Book of Common Prayer must be used.

Its use a blessing in the past

Under God the Prayer Book has been a great instrument of blessing in the past. It has preserved the light of the Gospel in times of declension, and maintained a witness to the people when the ministry has failed. It has been the means of convicting and converting sinners. The Rev. Legh Richmond, in *The Annals of the Poor*, wrote of an incident which occurred at the funeral of a young countrywoman in a small village on the Isle of Wight in 1800:

A circumstance occurred during the reading of the Burial Service, which I think it right to mention, as one among many testimonies of the solemn and impressive tendency of our truly evangelical Liturgy.

A man of the village, who had hitherto been of a very careless and even profligate character, went into the church through mere curiosity, and with no better purpose than that of vacantly gazing at the ceremony. He came likewise to the grave, and during the reading of those prayers which are

appointed for that part of the service, his mind received a deep, serious conviction of his sin and spiritual danger. It was an impression that never wore off, but gradually ripened into the most satisfactory evidence of an entire change, of which I had many and long-continued proofs. He always referred to the Burial Service, and to some particular sentences of it, as the clearly ascertained instrument of bringing him, through grace, to the knowledge of the truth.³⁰

Earlier in the eighteenth century the reading of the Litany by Daniel Rowlands at Llangeitho was remarkably owned by God to the beginning of a revival of religion in the neighbourhood:

While he was engaged one Sunday morning in reading the church service, his mind was more than usually occupied with the prayers. An overwhelming force came upon his soul as he was praying in those most melting and evangelical words, — “By thine agony and bloody sweat, by thy cross and passion, by thy precious death and burial, by thy glorious resurrection and ascension, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost.” This passage is more emphatic in the Welsh language, by reason of an adjective going before the word “agony”, signifying “extreme”. The words, if translated, would run thus, — “by thine extreme agony”. As he uttered these words, a sudden amazing power seized his whole frame; and no sooner did it seize on him, than it ran instantly, like an electrifying shock, through all the people in the church, so that many of them fell down on the ground they had been standing on in a large mass together, there being no pews in the church.³¹

The desire of the great missionary, Henry Martyn, to do good to the people of India meant that he not only translated the New Testament into Hindustani, but also those parts of the Book of Common Prayer which are most frequently used. His biographer, John Sargent, recorded that by February 24, 1807,

a work was completed by Mr. Martyn, which, had he effected nothing else, would have proved that he had not lived in vain, — the translation of the Book of Common Prayer into Hindostanee; and on Sunday, March 15, he commenced the performance of Divine worship in the vernacular language of India, concluding with an exhortation from the Scripture in the same tongue. The spectacle was as novel as it was gratifying, to behold two hundred women, — Portuguese, Roman Catholics, and Mohammedans, — crowding to attend the service of the Church of England, which had lost nothing, doubtless, of its beautiful simplicity and devout solemnity in being clothed with an Oriental dress.³²

So, by grace, the Book of Common Prayer has been an instrument for good in the hands of the godliest men of each generation.

The danger consequent on any change in the Book of Common

Prayer has been stated in the past, and has been only too fully proved by the introduction of alternative services in 1965 and of the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980. Newton wrote:

As to our liturgy, I am far from thinking it incapable of amendment; though, when I consider the temper and spirit of the present times, I dare not wish that the improvement of it should be attempted, lest the intended remedy might prove worse than the disease.³³

Simeon declared:

Seek not to change even what you deem faulty, for hardly any change could be effected in the Prayer Book or Formularies which would not result in greater evils than those which you wish to remedy.³⁴

Moule wrote in 1892:

If a temperate and equitable revision were possible at the present time I should welcome the prospect on most accounts. But it seems to me plain that it is *not* at present possible. And meanwhile I thank God from my inmost heart for the actual Prayer Book as a whole.³⁵

The worst fears of these illustrious men have been realised. There has been a deliberate attempt to change the doctrine of the Liturgy as well as its language, and the supposed remedy has proved worse than any imagined disease.³⁶ Change has been seriously damaging; the choice effected by change is no choice, as there remains only one satisfactory English liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer.

Its use must be commended to others

We must commend the use of the Book of Common Prayer to others. This is a hard task, because of the unreasoning prejudice against it which exists in the feelings of many. We must seek to understand the false world view which has led to this prejudice: a man-centred approach to worship, which leads to entertainment, and an aping of the world of entertainment; confusion over the work and offices of the Holy Spirit, which leads to charismatic-style worship, with its mindless repetitions; the false seeking after immediate and complete comprehensibility, which leads to trite and banal statements. We have to seek to show men the scriptural character of the Book of Common Prayer, to teach them what are the characteristics of spiritual worship, and to show them that the Prayer Book is the only liturgy which is intelligent, reverend, and sustainable. We have to show the excellence of the Liturgy.

Great care must be taken in its use

We must take great care in its use. It is not always well or carefully used. In his book on *The Work of the Ministry*, Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas devoted a chapter to "The Prayer Book Services", giving advice as to how they might be most effectively lead. He wrote: "there is no necessary incompatibility between constant use and constant spirituality if only proper care is taken".³⁷ Bishop Moule, in his work *To my Younger Brethren*, devoted a chapter to "The Clergyman and the Prayer Book", in which he exhorts younger ministers to use the Book with great care and preparation.

I would entreat my younger Brother to resolve in the Lord's name that his own use of the Prayer Book in his ministration be to him a thing of sacred importance and personal reality. We need to form such a resolve deliberately, and to watch and pray over it.³⁸

He looks at the need to pray the prayers; to read the lessons with care; to give attention to the conduct of the occasional offices; and to administer the Holy Communion with a manifest reverence and restful simplicity. May John Newton's description of William Grimshaw be true of every minister as he uses the Book of Common Prayer:

For with him, the reading prayers was not a matter of custom or form, to be hurried over merely as a prelude to preaching; he really prayed, and the solemnity of his tone and gesture, induced the people, at least apparently, to pray with him.³⁹

Our care to use it well will include explaining it and teaching about it. If there are words whose meaning may not be self-evident, they must be explained; and the structure and meaning of the services must be taught to the people. Thus Moule recommended his younger Brethren

to do what they can to interest their people in the Prayer Book, and to promote its intelligent use, by taking what opportunities they can to talk to them about it. Many a private occasion for this will no doubt present itself. But if now and then a simple lecture on the history of the Prayer Book can be given, and if possible well illustrated, it will be very useful; and so will be a series of week-night devotional addresses on the teaching of the Prayer Book. And let not the need of plain matter-of-fact explanation of obsolete terms and technical phrases be forgotten on such occasions.⁴⁰

Our care in its use will require us to use it as it was intended to be used. In a number of ways the Prayer Book is not used as it was

intended, and that is to the great detriment of the worshipper. The Exhortation which is an integral part of the service of Holy Communion is nearly always omitted (it is the exhortation which is printed on pages 249-250 of the commonest edition of the Prayer Book, published by the Cambridge University Press). This calls those attending the service to self-examination, teaches them about the death of Christ, and states the purpose of the Lord's Supper. It is a most important and most valuable part of the Order for the Lord's Supper. It can be comfortably read in three minutes: its omission is intolerable.

The tyranny of the Anglican chant has led to the using of only one psalm, or only a part of a long psalm, in choral services. The chanting of the psalms is very beautiful and, as its pace is slower than reading, gives one the opportunity to meditate more unhurriedly on the words. But it is a rather difficult enterprise for congregational singing, and it is probably that in particular which has led to the custom of singing only one psalm, or part of a psalm. The loss to the worshipper is great: the psalms are a unique, devotional part of Scripture, and they allow the worshipper to pray and meditate in a way entirely different from the rest of the service. There are those who claim that there is not enough variation within the Prayer Book services: but one of the largest variants is severely reduced, when only one psalm, or a part of a psalm, is used.

A third way in which the Prayer Book is often not used as it was intended is in the omission of the Litany. This superb vehicle for prayer is required by the rubric to be used each Sunday; but in many churches it is never heard. It should be made a regular part of a church's worship.

Conclusion

The use of the Book of Common Prayer is required because of its unique excellency. Two testimonies to that excellency remind us of the treasure for our good which God has mercifully entrusted to us in the English Liturgy. Henry Venn wrote:

How often have I declared my utmost veneration for the Liturgy! How often in your hearing, how often in the church, declared the superior excellency, in my judgement, of the Liturgy to every mode of worship, not only amongst the Dissenters, but that had ever been in the Church of Christ, as far as I had

knowledge! Nay, more than once have I said, I never was present at any meeting where I perceived the power of godliness as amongst the congregations of our Church, where the Gospel is preached.⁴¹

William Wilberforce referred in his best-selling work, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System . . .*, which was published in 1797, to “our inestimable Liturgy”:

a Liturgy justly inestimable, as setting before us a faithful model of the Christian’s belief, and practice, and language: as restraining us (as far as restraint is possible) from excessive deviations: as furnishing us with abundant instruction when we would return into the right path: as affording an advantage-ground of no little value to such instructors as still adhere to the good old principles of the Church of England; in short, as daily shaming us, by preserving a living representation of the opinions and habits of better times, like some historical record which reproaches a degenerate posterity, by exhibiting the worthier deeds of their progenitors.⁴²

And what of ourselves? As Charles Simeon wrote:

All that is wanting is, *an heart suited to the Liturgy*, and cast as it were into that mould. It may with truth be said of us, “They have well said all that they have spoken: O that there were in them such an heart!” Let us only suppose that on any particular occasion there were in all of us such a state of mind as the Liturgy is suited to express; what glorious worship would ours be! and how certainly would God delight to hear and bless us! We will not say that he would come down and fill the house with his visible glory, as he did in the days of Moses and of Solomon; but we will say, that he would come down and fill our souls with such a sense of his presence and love, as would transform us into his blessed image, and constitute a very heaven upon earth. Let each of us, then, adopt the wish in our text, and say, “O that there *may be in me* such an heart!” . . . whenever we come up to the house of God, let us seek those very dispositions in the use of the Liturgy, which our Reformers exercised in the framing of it.⁴³

They have well said all that they have spoken:

O that there were such an heart in them!

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